

COMMENTARY: Media violence? Canada's private broadcasters are on this case

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By Ronald Cohen

MEDIA VIOLENCE IS AGAIN in the news. A week ago, Professor Peter Jaffe and his coalition gave a press conference on the subject of media violence. It seemed to be for the benefit of the uninitiated.

Did the group of teachers and parents even realize that much of what they sought was, in the case of television, already in place? Or did they have an ulterior objective in ignoring the huge efforts already made by Canada's private broadcasters?

And last week, M. Bernard Bigras' Private Member's Bill C-327 (An Act to amend the Broadcasting Act [reduction of violence in television broadcasts]) is scheduled for debate in the House of Commons. A co-ordinated event? Who knows?

The issue of violence in the media is not new. Nor is M.P. Bigras' bill, which was first introduced in the House in 2000. It was not necessary then and, when I met with M. Bigras on April 20, 2000, I explained to him which steps had already been taken by Canada's private broadcasters. If such a law was inessential then, it is even less necessary seven years later.

When 13-year old Virginie Larivière deposited her 1.3 million signature petition with Prime Minister Mulroney in November 1992, television was the issue, but it is now 2007, and the world has changed. First, even the coalition acknowledged that technology has resulted in the greatly increased role of video games, DVDs and music lyrics as platforms for violent content. Indeed, I would suggest that these sources have likely become the primary source of media violence.

Second, and this is really the important point, Canada's private broadcasters have long since taken charge of the issue of violence on television.

The first major initiative was the drafting of a firm set of standards. They were introduced in the form of the CAB Violence Code at a joint press conference of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, the CRTC and the Canadian Association of Broadcasters on October 28, 1993. Although the code bears the facultative title "Voluntary Code Regarding Violence in Television Programming", do not put any weight on the word "voluntary". As every broadcaster knows, the code is anything but. It is a Condition of Licence for every broadcaster in the country.

Although the debate regarding the causal relationship between televised violence and behaviour was still going on in the early 1990s, the private broadcasters were determined to be part of the solution. That code indeed provided solutions.

The first of these was the Watershed. Broadcasters do not air programs that include any violence intended for adult audiences before 9 p.m. or after 6 a.m. Even though the Broadcasting Act requires the provision of programming for a wide variety of tastes and interests, broadcasters view that early part of the day as a safe haven, free from adult-themed programming, for Canadian families.

In addition, there is no gratuitous or glamorized violence on television at any time of

the day or night. Period.

The tragedy at Montreal's École Polytechnique in 1989 influenced the private broadcasters to prohibit both abusive comment and any programming that sanctions, promotes or glamorizes any aspect of violence against women. They also extend that protection to other identifiable groups. Such prohibitions also apply at any time of day or night.

Moreover, there are special rules dealing with children's programming (children being defined as under 12). There is not a more thorough set of rules in any country. Very little violence, whether physical, verbal or emotional can be included. Animated children's programming cannot have violence as its central theme or even suggest that violence is the preferred way to resolve disputes. It cannot encourage dangerous imitation. Nor can it include themes that threaten a child's sense of security. Even frightening or otherwise excessive special effects not required by the storyline are prohibited. And so on.

Even as the terrible tales recounted at the Pickton trial stress society each day (and will for much of the next year), there are cautions in the code relating to the content of news and public affairs programming. While assuring that, in this democracy, the presentation of the news ought not to be sanitized to hide the reality of the human condition, broadcasters must be cautious in the use of violent or disturbing footage, taking into account the age of likely viewers at earlier times of day.

Broadcasters actively help audiences make informed viewing choices. Ratings icons run every hour and advisories telling viewers in plain language what's coming are broadcast at the start of dramatic programs and following every commercial break.

And, finally, in the event that any one of the foregoing rules is breached, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council is there to deal with it. The disappearance of the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* a decade ago is ample evidence of that. (And other programs such as *G.I. Joe* and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* followed suit, although the CBSC had not ruled on them. Broadcasters understood that they were of the same genre.) Moreover, the percentage of complaints about violence on television made by the public, which is a fair barometer of their concerns, has dropped steadily, in fact by 37% between 2001 and 2006.

The immense role to be played by parents, who are the content gatekeepers in their homes, must also be borne in mind. Nor is violence the only issue for them. What is or is not appropriate for any given family must be determined by those who guide familial values. And television set manufacturers and cable/satellite digital boxes provide the V-chip and other technical blocking devices to cut out signals that parents consider inappropriate for their homes.

In any event, whatever the other media (in the music, video games and film areas) have or have not been doing, Canada's private broadcasters and the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council have been on top of this issue for years.

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