

TELEVISION TEACHES VIOLENCE

In Milpitas, Calif., a 16-year-old boy allegedly killed his 14-year-old former girlfriend and then for a day or two took friends by to see the body in a nearby ravine. In Maryland, an 18-year-old woman asked her boyfriend and his friends to kill her husband of two months and so they did. Then, like the kids in California, they all went home.

These incidents of teen-age murder are just two examples of a startling and frightening trend—the increasing willingness of youngsters to kill. What is striking about both incidents is not only that they happened, but that the kids thought nothing of them. They thought that murder was somehow routine or that if it was not routine for them, then it was for others.

Probably no other generation has grown up with as much violence as this one. The violence, though, is not real. It is televised, which means that it is a special kind of violence. It has no consequence. People get hit, but never injured. People punch other people, but no one gets hurt. Cars collide and the people in them jump out without a scratch (not even whiplash) and chase one another. People die, but they are not missed or grieved for, and they are almost always one-dimensional characters anyway—like strangers.

Other generations have seen violence, of course. These were the generations who lived through wars. They saw violence, but they knew it produced

agony. They knew death, but they knew it produced tragedy. They might, after a while, become inured to what they saw, but they fully understood the consequences of it. Now we have a generation that does not even understand that. In the Maryland case, for example, the woman who had her husband killed started to panic only when the police did not act the way they do on television shows.

I suppose it is easy to blame television for adolescent violence. It might be more than easy; it might be dangerous. The inevitable consequence, after all, has to be some sort of censorship, and that is something to be feared. We would like to see some hard evidence that television is the cause and violence is the effect before we do anything to infringe on the First Amendment.

But there is a certain amount of evidence. There have been some studies and some tentative conclusions. The interesting thing is that these have not been enough; not enough for the civil libertarians, which is one thing, but not enough for the general public, which is something else. After all, the general public supports censorship when it comes to sex. It would not tolerate sexually explicit material on television for fear it would, at a minimum, corrupt the morals of young people. With pornography, the fear has always been that children would do what they see.

But the fear that is so prevalent when it comes to sex is somehow absent when it comes to violence. Why do we expect young people to imitate one thing (sex) and not another (violence)? The answer probably has to do with the fact that sex has always been more or less in the closet, while violence—at least most

kinds—has long been not only out in the open but admired. In the Old West, at least in movies of the Old West, bar-room brawls occurred out in the open, while sex was happening behind closed doors upstairs.

No matter what the reason, all this gratuitous violence has to be taking a toll. Watching television, after all, is the dominant activity of most young people. It shapes their idea of what reality is. Reality's a term used by kids to refer to what grown ups do. It must seem to the kids that being grown up means being able to do the wrong thing. Morality is for kids only.

Adults, of course, know better. They know that all acts have consequences and this is something they try to teach their children. Yet despite this, they turn over their children to an entertainment medium that has none of their moral or ethical values, that teaches all the wrong lessons, sets the worst examples and gets applauded for switching from emphasizing sex to emphasizing violence.

As for the industry itself, it goes merrily along, programming violence to make a buck and then washing its hands of the consequences. Being a network executive must be a lot like being in love. You never have to say you're sorry. ■

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