Youth Issues and Media Influences

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With this new springtime issue, we must continue to consider proactively the plight of our young people.

Although there are high quality mass media programming through public television, radio and educational websites, such as The World & I Online (see below for web address), our culture continues to be overwhelmed with violence and inappropriate sexual innuendo portrayed in the media.

Author and professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Central Florida , Ray Surette quotes Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, professor at the Harvard JFK School of Government and violence prevention specialist:

"It is guns, it is poverty, it is overcrowding, and it is the uniquely American problem of a culture that is infatuated with violence. We love it, we glamorize it, and we teach it to our children!" ("Media, Violence, Youth and, Society," on WorldandI.com, 7/1994.)

Both of these specialists qualify their views by indicating that the media cannot be proven to be an absolutely negative influence, but is, rather, a part of a social phenomenon. (See Statistical Tables: "Do You Know Where Your Kids Are?" and "Teens vs. Adults.") However, they agree that the violent nature of the media has a conducive ... effect on "generating aggressive behavior" in society at large.

With this grim view, however, there are some encouraging research results for good quality media influences. For example, as noted by Nora Boustany, "Music can have a magical effect on children accustomed to the rumble of artillery fire, the dispiriting drone of warplanes and the life-threatening bark of the enemy." ("For Children in War Zones, Strains of Happiness and Hope," The Washington Post, 2/17/06.)

Nora describes the outstanding work of Liz Shropshire, founder and director of the Shropshire Music Foundation, who teaches children in the war zones "to sing and play musical instruments as a way to bring them out of their trauma." This observation includes music from portable devices, including I-pods, cell phones, game players, etc.

Although there is a general consensus that children who spend more time watching television spend less time interacting with their family, playing creatively, or spending time in nature, hope can be seen with an increase of family-friendly television and cable programming.

The Parents Television Council (PTC) offers extensive listings and reviews of children's programming according to Michael Conlon of Reuters, in his article entitled, "Electronic Babysitter Vindicated By A New Study: TV Not So Bad For Kids." A well-known study published in 2004 in the U.S. Journal of Pediatrics said that children who watch a lot of television were more likely to develop attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). But, with more current research, "exhausted parents of overly active children are more likely to let them watch TV to give themselves a break--and not that TV itself leads to ADHD" (in a report from Texas Tech University).

Hope Chen, an Associated Press writer, cites in her article, "FCC: Cable 'a la Carte' Would Save Money," that if cable subscribers could pay for only those programs of their choice, especially with quality selection in mind, they would save a lot of unneeded expense.

Television and Internet require parental guidance for our youth; and, a wise use for all ages, according to a report from the Pittsburgh Tribune Review, "Children's TV Studded with Dark, Violent Acts." The PTC studied hundreds of children's daytime programs last summer and detailed 2,794 or 6.3 violent incidents per hour, more than the PTC found in prime time aimed at adults during a 2002 study.

In the same report, PTC Founder, Brent Bozell, observes that the quality of animated cartoons has radically changed from past generations to the current time. "There's nothing wrong with fanciful, fantasy violence," said Bozell. 'Tom and Jerry' and 'Popeye' are in great contrast to current "protagonists caught in dark, powerful, oftentimes scary scenarios where there is hard violence." Dr. Michael Rich, Director of the Center of Media and Children's Health at Harvard University's Medical School, observes that "violent cartoons can increase children's anxiety, desensitize them or lead them to believe that violence is more prevalent--and acceptable--in real life than it really is."

The PTC further cites the Cartoon Network as having the most violent incidents and praises the Disney Channel as the least violent (ironically, the Walt Disney Channel owns both programs). Further watchdogs include TiVo, Inc. and the Kid Zone Service. Do you know where your kids are?

These are among the findings of a survey of teens who use the internet and their parents.

Online teens said the household computer is in a public place, not their room. 73 %

Parents of online teens said they set rules about their kids' online time. 64 %

Parents said they check where their teen has surfed. 62 %

Teens who use the Internet at home said they believe their parents monitor their online activity. 33 %

Online teens said teens aren't careful enough with personal information online. 81 %

Online teens agreed that teens aren't careful enough with their personal information. 79 %

All parents and 64 percent of all teens said teens do things online they wouldn't want their parents to know about. 65 % all parents 64 % all teens

Source: "Protecting Teens Online" by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005

Teens vs. adults

Here is what teens and adults are doing in cyberspace.

Teens Adults Play online games 81 % 32 %

Send or receive instant messages 75 % 42 %

Get info about a school they might attend 57 % 45 %

Send or read e-mail 89 % 90 %

Get news or info about current events 76 % 73 %

Look for news or info about politics 55 % 58 %

Look for religious or spiritual info 26 % 30 %

Buy things: Books, clothes, music 43 % 67 %

Look for health, diet, fitness info 31 % 66 %

Look for info about a job 30 % 44 %

SOURCE: "Teens and Technology: Youth Are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation" by the Pew Institute & American Life Project, 2005 -- Contact staff writer Penelope M. Carrington at pcarrington@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6027

Traditionally, newspaper cartoons and comic books presenting noble adventures, with forces of good overcoming evil in various sequences of stories, are more currently referenced as the Graphic Novel or Sequential Art. While what we call comics or cartoons, one of the few phenomenons of American Popular Culture along with Jazz and the 'mystery and adventure novel' (first created by nineteenth-century writers, James Fennimore Cooper and Edgar Allan Poe) are actually extolled by the French as genuine and original culture—at a time when Americans thought they had no culture. In fact, with the explosion of 'Pop Culture' in the 1960s , Ph.D. candidates were writing their dissertations at the Sorbonne in Paris, on the 'Jungle Wisdom' in "The Phantom" and about the features of science fiction with the elegant character 'Mandrake the Magician' -- the creations and continuous work of the famous cartoonist and playwright and theater director, Lee Falk. Also, Festivals in Spoleto, Italy celebrated the creative accomplishments of especially the American cartoonists. Other good examples of noble adventure are the classic 'Prince Valiant', Will Eisner's 'The Spirit'; also, the gentle humor of Jerry Robinson's 'Flubs and Fluffs' and Charles Schulz's 'Peanuts', etc. Actually, the list is quite extensive and the good examples numerous for family-friendly Popular Culture.

However, as journalist Cheryl Wetzstein (The Washington Times, March 3, 2006, pg. A12) along with other journalists and media watch organizations observe, especially in referring to Cartoon Network, a "24/7" animated cartoon program, "Children's cartoons still abound with slapstick comedy, but more than a few contain bullying, put-downs, vulgar words and sexual innuendo ."

Sen. Sam Brownback, Kansas Republican, urges, "It may be time for federal agencies to investigate whether broadcast companies again are targeting children with adult materials." Mr. Brownback also urged Congress to pass legislation to boost fines for TV indecency violations.

In considering the influence of films/movies on youth and smoking, journalist Kori Titus on Scenesmoking.org offers the following statistics:

Each day in the U.S., about 2,050 adolescents will start smoking. More than half will start because of exposure to smoking in movies and more than half of the movies rated PG and PG-13, movies targeted directly at these young people contain, tobacco.

The more a favorite star smokes in movies, the more likely that a teen viewer will smoke. Leading actors light up in 87% of movies with tobacco. When tobacco is shown in a movie, leading actors smoke in 82% of them. 26% of movies with tobacco clearly show tobacco brands. Movies, and movie stars, make tobacco look…sexy, glamorous, tough, fun, rebellious, and cool. More than 1,000 teens will start smoking today because of these images. 340 of them will die early from a smoking related disease. It's time for this to change.

While the statistics are overwhelming regarding the negative influence of the media on youth, we may conclude with the impression, due to the vast informational resources and studies, that there is a lot of hope. Predatory and negative media influences will be eclipsed by positive educational and constructive influences for our youth and all of society if we as adults continue to take responsibility to protect and to direct young people to what we know to be healthy and good for them.

I have provided a short "GO TO" reference list to assist parents and caregivers:

Online learning resources: Parents Television Council: www.parentstv.org ; World & I magazine, www.worldandi.com ; Blackboard Inc. and Blackboard Beyond Initiative, Michigan Department of Education, www.nettekker.com ; www.learnport.org ; www.thinkronize.com

Monitoring TV programming: Families Forever Seminars

Internet monitoring: www.kids.getnetwise.org ; www.ilearn.isafe.org ; The VA Department of Health, www.vahealth.org ; and Net Nanny.

The Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use and cyber bullying: www,csriu,org.