

Television Violence: Fraying Our Social Fabric

Introduction and Chapter Five: Conclusions and List of Recommendations

Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Communication
and Culture, June 1993

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[Foreword](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter Five: Conclusions and List of Recommendations](#)

Foreword

Someone has to say, "Enough" – because this is disaster, we are destroying ourselves. Successive societies have destroyed themselves by the failure of their leadership to say, "I know in many respects that's what you'd like to see, but you know what? It's bad for us, we're damaging ourselves. We are untying the fabric of our society."

– David Puttnam, former president of Columbia
Pictures

The historian Arnold Toynbee has pointed out that 19 out of 21 civilization have died from within, not by conquests from without. He tells us that there were no bands playing or flags waving when these civilizations decayed. It happened slowly in the quiet and the dark when no one was aware of what was happening.

A democratic society carries no inborn guarantee that it will survive on its own merits. We have seen many such societies perish even in our time. A free society cannot be taken for granted. Truth and freedom must be guarded as precious treasures. The foundation to support the civil liberties we enjoy today is dependent upon the vigilance exercised by those who can recognize and who will protect and oppose invasion of their liberties by governments, national, provincial, or municipal.

– The Honourable Emmett M. Hall, former justice
of the Supreme Court of Canada

During an interview with Bill Moyers on PBS, the American public television network, David Puttnam described how the Roman circuses evolved over several hundred years from places of mild entertainment to places where hundreds of thousands of people died. According to Puttnam, the Roman circuses became "more and more bloody, more and more grotesque" as a result of the public's demand for "more and more" violence.

The words of David Puttnam and Arnold Toynbee remind us that societies can disintegrate from within if the values that these societies cherish are allowed to decay by a slow, subtle attrition. Justice Hall reminds us that a society needs to be vigilant in opposing such an invasion of its democratic values.

The Committee believes that the problems of television violence, and the larger issue of societal violence, could lead to the fraying of the fabric of our modern civilization unless a comprehensive strategy is developed to arrest such insidious progress. The signatures of more than 1.3 million Canadians on Virginie Larivière's petition in favour of legislation against television violence, and the reaction of the House of Commons and the Minister of Communications to this petition, lead us to believe that the past complacent attitude of this country's population, institutions and government towards television violence is changing. As our review of previous Canadian efforts to address television violence demonstrates, and as an earlier reference from the House of Commons arising from a motion by Larry Schneider, M.P., calling for a full review of the media's portrayal of violence also indicates, the current public concern over this issue is not a new phenomenon. What is needed is for government, the federal regulator and broadcasters to act.

The values that a society holds are constantly changing. This is not surprising given that our values are shaped by events occurring around us. Today, with instantaneous communications between cities, countries and continents, our values are shaped by a greater variety of factors than was the case in the not so distant past. With such means of communications, events taking place in other continents have the potential to shape our own values.

In this information age, television has quickly acquired a central place in our homes, both as a source of information and as a means of entertainment. Television offers the potential to shape our values, our beliefs, our knowledge and our attitudes. The power that television has to effect potential societal changes has received increased attention from

researchers and governments over the last three decades. To a great extent, this attention has focused on the effects of television violence on the attitudes and behaviour of the television audience, particularly on the effect television violence may have on children.

Hundreds of studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between television violence and aggressive and antisocial behaviour in individuals, although it is impossible to predict the precise effects on individuals at any given time and place. People who advocate government intervention argue that the scientific evidence is sufficiently sound to warrant the imposition of limits on the freedom of expression of broadcasters. Some even argue that the burden of proof should be shifted to the broadcasters, namely, that the broadcasters should be required to prove that their programming is harmful to the viewers. After all, under section 3(1)(h) of the Broadcasting Act, broadcasters "have a responsibility for the programs they broadcast." According to this thesis, government has a duty to protect the mental and physical health of Canadians given its role as guardian of societal values. In accordance with this principle, government must demand, through the regulatory body (the CRTC), and at the request of the latter, that broadcasters prove that television programming is a safe consumer product.

Parents have the moral responsibility to transmit their values, and those of the society around them, to their children. The Committee is aware that, notwithstanding the fact that parents must exercise a certain control over the audiovisual materials entering the home, they must not and cannot be solely held responsible for controlling television violence. In fact, the question of parental control raises a host of issues of a practical and enforcement nature, as well as socio-psychological ones.

Government, as responsible social guardian, has the responsibility to protect societal values. This responsibility is exercised frequently by our governments through existing legislation such as the Criminal Code. The Committee is also aware that the role of the legislator cannot be to control everything but that its duty is, first and foremost, to protect societal values. Faced with constantly changing values, governments have the difficult task of accurately assessing the pulse of the population on any given issue and, with the help of expert advice, public input and parliamentary scrutiny, adopting policies, programs and legislation which will best respond to the many conflicting factors involved.

In asking their government to legislate against television violence, the Canadians who have signed Virginie Larivière's petition have exercised their democratic right of freedom of expression. However, by legislating against television violence, the government would be curtailing the freedom of expression of others, including broadcasters, advertisers, artists

and television viewers. The challenge that our society faces is to recognize that television violence may be destroying the values which keep us together as a civilization, and to find a way to control it without violating our fundamental democratic right to freedom of expression. Confronted with these realities, the Committee has come to the conclusion that broadcasters must do more than simply broadcasting.

We believe that the overall approach we are recommending, as suggested by many of our experts and witnesses, will meet that challenge. The people of this country must be given the means to make their own well-informed choices. This approach carries with it the notion that individuals should have at their disposal the necessary information and the technical means to make appropriate television viewing choices, for themselves and for their children. A socially responsible and accountable broadcasting industry, cooperative federal and provincial governments, and the grass roots efforts of concerned citizens and groups will make this possible.

Helping individuals make well-informed television viewing choices will be one important step toward dealing with the larger problem of societal violence. It will also enhance our values and strengthen the ties that bind our social fabric.

Introduction

On 18 November 1992, the House of Commons referred the petition of Virginie Lariviere on television violence to the consideration of the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture. The petition was initiated by Virginie Lariviere following the robbery, sexual assault and murder of her 11-year-old sister, Marie-Eve. While grieving for her sister, Virginie came to be convinced that television violence may have been the cause of her sister's death. Over the next eight months, with the help of her family, she started a crusade to gather the signatures of Canadians across the country who felt as she did. With more than 1.3 million signatures, the petition called for citizens to boycott violent television programming and for the government to pass legislation requiring television networks to make progressive reductions in the violent content of their programming over a ten-year period.

Earlier, on 12 February 1992, the House of Commons referred a motion by Larry Schneidel, M.P., to the Committee calling for a full review of the media's portrayal of violence, particularly with respect to women and children, and seeking better ways to protect innocent Canadians from

being exposed to such gratuitous violence without interfering unduly with artistic freedom or freedom of the press.

Members of the Committee met on 24 November and 3 December 1992 to discuss their approach to the subject referred by the House of Commons. It was agreed to begin the study with an initial series of briefings by experts on television violence and criminology and to follow these with public hearings. Given conflicting activities in its schedule, the Committee decided at the end of the public hearings to establish a Sub-Committee on Television Violence in order to concentrate on the drafting of its report. These efforts, and the review and approval later given by the Standing Committee on Communications and Culture, led to the present report.

The Committee recognized that this subject is complex and agreed that the report should consist of a preliminary survey of the facts, issues, and possible responses. The Committee was helped a great deal in the choice of its possible responses by the flurry of initiatives that took place during the course of the study. The subject came alive in many directions at the same time: initiatives were taken by the Minister of Communications, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, the broadcasting industry, the television program production industry, and many associations and institutions concerned with violence in the entertainment industry. These actions and activities, along with others, are described in this report. The Committee wishes to thank these individuals, associations and institutions for their generosity in sharing their ideas and comments with us.

During the course of our study, the Committee reviewed a wide range of possible solutions to the problem of violence on television. We concluded, given the complexity of the problem, the variety of potential remedies, and the importance of safeguarding freedom of expression, that adopting a framework of innovative, co-ordinated, co-operative and graduated responses would be most appropriate. Some of the mechanisms considered included public forums, research, education, consumer action, cross-border collaboration, funding for Canadian productions, regulatory controls and amendments to legislation. The range of responses directed at individuals, the industry and government reflects the Committee's conviction that everyone must play a role in reducing the amount and degree of violence on our television screens. Parents, teachers, consumers, researchers, broadcasters, artists, producers, advertisers, regulators and legislators must all participate.

The options we have considered are set out in this report in an ascending order of involvement on the part of government. They are presented this way in order to underline the Committee's preference for solutions that encourage individuals to make their own choices responsibly and to

emphasize our reluctance to opt for government interventions that would impinge on personal freedoms.

It is our hope that this report will be the first step toward what we believe should be a priority initiative for the federal government. A comprehensive inquiry into all aspects of societal violence – interrelationships, causes, effects and remedies – is needed in our view. Television violence is only the tip of the iceberg, it must be addressed, but in an integrated approach to the larger issue of societal violence.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and List of Recommendations

Conclusions

The Committee concludes that Canadian children, teenagers and adults who watch a large number of American television programs are exposed to a high level of televisual violence. This conclusion is based on the following findings: The Committee has carefully considered the oral testimony of experts and witnesses and the written evidence submitted. On that basis, the Committee has come to a number of fundamental conclusions.

- 1) American research has shown that American television programs tend to be violent (eight acts of violence per hour during prime time on the three major American television networks);
- 2) Overall, Canadians watch a large number of American television programs (73% and 37% of the time for anglophone and francophone Canadians respectively); and
- 3) Children and teenagers watch relatively more American television programs than adults (75% and 83% of the time for English-speaking children and teenagers respectively; 46% and 48% for French-speaking children and teenagers respectively)

The Committee considered the advice of experts on whether television violence causes aggressive tendencies and antisocial behaviour in individuals. The Committee agrees with the conclusions of social scientists that there are many, complex, and sometimes interdependent causes of societal violence. However, the scientific evidence on the effects of television violence, we were told, is at best uneven and more often inconclusive, weak and contradictory. Faced with the difficult task of determining which evidence to believe, we have adopted the prudent view

that television violence is one of the many risk factors which may contribute to aggressive tendencies and antisocial behaviour. We have clearly found that the violence portrayed on television reflects and shapes unhealthy social attitudes. The extent of its effects and the precise nature of the causal relationship between the violence viewed on television and the violence perpetrated in Canadians' daily lives are not clear and need further study.

The Committee has concluded that, although the risk may be small that television violence causes aggressive tendencies and antisocial behaviour in certain individuals and may never be proven conclusively, it cannot be ignored. The inconclusiveness of this risk has led us away from recommending that the government legislate outright against television violence at this time. Instead, we have come to the conclusion that the problem of violence on television should be addressed co-operatively, by all the players, including the industry, parents and governments, and with minimal legislative intervention. Simply legislating generally against all television violence would be a draconian approach to dealing with what is only a small part of a much larger problem – the problem of pervasive violence in our society.

In our opinion, most Canadians would object to blanket restrictions on the freedom of expression of broadcasters and on their own personal viewing choices. We believe, nevertheless, that freedom of expression is not an absolute and unconditional right, that the industry has a social responsibility to respond to the concerns of the audiences which it serves, and that the industry must be given the chance to do so, independently and in lieu of legislation, wherever possible.

We also believe that Canadian parents should share the responsibility for what their children and teenagers watch on television, but that they need to be better equipped to properly exercise their freedom of choice.

We believe that a uniform classification system for television programs, strengthened and enforceable broadcasters' codes on television violence, media literacy education, heightened public awareness, and new electronic devices which can filter or block programs or channels, will be necessary to assist parents in their task.

We have concluded that the federal government has an important leadership role to play, primarily in its policy-making capacity. For example, the government must formulate policy for itself on advertising during violent programs, provide greater financial support or incentives to non-violent Canadian productions, and seriously discuss the problem of excessive television violence with our American neighbours. Lastly, we have come to the conclusion that an amendment to the Criminal Code is

needed to control extremely violent forms of entertainment, such as slasher and snuff films and videos.

In the Foreword to this report, we expressed the view that the problems of television violence, and the larger issue of societal violence, could lead to the fraying of the fabric of our modern civilization unless a comprehensive strategy is developed. The task of dealing with societal violence is a challenging one under any circumstance. The task of dealing with television violence is also challenging, as it must be undertaken without violating our fundamental democratic right to freedom of expression. We believe that the overall approach recommended in this report will meet these challenges. This approach is reflected in the following list of recommendations.

List of Recommendations

PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

RECOMMENDATION No. 1 – The Committee recommends, in view of the importance of maintaining current, open and widespread public dialogue on the subject of television violence, that the federal government encourage and facilitate a process of public meetings and conferences devoted to television violence and related issues. (Page 34)

RECOMMENDATION No. 2 – In view of the fact that violence on television is symptomatic of the larger problem of violence in society, the Committee recommends that a joint federal-provincial task force be convened to inquire into all aspects of societal violence – interrelationships, causes, effects and remedies – including, but not limited to, media violence, domestic violence, and racial violence. (Page 35)

The Committee further recommends that the findings of the joint federal-provincial task force be set out in a White Paper. (Page 35)

CANADIAN RESEARCH ON TELEVISION VIOLENCE

RECOMMENDATION No. 3 – The Committee recommends that government funding bodies, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and government departments, such as Health and Welfare Canada and the Department of Communications, dedicate more of their financial and other resources to supporting original Canadian research into the causes, effects and control of television violence. (Page 36)

PUBLIC ACTION GROUP ON TELEVISION VIOLENCE

RECOMMENDATION No. 4 – The Committee strongly endorses the recent establishment of the National Action Group on television violence and recommends that the Minister of Communications provide financial support to, and maintain close contact with, its progress. (Page 37)

PUBLIC EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATION No. 5 – The Committee recommends that the federal government take action to encourage provincial governments to survey their media literacy policies and programs to determine whether they specifically address the issue of violence on television and reach groups outside the educational system such as parents, other adults, and pre-school children. (Page 38)

RECOMMENDATION No. 6 – The Committee recommends that the federal government foster creative initiatives which inform viewers about television violence and make them more television literate, using television itself as the educational tool. (Page 39).

RECOMMENDATION No. 7 – The Committee urges the Department of Health and Welfare to conclude an agreement with the National Film Board to produce, in co-operation with provincial educational authorities, a media literacy guide which would provide children with the tools to understand the positive potential of television and help them become discerning television viewers. The Committee recommends that television violence form an important component of the proposed media literacy guide. (Page 40)

INDIVIDUAL ACTION

RECOMMENDATION No. 8 – The Committee recommends that the Minister of Communications give priority to fostering research and development of screening devices for televisions and VCRs. (Page 41)

RECOMMENDATION No. 9 – The Committee recommends that both the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council regularly inform the viewing public, during prime time viewing hours, about the procedures which they may follow to communicate their views or to complain about violent television programming. (Page 42)

INDUSTRY ACTION

RECOMMENDATION No. 10 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission continue to press broadcasters to be responsible in purchasing and scheduling violent programming and that those who do not demonstrate the requisite measure of responsibility be held accountable and subject to the Commission's sanctions. (Page 44)

Further, the Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission continue to press the industry for an effective self regulatory code (or codes) governing violence on television and to intensify its efforts to achieve this goal as quickly as possible. (Page 44)

RECOMMENDATION No. 11 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission inquire into whether one universal code about television violence can be devised for all elements of the industry or whether separate but parallel codes would be more appropriate, and accordingly, direct both broadcasters and cable companies to develop either one common code or parallel codes in tandem. (Page 45)

RECOMMENDATION No. 12 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission determine the type of classification system appropriate for Canadian television programs and that it design the framework for such a television program classification system, including responsibilities for implementation and administration of it, bearing in mind the possible integration with provincial film and video classification systems. (Page 47)

RECOMMENDATION No. 13 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission determine the most- suitable time for adult-only programs. (Page 48)

RECOMMENDATION No. 14 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission require that any voluntary codes on violence be formally approved by the Commission and that compliance with the codes be made a condition of licence. (Page 49)

NON-LEGISLATIVE ACTION BY THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION No. 15 – The Committee recommends that the federal government formulate guidelines for its own advertising during television programs containing violence, and thereby set a positive example for other leading advertisers in the country. (Page 50)

RECOMMENDATION No. 16 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, as the body charged with implementing the federal government's broadcasting policy, continue to take full advantage of its powers of moral suasion and continue to pioneer initiatives to deal with television violence. (Page 52)

RECOMMENDATION No. 17 – The Committee recommends that the Minister of Communications, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission and others continue to engage in cross-border discussions on television violence, in an effort to promote a collaborative and unified response to this problem. (Page 54)

RECOMMENDATION No. 18 – The Committee favours continued federal government investment in the production of Canadian television programs which would reflect the concerns of this Committee" regarding television violence and the objective of the Broadcasting Act to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social and economic fabric of Canada. (Page 58)

LEGISLATIVE ACTION BY GOVERNMENT

RECOMMENDATION No. 19 – In terms of an overall strategy for addressing violent programming on television, the Committee recommends a graduated approach. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission should begin by immediately making a few key regulations to complement the self-regulatory efforts of the industry and to symbolize the need for programming reform and, in the event that industry self-regulation proves ineffective, the Commission should then move to produce stricter regulations, giving due consideration to the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. (Page 59)

RECOMMENDATION No. 20 – The Committee recommends that the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission pursue its proposal to add a rule against abusive violence to the programming content regulations, as a beacon to broadcasters, and as a symbolic, legislative gesture denouncing excessive, gratuitous, or glamorized violence on television. (Page 60)

RECOMMENDATION No. 21 – The Committee recommends that, once a universal classification system is in place, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission require all television broadcasters to adopt a program content advisory system which would broadcast the program's designated classification directly onto viewers' television screens. (Page 60)

RECOMMENDATION No. 22 – The Committee recommends that, in the event industry self regulation is unsuccessful, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, giving due regard to the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, should devise a regulatory scheme to govern the broadcast of programs with violent content, including a universal television program classification system and strict penalties for violating the regulatory scheme. (Page 61)

RECOMMENDATION No. 23 – The Committee recommends that, if industry self-regulation is unsuccessful, and if the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission does not respond effectively within a reasonable period of time, the Minister of Communications introduce legislation to achieve the same effect as proposed in Recommendation No. 22. (Page 61)

RECOMMENDATION No. 24 – Given the complexity of the regulatory and competitive issues associated with controlling cable distribution of violent U.S. programming, the Committee recommends that these issues be specifically addressed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission with the objective of moderating violent content wherever possible. (Page 62)

RECOMMENDATION No. 25 – The Committee recommends that the federal Minister of Communications convene a round-table discussion with the provincial ministers responsible for film and video classification on the subject of developing a universal film, video and television program classification system. (Page 65)

RECOMMENDATION No. 26 – The Committee recommends that the federal Minister of Justice, in collaboration with his provincial counterparts, study the matter of extremely violent forms of entertainment, such as slasher and snuff films, to determine the criminal legislative measures needed to control them and to design such legislation to conform to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. (Page 67)

RECOMMENDATION No. 27 – As the Minister of Justice ultimately introduces criminal legislation to control extremely violent forms of entertainment, such as slasher and snuff films, and proceeds to amend the

Criminal Code accordingly, the Committee recommends that the Minister of Finance review and, if necessary, revise Schedule VII of the Customs Tariff to ensure that it complements the necessary amendments to the Criminal Code (page 68).
