
Public Meeting

of

ASSEMBLY TASK FORCE ON ADOLESCENT VIOLENCE

“Testimony regarding the influence of violence, as depicted in the popular media, on the behavior patterns and value systems of young persons”

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MEMBERS OF TASK FORCE PRESENT:

Assemblyman Paul DiGaetano, Chairman
Assemblyman Tom Smith, Vice Chairman
Assemblyman Samuel D. Thompson
Assemblywoman Mary T. Previte



ALSO PRESENT:

Assemblywoman Barbara Wright
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ASSEMBLYMAN PAUL DiGAETANO (Chairman): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen and members of the committee (*sic*). Welcome back to the new year.

Assemblywoman Wright, we thank you for joining us today, sitting in on this panel.

We have some witnesses signed up to testify prior to today's meeting. They are not all here yet, but we will begin with those who are. For anyone who is unaware, this is the, I guess, fourth hearing now by this Assembly Task Force on Adolescent Violence. And we will begin our testimony today with Mr. Robert Peters who is President of Morality in the Media.

Mr. Peters, would you please come forward.

If the red light is on -- I think they are red. If the light is on any one of those mikes, they are transmitting. (referring to PA microphone)

ROBERT PETERS: Thank you for inviting me. I don't always, or usually, prepare a written statement, but I have done so today.

My name is Robert Peters. I am a graduate of Dartmouth and NYU School of Law. I began my work at Morality in Media in May 1985 as a staff attorney. I was named President in September 1992. Founded in New York City, Morality in Media is a national, not-for-profit, interfaith organization that works through constitutional means to combat obscenity or hard-core pornography and to uphold standards of decency in the media.

We are also concerned about the related problem of gratuitous, and often graphic, sadistic violence in various media: television, films, music, rap, video, and computer games.

That violence occurs in real life, no one can deny. And few would argue that the media should never, under any circumstances, depict or describe an act of deadly or injurious violence. I recently watched *Glory*, a film about the heroic efforts of African-American Union soldiers in the Civil War. I wouldn't recommend it for small children, but the film's graphic violence was not gratuitous. Many PBS documentaries about the two World Wars of this century have depicted the horror of war. I wouldn't recommend them for small children, but none depicted violence in a gratuitous manner. *Private Ryan* and *Shindler's List* also depict horrific violence, but again the purpose is to instruct, not sensationalize.

While I have often wondered why the crime of choice for drama is usually murder, often multiple murders, it is clear that drama can treat the details of murder in an essentially responsible manner. One technique is to not show the persons being murdered. As I see it, however, there are four problems with media violence.

The first problem is that there is simply too much of it. Dr. George Gerbner, dean emeritus of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has been the most eloquent spokesperson for the view that apart from any causal relationship, connection to real-life violence, the glut of media violence desensitizes viewers and contributes to what he calls the mean world syndrome.

I would add that the glut of media violence also robs young people of valuable opportunities to view programs in which others successfully deal with real-life problems not involving violence or to participate in a wide, infinite variety of constructive, and often rewarding, activities. While some

violent programs do certainly provide positive role models, few youth will become police officers, private detectives, prosecutors, defense attorneys who always represent the good guys, vampire slayers, or defenders against alien beings.

A second problem with media violence is that much of it can easily be imitated. To help make the point, I will digress for a few moments to my own childhood. I was born in 1949 and raised in a small town in Illinois. Back then there was plenty of violence in films, but it consisted mostly of war violence, primarily World War II violence, cowboy and Indian violence, good guy-bad guy violence, cops and robbers where the good guys always won, and horror films like *The Monster from the Black Lagoon*. I still have a picture of my brother and I with our cowboy hats on and six guns dangling from their holsters. I still remember the thrill of playing war games with a plastic World War II carbine and wanting to be a G-man. But there weren't opportunities to do away with other cowboys or hostile Indians, Germans or Japanese or with gangsters or monsters.

I would add that I grew up in a community where hunting was common and where many people, including my father, had a gun in the home. Killing each other or our classmates, teachers, or neighbors, however, never entered our young, impressionable minds. Today, things are different. Gone are the industry standards that prevented film producers and directors from glorifying the bad guys. And the bad guys are no longer cowboys, hostile armies, or denizens of the underworld or a black lagoon. They are often troubled, youthful characters with real-life counterparts found in our nation's

troubled homes and communities, and they engage in behavior kids can readily imitate.

A third problem with today's media violence is the manner in which it is depicted. It is one thing to show a shooting or stabbing. It is another thing to show it in sadistic slow motion with a bullet or bullets or knife penetrating the body, the blood spurting, and a body part dangling or flying and to do so not for the purpose of showing the horror of violence, but rather to portray it as an exciting, pleasurable, and effective way to handle problems.

I still remember as a child listening to football games on the radio and anxiously waiting to go out and play football when the game was over. Why should we be surprised to discover that kids now fantasize about injuring or killing a peer, neighbor, retailer, or cop when that is what they are constantly exposed to and what is made so exciting and appealing?

The fourth problem with media violence is Hollywood's infatuation with guns. Instead of portraying guns as, at best, a necessary evil when used as weapons, guns, especially handguns, are portrayed as a means of empowerment, as a component of being tough, and/or a way to be in control of a situation. Why should we be surprised to discover that so many kids want a gun? If Hollywood stopped glorifying possession and use of handguns, there would be far fewer crimes committed by youth with handguns.

The defenders of media violence often say that there is no conclusive scientific proof that media violence causes or contributes to real-life criminal violence. This is probably true, but that doesn't mean there isn't a large body of evidence showing a connection between media violence and real-life violence.

I often say that when common sense, personal experience, anecdotal evidence, and social science research all point in the same direction, the burden of proof should shift from those who argue that there is a connection to those who say there isn't. Clearly, common sense says there is a connection. Kids learn not only by observing or listening to persons who are actually in their physical presence, but also from observing or listening to what they see or hear on film or TV or video or computer. Most of us also know from personal experience that kids learn from and imitate what they watch or hear on film or TV or video or audio recordings and it wasn't always good.

There is a mountain of anecdotal evidence often found in local newspaper accounts of crimes which indicate that viewing antisocial behavior on film, TV, video, computer game or listening to antisocial behavior being extolled in music or rap lyrics negatively impact many young people. Finally, there is a mountain of social science research showing a link between viewing antisocial behavior on TV and real-life antisocial behavior.

What then can society do about the problem of media violence? Part of the answer is unquestionably a greater effort to raise public awareness. In particular, parents, educators, and clergy must be made to understand that youth are often negatively affected by what they see and hear in popular culture and that every reasonable effort must be made to shield them from harmful media influences and to educate them about how media affects them.

Every effort must also be made to impress upon those that produce and distribute entertainment that along with their rights comes a weighty responsibility to exercise those rights in a manner that does not carelessly or recklessly cause harm to others. If efforts at moral persuasion fail, the finger

of public disapproval and, whenever possible, economic persuasion must also be brought to bear. While public officials cannot do the whole job, their added voice will strengthen the grassroots efforts.

The last remedy is the law. Personally, I would much rather see the media voluntarily get its house in order without resort to law. But if the media fails or refuses to accept its responsibility, then I would suggest two different legal approaches to address the problems.

The first is a law making it a crime to knowingly distribute or exhibit to minors entertainment that contains specified types of violence. While the courts have often invalidated such laws -- and I list two cases which have done so -- the Supreme Court has never held that the Constitution forbids all laws restricting children's access to media violence. The challenge, as I see it, is in the drafting.

The second approach would make those who distribute media violence civilly liable in limited circumstances for the foreseeable harms that result. The courts have not looked favorably on efforts to hold media companies civilly liable for such injuries and to some extent with good reason. No matter how responsibly a media company acts, there is always the possibility that some tormented soul or depraved sociopath might get the wrong idea. And even responsible people can at times make errors in judgment.

Clearly, the barrier for establishing liability would have to be somewhat high. But in my view it is unconscionable to let media companies off the hook. No matter how irresponsibly, recklessly, or with depraved indifference they act, unless they legally incite the conduct-- They almost have

to say, “Do it right now.” And if they don’t do that, they don’t meet the legal standard of incitement, and virtually, they will never meet the legal standard of incitement as it currently is understood. There simply must be a rule of reason in this area of law, which has so far eluded the courts.

I should add that in my view a law requiring content ratings on destructive garbage may help a relatively few parents, but content ratings alone will not solve the problems.

In conclusion, I am not here to indict the media for all or even most of the violent antisocial behavior that occurs in society. Clearly other causes are at work, including drugs, the proliferation of handguns, dysfunctional families, and the vicious cycle of poverty. But to go to the other extreme and to argue that popular culture is not a factor is, at best, a display of ignorance and at worst a purposeful attempt to deceive the public and this Task Force. As I see it, there is no one easy solution to this problem. But a concerted effort on the part of all concerned will bring meaningful progress and in the long run spare many youth, as well as their families, peers, neighbors, and communities, much heartbreak and tragedy.

I have included in my packet, which I gave to you, some background material. Particularly, this book (indicating) has a section on the research on violence. But I suspect you will probably have a witness who is a professional in that area, which I do not claim to be. I’ve also included some anecdotal evidence, and I can give you a lot more in terms of newspaper accounts of various crimes where there is at least evidence that the kid watched this film or saw that television program or was doing this video, violent computer game or listening to this rock album or this rap music. I’ve got files.

And we certainly do not have a universal access to the news media. We don't have a clipping service. It's just the things that I spot in the area press and that some of our members occasionally send to us.

But to me the evidence that there is a connection is indisputable. Again that doesn't mean that we should view the media as the whole or even the biggest part of this problem. But it does say to me that they are part of the problem, and a good case could be made that until they start cleaning up their house, this problem is not going to be solved.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Thank you very much, Mr. Peters.

Are there any questions from the committee members?

Assemblyman Thompson.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: I would just like to say that I agree with a number of the comments you made in the early part of your testimony. While 14 years older than you, my background is very similar. I grew up as a very young kid watching Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, the westerns on Saturday, and there was always violence in these movies. The cartoons -- I mean, Woody Woodpecker and Porky Pig and everybody -- they always beat each other up, and we always sat there and we laughed about it. It didn't turn me into some kind of violent creature and the same with most of my friends. But there is no question that there are some individuals that are more susceptible to violence than others.

I think that the problem that we face relative to the media today -- while they are rather gratuitous in the amount of violence and gore that they put into it, I think a bigger problem is, as you mentioned, the morality that

they display in it in that virtually very frequently the criminals get away with it, not only get away with it, but they make out, they get rewards, etc. And it's not just the movies, but it's also TV.

A couple of shows that are on right now that are, you know, ranked tops in the nation, *Law and Order*, *The Practice*, probably more than 50 percent of the time they portray somebody who is obviously guilty, committed the crime, and they get away with it. They portray the prosecution as dimwits who are always stumbling over their feet or committing illegal acts, and etc. Same thing relative to the government. The government, the CIA, and etc., they are always the bad guys. And I think this is what impacts the youth more so than just the amount of violence in there, that they are being told that, hey, very frequently you are going to get away with it, you're going to get rewarded for it. It's the government and the government agents, the police, whoever -- they are the guys that are going to get it in the neck. I think that's a major problem with what we see in the media today.

MR. PETERS: Just a quick response to that. I don't ever remember growing up and anybody wanting to be a bad guy in terms of role modeling a TV character. Everybody wanted to be a good guy. When you had Elliot Ness, nobody wanted to be Al Capone. It was portrayed in a way that if you were going to be involved in violence, you were going to be a law enforcement agent fighting the bad people. And obviously sometimes, you know, the good people turn out to be bad people. But when so often the heroes of violence are not good people, it sends a very bad message. I wanted to be in the armed services, I wanted to do this and that, but everything I

wanted to do was lawful because those were the role models that I watched as a kid and listened to on the radio. And today kids don't have that anymore.

You know the antihero came along in the '60s, which was also my college time, and it's never gone away. Kids don't have the clear, set role models, and unfortunately, oftentimes they don't get it in the home.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Assemblywoman Wright.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: Mr. Chairman, through you. Mr. Peters, you started to get at my point when the transition took place. Because what we are talking about is robbing children's childhood, I think, by not having positive role models and that the good guys don't win.

What is going on since 1960? Is that the beginning, as you must know, that the chronological evolution of this massive violent bad guy win issue?

MR. PETERS: I'll tell you, I stopped watching it for enjoyment two decades ago plus. But I sometimes think that-- I feel sorry, with all the talk, you know, boys and girls these days-- In some ways, I feel sorry for kids because it seems that the only, in one sense, positive role models that boys have are violent men. You know, you go back and you watch the great movies of old and all the great human interest stories and the character that was developed in those stories and the admirable qualities that came out. You don't have much of that anymore. You basically got macho guys that are great with their fists or a gun or whatever the heck it is. But I don't know, I would say that-- So to me there aren't many genuinely positive role models in the sense of somebody that truly exemplifies great character and moral character.

More often the positive person is a violent person. But clearly the antihero is still alive and well in the entertainment media.

I make a practice of looking through the movie reviews every Wednesday and Friday in New York City because that's when they come out. And I don't read them all with detail, but I am looking for certain things that catch my attention. And it's just amazing how many films-- And basically, I don't know, as the film industry is moving away from the studios and into the independents, a lot of the independent producers are at war with or in total rebellion against society. And they may be good films from an artistic perspective, but the heroes of these films are not often very good role models for young people. And we all know that young people flock to the movies that they least should be going to see.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: Mr. Chairman, can I just-- I became exposed to this more recently because I'm not a moviegoer-- And you have young children. And so I took an eight-year-old to their first movie. I took them to *Prince of Egypt*, and I expected this to be, you know, a children's film. And what you have helped me understand, Mr. Peters, in your testimony is that basically the good guy won.

But I was just overwhelmed by the action in the film, and during the war, even though it was positive, I just felt disgusted by the amount of violence because it was a war. If I'm reacting, I can't imagine what-- The seven -- eight-year-old had his popcorn, and he just ate his popcorn, and we didn't have a lot of discussion because it was very deep from the biblical sense and I was missing some-- I hardly saw the (indiscernible), but I sure saw the

war. I also saw -- I forget -- someone who died, and they were laid out like a mummy in a wake kind of thing.

I was overwhelmed by this whole thing. And I hope to continue to work with this child in terms of explaining what it meant. I guess it's just that-- I guess we are from the sensitivity-- We didn't grow up with this. I don't attend a lot of violent movies, so I'm just not sensitized to it.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Assemblyman Smith.

ASSEMBLYMAN SMITH: Would you say that the wars that we have been through, World War II, Korean War, and the Vietnam War, have a lot to do with the violence in our country today? Because our alternative seems to be violence against each other?

MR. PETERS: Well, again, of course anecdotal, to me if-- Well, it depends on-- I grew up with World War II movies, and if anything, to me-- I don't know. And I know I wasn't unique in the situation where I grew up. If that violence had an effect-- If watching that type of violence had an effect, it made you want to be a soldier, it made you want to defend your country. The old World War II movies were very patriotic, purposefully so. They inspired-- They were intended to inspire self-sacrifice and heroism, and they did. I think they did for a whole generation.

To me-- I was a very aggressive kid, but most of the aggression that I viewed in media was either clearly bad -- and I never really had any interest in exemplifying that violence. There was always a channel for it. And today it is my observation that there are very few positive channels for violence

that kids see in the media. I mean we have gluts of cops and robber shows and whatever. And I'm not--

Again I think you know Hollywood in the old days had a broad spectrum of human interest films where character and dialogue-- My wife and I often comment that we watch a lot of PBS and we say, "God help these kids if they can't appreciate the development of character on screen." If they have to see constant changes and action and sound bites because they don't have the attention span to watch, to see a character develop by a good director or a good actor or actress-- You know everything has got to be moving, and so often it is clearly sex or violence that is the subject of the action.

But I don't know. I mean to me war is a painful necessity of life, and it seems to me that-- I'm not a historian, but there have been a lot of wars before the ones we had this century, but the average kid doesn't want to join the Marines. The average kid-- That's not what the violence of our films today is inspiring kids to do, to become part of the military.

To me what is the question is, how does violence in the media affect kids? I just say, from my perspective, we played World War II, we had six guns, we played cowboys and Indians, we wrestled, we played football, we did all of these aggressive sort of things, but we weren't exposed to a constant diet of thrill killing of solving every personal problem or some tormented soul goes out and does terrible things and the director portrays this guy as a wonderful human being somehow. You come down being sympathetic with him. He was right, society is wrong even though he killed this person. That's the kind of media messages that kids get today. In my opinion, it affects some of them to think that way.

I don't think I was ever exposed to that type of media message growing up. I mean, you know the bad guys-- Obviously there were limits to the old media in terms of its stereotypes and whatever, but it didn't send the message that it was okay to kill your neighbor because you didn't like your neighbor. For whatever your reasons, it just didn't send that message.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Assemblywoman Previte.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN PREVITE: Mr. Chairman, I think you know that I work every day of the week with boys who kill, girls who kill, who rape, who hurt people. For 25 years I have watched these children carefully and listened to them, interviewed them, sat knee to knee with them listening to their stories. There is no question in my mind that the diet of violence that they hear in the movies, that they listen to in their rap music tells them it is okay to be disrespectful to authority, to violate women. It will perhaps astonish you when we interview girls in our center who also perpetrate crimes. It is not uncommon for us to have girls say that it's okay for boys to beat on them, for a man to beat on a woman, it's expected. They have listened to this. It's just part of the world.

They eat a diet to their souls. They feed their souls on violence, pillaging, raping, blood, guts, and war. You cannot tell me that that does not affect a child. I guess the Bible says that you are what you think. And if we are filling children's minds with this, then clearly we are shaping their world because that is all they really know.

When I have interviewed boys about who their role models are -- because I wanted them to be like me, that my role models were teachers, my Sunday school teacher, or a coach. I had a boy look me in the eye sitting in

my office, and he said it is not like that. “We don’t have teachers we admire. We don’t have doctors out there. The role model is the drug dealer on the corner with the fast cars.” And that is a reality that we have to accept because that is the way they are being shaped. I think the telling fact is that today among the boys and girls that I have worked with the word bad means good.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Thank you very much.

Mr. Peters, thank you for your testimony.

We will next hear from Robert Kubey, professor of journalism at Rutgers University.

R O B E R T W. K U B E Y, Ph.D.: Good morning. Thank you for inviting me. I will try in the later part of what is my written testimony to make some suggestions -- having thought about this issue a fair amount -- suggestions that a legislative body such as yours or the larger legislature of the Assembly could consider.

It’s very difficult to address what is being done in Hollywood. Indeed, the Federal government can barely address it. Hollywood is increasingly creating material for a worldwide market. One needs to recognize that. A state government is rather limited, but I think there are things that we can do.

I’m Professor Robert Kubey. I direct the Master’s Program in Communication and Information Studies at Rutgers - The State University of New Jersey in New Brunswick. And I am the former research director of the Media Education Laboratory at Rutgers Newark. I co-authored one of the technical reviews in the 1982 National Institute of Mental Health 10-year review study on television and have previously testified on the matter of

television violence before a subcommittee of the United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary.

It's long been established that people, especially young people, can and do imitate or model some of the violence and aggression that they witness in film and on television. The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee Report of 1972 drew this conclusion 27 years ago. Indeed, the 1982 National Institute of Mental Health 10-year follow-up study concluded the same thing. And, in fact, that study noted that the research literature had moved from "whether or not there is an effect to seeking explanations for the effect." And what I have capsulized at this point, if you talk to knowledgeable researchers who followed this literature, there is no question in anyone's mind any longer that there isn't some kind of direct effect. How powerful it is and who is affected these issues can be debated.

The American Psychological Association Report of 1993 focused on four long-term effects that they believe had been established.

1. Increased aggressiveness and antisocial behavior.

This is long-term effects of viewing violence.

2. Increased fear of becoming a victim.

3. Increased desensitization to violence and to victims of violence.

4. Increased appetite for violence in entertainment and in real life.

It is also widely accepted among media researchers that the modeling effects of mediated violence are particularly prevalent among persons who are at risk, that is, young people and adults who are psychologically unstable.

In the last decade the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National PTA, and numerous other organizations have advised parents about the dangers of heavy violence viewing. Many pediatricians now routinely advise parents in their practices to limit television viewing generally and to limit especially violence viewing and material that might frighten children.

Desensitization caused by heavy exposure to violence in the media is arguably as important a matter to consider as modeling. If a prospective perpetrator believes that the impact of shooting someone will be far less substantial than it would be in reality, there is an increased chance that a person might pull the trigger or put themselves in harm's way. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of desensitization is anecdotal and comes to us from emergency room physicians who have reported that some young people admitted to the ER with a gunshot wound are surprised at how much being shot hurts.

While no one has established media violence as the cause, it is widely thought that seeing hundreds of people shot in film and on television and not react with substantial pain or after being shot go on to complete various heroic acts has created an impression, perhaps combined with wishful thinking, that if you were merely winged by a bullet that it won't really hurt that much. Although his credibility is greatly at issue, one of the two boys in the Arkansas shooting last year -- the school shooting in Jonesboro -- claimed that he didn't think shooting at his class schoolmates would really hurt anyone much.

The Arkansas shootings are also of particular concern with a specific regard to the extraordinarily intensive media coverage causing a number of us at the time to predict that there would be copycat shootings that would follow. The most notable of these occurred a couple of months later in Springfield, Oregon.

It is easy to see how the vast media coverage afforded the Jonesboro shootings could help prime some young minds with ideas that shooting classmates might be one way of dealing with frustrations at school. Such media coverage might well suggest to a lonely, alienated young person desperately needing and seeking attention that one way to get attention is to perpetrate such an act. I wrote an op-ed for the *Christian Science Monitor* on this topic this past May and have included it with my written testimony.

And what of the overall, cumulative impact of hundreds of hours of violence viewed, year in and out, over 10 or 20 years? Is it more or less probable that the school shootings we witnessed this past spring would occur in a society that traffics constantly in extraordinarily violent media images compared, say, with a society where such images don't occur at all? Would such shootings have been as likely to occur were, say, even one-tenth of all of the shooting deaths we witness in our fictional media replaced by images and story lines where people worked to resolve their differences nonviolently through talk and negotiation?

Now, what might be done? I would encourage consideration of a broad-based approach intended to reduce aggression and violence among youth generally. I've tried to consider what might be reasonable for a state legislative committee such as yours. I have six suggestions. They won't take very long.

1. Media education for students. Various forms of formal media education are now being delivered in countries around the world with Australia in the lead. Now that country requires media education from kindergarten through 12th grade. All the kids in Australia are getting educated about how the media construct images.

With specific regard to violence, the Center for Media Literacy in Los Angeles has created a set of self-contained educational teaching units and videos called *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media*. These are designed to help school-aged children in three different age-groupings. They have grades four and five, grades six to eight, grades nine to twelve. It helps kids see how media violence is created and to contrast it with real-life violence. There is also a unit designed specifically for parents and caregivers.

These units have been well received in a number of locations around the United States. The program is designed to: (a) reduce exposure of young people to media violence; (b) change the impact of violence that is viewed; and (c) help parents and children find alternatives to violent entertainment.

One activity, for example, challenges students to write a plot and create a cast for a movie that would attract a large audience but without any violence. In having older teens work with younger ones and through such exercises as I have just described, it is reported that students become more aware and more vigilant about the violent images they are exposed to. State agencies might explore the value of such educational programs and also consider funding evaluation research of their efficacy.

Ideally, educational media violence interventions would be set within a larger context of more broadly designed media education curricula. The State government might fund pilot media education programs to develop effective interventions and test them for broader implementation.

2. Media education for parents. Media education goals with regard to violence and other social problems, such as drug abuse, must also be introduced and taught to parents through PTAs, scouting, and religious organizations. Indeed, private schools and private groups often have a freer hand to impart what some would call values education than do today's public schools.

3. Public service ads and announcements. The State might consider developing a series of ads for print publication or public service announcements for radio and/or television that would make more clear the distinction between much fictionalized violence and the real thing. Very specific messages could be developed and pretested for at-risk populations or for parents and for other adults who work with children.

4. Teaching nonviolent conflict resolution. It's not nearly enough to teach what not to do. Interventions are much more successful when we also teach and reward what to do, what desirable behaviors we would like to see. Indeed, the State of New Jersey might distinguish itself by pioneering pro-social messages and curricula focusing on nonviolent conflict resolution techniques. The media teach people how to commit murder and inflict mayhem on one another or scream invective at one another on gratuitous TV talk shows, but there is precious little media or educational presentation of

positive means of people effectively working through their problems using discussion and negotiation.

5. Caution in news reporting. Editors of newspapers and producers of radio and television news ought to be encouraged to accurately cover violence and to exercise special caution when using banner headlines or leading news broadcasts with sensationalized stories that are particularly prone to the phenomenon of copycatting.

First Amendment rights must be respected and upheld, of course, but one can cite the recent example of the editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times* who, this past May, deliberately chose to cover the Springfield, Oregon, shooting on Pages 2 and 3 of his paper, rather than running a banner headline and photo on the front page where even more children and teenagers would have seen the story jumping out at them from news boxes and from the newspaper lying on the living room floor. Interestingly, the *Sun-Times* was deluged with congratulations, with one reader E-mailing, “Brace yourself for accusations of responsible journalism.”

Once again, the role for the legislative branch of government is not clear or simple here. A statement of sentiment or bringing the Governor on board to help deliver a message about journalistic responsibility could be considered.

6. A statewide educational conference on media violence. A statewide conference of educators, parent groups, journalists, youth agency heads, and religious leaders could have real value in sensitizing responsible adults to provide more oversight both in how media stories are created and whether and how young people are exposed to media violence.

As I wrote in my *Christian Science Monitor* op-ed this past spring, “No one can predict or readily prevent the next episode of some sad, alienated person running about with a loaded weapon. But we can do something about children and adults regularly exposed to media images that can’t help but be imitated by the most at-risk members of society while also desensitizing many more audience members to the pain and misery of others.”

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Thank you.

Are there any questions of Professor Kubey? (no response)

Thank you very much for being here today, professor.

We will next hear from Paul Arthur, professor of English and film at Montclair State University.

P A U L A R T H U R: Yes, good morning.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Good morning.

MR. ARTHUR: I should start by saying that my perspective is that of a media educator and a critic, rather than that of a social scientist or researcher or public policy expert. I have been teaching about popular film and TV for over 25 years and have been writing in mainstream and also academic publications for nearly that long.

For me there are simply two important questions to consider. First, is there a direct or indirect relationship between representations of violence in the media and actual lethal violence committed by American adolescents? And, second, if the linkage exists between violent images and actual crimes -- and like the previous speakers I am indeed convinced that

there is a relationship -- what, if anything, can we do to respond to or alter the harmful effects to the ultimate benefit of society?

No one now doubts that the nature of violence in film and TV, both in terms of quantity and also quality, and I use the latter term advisedly, had changed radically over the last 30 years. The rules or conventions governing the showing of mayhem are simply not what they were in the '60s or even the '70s. Most obviously there has been a marked increase in the number of violent acts to which young children are exposed as well as a steep reduction in the age levels at which media violence is consumed. And it's been this combination of factors, I think more than anything else, that have led to claims of significant influence on the behavior of especially adolescent males.

Just as important, however, are changes in the content of violence, which, as a previous speaker suggested, has grown increasingly more graphic, more inventive, and more brutally realistic. But alongside of these changes in content there have also been changes in the visual forms by which violence is presented, and this has been something that I think has been unfortunately downplayed.

For the last several decades the entertainment industries have been busy inventing entirely new technologies of violence, ways of showing and psychologically exploiting physical brutality that were simply unknown to previous generations. While we researchers speak of a quantitative onslaught of violent images, they tend not to pay attention to the shifts in presentation. Some of the basic data on the current state of violent consumption in our culture is alarming but also probably familiar.

By age five, a child will witness over 200 hours of violent images on TV. By age fourteen he or she will see over 13,000 separate killings. By eighteen the average American will have watched 200,000 violent acts and 40,000 murders. Roughly 20 percent of five- to seven-year-olds have seen movies such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*. By the time they reach eleven, 89 percent of American kids have seen this type of movie.

A dozen or more national and international studies conducted since the 1960s have attempted to establish causal connections between the amount of TV or movie watching and criminal behavior in our society. Two National Institute of Mental Health studies from the 1980s concluded that “violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and adolescents.” And one of the most ambitious independent inquiries, Dr. Leonard Eron, who examined subjects in New York State at ages eight and then again at nineteen and then again at thirty, Dr. Eron states unequivocally, “There can no longer be any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime, and violence in society, and this affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels, and at all levels of intelligence.”

This is obviously very bad news. Unfortunately it’s also terribly misleading. I’ve looked into some of the research protocols involved in these studies, and they are from, my standpoint, deeply and perhaps fatally flawed. One problem involves the abstraction of a category referred to as “violence” from hugely different contexts of meaning, visual practice, and viewing conditions. Stated simply, there is not just one thing called violence which could or could not promote real criminal acts. Common sense dictates that the

more violent the film or TV show, the greater the potential it has to influence behavior. However, no such correlation has ever been found. Common sense tells us that media representations which force the viewer to identify with the perpetrator of a violent act, rather than with the victim, are more likely to predispose one towards or to incite imitative behavior. There appears to be no such linkage.

The same might be said for films and TV shows which fail to deal with the aftermath, with the physical pain and the psychological consequences, of violence. Again there are no such findings. Researchers argue that constant exposure of children to media violence has a desensitizing effect or that it leads to “a confusion between reality and fantasy.” This may be true and I believe it is true, but what does it mean for our attempts to reckon with, to deal with, confront this problem and the very precise mechanisms of influence that it might carry?

In isolated cases, perpetrators of violent crime have testified that they were motivated by or copied a particularly violent media scene. John Hinckley is perhaps the best known example. Yet we also ought to remember that far greater numbers of violent criminals have cited the Bible as inspirations for their acts. Too often, I think, studies reduce complex systems of visualization and independent perception to an overly deterministic model based on stimulus response.

The experts would have us believe that violence is violence regardless of what’s actually shown, how it’s shown, and in what types of stories or fictional or imaginative registers it appears. That is for some of these studies a film such as *Natural Born Killers* is said to possess exactly the same

psychological valence or potential as *Silence of the Lambs* or as daytime soap operas or for that matter *Saving Private Ryan*. I'm not an apologist for violent media, but I am afraid that this approach can't take us very far since it produces both bad science and in its wake perhaps bad public policy.

If we are unable to discriminate between different levels, or among different levels, of media violence, if we are unable that is to figure out the most harmful areas of content or the worst genres or the worst representational strategies, how can we begin to address what we all admit is a serious problem, which is the power of images to create and glorify violent models of personal transcendence?

Since as a society we value the principle of free expression, the imposition of -- or in the case of Hollywood movies a return to -- some external official agency of regulation or censorship is unlikely and probably for the majority of citizens intolerable. Movie and television rating systems, which have, in any case, focused more on sex than violence, have proved completely ineffective in an age of vast distribution of videotape, cable TV, and the Internet.

Devices such as the V-Chip have only a limited application and, as with other a priori remedies, only make the forbidden images seem more exotic. Public pressure on media industries to curb on-screen violence is a possible solution, but I believe it is feasible only if it is supported by long-term economic boycotts, a tactic which requires a nearly impossible political consensus if it is to avoid charges of favoritism or opportunism.

I can offer but a single recommendation and perhaps not surprisingly it concerns education, or more precisely what has come to be

known as media literacy. Violent images have a unique ability to capture the imaginations and hence to effect the attitudes of young viewers. Unlike photographs or comic books or literary descriptions or even song lyrics, they are at one and the same time completely believable, ultrareal, and completely fantastic. They can present a world which looks very much like the one we inhabit and yet operates according to very different physical, to say nothing of ethical, standards and laws where, for instance, the deadly use of firearms is seen at once effortless and thrilling. Part of the pleasure taken in these images involves a balance between emotional distance and vicarious participation, a mixture that many psychologists think nourishes all sorts of conscience and unconscious antisocial desires.

The visual worlds created by film and TV are densely constructed, yet they appear to us as seamlessly transparent extensions of our lived realities. They are, in a word, mystifying. I believe the only way to begin to rob these images of at least some of their potency is to strip away this highly seductive surface and allow viewers access to visual and audio mechanisms such as editing techniques, camera angles, music, and so on, that induce potentially dangerous fantasies of power and domination of others.

Students frequently comment to me after taking a basic course in film and TV that they can no longer watch their favorite shows in the same way. This is something I always take as a compliment. Some of the students insist that having taken such a course all the fun is gone. But others have reported a heightened sense of insight or control over the viewing process that they say not only does not diminish their pleasure, but enhances it. To know

how a magical illusion is produced, to know why it's capable of producing such strong emotional reactions in us is to begin to neutralize its unconscious hold.

A concerted effort at demystification of violent images would involve taking media literacy nearly as seriously as competence in reading and writing. It would involve helping elementary and high school students to decode, analyze, and interpret complex elements which constitute the language of motion pictures. As a public initiative, this idea so far, at least in this country, has been realized in piecemeal fashion when it's been realized at all. At present only 11 states require instruction in media literacy; although, many school districts around the country offer courses on an elective basis.

Among those involved with the tracking and growth of media literacy and also clinically studying its effects on children, Julie Dobrow, a professor of childhood development at Tufts University, has asserted that "media literacy is becoming increasingly important in political debate and has direct application for communications policy in our schools and ultimately in our homes." Newspapers and magazines have begun to show increasing interests. For instance, a recent article in the *New York Times* dated the 3rd of January of this year describes the excellent work of the media education center in Manhattan, part of an alternative middle and high school program in which mostly inner-city kids are taught not only to make their own videos, but to analyze the visual practices of popular media including MTV.

In the not too distant future, it's my fervent hope that media literacy will become a basic requirement for high school graduation. We have been convinced that repeated and accelerating classes in sex education and drug awareness have a generally positive influence on destructive patterns of

behavior. The same might be true of media education; although, admittedly, I don't know of a single shred of evidence to support this notion.

I would further argue that we not only need to intervene much earlier in young people's experiences of media, but we need to train large numbers of teachers in media literacy techniques. Beginning this year in 1999 the State of New Jersey has mandated that secondary teachers must take a 100 hours of instruction over five years in order to maintain their teaching certification.

Perhaps this Task Force might consider recommending that teachers in the humanities, especially English teachers and social science teachers, be required to take courses in media literacy at local colleges and universities with a goal of eventually establishing standardized curricular guidelines for teaching about media in our public schools. Whether or not we are able to scientifically measure the inhibiting effects of such a policy on adolescent violence -- and I'm not sure we ever will be able to -- I feel that we would be making an important contribution to the ideals of an informed, critically active, and ethically responsible citizenship in a media-saturated culture.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Thank you, Professor Arthur.

Any questions from the committee?

Assemblyman Thompson.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: First, when we speak of violence in the media, and so on, our first thoughts are relative to movies and TV shows and, etc., but perhaps an equally troubling situation is our news media. Thus,

when do you ever watch a news show that they aren't not out covering violence there, some violent acts? And, in fact, the more violent the act, the more they are like flies on honey. They are all over the place, and the coverage becomes very extensive and very detailed. What about the impact of the news media coverage of violence as opposed to what is fictional violence?

MR. ARTHUR: I don't have any real experience with studies done on news media violence. But what I can tell you is that a very large difference is that for the most part, when TV channels cover violent acts, they are covering the act, hopefully--

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: Of course, we had one earlier speaker spoke of the Jonesboro, Arkansas, shooting.

MR. ARTHUR: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN THOMPSON: As soon as it occurred, the media spread it all across the country, and it was said that there will be copycats, and there were. This again was a consequence of the news media coverage as opposed to fictionalized accounts.

MR. ARTHUR: But the-- I think to separate that to say, yes, there are going to be copycats, but the manner in which that action is copycatted I think can't be reduced to a single stimulus. That is, kids know, or they think they know, what it feels like to hold assault rifles and shoot at targets not because of what they have seen in the news media, but rather what they have seen in fictional TV and movies.

And so, yes, is there is evidence that there is some copycatting that's directly related to news media? I think there is. But I think that the copycatting, the imitative behavior, doesn't come from a single source, but

rather is supported or amplified by a young person's experience in fictional entertainment.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Anyone else? (no response)

Thank you very much, Professor.

The last testimony of the day will come from Gerry Luongo, not Assemblyman Gerry Luongo, but Gerry Luongo of the New Jersey Institute on Violence.

Ma'am, can you just tell me what community your institute is in? It's not placed here--

GERRY LUONGO: It's at the University of Medicine and Dentistry in Newark.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: In Newark, thank you.

Please, proceed.

MS. LUONGO: Dr. Greene, the Executive Director, was asked to testify this morning, and he sends his regrets he is unable to do so. He has testified before this group before. I was not planning on testifying, so I don't have formal remarks for you and I'm kind of winging it, and I appreciate your patience with that.

We do applaud you for your commitment to study this issue from all angles. At the same time, we ask that you use some caution in approaching this problem or its solutions in any oversimplistic manner. It's too easy for us to say it's about the good guys verses the bad guys. It's too easy for us to say it's the white hats and the black hats.

Please keep in mind with all that you have heard this morning that most youth are not violent. Most youth did not copycat those horrific

incidents in the schools, nor did most youth express an interest in it. Most youth were horrified by it, scared by it. Yet, at the same time, most young people are viewing the same movies, they are seeing the same television shows, the same screen. Young people in affluent suburbs are seeing the same gore and violence as young people in the inner cities, yet when we compare the rates of violence of these two groups of people, they are radically different.

We have to ask -- if media has such a tremendous impact on youth violence, then we really need to ask why aren't more youth violent? Why aren't more youth picking up guns and entering gangs? Youth violence-- We would suggest that the institute is more a factor of despair and hopelessness. If you're 13 years old and you truly, truly cannot conceive of living beyond the age of 21 because your peers are dead, because your family has been harmed, because you see no opportunity for success in life, then the risks of violence are less. You are more likely to take great risk with your lives and those around you because they are so small, they are going to end soon anyway.

We've heard a lot about modeling behavior this morning. What we do know is that real violence triggers real violence. Living in a community with gangs, with guns, with domestic violence, you are likely to repeat that behavior. Youth who engage in violence are modeling behavior. They are modeling the behavior in their neighborhoods, they are modeling the behavior in their homes and in the projects. They are not necessarily modeling the television show. They are modeling their own real life.

We are not saying that the media has no impact on youth and violence. We are saying it's maybe less significant than you have been led to believe this morning. You have limited resources, and we would ask that you

would direct those resources on the causes of youth violence that are significant, that are overwhelming such as poverty and racism and despair.

We've heard a little bit this morning, too, about that some of the research may be flawed and there is no consistent definition of what is violence in the research. We heard that some research indicates that television programs increase aggressiveness in young children. And while that may be true, we have to ask, what does that mean? Does that mean that that little boy was aggressive immediately following the show, does it mean he was picking on his little sister, or does it mean he picked up a gun?

There is no consistency in some of this research, and we ask again your caution. We would be happy at the Institute to do -- I don't know how more you want to get into the issue, but we would be happy to do a study for your literature research for you comparing what is out there and what is said and how the research has drawn its conclusions, if that's something you may be interested in.

I really don't have anything else to say. Again we are not saying that the media has no impact, but we are saying that youth violence is very complex, and the young people who are picking up guns are doing so because that's their reality, it's not their fiction.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Thank you, Ms. Luongo.

Let me assure you on behalf of every committee member that this committee and the Legislature will act with all due caution and all do deliberation. I know you focused on the media, but that is one area that I think you would get all legislators to agree is the area that the Legislature might have the least ability to impact one way or another. And I think if you

surveyed all legislators, maybe all elected officials, they might not have a very high opinion of the media for other reasons, not for violence. But I can assure you that this committee will not act in any rash manner and we know--

MS. LUONGO: I didn't mean to imply that.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Okay. We know that there are no simplistic responses, and it may end up that this committee finds that there is no legislative action to be taken, and it could very well come to those conclusions.

But I don't want you to leave these proceedings today thinking that we are focused on the media and that's where we are going to direct our action.

So thank you very much.

Assemblywoman Wright.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: May I just clarify?

You are from an institute at the UMDNJ?

MS. LUONGO: Yes.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: Institute--

MS. LUONGO: The Violence Institute of New Jersey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: And are you a member of the staff?

MS. LUONGO: Yes, I'm staff.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: And are you a physician?

MS. LUONGO: No, I am not a physician. I am a staff member at the Institute.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN WRIGHT: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I just wanted to clarify that.

ASSEMBLYMAN DiGAETANO: Any other questions? (no response)

Thank you very much, ma'am.

That concludes today's testimony. There were two others who had signed up to testify before today's hearing, one who called and canceled this morning, the other, I'm not sure why this person did not show up, but they did not.

So I want to thank you all for your patience with us today, and thank you all for taking time out to be here with us.

(HEARING CONCLUDED)