



# Catholic Courier

DIocese of Rochester, New York ■ Vol. 105 No. 19 ■ Thursday, February 17, 1994 ■ 75¢ ■ 16 Pages

## Should we arrest TV? Some want government censorship, but most critics push media literacy

**THIS MOVIE CONTAINS  
VIOLENT MATERIAL WHICH  
MAY BE UNSUITABLE  
FOR CHILDREN.**

**PARENTAL DISCRETION  
IS ADVISED.**



**THIS POLICE DRAMA  
CONTAINS ADULT  
LANGUAGE AND  
SCENES WITH PARTIAL  
NUDITY. VIEWER  
DISCRETION IS ADVISED.**

**D**uring a Senate hearing last October, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno warned the U.S. television industry that it must substantially curb the amount of violence being shown or the government will intervene.

In so doing, the attorney general echoed a growing consensus among most mass-media observers and average viewers that repeated broadcasting of violence helps bring out and inspire violence in society.

An employee of NBC News, for example, told the *Catholic Courier* that a recent unscientific call-in vote on whether TV violence should be censored garnered 30,917 callers favoring such a measure and only 3,635 voting against it.

The attorney general's tough talk seemed to have achieved the effect those call-in voters wanted. On Feb. 1, the cable TV industry agreed to use an independent panel to rate its shows for violence. It also endorsed a House bill mandating that new TV sets include "V-chip" technology, which would allow parents to block out violent shows.

Broadcasters and cablecasters would transmit a signal with a violent show. A microchip, part of all sets sold in the United States since 1990, would store that information. Parents could block out single shows or all violent shows en masse.

Also on Feb. 1, the four commercial broadcast networks said they would submit their programming for a joint qualitative assessment to be done once a year, also by an outside entity. The networks did not endorse any of the violence regulation bills before Congress, however.

As a result of these actions, Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., said he would hold off, at least for now, from backing legislation intended to reduce TV violence. No other lawmaker in the debate, though, echoed Simon.

Although a minority of observers still contend that TV violence does not cause real violence, critics of the TV industry point to thousands of studies on TV violence undertaken since the 1950s to prove their point.

For example, one study published in 1992 by Dr. Brandon Centerwall of the University of Washington concluded that homicide rates among whites in the United States, Canada and South Africa all increased sharply within 10-15 years after the introduction of television.

In an interview in *Media & Values*, the doctor concluded that "because homicide is primarily an adult activity, children have to age 10-15 years before they are old enough to commit homicides ... Violence doesn't have much of an effect on adult audiences. Violence on TV has enormous effect on what adults do, but that's a result of violence viewed in childhood."

Indeed, many media watchers fear that society is already so numbed and jaded by television and movie violence that real violence will only grow worse in the next few decades.

"There's a real feeling of unease that we've passed some sort of threshold," noted George Comstock, who holds an endowed chair as S.I. Newhouse Professor of Communications at Syracuse University. Comstock is also a nationally known expert on the effects of televised violence.

Comstock's work has shown, among other effects, that children learn social values from TV violence, and those values include approval and applause for characters who choose violence as a way to solve problems.

"It's quite possible that we've created some monsters," he said in a telephone interview with the *Courier*, as he reflected on today's murderers who grew up on TV.

But if violence on TV creates violence in society  
**Continued on page 14**

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