

make a much more durable contribution to enabling youngsters to discover America by putting that money into making the Bill of Rights and the 14th Amendment come alive in classrooms. He can also bring into schools all kinds of Americans who have effectively used constitutional guarantees.

Students could then begin to believe that they actually do share some very basic and personal rights—just as Cesar Chavez, Malcolm X, and William C. Douglas did. Dr. Hackney ought to bring schoolkids into his “national conversations.”

*Nat Hentoff*

## Parental Filters for Television Violence

Although enough red herrings have been employed in the defense of violence on television to cover even the largest TV screen, their fishy nature is apparent. We can readily scrape them off and engage in a serious examination of ways to remove gratuitous violence from the tube. I will show that it is easy to filter out the mayhem and smut on the tube without introducing censorship even of the indirect kind.

Red Herring #1: *Violence in the media doesn't cause violence; poverty and guns do.* The average income of Americans has grown over the last generation and guns have become somewhat more difficult to acquire legally, yet violence has grown by leaps and bounds. Red Herring #1 reflects the curse of thinking in terms of either/or. The fact is that while poverty and guns are major causes of violence, the images we acquire from the media also play a role. The powerful influence of the screen is borne out by the death of the unlucky teenager who learned to play “chicken” with speeding trucks from watching *The Program*, a Disney film. *Beavis and Butthead*, MTV's hit serial, is reported to have convinced a young boy to burn down a mobile home. His two-year old sister was killed in the blaze. Experimental evidence further buttresses these observations. I find particu-

larly convincing a tape showing an infant watching a violent film; as the action grows more abrasive, he attacks the teddy bear in his hands ever more aggressively.

Red Herring #2: *You can't have art without violence*. Drama requires, they tell us, building tension that can later be released. Lady Macbeth will eventually be dragged away by the same antiviolence squads that would today can *Rambo*. Be serious. From *Moby Dick* to *The Old Man and the Sea*, writers have found numerous ways to mount tension and to release it, even to titillate, without squirting blood in your face and pouring body parts all over the screen. Hamlet and company are not in any real danger either. True, we shall always bicker over a few borderline cases, but it's not difficult to distinguish conflicts inherent to a story from gratuitous violence. And when violence must be introduced, it doesn't have to be thrust in the audience's face. Hearing a slap is more subtle but no less effective than watching skin being slashed; seeing a shadow wielding a knife will suffice for most dramas without having the victim's guts spill into her lap. Most important, violence can be framed, as it often is on the evening news, not as a great psychological respite from the day's pressures, but as a vile act that leaves in its wake distraught parents, orphaned infants, and paralyzed youngsters.

Red Herring #3 (the biggest of them all): *Curbing violence will lead willy-nilly to censorship*. True, some proposals might put us on a slippery slope by creating a government or industry agency that would rate TV programs. These proposals might lead to a ban on programs that have triple V (for violence) ratings during the hours that kids are about, as such agencies have done in Europe. A simple technology exists, however, that can enable parents to filter what their children watch, while avoiding government controls on the content of what is produced and marketed by the media.

I call this device parental filters; others refer to it as "VCR-minus." The gadget draws on the same five-digit numbers published daily in newspaper TV listings for coding VCRs (or VCR-plus). All those who have trouble programming their standard-issue VCRs need to do is punch in the correct digits (about as onerous as "dialing" on a touch tone phone) and the VCR will record appropriately. A VCR-minus has the opposite function; it blocks selected programs

from being shown. You can program it once to screen out all Bruce Lee movies for the rest of the year or to block out blue channels permanently.

Parental filters allow parents to select what their children view, without government and without industry-issued ratings. No violation of free speech is involved; on the contrary, it is a parental responsibility to guide what their young children hear, see, and read (in some circles this is called, quite properly, education). The notion, advanced by TV activist Peggy Charren, that parents should simply tell their children what to watch or to turn off the TV, ignores that today's children are often home alone.

The VCR-minus differs from the V-chip favored by Congressman Edward Markey, although the chip may also do the trick. Markey favors obligating TV manufacturers to activate a chip already in all new TV sets so that it can respond to signals of V rating. The chip was originally introduced to provide closed captions for the hearing-impaired, but as Markey explains, it has room on it for the additional encryption. Under Markey's bill, the TV industry would be required to rate its products and to transmit signals that would alert the chip to the extent of violence in the particular show being broadcast. Parents could screen out TV shows on the basis of the violence level they're willing to tolerate for their kids. Because this approach requires the cooperation of TV manufacturers and broadcasters, I prefer parental filters, *which leave the choice completely to parents and require no cooperation from any other party.*

Over scores of lunches and radio call-in shows, I have sung the merits of parental filters before numerous groups. In every case, someone has snickered and suggested Red Herring #4: *Parents cannot operate such devices; they will have to rely on their children, who will disarm them in a jiffy.* When I point out how easy a VCR-minus is to operate and that the children at issue will be young, not advanced adolescents, someone inevitably raises Red Herring #5: *Those parents who most need to control their sets will be least likely to bother.* "Those parents" is a phrase that is sometimes racist and always snobbish; I do not believe that conscientious parents can be found only in the suburbs, nor is it necessarily those in inner-cities who need parental screening most. Let me hasten to add that it does not matter. If only 10 or 15

percent of the parents in any market activate their filters, advertisers will quickly move their program-enabling dollars elsewhere, and excessively violent TV shows will die on the vine. The mere mention of some programming as particularly offensive has already caused some advertisers to withdraw. The introduction of parental filters will strongly motivate advertisers to respond to parental concerns.

Unfortunately, you cannot rush to the store to buy a parental filter yet. Like air bags in their early days, the technology is only now being perfected, and until there is substantial demand for it, the devices will continue to be unavailable and expensive. Parents' groups, educators, and other concerned parties should support efforts by The Communitarian Network to champion parental filters, recently also endorsed by the Character Education Partnership. Art, the First Amendment, and America will all survive quite nicely if violence is curbed on the screen by parents, and as a result, subsides to some extent on the streets.

*Amitai Etzioni*

## A New Approach to Sex Offenders

Recently, a debate has arisen in this country over requests by sex criminals that they be permitted to undergo the surgical operation known as orchiectomy—more plainly, castration. The argument began in 1992, when Steve Allen Butler, a previously convicted child rapist, asked Judge Michael McSpadden, of the 209th Criminal District Court in Houston, to let him be castrated rather than go to prison. McSpadden acceded to this request, setting off a hubbub that raged through the talk shows. Local black leaders contended that the bargain was racist, because the offender in the case was black. The director of the Rape Crisis Program at the Houston Area Women's Center opposed castration on principle, even when it was voluntary.

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