

Violence—Entertainment Industry

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Violence -
Entertainment
Industry

An Appeal to Hollywood

American parents today are deeply worried about their children's exposure to an increasingly toxic popular culture. Events in Littleton, Colorado, are only the most recent reminder that something is deeply amiss in our media age. Violence and explicit sexual content in television, films, music, and video games have escalated sharply in recent years. Children of all ages are now being exposed to a barrage of images and words that threaten not only to rob them of normal childhood innocence, but also to distort their view of reality and even undermine their character growth.

These concerns know no political or partisan boundaries. According to a recent CNN-USA Today-Gallup poll, 76 percent of adults agree that TV, movies, and popular music are negative influences on children. Seventy-five percent report that they make efforts to protect children from such harmful influences. Nearly the same number--73 percent--say shielding children from the negative influences of today's media culture is "nearly impossible."

Moreover, there is a growing public appreciation of the link between our excessively violent and degrading entertainment culture and the horrifying new crimes we see emerging among our young: schoolchildren gunning down their teachers and fellow students en masse, killing sprees inspired by self-indulgently violent films, teenagers murdering their babies only to return to dance at the prom.

Clearly, there is no simple causation at work here. Many factors are contributing to the crisis engulfing many of our children--negligent parenting, ineffective schools, divorce and family disintegration, and the ready availability of firearms. All are important, and all should be a part of our national conversation on this problem. But surely no one can argue that our entertainment culture should be exempt from the discussion.

Among researchers, the proposition that entertainment violence adversely influences attitudes and behavior is no longer controversial; there is overwhelming evidence of its harmful effects. Numerous studies show that degrading images of violence and sex have a desensitizing effect. Nowhere is the threat greater than to our at-risk youth--youngsters whose broken homes or disadvantaged environments make them acutely susceptible to acting upon impulses shaped by violent and dehumanizing media imagery.

Many factors, including the drive for profit in an increasingly competitive media marketplace, are contributing the downward spiral in entertainment and the disappearance of even minimum standards.

In the past, the entertainment industry was more conscious of its unique responsibility for the health of our culture. For thirty years, television broadcasters lived by the National

Association of Broadcasters (NAB) Television Code, which detailed broadcasters' responsibilities to the community, to children, and to society and prescribed specific standards. For many years this voluntary code set boundaries that enabled television to thrive as a creative medium without causing undue damage to the bedrock values of our society.

In recent years, several top entertainment executives have spoken out, laudably, on the need for minimum standards and, more recently, on the desirability of more family-friendly programming. But to effect real change, these individual expressions must be translated into a new, collective affirmation of social responsibility on the part of the media industry as a whole.

As parents all of us, too, have a major responsibility to supervise our children's access to the entertainment media--be it television, films, music, videos, video games, or the Internet. Allowing children unsupervised access to today's media is the moral equivalent of letting them go play on the freeway. Parents should limit TV viewing hours. They should know what programs their child is watching, what music he or she is listening to, what films he or she is attending, what videos he or she is renting, what video games he or she is playing, and what web sites he or she is surfing on the Internet.

While most parents are concerned about the media's influence, some, unfortunately, neglect these critical obligations. But today even the most conscientious parent cries out for help from an industry that too often abdicates its responsibility for its powerful impact on the young.

Therefore we, the undersigned, call upon executives of the media industry--as well as CEOs of companies that advertise in the electronic media--to join with us, and with America's parents, in a new social compact aimed at renewing our culture and making our media environment more healthy for our society and safer for our children.

We call upon industry leaders in all media--television, film, music, video, and electronic games--to band together to develop a new voluntary code of conduct, broadly modeled on the NAB code.

The code we envision would (1) affirm in clear terms the industry's vital responsibilities for the health of our culture; (2) establish certain minimum standards for violent, sexual, and degrading material for each medium, below which producers can be expected not to go; (3) commit the industry to an overall reduction in the level of entertainment violence; (4) ban the practice of targeting of adult-oriented entertainment to youth markets; (5) provide for more accurate information to parents on media content while committing to the creation of "windows" or "safe havens" for family programming (including a revival of TV's "Family Hour"); and, finally, (6) pledge the industry to significantly greater creative efforts to develop good family-oriented entertainment.

We strongly urge parents to express their support for a new voluntary code of conduct directly to media executives and advertisers, whether through calls, letters, faxes, or e-mails, or **by becoming signers of this Appeal by filling out and submitting the form below**. And we call upon all parents to fulfill their part of the compact by responsibly

supervising their children's media exposure.

We are not advocating censorship or wholesale strictures on artistic creativity. We are not demanding that all entertainment be geared to young children. Finally, we are not asking government to police the media. Rather, we are asking the entertainment industry to assume a decent minimum of responsibility for its own actions and to take some modest steps of self-restraint. And we are asking parents to help in this task, not just by taking responsibility for shielding their own children, but also by making their concerns known to media executives and advertisers.

Hollywood has an enormous influence on America, particularly the young. By making a concerted effort to turn its energies to promoting decent, shared values and strengthening American families, the entertainment industry has it within its power to help make an America worthy of the Third Millennium. We, leaders from government, the religious community, the nonprofit world, and the private sector, challenge the entertainment industry to this great task. We appeal to those who are reaping great profits to give something back. We believe that by choosing to do good, the entertainment industry can also make good--and both the industry and our society will be richer and better as a result.

Signers as of July 21, 1999

Steve Allen	Norton Garfinkle Chairman Oxford Management Corporation	Armand M. Nicholi, Jr., M.D. Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry Harvard Medical School
William J. Bennett Co-Director Empower America	Robert George McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence Princeton University	Michael Novak George Frederick Jewett Scholar American Enterprise Institute
David Blankenhorn President Institute for American Values	George Gerbner Bell Atlantic Professor of Telecommunications Temple University Dean Emeritus Annenberg School, University of Pennsylvania	Sam Nunn Former U.S. Senator
Sissela Bok Distinguished Fellow Harvard Center for Population Studies	Patrick Glynn Director Media Social Responsibility Project Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies George Washington University	Neil Postman Professor New York University
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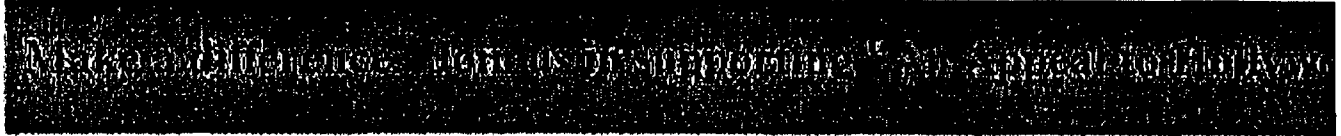
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Monday, June 7, 1999

Hollywood Surprised by Clinton's Violence Inquiry

Entertainment: Some in industry are miffed at president, saying he has one-upped Congress at their expense.

By AMY WALLACE, FAYE FIORE, Times Staff Writers



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Shortly after President Clinton loosed federal investigators on the entertainment industry last week, Hollywood began cooking up conspiracy theories. What, blindsided executives in Los Angeles wanted to know, had made this Democrat--a fan of pop culture, defender of the 1st Amendment and major beneficiary of the industry's largess--launch a \$1-million inquiry into how they market violence to children?

Was the lame duck president searching for a legacy that wasn't scandal? Was he mad that not a single Hollywood honcho had attended his May 10 youth violence summit? Was he trying to give Hillary Clinton a springboard to run for the Senate?

"Clinton did this in a surprising way," said Donna Bojarsky, a Democratic activist with long-standing Hollywood ties. "People are trying to understand it."

What had happened in the six weeks between the high school massacre in Littleton, Colo., and Clinton's unprecedented probe of entertainment violence only underscored how the insular worlds of Washington and Hollywood play by different rules. If on the surface they both attract big egos, value showmanship and survive by figuring out what America wants, they are different in one key respect: Washington lives by votes, and Hollywood by profits.

"We're driven by market forces," said one movie industry insider, rejecting the notion that Hollywood's production of violence is out of sync with the nation. "We are in sync with America. People love violence. They will rebuke it all day long, but 'The Matrix' just made \$155 million."

However accurate, that bottom-line viewpoint--bolstered by the fact that moviegoers often say they want one thing then plunk down \$8 at the multiplex to see another--may have left Hollywood unaware that this time Clinton meant business. Few in the entertainment world expected the boom would be lowered so quickly, or that Clinton would be the one to lower it.

But if the industry was in tune with the desires of millions of consumers, it was hopelessly out of touch with the depth of the national sentiment demanding action after Littleton and the political realities of Washington.

"Clinton was well-armed with polling that told him what this would mean, and he doesn't move without that," said one

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this would mean, and he doesn't move without that," said one East Coast film industry lobbyist. "There are few forces of nature more powerful than a political opportunity waiting to be seized."

Political insiders agree that the events of last week were vintage Clinton--co-opting a popular issue with expert timing. The Senate-passed legislation ordering the Federal Trade Commission and Department of Justice to investigate the marketing of music, movies and video games to children was awaiting approval by the House. When Congress went out of town for the Memorial Day recess, Clinton leaped out front and ordered the probe himself.

His action was consistent with his history on similar issues--pushing a balking television industry to accept sex and violence ratings, lambasting violent rap lyrics and publicly condemning the industry's excesses.

Inquiry Follows Party Fund-Raiser

What recent events illustrate is the sometimes profound disconnect between the Democratic president and the industry that thinks it has a relationship with him. In the weeks after Littleton, the links between the two power centers were frayed.

Some East Coast political analysts said Hollywood's strong financial support of Clinton's agenda probably boomeranged--targeting the industry rather than shielding it.

The inquiry came two weeks after DreamWorks principals Steven Spielberg, David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg hosted a Beverly Hills event that raised \$2 million for the Democratic Party. Some saw the inquiry as a move to ward off charges that the Democrats use Hollywood as a cash machine but are loathe to take it to task on tough issues.

"After that fund-raiser in Los Angeles what could [Clinton] do?" said one political observer. "People were going to say Hollywood bought him [and the Democrats] off."

Those contradictory perspectives were voiced time and again last week: Washington accused Hollywood of hiding behind the 1st Amendment to defend the production of disturbingly violent product, and Hollywood decried Washington for scapegoating. Many in the industry said it was their earnest desire to help curtail youth violence, but that the White House slammed them before they had the chance.

"[Clinton's] announcement certainly felt like finger-pointing," said Andy Spahn, corporate spokesman for DreamWorks SKG, adding that the timing and scope of the inquiry seemed inconsistent with the president's earlier invitation to work together without blame.

Industry leaders were discussing possible steps to reduce youth violence when Clinton charged ahead. "Why none of us were consulted and why that process wasn't permitted to unfold isn't clear to me," Spahn said.

Nevertheless, one entertainment industry publicist noted that though Hollywood players may feel miffed, they don't have a lot of alternatives.

"It's not just about the money. They share their aura, their glitter, their fairy dust. They let [politicians] come to their homes. That's what flips them out more than anything else. They thought the seduction had worked. They thought they

owned this guy," the publicist said. "But they're stuck. There's nowhere to go."

Clinton Earlier Expressed Concerns

Clinton's concerns about media violence are not new--he has been consistent about the issue since he first campaigned for president in 1992. After TV's "Murphy Brown" featured Candice Bergen as an unwed mother--drawing fire from the likes of then-Vice President Dan Quayle--Clinton said he was "troubled by the gratuitous violence and sex and mixed moral signals on television."

Visiting Hollywood in late 1993 after his election, Clinton urged agents at the Creative Artists Agency to take personal responsibility for what they helped produce.

Then at last month's White House summit, Clinton spoke of a direct link between violent images and violent acts. The combined eagerness of Congress and the White House to find a solution--or at least to appear to be actively searching for one--made it clear in Washington that some federal action had to be taken to assure the nation that its government wasn't just sitting around waiting for the next campus tragedy.

"The president was determined from the beginning to focus our efforts on ending marketing of violence to young people, and since the summit he has made that point in a variety of ways," said a senior White House official. "Many in the entertainment industry haven't grasped the distinction between marketing and creative license, and they had a reaction to any action by the government, even one that's designed to reinforce the spirit of the industry's own [movie] rating system."

Hilary Rosen, president of Recording Industry Assn. of America, responded: "It's not that the industry didn't understand that Washington was serious. But there is a broad-based cynicism about the president's motives--that something has to be done because we have to look like we're doing something."

The federal inquiry may only be the beginning. On Friday, Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) joined Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) in a bid to expand the law that requires warning labels on cigarettes to apply to violent entertainment products. They plan to introduce a Senate bill to that effect next week. Industry analysts saw the action as the latest volley in a game of one-upmanship, with Clinton and Congress now competing to see which could slap Hollywood hardest.

As politicians such as Lieberman vowed to deliver a "wake-up call," by week's end Hollywood was already wide awake.

"Bill Clinton loves black people. He rebukes Sister Souljah," mused one Hollywood insider, recalling Clinton's 1992 condemnation of the militant black rap singer's comments after the Los Angeles riots.

"Bill Clinton loves poor people. He signed the Republican version of welfare reform. He's a friend of Hollywood and he bashes Hollywood. It's not inconsistent with the middle of the street he likes to walk. We are Sister Souljah right now."

What inflamed Tinseltown most was Clinton's decision to limit the federal inquiry to the entertainment industry, leaving the impression that the guns were not part of the problem.

TV producer Norman Lear, a longtime supporter of Democratic causes, said, "Singling us out--looking at the entire culture, the whole fabric, and picking out one thread and pointing the finger because that's the way the wind is blowing? My visceral reaction is the president . . . had nothing to say, so he grabbed at a straw. I find that totally objectionable."

That people feel not just ambushed, but spurned, could have lasting effects for the Democratic Party, part of the reason Clinton's decision to launch the inquiry did not have the unanimous support of his advisors, according to one senior White House official. But Clinton "felt comfortable" with the timing, the official said, and remarked heading back from the Rose Garden Tuesday that it was "the right thing to do."

Part of Clinton's comfort could stem from the fragmented nature of contemporary Hollywood. The movie studios now are part of multinational corporations with myriad products and competing interests. Actors and directors often are dissatisfied with the ways studios market their films.

"There is no monolith Hollywood," said one Washington lobbyist. "One guy can't stand up, snap his fingers and say, 'We will no longer support the White House, Hillary or [California Democratic Sen.] Dianne Feinstein.' Not like other industries where they all support their friends all the time."

Meanwhile, there are signs that Hollywood is responding in its own way. Agents report a "chilling effect" on violent projects, even the most innocuous. Disney's plan to create a feature film franchise called "Fear Street" (based on a series of humorous children's books by R.L. Stine) reportedly was shelved in the wake of Littleton.

And not everyone is chafing at the inquiry.

"I understand being singled out looks bad, but to think that the gun lobby hasn't been singled out since Columbine is inane," said Jeff Ayeroff, co-chief of Sony Music's Work Group label, who in the early '90s helped create "Rock the Vote," a voter registration effort aimed at young people. "Self-examination isn't a bad thing."

* * *

Times staff writers Ronald Brownstein and Elizabeth Jensen contributed to this report. Wallace reported from Los Angeles, Fiore from Washington.

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