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1998 National Survey: Not In The Public Interest

Press Release 8/4/98

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Press Release

Survey Examines Excesses and Improvements in Local TV Newscasts Across the U.S.

For Immediate Release:
Tuesday, August 4, 1998

Contact: Paul Klite (303) 832-7558

Denver, August 4 (RMMW) - Coverage of violent events averaged just over 40 per cent of all the news in Rocky Mountain Media Watch's fourth annual snapshot survey of local television news across the U. S. The report, entitled Not in the Public Interest, released today, analyzes the content of March 11 newscasts on 102 stations in 52 metropolitan areas, and presents detailed examples of good and bad journalism.

Stations KVUE, Austin, NECN (New England Cable News), Boston, KTCA, Twin Cities and KTVU, San Francisco are commended for presenting quality programs that provide empowering information to viewers. Conversely, stations, KSAZ, Phoenix, WSB, Atlanta, WOOD, Grand Rapids and KNBC, Los Angeles are among those identified as broadcasting shows that were overloaded with mayhem.

"The report focuses our concern that most local TV newscasts have abandoned the public interest in the race for ratings," said Paul Klite, RMMW Executive Director. "It is also exciting to see a few stations are breaking the tabloid mold." Other

findings are:

--The news is out of balance on many stations, with an over-emphasis on crime and disaster coverage. This pattern is consistent over a four year span.

--Important issues, like education, the environment, poverty, arts, science, labor, growth, transportation and governance, are neglected in newscasts.

--Women and minorities are under-represented as anchors and sources on programs.

--Entertainment tactics have invaded the news. Sensationalism and hype generate emotion (arousal), but do not inform citizens about their communities.

--Newscasts average one-fourth as much fluff and triviality as news.

--Fifteen stations broadcast more commercials than actual news.

RMMW is a non-profit activist organization seeking better TV news for a stronger democracy. The complete report, available from RMMW, calls on station owners, journalists, the FCC and citizens to demand improvement of the quality of local TV news. An executive summary of Not in the Public Interest is on RMMW's web site at www.imagepage.com/rmmw.

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1998 National Survey: Local TV New in America, March 11, 1998

Not In The Public Interest: Executive Summary

One hundred and two local TV newscasts from 52 U.S. metropolitan areas, all taped on March 11, 1998, are analyzed for content and presentation. Rocky Mountain Media Watch's fourth annual national survey examines what is in the news, what is not and why, and highlights examples of good and bad journalism. The major findings and conclusions are:

- The news is seriously and consistently out of balance on most stations, with a heavy emphasis on crime, disaster, hype, triviality and commercials.
- Many issues, like education, the environment, poverty, arts, science, labor, AIDS and governance are neglected in newscasts.
- Women and minorities are under-represented as anchors and sources on newscasts.
- Sensational reporting generates high emotion (arousal) and ratings, but does not inform citizens about the range of important issues facing their communities.
- This toxic diet of television news is not in the public interest.

Content analysis of the taped newscasts reveals that actual news averages 41.3 per cent of programs. Fifteen stations have more time devoted to commercials than news. There is slightly more actual news (46.4 per cent) in larger markets than medium (39.5 per cent) and smaller cities (37.5 per cent). Seventy-one per cent of all the news is about local or state-wide events, 23 per cent is national in scope and 6 per cent is international news.

Among 26 news topics, crime stories are dominant in the news, comprising 26.9 per cent of the news airtime. There are 525 separate crime stories in the sample, and murder stories (146 separate stories) are the most frequent crime-type discussed in the news, followed by other violent crimes like assault, rape and sexual abuse. "If it bleeds, it leads" remains a truism on local TV news because crime events are dramatic and gain people's attention. Many crime stories produce an intense emotional response in viewers, such as fear, alienation or excitement; these are highly prized reactions by news departments and advertisers. Crimes predictably occur every day and crime reporting has become a routine, a lazy habit, for news departments. Crime rates may be down across the U.S. over the last few years, but not on local television news.

Disaster coverage averages 12.2 per cent of the news. Dramatic video of fires, large and small, plane crashes, car crashes, bus crashes, truck crashes, floods, accidents, power outages, blizzards, explosions, earthquakes and asteroids total 268 stories in the sample. Ninety stations air some disaster news, which is often presented as

brief clips under twenty seconds in length. We depend on television to provide up-to-the-minute information about any imminent disaster threats, but the majority of disaster items in the local news have little immediate relevance to our lives. As a news product, these stories are valuable to broadcasters, since natural and man-made disasters can be bizarre, awesome, terrifying and attention-getting, all traits that do well in the ratings.

News about health, government and the economy each average almost 10 per cent of the news. A range of important topics like education, the environment, elections, arts, science, poverty, AIDS, religion, labor and children receive very little coverage on local newscasts. For the fourth year in a row, this pattern of imbalance in the news is so consistent it takes on the trappings of a habit or ritual.

We do note a small group of stations whose newscasts stand out for quality, intelligence and creativity. These include KVUE-TV, Austin, TX , which has strict guidelines for airing crime stories, KTCA-TV, Twin Cities, MN, a PBS Station whose news shows are devoid of tabloid tricks and tactics, NECN, the 24 hour all-news New England Cable Network and KTVU-TV, San Francisco, a FOX affiliate whose broadcast today is notable for the depth of stories and compelling subject matter.

Unfortunately, most newscasts are dominated by excessive reliance on news and features chosen to produce a strong reaction in viewers, what the marketing industry calls "arousal." As McLuhan prophesied, "It takes emotion to move merchandise." Arousal items include violent and sexual cues, hype, exaggeration, over-commercialism and a variety of entertainment devices.

Society has been slow to appreciate exactly how TV brutality effects people. Yes, violence is part of life and part of the news, but it should be handled with care and sensitivity by broadcasters. Hundreds of research studies have shown that viewing savage imagery day after day can negatively influence children' learning, aggression and empathy. Adults, too, are not immune and can become cynical, fearful or desensitized by relentlessly threatening media messages. Many health and educational organizations have spoken out on the cumulative public health impacts of media violence. It can act in ways that resemble a powerful and toxic chemical stimulant. From the ancient Roman Circuses to the Jerry Springer Show, some people "enjoy" the rush of watching

violence.. It triggers a sadistic streak that represents a dark side of human nature.

As a way of quantifying the total dose of violent news in any single program, we calculate the "Mayhem Index" of newscasts. The combined airtime given to stories about crime, disaster, war and terrorism is compared to the total amount of news. These news topics have in common a focus on violent events that can elicit powerful reactions from the audience. The average Mayhem Index for all the programs in this sample is 40.2 per cent of the news.

Some of the stations with the highest Mayhem Indexes this day are: KSAZ-TV, Phoenix, AZ, 83.7 per cent, with an almost unrelenting series of crime and disaster stories; WSB-TV, Atlanta, GA, 81.6 per cent; WOOD-TV, Grand Rapids, MI, 77.5 per cent, with a succession of stories about murder, serial killers, assault, sexual deviance, terrorism, fires and floods; KNBC-TV, Los Angeles, 73.5 per cent, consistently near the top for mayhem in all of RMMW's surveys.

In contrast, WAVY-TV, Norfolk, 6.2 per cent, KRON-TV, San Francisco, 8.0 per cent, and KTCA-TV, Twin Cities, 0.0 per cent, score the lowest today for violent content.

There is a joke about television news that anything worth doing is worth overdoing. When it comes to titillation this is certainly the case. The airtime given to chit-chat between anchors, promotions and previews of upcoming stories, the "soft" or trivial news and the items about celebrities is compared to the amount of news to generate the "Fluff Index " of newscasts. The average Fluff Index of the survey is 25.1, meaning that there is one-fourth as much fluff as news.

Some of the memorable soft news today includes a beauty contest in Albania, two new fads - hair tatoos and beer baths, Bill the dog returns home, and a horse is rescued from the mud in California; 27 stations carry this last item.

This just in. An asteroid is on a collision course with Earth according to 18 of the 102 stations. KNBC-TV in Los Angeles reports if it hits us "it will be like setting off two million atomic bombs." KCBS-TV, Los Angeles, says the asteroid "could disrupt civilization." The news anchor does a double-take as he contemplates the enormity of his own words and starts to laugh uncontrollably. (You may remember that the next day, scientists recalculated the asteroid threat and declared it to be remote.) And now this.

About half the stations in the sample broadcast a short update on the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky investigation. The story is presented as a serious criminal matter and today's rumor is that the President may testify before the grand jury. Clinton, shown meeting with the U.N. Secretary General, declines to talk about the scandal, saying "I must do the work the people elected me to do." Many stations replay the videotape showing Clinton and Lewinsky hugging for the umpteenth time. This story is the latest in a line of media feeding frenzies - Menendez, Tonya, Buttafuccho, Bobbitt, O.J., JonBenet and now, the best soap opera of all, "The Oval Office" starring you know who. Obsessive coverage of this story seriously detracts from time and resources that could be used to cover other important issues and events.

RMMW surveys measure the gender and ethnicity of each person who appears and speaks in the news. Three-quarters of all the anchor-persons, including weather and sports hosts, are males. So are 70 percent of the experts, authorities and sources whose opinions receive air-time on newscasts. Females comprise 49 percent of all the reporters. Women outnumber men in newscasts as victims.

Minorities are under-represented in positions of authority and power, such as anchor-persons, official sources and reporters. Blacks and Latinos do appear frequently around crime events both as perpetrators and victims. Predominantly, viewers see people of color in the news mostly when they've done something wrong, sending a negative message. We have come a long way since the vicious stereotyping days of black-face in the broadcast media but there is still plenty of room for improvement.

We conclude that many of the news choices encountered in this sample are totally arbitrary. On some stations, it seems as if anything and nothing is "news." Choices are often skewed towards items with dramatic video, sensation and triviality. Almost any single newscast will contain examples of the fear of death, violence and catastrophe, a cuddly animal, the sports play of the day, some strong human interest, the vicarious excitement of celebrity, scores of joyful young faces in the ads and a vulgar screaming car salesman. Elements of successful entertainment that have invaded the news, like escape from reality, fantasy, illusion, exaggeration, pandering to emotion, exploitative sex, hype, celebrity, music and humor, are irrelevant, even antithetical, to the idea of news and an informed citizenry. The soul of news is

truth, reason, balance and accuracy.

Local TV news content across the country is seriously and chronically skewed. Like other unbalanced diets, over time, it can be unhealthy. A host of significant symptoms have been attributed to distorted TV news, including viewer alienation, cynicism, violent behavior (including copy-cat crimes), intimidation, passivity, ignorance, racial polarization and disempowerment. Together these constitute a toxic stew of pervasive negative influences in our culture.

Television is a central force in our society and 80 million viewers tune in each night to local TV newscasts. For the sake of our democracy, the local television news can and must improve. It is the joint responsibility of all who are involved and concerned to catalyze this change.

-- Owners and advertisers must see beyond their bottom line mentality.

-- Congress and the Federal Communications Commission should restore meaning to the promise of the public airwaves and the public interest.

-- Journalists must raise their ethical standards and fight to keep the entertainment industry out of the newsroom.

-- Citizens must become critical viewers, aware of the manipulation and conditioning that passes for news.

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December 1, 1998

Video Game Report Card Press Conference

Statement of Senator Joe Lieberman

We are here today, in what has become a holiday season tradition, to release our Fourth Annual Video and Computer Game Record Card and Holiday Shopping Guide.

This project grew out of the hearings that Senator Kohl and I held in 1993 and 1994 to examine the threat video game violence poses to children. Once the hearings ended, we wanted to continue raising public awareness about this issue, and we decided as a result to produce a "state of the video game union" report to coincide with the holiday shopping rush, the peak time for game-buying.

In a few minutes, Dr. David Walsh, the director of the National Institute on Media and the Family, our partner in this project, will present the detailed findings of our 1998 survey, along with a guide to the season's hottest games. Before he does, I want to take a moment to thank Dr. Walsh for his ongoing cooperation and commitment to this project, which has evolved into quite an undertaking, thanks to the rapid growth of the game industry.

What we have learned from this year's study is that video game industry has developed a split personality. It is a Jekyll-and-Hyde story for the Information Age.

The industry has a family-friendly side, and there is much to like it about it. Most games contain little if any violence, and those that do are clearly rated. Many games are not only innocuous but strikingly inventive, not to mention highly entertaining. And research is showing that game-playing can improve children's inductive reasoning and problem-solving skills and sharpen their sense of spatial relations.

But move away from the mainstream, and you'll find a different, more sinister face. Over the last few years, we have seen the rise of a small but significant core of ultra-violent games that are far more realistic and gruesome than the shooting games that first caught our eye six years ago. They are also far more perverse and anti-social in the way they reward death and depravity. Killing and carnage is not enough any more -- to torture and maim is often the name of these games now.

But don't take our word for it. Just read what the makers of these games are saying in their own marketing. "More fun than shooting your neighbor's cat," boasts an ad for Namco's Point Blank. "Escape. Dismember. Massacre," reads the bloody headline for Interplay's Die by the Sword. "Happiness is a warm cranium," promises an ad for Sony's Cardinal Syn.

Our survey shows that most parents are unaware of these ultra-violent games, which are almost all rated "Mature" for players 17 and older, let alone their outrageous ads. But kids seem to know them well. The ads I cited above, along with the several others included in our press packet, were found in glossy game-player magazines, which are read regularly by young gamers. Many of those same kids are also visiting a growing network of on-line game sites, where, outside the light of public scrutiny, the marketing teasers are often even more offensive, and little is done to prevent children from getting access to the most extreme games.

What's more, there is evidence that some game-makers are targeting their marketing of

adult-rated games directly at kids, suggesting that Joe Camel has gone digital. A cursory review of the marketplace showed that action figures based on characters from Capcom's Resident Evil 2 and GT Interactive's Duke Nukem are being sold at Toys-R-Us and other toy stores this month. And an April press release from DDB Needham Dall and McCann Erickson, two leading ad agencies, openly stated that they had begun to and would continue to "target" their marketing of Midway's Mortal Kombat Mythologies at "teen" audiences. All three games are "M"-rated.

These marketing tactics raise a serious question about whether game-makers are intentionally selling murder and mayhem to children, and thereby undermining their own rating system. We don't know enough today to answer that question, but we do know enough to be troubled by where some in the industry are going. That is why we have sent a letter to the Interactive Digital Software Association, which represents the leading publishers, asking them to thoroughly investigate the industry's current marketing practices, and to evaluate the compliance with IDSA's own ad code, which expressly prohibits ads targeting adult-rated games at children.

We are hoping IDSA will be responsive. To date, industry leaders have gone out of their way to dispute the idea that game violence can be harmful, and to make clear that they feel it is the parents' responsibility, not theirs, to draw lines. On the latter count the industry has a point, and this year's report indicates that many parents are not doing a very good job on the monitoring front. That says to me that we must do more to educate parents about game violence and encourage them to make better use of the rating system. We will, and we appreciate the willingness that IDSA has shown to help promote the ratings.

But that does not excuse the game-makers from their larger responsibilities. The fact is we have compiled a strong record, starting with our hearings, to show that repeated exposure to these games can be harmful and should be cause for concern. We know this from social science research, which Dr. Walsh has summarized in a handout we have provided; from the testimony of a wide array of experts on child psychiatry and juvenile crime; and from the statements of parents like Don Ramsey of Alaska, who is convinced that his son, an avid gamer, was emulating the popular computer game Doom when he ran through the corridors of his high school with a shotgun last year and murdered his principal and a fellow student.

The case of Don Ramsey's son, reported by the Boston Globe, is one of several recent school shootings that bears some connection to video violence. I am not saying that violent games are to blame for these terrible tragedies. But as I have said before, these games and their awful ads are part of a toxic culture of violence that is enveloping our children, that is helping to desensitize them and blur the lines between right and wrong, and encouraging some of the most vulnerable of them to commit violence. How many more brutal killings must be committed by kids barely old enough to shave before we confront this connection?

Or as ethicist Sissela Bok asked in her book Mayhem, "Is it alarmist or merely sensible to ask about what happens to the souls of children nurtured, as in no past society, on images of rape, torture, bombings, and massacre that are channeled into their homes from infancy?"

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Background Articles on Violence in the Media

These articles represent several years of research and work by the Center for Media Literacy. By reading them and following links to related websites (see right-hand column), you will begin to understand this volatile, complex issue.

General Articles

- [Television Violence and the Art of Asking the Wrong Question](#)
by George Gerbner, PhD.
"'Happy violence' is cool, swift, painless and often spectacular, designed not to upset but to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a mood to buy."
- [TV Violence: It's Time to Break the Circle of Blame](#). Summary of testimony to the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee, July 12, 1995.
By Elizabeth Thoman
The real question should be: "What is the long term impact on our national psyche when millions of children, in their formative years, grow up decade after decade bombarded with very powerful visual and verbal messages demonstrating violence as the preferred way to solve problems and normalizing fear and violence as 'the way things are?'"

Making the Connections

- [Beyond Blame: Media Literacy as Violence Prevention](#)
by Elizabeth Thoman
"Media literacy must be a necessary component of any effective effort at violence prevention, for both individuals and society as a whole"
- [The Violence Formula](#)
by Barbara Osborn
- [Babylon Revisited: How Our Violent Origins Resurface in Today's Media](#)
by Walter Wink
"Thus the myth of redemptive violence has become the cornerstone of foreign policy, enshrined in the doctrine of the national security state. Might is right."

[Media Violence Intro Page](#)

[M.V. Background Articles](#)

[M.V. Links](#)

[Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media](#)

A Media Literacy Learning Program for Children, Parents and Your Community

[Other Teaching Resources](#)



- Canada Adopts Five-Point Plan to Ban Violence on Television
by H. Brooke Primero
"Canada has had the excuse for years that we will wait for the Americans. Well, we cannot wait for the Americans anymore"

Searching for Solutions

- Imagine: A Media of Meaning
by Elizabeth Thoman
"I am confident that a strong national campaign of media literacy awareness and action around media violence is ready to be born."
- 20 Ways to Create a Caring Culture
by Jay Dover
- [COMING SOON] What's Wrong With the Ratings?
By Barbara J Wilson, Ph.D.
"Characters who receive money, popularity or praise for violent acts can encourage aggressive attitudes and imitative behavior."
- [COMING SOON] Taking a Stand: A Postcard Campaign for Nonviolent Media
by Barbara Osborn
- [COMING SOON] How to Organize a Local Postcard Campaign
- [COMING SOON] Challenging the Myths of Media Violence by Rosalind Silver
"We must create a culture where our children can grow up safe, healthy and whole. But we can't do it waiting for someone else."
- [COMING SOON] New Heroes for a New Age: Stories of Nonviolence Inspire the Best in Us
By Arthur Kanegis

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~~December 7, 1998~~
December 7, 1998

Statement of Senator Joe Lieberman

Silver Sewer Press Conference

It is with considerable disappointment that I join with my friend Bill Bennett today in dishonoring CBS with our second Silver Sewer Award. I say disappointment because in the years that Bill and I have been pleading with the entertainment industry to clean up the popular culture, CBS has made a noticeable effort to create more family-friendly programming -- probably more than any of the other major broadcast networks. I would much rather be here to praise them for that.

But the truth is that CBS, by virtue of two major decisions this year, has become as much of a standard-shredder as a standard-setter today. The network that once gave us Edward R. Murrow and Jack Benny, and more recently gave us Dan Rather and Dr. Quinn, chose this year to dump Dr. Death and Dr. Depravity into the public square.

It was Howard Stern, Dr. Depravity, who proudly predicted back in April that his show would bring television standards to an "all-time low." He could not have anticipated that "60 Minutes" would give him a run for his money with its misguided decision to air the videotape of Dr. Jack Kevorkian killing Thomas Youk on its November 22nd broadcast.

What is most troubling about this segment is the precedent it established, and the effect it may have on the electronic news media in the future. The fact is that the Kevorkian killing did not run in a vacuum. Its airing comes at a time when the standards of TV news are sinking, when more and more news outlets are competing not just with each other and "Hard Copy" and "Inside Edition," but with the Sterns and the Springers and the horrible Fox reality shows to see who can be more provocative and more profitable.

This race downward is particularly evident on local newscasts, which are watched by an estimated 80 million Americans every day, and which, according to studies by the Rocky Mountain Media Watch, are often dominated by inflammatory reports about murder, rape, and violent disasters. These reports consume as much as 80 percent of the newscasts on some local stations, and are often designed to arouse more than to inform. If it bleeds it not only leads, this study showed, but it often follows in bunches.

The Rocky Mountain study concluded that "elements of successful entertainment that have invaded the news, like escape from reality, fantasy, illusion, exaggeration, pandering to emotion, exploitative sex, hype, celebrity, music and humor, are irrelevant to the idea of news and an informed citizenry. The soul of news is truth, reason, balance, and accuracy." The authors of the study went on to say, "local TV news content is across the country is seriously and chronically skewed," and for that reason, Rocky Mountain Executive Director Paul Klite said, "the report focuses our concern that most local TV newscasts have abandoned the public interest in the race for ratings."

When it aired the Kevorkian killing, "60 Minutes" may have sent a signal to the rest of the news community that no lines should go uncrossed, particularly during the sweeps. This message is especially dangerous because of the messenger, because it is coming from the most esteemed news program on television, and the network of Murrow, Cronkite, and yes, the great Mike Wallace.

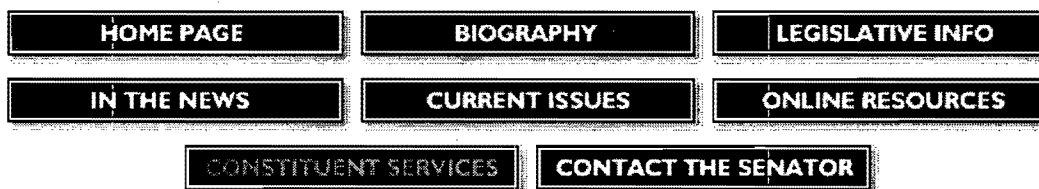
The only hopeful aspect of this story is that the news community seems much more willing to engage in an open and far-reaching debate about standards and judgements than the entertainment industry. We saw that last spring in the wake of the voyeuristic coverage of

the freeway suicide in Los Angeles, and we're seeing it again now, as many news people, such as U.S. News & World Report editor Steve Smith, have harshly condemned "60 Minutes" for showing the Kevorkian killing.

We appreciate this debate and want to enter into it, which is why we have sent a letter to the Radio-Television News Directors Association raising some of these concerns and requesting a meeting with the RTNDA leadership to discuss them further. In particular, we hope to again make the case for a new code of conduct for the television industry. Such a code would draw the kinds of moral and ethical lines that public is eager to have re-embraced, and in doing so, would also insulate national and local news providers from the intense competitive pressures to be the most shocking on the block.

Letter to CBS

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A Guide to Safe Schools