

**INSTITUTE FOR MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVES**  
DEDICATED TO PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH

**AN OPPORTUNITY TO PREVENT VIOLENCE**  
An Address to the Industry

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The Industry-Wide Leadership Conference on  
Violence in Television Programming  
August 2, 1993

As public concern over violence escalates into fear, policy makers are feeling increasing pressure to find some answers and act accordingly. This concern has also led to an aggressive attack on the media as being a primary cause of the violence epidemic in America. The entertainment industry, specifically, is in a very difficult position, especially in light of the complexity of the problem of violence. The Institute for Mental Health Initiatives (IMHI), recognizes that television has the power to influence behavior. *We, however, see the influence of TV and film as an opportunity rather than a threat.*

**The Creative Community: The World's Storytellers**

Since the very beginning of civilization, cultures have used storytelling to entertain, to pass on societal norms and conventions, and to inform the community about the challenges of life. The most interesting stories tap into fantasies, stimulate imagination and validate our own feelings and struggles.

You, the creative community, have become our nation's storytellers. Like the storytellers of old, you entertain, engage, inform and teach.

Unlike the storytellers of old, however, your audience is more vast, with TV in 93% of American homes, and with the average household viewing TV eight hours a day. And, also unlike the storytellers of old, you do not have *personal* interaction with your audience or even know them, and thus do not know how your stories affect each individual viewer. When a narrator tells a violent story directly to a listener, the narrator can watch the person's reactions. If the listener looks afraid, or laughs inappropriately, the storyteller has the opportunity to modify or even change the nature of the story. TV does not allow for such interaction. This lack of direct and immediate feedback becomes particularly problematic where violence is depicted.

**Defining Violence**

Violence is generally defined as "an act intended to harm something or someone". Is there such a thing as "good violence" and "bad violence". Viewers can learn from a depiction of violence

when it is embedded in a meaningful context, portrayed as a last resort for heroes who have used their wits when encountering danger, depicted as a socially undesirable and unglamorous option, or when the tragic physical and psychological consequences to the perpetrators, victims and witnesses are shown. Deleterious TV violence, on the other hand, is violence which exists apart from a meaningful context, portrayed as a socially desirable, thrilling, or glamorous option, broadcast excessively, or sanitized - so that the tragic consequences are not depicted, or portrayed as the ONLY option for dealing with the conflict.

### **Why are we fascinated by Violence?**

There has always been an undeniable "market" for violence. We are fascinated with violence even as we have ambivalence about it. We become engaged with the forbidden fruits that excite us. We search for the courage to witness it without looking away. We are attracted. We are repelled. We cover our eyes. We peek. Conflict, sometimes even savage conflict is an integral part of our human drama. Violence can be much like some of our dreams - thrilling to our senses, and, therefore, dangerous, intoxicating and destabilizing. Some of us can vent our own aggressive feelings, frustration and anger even as we are inhibited in real life. These *feelings of amazement and terror* are essential to stories.

By sanitizing TV we would lose valuable opportunities to teach people ways of dealing with the realities of their psychological, if not real worlds. *Violence can contribute to the drama without constituting the drama.* Much of today's TV violence, however, titillates and excites without establishing a meaningful context. Moreover, through the frequent co-occurrence of sexual images and violence, viewers naturally equate sex with violence. *The challenge of the creative community and the visual media is to strengthen viewers on their ability to deal with aggressive feelings and violence.*

### **The Impact of Viewing Violence**

Viewing violence affects viewers of all ages, sexes, temperaments, socioeconomic levels and intelligence in different ways. While for some, violence on TV can speak to their fantasy life, for others, it mirrors and reinforces the violence they witness in their everyday lives. In addition, most of the research on this topic concludes that exposure to television violence encourages aggressive behavior by children and adults. On the other hand, viewing deleterious TV violence can desensitize some and isolate others, and intimidate many (see Reference 1).

*Frequently, violence is portrayed as the only available option to resolve conflict. The barrage of violent images only serves to reinforce a negative and limited approach to solving problems.* Furthermore, this barrage of violent images can greatly elevate the level of excitation of the sympathetic nervous system in the viewer. Social scientists have found that the level of excitation affects the threshold of anger as well as hostile and aggressive actions (see Reference 2). Like a drug addict, a viewer may desire more and more arousal (i.e. violent images) in order to reach higher levels of excitation. Also like an addict, a viewer may become more tolerant of not only TV violence, but also real violence. Once excitation has climbed to higher levels, efforts need to be directed at lowering it to moderate levels. *It is critical that you consider the inadvertent impact of frequent violence viewing and your responsibility to avoid "overdosing" the public.*

### **How Can TV Help Redefine the Norms Regarding Violence?**

We are immersed in an extremely violent culture. Many say that violence is becoming a defining characteristic of American society. What is most frightening is that violence is becoming an

acceptable way of dealing with disagreement and conflict. The following quote from a 16-year-old girl powerfully illustrates this point: "Everyone knows someone who has a gun and carries it... it's just the way it is now." (see Reference 3). This disturbing "norm" is very often reinforced by the media. The problem of violence is also exacerbated when violence is glamorized on TV and in films. As one convicted murderer recently wrote about his fellow inmates at the Maryland State Penitentiary, "Seeing TV shows depict the rewards of crime and drug dealing as financially profitable, each of these impressionable teens stated that the risks of death and or imprisonment were worth it." (see Reference 4)

The creative community can redefine the norms and deglamorize violence, while still maintaining the drama of human conflict, by: 1) Minimizing senseless violence, 2) Depicting violence as a last resort for heroes who have used their wits In danger, 3) Depicting only villains and fools as the perpetrators of thoughtless violence, and their use of weapons as weak and shortsighted, and 4) Portraying the emotional and social consequences and impact of violence on the perpetrators, victims and witnesses.

### **IMHI's Role: Increasing Public Awareness of the Link between Anger and Violence**

*Recognizing that chronic hostility and unresolved anger are at the root of the majority of the violence experienced today, IMHI places emphasis on the portrayal of anger management and conflict resolution skills as a primary way of reducing violence on TV and in society.* Surveys tell us that the majority of violent behavior in school occurs among acquaintances and is due to long standing disagreements, romantic disagreements, fights over material possessions, depression, vendettas against society or employers and name calling (see Reference 5) -- all of these behaviors stem from mismanaged anger. Everyone feels angry, but few of us, including TV and film characters, are skilled with different ways to respond in an anger situation. Research shows that young people who have some skill at managing their anger are less likely to become school failures or runaways, attempt suicide, commit violent crimes, suffer from emotional illnesses such as depression (see Reference 6) or grow up to be early victims of heart disease or strokes (see Reference 7).

In response to the general lack of knowledge of the link between anger and violence, IMHI reviewed and synthesized the research on anger and met with the leading experts in the field. We developed national campaigns on anger management that use the acronym, RETHINK. Each letter of RETHINK stands for a specific anger management skill. *By teaching people skills to manage their anger constructively, we empower them with the ability to understand their own and others' feelings and resolve conflict in a non-violent manner. Incorporating anger management and other important social skills into both animated and real-life characters on television, the public can learn, through imitation, more varied ways to channel anger, Increasing the viewer's repertoire of responses to stimuli that provoke anger and violence achieves two major goals: 1) reduces the need to resort to violence and 2) enhances physical health, mental and emotional well-being,*

### **Creating Exciting Programming**

The question then becomes - how can the media create exciting and popular programming while simultaneously communicating messages important for maintaining a healthy and less violent society? Is violence imperative to creating thrilling drama? By creating compelling programming that contain authentic emotional responses, the audience will be attracted because the program will resonate with the viewers' concern and interests. IMHI, with the help of our many advisors both in the mental health field and in the media, is interested in working with the creative community to present the drama of human conflict, which attracts and excites viewers, without always portraying violence as attractive and the *only* response to conflict.

Since conflict and anger are crucial elements of entertainment, IMHI, in consultation with social scientists and representatives from the media, has recommendations for the creative community. These suggestions include: 1) *Showing variety in the kinds of people who got angry* (debunking the myth that only "bad people" or villains get angry. Anger is, in fact, a universal emotion); 2) Portraying the different triggers of anger (for example, flare-ups affect families differently, depending on the ages and stages of the children, the quality of the marriage, as well as on the background and cultural beliefs of the family); 3) *Depicting the skills a character uses in managing his anger.*

By trying to calm down and RETHINK, a character can:

- 1) Recognize when he is angry. What are the physiological and behavioral clues that tell the character he is getting angry? For example, does the character have a headache, does he bite his nails or yell?
- 2) Empathize with the other person. Does the angry character step back and put himself in the other person's shoes?
- 3) Think about the situation in another way. Does the angry character try to gain a new perspective on the situation, for example, by using humor?
- 4) Hear the other person's expression of feelings and point of view.
- 5) Integrate respect and love with his expression of anger.
- 6) Notice what works for the angry character to regain control of his anger. What can the angry character do to calm himself? For example; he may take a deep breath, take a walk on the beach, or go to a comedy show. What can other characters do to help an angry character to calm himself. They might listen to him, distract him by making him laugh, or leave him alone for awhile.
- 7) Keep his attention on the present problem and alternative solutions without bringing up old grudges and wounds.

### **Providing Parents with the Tools to View TV Critically**

In addition to furnishing advanced parental advisories, you can help parents acquire critical viewing skills. IMHI has developed the *Anger Episode Check List* which allows viewers to identify the different options for resolving conflict depicted in a show. The viewer "scores" shows based on the number of anger management skills portrayed. Researchers have found that children who can generate different options for dealing with problems can more easily cope with anger, get along better with their peers, and are less likely to display aggression, impatience, or social withdrawal (see Reference.7). By recruiting parents to become active, as opposed to passive viewers, they will be better equipped to guide their children. It is recommended that you accomplish this goal by providing parents and other adults (i.e teachers, counselors, etc.) with question guides for particular shows. This way, they can use kids' favorites TV shows as tools for practicing conflict resolution skills and alternative ways of responding.

### **Responsive and Responsible Programming**

Entertainment is a powerful educator of the American public. Viewers learn behaviors through imitating role models. They learn "facts" about our society from the "realities" presented on TV and in films. Audiences absorb messages about our social norms and values. Additionally, researchers have shown that entertainment plays a role in healing by helping us to laugh and to escape briefly the problems of our own lives. Entertainment's role in promoting health includes its important contribution to changes in diet, to the decrease in heart disease, to promoting safe driving, and to the reduction of smoking for some groups.

Because of your influential role, a special relationship evolves with the viewer. Therefore, it is suggested that the creative community develop, adopt and enforce a code of ethics. In addition, it is essential that you take advantage of the rich body of knowledge on anger, violence and other

human dynamics. Equally important is an understanding of how your programs affect viewers. This information will not only serve in the best interest of viewers, but will also provide you with a treasure chest full of ways to add new dimensions to characters. *The commitment to understanding research, in combination with a code of ethics, will help to restore the public's trust in you as responsive and responsible.*

## **CONCLUSION**

From a public health viewpoint, a change in television content and programming practices is a much more powerful approach to violence prevention than any of the suggested alternatives, such as: reducing the incidence of violent portrayals, using parental advisories, implementing rating systems, or installing channel blocking devices. Making *substantial* changes in television content and programming will not be easy but is well within the realm of possibility. *You have the influence, the tools, and the audience to redefine the norms and make violence an unglamorous, unacceptable and unrewarding way of dealing with conflict.*

IMHI recommends that you help redefine the norms with respect to anger and violence by: 1) Minimizing excessive and senseless violence, 2) Depicting varied options for dealing with anger and conflict, 3) Providing viewers with the tools to monitor and evaluate programming, 4) Taking advantage of the body of knowledge on human development and dynamics, and 5) Developing, adopting, and enforcing a code of ethics.

The change will require courage, determination and above all, creativity. The rewards to society of such leadership will be immeasurable.

## **SUMMARY OF IMIU'S RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIVE AND RESPONSIBLE TELEVISION**

Redefine the Norms: Deglamorize Violence

- 1) Minimize senseless violence
- 2) Depict violence as a last resort for heroes, who have used their wits in encountering danger.
- 3) Depict only villains and fools as the perpetrators of thoughtless violence and their use of weapons as weak and shortsighted.
- 4) Portray the emotional, social consequences and impact of violence on the perpetrators, victims and witnesses.

Depict Alternatives for Dealing with Anger and Conflict:

- 5) Show a variety of constructive anger management behaviors that serve to empower both the characters and the viewers.

Make Viewers Part of the Process Through Active Viewing, Evaluation and Feedback:

- 6) Provide guidelines for the public to monitor programs with respect to anger and violence.
- 7) Conduct on-going focus groups with children and adults.

Tap into Resources on Human Behavior:

- 8) Create responsive programming by (a) engaging in on-going consultations with mental health experts so that the developmental stages of the target population can be accurately addressed, and (b) taking advantage of the information available about human development and dynamics.

Educate the Public:

- 9) Create and air Public Service Announcements that not only denounce violence as the only way

of managing conflict but that also give specific techniques on how to manage conflict and anger.  
10) Produce animated specials and other shows for children and adults which model social skills

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