

Cartoons are a reflection, not a cause, of violence



MARTIN FISHER

"There is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so."
— Hamlet

Fight fight fight, fight fight fight. It's the Itchy and Scratchy Show." Bart and Lisa Simpson's favorite cat-and-mouse cartoon within a cartoon may very well be the most violent show on television. And if Attorney General Janet Reno has her way, the FBI will have Krusty the Clown in cuffs for putting such violence on the tube.

The entertainment industry is coming under increasing pressure to reduce the amount of violence on television and the movies, and two recent events have added fuel to the censorship fire.

A couple weeks ago, a 5-year-old Ohio boy set fire to his house, killing his little sister, after allegedly watching MTV's dynamic duo, Beavis and Butthead, demonstrate the joys of arson. "Uh huh, uh huh. Fire's cool."

More recently, a couple of young men have been killed after mimicking a stunt in Disney's movie, *The Program*, in which football players prove their manhood by lying on the center divider of a highway while traffic roars past on either side. "Uh huh, uh (splat!)"

In typical knee-jerk fashion, critics and legislators are clamoring for the entertainment industry to accept the blame for these tragedies or face the wrath of

Reno (herself responsible for one of this year's more violent television moments), or the Congress (which ought to be subject to one of this year's more violent television moments).

The problem is neither with Beavis and Butthead nor Disney — it's with these kids and their parents. In the Ohio incident, one can only wonder why the boy's mother kept matches in a place he could get to them. Reports suggested the mother had caught the boy playing with fire previously, and thus knew of his pyrotechnic proclivities.

Obviously, whatever she did to discourage him, if anything, failed quite miserably and ultimately cost the life of her daughter. And instead of accepting responsibility for not teaching her son the dangers of fire and for leaving matches where he could get at them, she took the easy way out and blamed a cartoon.

Critics argue the mind of a 5-year-old is easily impressionable. If that's the case, should his mind not be as easily impressed by his mother as she claims it was by a guy named Butthead?

Even more ludicrous are the claims by parents of young men in the Northeast that their sons' minds are sufficient mush that a Disney movie could cause them to believe it's cool to lie in the middle of the street and hope a truck doesn't crush their empty skulls.

They were not impressionable young 5-year-olds. They were between 17- and 24-years-old and should have known better. The mother of one of the victims claimed "95 percent of what gets on TV or in the movies gets into kids' heads."

Apparently the part about not laying in the middle of a highway was part of the 5 percent that went in one ear and out the other.

The mother then asked a question that goes to the heart of the issue — "Why are they putting these movies out for our children?" And this is where the government has decided to step in. Reno is threatening legislation that would ban violent programming at certain hours, require TV to rate its programs and to provide warning labels for violent shows.

Once again, the most basic solution is being ignored — turn the channel, don't go to violent movies. Imagine the uproar that would follow a suggestion that newspapers stop covering certain stories. What if the *Register-Guard* decided to stop covering homosexual issues because the Oregon Citizens Alliance claimed doing so caused people to experiment with homosexuality, and that was bad?

Some people may recall the trials of heavy-metal performers Ozzy Osbourne and Judas Priest. Osbourne was sued by the parents of teenagers who had committed suicide while listening to Osbourne's song "Suicide Solution." Judas Priest was sued on similar grounds for its song "Better By You, Better By Me," which the parents of the deceased claimed contained backward messages urging listeners to commit suicide. Both suits proved unsuccessful.

In both cases, parents blamed the recording industry for caus-

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ing their children to kill themselves, instead of accepting the fact that their children were depressive, suicidal alcoholics who likely would have found a way to kill themselves sooner or later, song or no song.

The media do not create violence in society, they reflect it. Although many people attempt to compare television's early years with the present day to show the increase in violent content, they fail to note that for many years, the media ignored violence altogether. The dramatic rise in television/movie violence is not so much Hollywood looking to make a fast buck as it is the realities of modern society finally being deemed worthy of discussion.

Even if there was a valid link between violence in the media and violence in the real world, who would decide what we can and cannot watch? Arguably the most violent programs on television are reality, or reality-based programs. What's the difference between car chases and shoot-outs on *NYPD Blue* and *COPS*? One is real, one is fiction based on reality.

The typical evening news broadcast contains more images of rotting corpses and people being blown into meat by-products than any other show on television. In fact, news programs often get away with what entertainment media cannot. For example, Madonna's "Erotica" video, banned from even MTV as too racy, was shown in its entirety on ABC's *Nightline*.

The most obvious flaw with efforts to control media content is deciding who decides. If the decision makers share your political or moral persuasions, you'll probably accept their choices. But not everyone shares the same ideals. Do we really want Pat Buchanan's cultural warriors to decide what we see? Today the target is violence. What about tomorrow? Pre-marital sex? Any sex? Positive portrayals of homosexuals (not that there's a lot of that now)? Acceptance of non-Christian religions?

It begins with Beavis and Butthead. It ends with your freedom.

Martin Fisher is a columnist for the Emerald.

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