

TIME FOR A CLAMPDOWN?

in
ENTERTAINMENT

A censorship crusade blames the media for society's ills

They're talking about a revolution: an explosion of electronic pathways that will give you access to the media, computer, communication and entertainment industries at the flick of a remote. But how can the information superhighway be a marketplace of ideas if it's littered with the speed bumps of prior restraint?

In recent years, both government officials and concerned citizens have waged an all-out war against what they consider objectionable entertainment. By calling for warnings, guidelines and ratings systems, they have declared that life imitates art. Instead of seeing entertainment as a reflection of society, they see it as a bad influence, a cause rather than an effect.

Ironically, the targets of those who would censor include some of the most successful and profitable entertainers/forms of entertainment in their respective fields:

- The nation's most listened-to shock jock, Howard Stern, has been condemned and fined more than \$1 million by the Federal Communications Commission.
- The critically acclaimed *NYPD Blue* was banned by approximately 40, mostly southern, ABC affiliates for being too violent, vulgar and sexually explicit.
- Songs by rappers Snoop Doggy Dogg and Ice Cube, among others, have been banned by popular radio stations KPWR in Los Angeles and WBLS in New York for lyrics advocating violence or expressing hatred of women.
- Chain store Wal Mart banned Nirvana's album *In Utero* due to its "distasteful" cover.
- Video game maker Acclaim has been chastised for the violent themes in its best-selling game *Mortal Kombat*. The Sega version of the game, which employs digitized blood and celebrates victory by ripping off the opponent's head, outsells Nintendo's more tame version of the game 2 to 1. Sega now employs a warning system similar to that used for movies.

Though these measures might seem extreme, some say the entertainment industry is expanding the boundaries of acceptability for profit and must be accountable for its products.

"Although I am wary of any form of government censorship, there must be self-censorship within the entertainment industry," says Josh Feltman, a junior at Harvard U. and president of *The Perspective*, the school's liberal magazine. "The industry... is taking the lead by presenting more and more violent and shocking forms of entertainment in order to present something new and to continually outdo both themselves and their competitors."

Others insist these boundaries are not extended by the industry, but by society itself. "Shows like *Beavis and Butt-head* are more reflections on society than they are products of corporate moguls trying to fill their wallets," argues Adam Shapiro, a junior at Yale and managing editor of *Counterpoint* magazine. "Kids today simplify the world down to things that suck and are cool."

Like many, Shapiro thinks this latest crusade targets the symptoms of reckless and violent behavior instead of examining their causes.

During the fall, *Beavis and Butt-head* quite literally came under fire when a handful of children around the country committed arson after supposedly imitating the pair. And a similar incident occurred when the film *The Program* was released late last year. In one scene, macho football players lie down on a busy highway as cars rush by them. After an 18-year-old was killed mimicking the scene, Disney pulled it.

To what degree should entertainment be held responsible for the actions of its viewers? If every scene is cut that could possibly offend or be dangerously imitated, college staples like *The Simpsons* or *In*

Living Color would never have been created.

It's not as if previous attempts at censorship and mandatory warnings have reduced violence or offensiveness today — a glance into the past shows a number of relevant parallels.

In the 1930s, after criticism from the government and other conservatives, the major motion picture companies developed the Hays Code, a list of "dos and don'ts" of appropriate movie content; it later evolved into the rating system which remains in place today.

During the 1950s, Frederick Wortham published *The Seduction of the Innocent*, which blamed comic books as part of the reason for America's growing delinquency. Wortham's book, which claimed, among other things, that the relationship between Batman and Robin encouraged homosexual tendencies, led to the creation of the Comic Codes Authority, which censored comic book content.

And since the advent of rock and roll, musicians have been criticized in much the same way that artists like 2 Live Crew, Guns N' Roses and Ice-T are today.

As soon as rock music was born in the 1950s, it was condemned by psychologists and the media for damaging the minds of America's young. Later, parents and critics watched horrified as the likes of Jim Morrison and Mick Jagger corrupted the viewers of the *Ed Sullivan Show* with their sexually explicit dance movements and smutty lyrics.

As technology continues to become more interactive, the war will continue to be waged. Video games, in fact, seem to be the latest contested territory. "They teach kids that it's OK to be violent, trivializing human life and death, and equating their worth with the number of points a player can rack up," says Gerry Nylese, a senior at Colorado State U.

According to David Dunning, a psychology professor at Cornell U., there is some debate whether these technologically advanced forms of entertainment could affect not only attitude but actual behavior. But the effects of TV violence, at least in theory, are less debatable, he says.

"There has absolutely been dramatic evidence in the laboratory, establishing a link between television violence and behavior," Dunning explains.

The history of censorship continues to be written, and in light of all this apparent media-inspired viciousness, the information superhighway's future is uncertain. How much fun can a roadtrip be if it's planned by your grandparents?

"The supposed effects of entertainment have one of two explanations," says Yale's Shapiro. "Either the public is overly impressionable, or they are overly willing to use violent and obscene programming as a scapegoat. Whichever explanation you accept, censorship is clearly not the solution. It would be better to educate the people and create a society of better free-thinkers."

By Brian Salsberg, *The Cornell Daily Sun*, Cornell U.



The controversial (top to bottom): Snoop Doggy Dogg, Howard Stern, *Beavis and Butt-head*, *Mortal Kombat* and Ice-T have more than just your parents up in arms.

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