

Princeton schools at forefront of media awareness

Not talking about TV reminds me of the story of the elephant in the living room and no one wanting to talk about it. I'm sympathetic.

There are many reasons why people choose not to talk about how they use the media, especially TV: if you don't talk about it, you don't give it undeserved recognition; even better, if you don't own a TV set, then your kids won't be harmed; or, if you use it sparingly, you lessen its effects upon you and your family.

But that doesn't work. Studies show that talking about TV with kids is the best way to counteract its negative impact. And you also have the chance to learn more about your child. Adults and children don't see the same TV. While you prefer the Cosbys, your offspring may delight in the doings of the dysfunctional Simpsons.

From Imus in the Morning to Letterman at night, we are deluged by hundreds, perhaps

thousands, of media messages — and not just from TV, but also from radio, magazines, newspapers, billboards, even from logos on T-shirts and baseball caps. Mass media are no longer peripheral to our lives. Media portrayals influence our attitudes and beliefs about racial, ethnic and sexual minorities. They teach our children how to treat the elderly, people with disabilities and each other.

Growing up in an image culture, unaware and overloaded with implicit and explicit media messages, our young are like fish swimming in polluted water. They are not able to separate themselves from the toxic effects of mindless viewing. Worse yet, they don't even realize there is a problem.

A report from a July conference held by the federal departments of justice, education, health and human services warns that TV violence can be addictive, that the more violence one sees,

the more "jolts per minute" are needed to keep viewers watching. The violence issue is just the tip of the iceberg. So-called "reality" shows such as "Rescue 911" and the blurring of news and entertainment present equally alarming problems.

This is as much a Princeton issue as it is anywhere else. Some Princeton children live in homes where the television set is on for more than seven hours a day. Some teen-agers in our community learn most of what they know about lifestyles, problem solving and social behavior from watching talk shows, MTV, sitcoms and soaps.

It's true for adults, too. How do we come to know what we know — or think we know? For most of us, the answer would be essentially the same: through the media. Recall being glued to

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the set during the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas event? Remember feeling grimly fascinated by the "instant history" of the Persian Gulf War?

A Roper Poll recently reported that 81 percent of North Americans get their news from television. However, most of us are increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of television and other media. The problem is that too many of us feel that there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Not so. Some Princeton parents and teachers are taking action to see that our kids and other community members have the chance to become smart media consumers. Two years ago, the Princeton Parent-Teachers Organization and the teachers association, the Princeton Regional Education Association, decided that it was time to learn more about the effects of the media upon learning. With the support of the school board, a school-community venture began.

First, media scholar and expert on TV violence, Dr. George Gerbner from the Annenberg School for Communication, the University of Pennsylvania, spoke at a public meeting. Then two small planning groups consisting of parents, teachers and community members met with Dr. Gerbner and discussed ways to develop a media awareness program, primarily within the schools.

As a result of this effort, the Princeton High School curriculum now includes media literacy training for all ninth grade students. The aim of the program is not to teach students what to think about the media, but to give students the critical skills that will guide them to discover the hidden messages behind what they see. The curriculum is designed to reinforce tolerance and respect for others by evaluating media stereotyping, and to encourage a healthy skepticism about the media, especially television news, commercials and entertainment programs.

Media education workshops were offered for the first time at the district's February Institute, a small number of media-literate high school students began training other students through the Career Awareness Program and the PTO sponsored an evening discussion group on the topic of Media Portrayal and the Female Image.

The Princeton community is a pioneer in the area of media education. Such efforts are virtually non-existent throughout the state — and even throughout the Country! But we need to do more. Most of us agree that censorship is not the answer and we are skeptical about the effect of labels and warnings as answers to the violence problem.

Everyone has a stake in this issue — as parents, as consumers, as citizens and as concerned community members. We need to widen the

approach so that every interested Princeton resident has the chance to take a more active role in creating solutions to our media and cultural problems. Through a combination of community organization and a sound media education program available to everyone, we can influence the way we use media and in the process improve upon our children's cultural environment.

The Princeton schools will continue their good work by further developing the media literacy curriculum. All students need to be trained to be media literate. After school media education programs taught by media-literate high school students would be a good idea. Princeton churches and other social agencies could become involved with these efforts. The PTO should sponsor more opportunities for parents to participate in workshops on how to critically watch and evaluate TV with their children.

If the media are part of the problem, the media might also be part of the solution. Princeton media producers — newspapers, cable television, radio and independent media businesses — can take part in our community initiative. In effect, ask the media to teach community groups and agencies how to create their own news features, public service announcements and interview shows. We would all benefit from a more realistic understanding of the media business, its constraints, codes and conventions.

Princeton High School students have produced fine samples of anti-ads, montages and parodies which cleverly address social and cultural problems. Several years ago, my video production students created a mini-documentary on the changes in the New Jersey Drug Laws. The project required extensive research, including interviews with state legal authorities and the Princeton police. The student producers then presented the video to the high school health classes for analysis and discussion.

While we tend to focus on the negative aspects of the media, we should not diminish the positive effects. Used well, the media can help us to better understand our world.

Like it or not, television is here to stay. But we can do something about its polluting messages. We can teach our kids not to believe everything they see or hear, but to question the "facts," to read the screen and to evaluate all media with a critical eye and ear.

We can learn how to use TV and other media as a learning tool, as a positive influence in our lives and the lives of our children. But we can't do much if we don't start talking about what's going on, and then decide to join those community members who have already started to do something about it. Remember: 500 channels are just around the corner.

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Next on my agenda for students is to establish a Cultural Environment Club, which will become a partner of the school's Environmental Council.