

B450. "Let's Worry More About Violence, Less About Porn" Philadelphia Inquirer (March 14, 2004).

Indecency, no; violence, yes?

The House just voted to fine broadcasters who display indecency - but not those who wallow in gratuitous violence. If the Supreme Court allows the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) to stand, Web sites will be required to block access to sexual material deemed "harmful" to people younger than 17.

But children will continue to be fully exposed to brutal beatings, dismemberings, torture, and garden-variety murders. Another law, whose constitutionality has already passed muster, is the Children Internet Protection Act, which exerts this same bizarre pattern of control over computer access: In public schools and libraries, porn is filtered out, violence is not.

Similarly, recent pressure on the media to remove Howard Stern from the airwaves, and on movie stars to pick up their Oscars showing less cleavage, upper or lower - in short, to "clean up" the media - includes only sexual over- and undertones, not gratuitous violence.

The public debate on the matter is usually cast as one between liberals quick to cry censorship and conservatives who see such laws as needed to mend the moral fabric of the nation.

But for once, we have ample data. As a sociologist I examined several hundred social science studies showing that young people are greatly harmed by the display of violence. Meanwhile, data about the "menace" of porn, to which COPA refers and is meant to cure, are at best murky.

James P. Steyer, who summarized the findings of more than 100 studies conducted over 30 years, identified four ways in which media violence affects children. It makes them believe the world is a mean and violent place. It causes some kids to act aggressively toward others. It teaches that violence is an acceptable way to deal with conflict. And it desensitizes kids to the use of violence in the real world.

A report by the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation concluded that watching significant amounts of televised violence hurts human character and attitudes; promotes violent behavior; influences moral and social values about violence in daily life; and often results in a perception of a nastier world and an exaggerated probability of being a victim of violence.

No comparable data show such or other ill effects of porn on minors. No data even come close.

That does not mean children should be exposed to porn. But it does show that the American focus on protecting minors from sexually explicit material, but not from brutal use of force, is screwy. It happens to be just the opposite of the ways other civilized societies deal with their media: in Scandinavia, for instance, "blue" channels are common while violence is carefully circumscribed.

Not that we should totally erase violence from our culture. Where violence is an integral part of a cultural product, it can still be displayed in less offensive ways. No blood and body parts flying in the face of the viewer; no celebrations of the notches on your gun proclaiming your heroism.

We still follow our Puritan roots when dealing with sex, but follow our Wild West roots when facing violence. Neither attitude well applies to the 21st century. We need to accept our sexuality as natural - and recall that we have found better ways of working out differences than shootouts at high noon. Congress and the courts should pay much more mind to gratuitous violence than to porn on the simple ground that violence is outright dangerous while porn is "merely" demeaning.