POWER RANGERS, V-CHIP TECHNOLOGY,
AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF MEDIA VIOLENCE

Joseph Galbo

Introduction

Whenever debates about violence and television come to public attention, we face both the empirical question of how violent TV programs affect their audiences and the larger issue of the politics of culture. One can address the broad topic of violence and the media by focusing on the recent Canadian censuring of the wildly popular children’s program Mighty Morphin Power Rangers as a case study.

We inhabit a discourse of panic about the overwhelming ubiquity of the mass media, its choices, and its influences. Every day we hear concerns about the rapid and unprecedented expansion in the number of television channels available to the public: the much-hyped 500-channel universe of information and entertainment. Increased public anxiety about technological development stems both from worries about quality, diversity, choice and cost, and from worries about the ways in which children will be affected. Will they spend more time staring slack-jawed and glassy-eyed at the box? Will they manically play videos on their new video-game TV channel and neglect their homework? Will they be exposed more often to unsuitable material as their parents frantically try to keep up?

In the past several months in both Canada and the United States, the public debates over violence and television have intensified and shaped the direction of both new regulations and the ways in which such new media-blocking technology, as the violence chip, or v-chip, will be deployed. For those of us involved in media literacy, this issue assumes a central role, for it has implications for a whole philosophy of education and for basic assumptions about children’s culture and how children learn and understand media texts. Thus it is important that we examine the complex interrelationships among the media, pedagogy, politics, and popular culture.

The Cultural and Regulatory Context

On November 1, 1994, the Power Rangers was censured by the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBCS) for contravening several articles of the newly released violence code.1 Immediately
following the censure, YTV dropped the show from its lineup while Global TV agreed to sanitize the program and edited an average of two minutes from each show. During this period, a lively exchange about censorship and the effects of media violence erupted in the editorials and op-ed pages of the Canadian press. Many anti-violence groups saw the move by the CBSC as welcome and long overdue. Meg Hogarth, executive director of Media Watch, a liberal pro-censorship group that monitors media violence and media portrayals of women, defended the decision by proclaiming that “the average parent out there will be very much heartened by the decision.”

Patrick Lee, a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), in an opinion piece in the Globe and Mail that criticized the anti-censorship position of journalist Rick Salutin and University of Toronto psychologist Jonathan Freedman, advanced an argument with a sizable backing among pro-censorship educators: Violent images have colonized children’s minds and their imaginations are “brimming with guns, bombs, laser beams, karate kicks and exploding robots [all contributing to] human society devolving into a Darwinian madhouse.”

Public outcries against television violence have erupted in every decade of the television era, but never has the sense of foreboding and dread been as intense as it is at present. The growing public discomfit with violent and sexual content in the media was recently borne out in a New York Times poll examining American attitudes about the influence of popular culture. While most Americans watch more than four hours of television a day, more than half could not think of a good thing to say about television. Moreover, many Americans discern a “direct connection between the fictional world that young people are exposed to and the way that they behave in real life.” Over half, or 52 per cent, of those surveyed believe the portrayals of sex and violence on television and in music lyrics contribute “a lot” to whether teenagers become sexually active or violent. A quarter said that such portrayals contribute “some.” When asked who is to blame for teenage violence, 21 per cent cited television as the top cause and 13 per cent cited lack of adult supervision. The television show that parents frequently mentioned as being forbidden to their own children was MTV's Beavis and Butt-Head, followed by Fox’s Mighty Morphin Power Rangers.

The research on violence and the media is voluminous; it represents an important knowledge industry that has kept social scientists employed for decades, and while most of these studies point to a correlation between television violence and increased aggression, especially in children’s behaviour, it is not at all clear that the link is a causal one nor is there an unequivocal position on what kind of long-term effects such exposure has. The latest comprehensive review of the over 3,000 studies on violence and the media, all made primarily in the U.S. and mostly since 1975, while affirming the correlation also reaches ambiguous conclusions. Some researchers argue for a weak, limited and qualified causal connection; others maintain that the relationship between any televisual representation and human behavior is so complex, so resonant, that it is impossible to separate one from the other in terms of cause and effect. Still others, like communication analyst George Gerbner, suggest that the causal question is misplaced and that television violence works to produce fear and construct a perception that the world is much meaner and violent than it actually is.

Thirty years of research on media violence has demonstrated that TV violence has some obvious effects on children’s behavior, but the nature of those effects continue to be widely discussed and fiercely debated. The discussion, moreover, has been generally one-sided and the potential of television to encourage such pro-social behavior as friendliness, altruism and cooperation is often overlooked or dismissed or seldom reported. The result is that today the perception that television is a breeding ground for violence and crime is more widespread than ever. North Americans worry that crime and decay are tearing society apart and they are troubled by the threat of the kind of social devolution to which Patrick Lee alluded in his defense of the Power Rangers censuring; they fear that violence is mounting and that moral verities are crumbling by the hour. Families are shattering. The best lack conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity. And children weaned on television are both desensitized and seduced by the simulated mayhem and murder they witness daily. In this discourse the link between media violence and social context is often made in terms of “mental health problems.” As Keith Spicer, the chair of the Canadian Radio-Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) put it, “If we don’t do something, we risk the mental health of our children. Fifteen to 20
years down the road, we're risking more crime, dysfunctional families and unhappy marriages." Such arguments, of course, are not new, but they do tend to slip into a cultural politics where television, rap music, video games, and films become the readily and most prominently understood signs for the causes of real violence in society. It is certainly easier to deal with these symptoms than it is to deal with the deeper causes of social violence.

**Warham, Comics and Moral Panic**

A brief detour into the recent history of the moral regulation of popular culture will help at this point. The reaction in the U.S. in the 1950s to comic book gore and violence encapsulated the moral panic of an earlier generation. The traditional moral sectors of society—the evangelical churches and their leaders—provided the bulk of the resistance to comics, and in the U.S., Dr. Fredric Warham remains to this day a villain. Most paint him as a reactionary who, horrified by the presence of a rebellious kids' culture, used his knowledge and training in psychoanalysis to frighten parents and educators into believing that comics led directly to "moral degeneracy" and "juvenile delinquency."

But few people know that Warham was a pioneer progressive psychoanalyst. Born and trained in Vienna, he had a courageous history of dedication to liberal causes. Before the publication of his famous and uncompromising attack on the comics, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Warham had achieved notoriety for his work on behalf of the American civil rights movement. In 1946 he founded the Lafarge Clinic, a free psychiatric clinic established in Harlem and named after Karl Marx's son-in-law. There he studied the psychological effects of discrimination on children. His research led to his testifying in important desegregation trials in the early fifties and became a key part of the legal argument in *Brown v. The Board of Education.* He spoke often and vigorously against the censorship of literature, edited an anthology of modernist writers, and was a passionate and discriminating collector of modern 20th Century art. But when it came to popular culture, his ideas were anchored in the European and leftist critique of the culture industries. Like his contemporary, Theodor Adorno, he thought that comics and other products of mass culture represented a false consciousness cynically dictated by a grasping cultural industry on its most vulnerable citizens.

In the comic book controversy Warham belongs to the paternalism of the left rather than the conformity of the right. For the conservatives, the comics undermined traditional moral order and authority; for the left-leaning Warham, comics undercut critical thinking and autonomy while encouraging a violent streak. Despite their different inflections, proponents of both arguments incorporate a dramatic self-image of their position as protecting children from the distortions and irrational effects of popular culture.

**Back to the Present**

In the recent Canadian debates on media violence, we find a similar juxtaposition of Warham-like liberal pronouncements and conservative anxiety about the collapse of moral order. The result is a dominant discourse which, however well meaning in its intent, perpetuates earlier political and pedagogical approaches of saving citizens and specifically children from the alleged irrationality of the media. In Canada, media violence has been implicated in two tragic and highly publicized crimes. Keith Spicer, chairman of the CRTC, has said more than once that the May 1992 release of two major CRTC reports on TV violence was in response to the shooting of 14 women in December of 1989 at Montréal's École Polytechnique. According to press reports, the killer, Marc Lepine, apparently liked *Rambo* and *Terminator* movies. In another high-profile incident, a 13 year old Quebec girl, Véronique Larivière, whose 11-year-old sister had been raped and murdered by an unknown assailant, received national attention when in November of 1992 she presented Parliament with a petition against TV violence signed by 1.5 million Canadians.

The nation's efforts to understand its grief, disgust and sense of outrage over these acts of brutal violence did not resolve themselves into a single focus on violence on TV, yet this issue gained a remarkable political salience and managed to mobilize various groups within English Canada and Quebec while such other issues as gender inequality and violence against women did not. In the Canadian war against media violence, the defence of a national culture has operated as a constant subtext. For some Canadians, violent American films, novels, and children's TV programs purvey a deeply disturbing
content that needs to be contained and policed: it separates our “imagined community” from the American Other. Consequently, during the past several years we have witnessed increased activity at the border: Canada customs targeted novels like *American Psycho*, bell hooks’ book *Black Looks*, and materials headed to gay and lesbian bookstores like Little Sisters and Glad Day. This reaction should not, of course, be a surprise, for it is in the geopolitical borders of countries that social power—usually hidden in everyday life—is unmasked and exercised. It was also during this time of ferment against media violence that Tim Collings, a little-known Canadian professor of electrical engineering from Simon Fraser University, designed a violence chip that would block sexual and violent content from TV shows. Part of the appeal of the v-chip is that it allows for the technological policing of the border between domestic and public space. Within a year of the first Canadian testing of v-chip technology, the Americans followed the Canadian lead and embraced the v-chip with a desperate, almost hysterical urgency, as a way of resolving their own political conflicts over violent and sexual images on television.

**Power Rangers, Violence Code and Perceptions**

A few words follow here about the violence code and the problematics of any official guidelines that try to fix the reading of any text. The violence code, released in 1994, is a voluntary code that serves primarily an expressive function: It assumes a “causal relationship” between on-screen images and behavior, and it reassures the Canadian public that the representation of violence in children’s programs remains closely monitored and subject to a strict set of guidelines. For instance, it requires that the consequences of the violence be clearly demonstrated, that the levels of violence are not excessive, that violence is essential to the development of character and plot, and that violence is not the only method used to resolve conflict. The document appears to be particularly useful, though not altogether successful, in identifying and targeting gratuitous violence. Many educators appreciate the importance of distinguishing different types of violence. Yet like most guidelines, the violence code receives contested readings by different groups with a political investment, and within months the new code was put to the test by concerned parents and pro-censorship groups. In the case of the *Power Rangers*, the Coalition for Responsible Television was to prove politically crucial as their letters of protest and their initiatives brought the show to the attention of the CBSC.

The framing of the relationship between children and television proved central to the *Power Rangers* debate. This relationship is particularly sensitive because we all realize that children represent a vulnerable audience. For a start, children’s abilities to understand and fashion their own meanings from television are tied to the various stages of cognitive development. Between the ages of five and eight, children begin to make important critical determinations; they become capable of distinguishing between programs and commercials, between characters and actors, between human and animated characters, and between fiction and the representation of “reality”; after six years of age, they do not generally confuse cartoon violence with real acts of violence like those they see on the news.

The age of eight appears to be the crucial age at which televisual understanding dramatically improves.

Even children as young as two recognize that television is full of “let’s pretend” fantasy and begin to develop their own rules for understanding TV. Some researchers have made play a key point of their investigation. They have observed that whether it is a cartoon or a live-action drama like the *Power Rangers*, children understand TV fiction to carry cues that it is not serious and that it is “play.” Parents may be wary or frightened of the nature of children’s play after watching television, as kids may seem “out of control” after watching an exciting action-adventure television show.

But being out of control and playing at being out of control are far from the same thing. Kathleen McDonnell’s recent book *Kid Culture* suggests children have their own, completely different, set of standards by which they measure narratives. In fact, they have their own culture, or to put in a slightly different way following Stanley Fish, their own interpretive communities, just as class-, race- and ethnic- or gender-based groupings may constitute “interpretive communities.” This is a fruitful perspective, one that recognizes and does some justice to the dynamic tension between the power of television to influence, and the power of children to engage and transform televisual texts and negotiate the shifting terrain they occupy. The importance of interpretive communities modifies the media-effect model and begins to suggest a different set of questions:
does the media do to an audience, what does an o the media? How are media texts integrated into the of viewers? How is viewing shaped by social ng shaped by its relationship to other narrative forms? other suggests that there is no monolithically conceived anation,” but a range of shifting, multiple meanings.

sis of the Power Rangers

er, Power Rangers was having a demonstrable effect on ravior. Educators were complaining about the increase d fisticuffs and the Power Ranger kicks that schoolly demonstrated on each other. Media reports grew enzied about the alleged wave of out-of-control violence, and pro-censorship groups mounted furious the show. Children, however, love it. Power Rangers is show’s most successful programs that attract a mixed gender audience, ed up 40 per cent of the viewerhip. As well as male and female characters from different racial which is certainly more reflective of the backgrounds of viewers, it is one of the few programs that allow females rgh the “glass ceiling” of the superhero world.

, the Power Rangers is a tangle of contradictions. Its play it both ways: It often represents conventional but it manages to undermine them by transforming the coded teenage girls, into assertive, active superheroines. tion becomes even more apparent in the whole treatment g,” which introduces us into the realm of children’s ch the way that folktales often represent transformation. older notion of transformation intersects with the broader f the information society.

ow, “morphing” is linked to children’s own sense of nt and their ability to transform themselves into superheroes where technology and the signs of different identities are recombined to produce a new mutant cyborg, part prehistoric dinosaur, part human, but ently adaptable. In the age of information when hybrid easily constructed electronically, we find in a show like

the Power Rangers, however directly or obliquely, a reinforcement of such tendencies. Popular culture and academia both make much of these ideas. From such respected authorities as Nicholas Negroponte and Sherry Turkle we hear heady speculations that morphing is a “powerful” cultural practice. Indeed, on her web page, Sherry Turkle, author of Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (1995), has a picture of Foucault next to a photo of the blue Power Ranger attached to a link to download a video that shows Foucault morphing into the blue Ranger. This ironic, postmodernist gesture suggesting that identity is now decentered and multiple seems to me to be only half right. “Morphing”—the continual construction and reconstruction of a virtual identity—embodies great potential but it remains locked within the power constraints of a high-tech industrialism and its service-oriented economy. Children are fascinated by morphing, and popular culture is more than willing to encourage an enjoyable romp into the construction of the identity of difference. Let us not forget, however, that morphing is made possible by the presence of an authority figure. The Power Rangers are empowered by Zordon, represented as a light source and a disembodied cylindrical head, an image straight out of the Wizard of Oz. So while morphing may challenge the idea of a fixed identity, it is also enabled and safely bounded by the diffused and benign authority of Zordon.

The Power Rangers can certainly be blamed for rampant commercialism. In Canada it is a 100-million-dollar business and in the U.S. it is worth over one billion dollars. The current levels of the commercial intervention of media products in general are certainly unsettling: A recent report suggests that over half of all the toys on the market in North America are licensed products linked to film and television characters. But we cannot assume that these narratives operate as an unchallenged form of domination. Children are not a docile captive market easily delivered to toy manufacturers. Over time, through their own experience and with proper guidance, children can learn to negotiate with a commercial world that has become both an oppressive space and a valuable resource for the creation of new identities and modes of perceptions. Not to recognize this built-in tension in consumerist society is to fall prey to the kind of Warham-like arguments of the 1950’s when modernist elitism erased the possibility of a critical popular reading.
Conclusion

The violent content of television is neither neutral nor just harmless entertainment. These pacifying arguments—traditionally made by television broadcasters—are disingenuous. But positing a relationship between media violence and real-life aggression is not the same as citing media violence as a "cause" of violent behavior. Social scientists have spent years trying to refine a model of "media effects" that pinpoint specific televisial messages and link them with an observable impact on the attitudes and behavior of viewers. This model, oriented towards linearity, order, precision, predictability and control, tends to give images an importance and autonomy they do not necessarily have. Furthermore, it tends to deflect attention from the larger social and economic reasons for violence and aggression. The main contributors to violence continue to be the social injuries of poverty, racism, sexism and class discrimination, and the best defences against social violence remain gun control legislation, education and social welfare policies. Unless we understand social relationships in all their complexity, censorship will not only fail but will also be used to preserve images and messages that support the status quo.

Regulating agencies like the CRTC assure Canadians that broadcasters can, through independent broadcasting agencies like the CBSC, ensure that programs adhere to industry codes on TV violence, sex-role portrayals and advertising aimed at children. What slips through this first filter can be caught in the home through the use of media blocking technologies. Ironically, conservative groups tend to accept v-chip technology reluctantly. During the CRTC hearing in the spring of 1996, the Coalition for Responsible Television, which actively defended the censure of the Power Rangers, adamantly opposed the v-chip. In the United States, conservative groups resist the technology, and Republican presidential candidate Robert Dole has already noted his reservations. While some liberals and members of the artistic community fear that the ratings system accompanying the v-chip will ignore important nuances of context and discourage the production of innovative and controversial programs, conservatives worry that the v-chip will attract only responsible parents who already monitor their children's TV watching. V-chip technology, in short, does not advance the conservative political agenda of intervening in the actual production of a culture so that it represents their own moral position and point of view.

A v-chip rating system will soon be released in Canada, and in the U.S. a v-chip rating system is expected in 1997. Trina McQueen, president of the Discovery Channel and current chair of the committee responsible for releasing the new Canadian v-chip rating system, reports that the industry is moving cautiously. News, sports and cartoons will be exempt from the ratings, but not such live-action children's programs as the Power Rangers. Some supporters of v-chip technology have constructed its social meaning as a kind of TV violence and sexual image prophylactic. Certainly this metaphor continues to associate the media with a site of corruption and disease, and as such, it is hardly a marked advance on how we should engage with a media culture that in the coming years promises to be even more daring, challenging and—sometimes and for some people—disturbingly different. For those parents worried about the effects of violent or disturbing TV images, the v-chip, along with related technologies like screening software to keep net-surfing children away from erotic material, can be a viable alternative.

The ongoing challenge, however, will continue to be to engage in a responsible, empathic dialogue with children about the programs they watch and the net sites they visit. Above all, the key rests in addressing these issues through a critical education about the media. If our priority is to free children from the harmful effects of the hidden power relations within culture—its violence, racism, sexism and consumerism—then we want to deconstruct the fabric of these texts and enable the young reader to challenge the assumptions they embody in a way that acknowledges and respects how children understand their own media culture. Empowering children to make their own judgments and decisions is far more productive than sheltering them from a potentially unfriendly media environment. All this takes time and considerable commitment, but let us not be deceived that media-blocking technologies are a workable surrogate.

To be sure, we should use them, but we also need to recognize their inherent limitations, as well as the political and cultural climate that makes such strategies necessary.
Notes

1. To be more specific the Power Rangers were censured for contravening Article 2.1, 2.2, 2.7 and 2.8 of the industry’s Voluntary Code Regarding Violence in Television Programming. Any broadcaster who continued to air the Power Rangers was in violation of the industry voluntary code on violence and could be subject to having their license revoked by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunication Committee (CRTC) upon renewal. The CRTC is roughly the equivalent of the American Federal Communication Committee (FCC) but has the additional mandate of promoting and encouraging Canadian culture and content. Censure by the CBSC would have serious legal repercussion for any broadcaster in Canada, but strictly speaking it does not constitute censorship since “prior constraint” by the state is not involved. However, it can be argued that it constitutes an internal and implicit private industry censorship. Broadcasters want to avoid lengthy argumentation with the CRTC when their licenses are up for renewal, so the Power Rangers were quickly pulled from the air. Global television initially replaced the Power Rangers with a tamer edited version which satisfied the industry voluntary code regulation but in Fall of 1995 decided to pull the show altogether fearing that it generated too much controversy. Nevertheless Canadian kids could still watch the unedited version of Power Rangers on Fox’s Cable network. Canada and the U.S. have different violence codes regulation, so with the introduction of the v-chip, some policy makers hope that these regulations can be harmonized in the same way that motion picture ratings are harmonized throughout North America.


5. The report was published in 1982 and was undertaken by the National Institute of Mental Health. See David Pearl, Lorraine Bouthilet, and Joyce Lazar, eds. Television and Behavior Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, 2 vols. (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1982). For an overview of the debates on media effects see Shearan A. Lowery and Melvin L. De Fleur, Milestones in Mass Communication Research: Media Effects, Third Edition (New York: Longman, 1995). Lowery and De Fleur conclude that there is a “causal connection” between television violence and aggression, though they argue that the link is tenuous at best.

6. According to a recent Ekos study, one of the most comprehensive public opinion surveys ever undertaken in Canada, Canadian concern with crime continues to rise despite evidence that the crime rate has not increased. The perception tends to reinforce a nostalgia that is particularly prevalent among older Ontarians, and is contributing to a far more conservative Canadian identity. For an overview of the Ekos study see Edward Greenspoon, “Maintain services, Canadians tell survey,” Globe and Mail, Feb. 25, 1995, A1.


8. Wartham also testified on behalf of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg and helped to arrange the adoption of their children. He was also an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, and in 1966, he conducted some of the earliest studies on the effects of televised war images on American adolescents. With characteristic confidence, he concluded that these war images would make war and violence more acceptable to the American people. Ironically, it would be these very televised images of war that would make Americans question their government’s policy in Vietnam. See Fredric Wartham, “Is TV Hardening Us to the War in Vietnam,” in O. Larsen ed. Violence and the Mass Media (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).
9. During the Power Rangers controversy, Ronald Cohen, the national chairman of the CBSC, in an opinion piece in the *Globe and Mail*, maintained that the broadcasters’ violence code “reflected the Canadian assumption that the causal relationship between on-screen images...and behaviour existed... Broadcasters have agreed to carry on their commercial activities as though that casual link has been established. The result is the violence code.” See Ronald Cohen, “TV’s violence code: The system works,” *Globe and Mail*, Nov. 24, 1994. As early as 1972, the U.S. Surgeon General’s Report declared a causal connection between TV violence and anti-social behavior.


4. The idea of recombination is well illustrated in the very production of the show. The Power Rangers are based on a successful Japanese action martial-arts show *Zyuu Rangers*.

Although the show’s setting is Angel Grove, California, the fight scenes with the fantastic monsters come directly from the original inexpensive Japanese show and are reintegrated into the American show.

15. This is a conservative argument against popular children’s toys, but children are also constantly subverting the commercial scripts. See Steve Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children’s Culture in the Age of TV Marketing* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1993).

16. Early in 1996 President Bill Clinton signed the Information Decency Act which will outlaw images considered pornographic and aimed at children. The Act, which was supported by the Christian Coalition, was subsequently challenged in a Philadelphia court decision.

17. Recently there have been a number of practical discussions about children and censorship. Jon Katz has written a useful piece in *Wired* magazine on children and the internet in which he proposes that children have a moral right to access the machinery and content of media and culture. He further suggests that the digital world is beyond the comprehension of many parents anyway so that any media blocking technology could in time be circumvented by a motivated child. The best solution, he argues, is for parents to have a social contract with their children. Media access is granted as a right but it is subject to some clear conditions: the child must follow such rules of safety as not giving out a telephone number or home address to strangers on-line, and telling parents about “pornographic” contacts. The goal is to develop within families “trust, negotiation and communication rather than phobias, conflict and suspicion.” See Jon Katz, “The Rights of Kids in the Digital Age,” *Wired*, July, 1997.

18. V-chip technology, as critics repeatedly stress, cannot make a distinction between films like *Schindler’s List* and *Die Hard with a Vengeance*; both would be blocked from our screens. A more useful strategy would be to open a discussion about media violence. Henry Giroux has suggested that we make a distinction between different modalities of violence: ritualistic, symbolic, and