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### FULBRIGHT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AMERICAN CULTURE AND MEDIA "TELEVISION VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN"

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Dear Fulbright scholars, honourable rector, professors, guests, my fellow students, ladies and gentlemen. We have heard a great deal on the powerful role that media, culture and politics has on America. There is one area that demonstrates how much influence media in particular has in America. I am speaking of television and lessons of violence it teaches. It is sad to notice how often in the last two years alone we have seen how well children have learned these lessons.

Let me also say that I see this issue from two sides – from the side of someone who has lived in Washington, DC, one of America's most violent cities and as a Mongolian who has watched American television as an outside observer.

On October 1, 1997, a 17-year old Mississippi boy brought a gun to school, killed two students and wounded seven.

A few weeks later, 15-year old Oregon boy attacked his school. On December 1, 1997, a 14-year old Paducah, Kentucky boy killed three girls from his class and wounded several other students.

In March 1998, two boys Jonesboro, Arkansas, just 11 and 13 years old, machine-gunned a group of students at their school, killing a teacher and three students.

A month later, a 14-year old Edinboro, Pennsylvania boy finished his graduation party by killing a teacher and a student.

In June 1998, a third 14-year old killed another two people at his

school in Richmond, Virginia.

More recently, on April 20 1999, two students of Columbus high school in Littleton, Colorado, fully equipped like army personnel, raged through their school with bullets and bombs leaving 13 dead, 15 including themselves.

In just a few short years, nearly thirty innocent lives fell victim to someone's violent behaviour. Almost thirty ordinary families lost their loved ones because of someone's violent act. In each case the "someone" was a teenage school boy.

**Wait a minute!** What is going on with these teenagers? Why are these kids behaving so violently?

These incidents have stunned America, and they have stunned the whole world. In America, people are trying to understand what's behind these deadly and vicious attacks. Some people, including President Clinton in his address to the nation a week after the killing spree in Littleton, Colorado, blame the violence on the availability of guns. Others blame the violent lyrics of rap music which, as Professor Feeley mentioned yesterday, is very popular among the younger generation.

Although these may play a part in the reasons of the violence, we should not overlook the role that television plays in the growing level and frequency of violence.

In fact, I think television is the most powerful influence on these incidents across America. Why? Because, simply American television shows a lot of violence. Watching television has become a habit for America's children; a habit that gets them used to seeing blood and acts of violence. The combination of habit and violent program is telling children that violent behaviour is common and ok.

Just think how many young people gain their cultural knowledge from the television programs they watch. Anyone who has spent time with young children knows they learn by watching what is going on around them. We have all seen a child over the age of two who can switch the television on and start to copy everything he or she sees.

There are many studies show that children and teenagers spend most of their free time sitting in front of the television – that America invented the concept of a "couch potato" for someone who plants themselves in front of the television. Television shows viewers an



exciting life – a life that is fast, full of beautiful, rich young people – that most people watching do not or never will have. In that sense, the television attracts the younger generation of American society as it does in many other countries.

But American television also broadcasts and introduces a violent world to young people for 24 hours a day from coast to coast. According to one study, children from ages two to eleven spend an average of 28 hours a week watching television – roughly four hours each day, seven days a week.

And each year, this same study shows, the time children and teenagers spend watching television increases. But what is it that young people watch during these 28 hours?

Let me make a detailed example. Prime-time programming, including the news, is basically a chronicle of violent incidents, homicides, car accidents, house fires, crime scenes and more. For example, at six o'clock on June 30, 1998 Washington, DC's TV channels 4, 5, and 9 started their evening news with coverage of a murder in Alexandria and hit-and-incident which killed one and wounded three.

Maybe DC is an exception and has an unusual amount of this violence and television is just covering the local events. Unfortunately this is not necessarily so. In Washington, DC and across the rest of the United States, local channels seem to compete with each other regarding which one will show such incidents most often and in greatest detail. It is their opinion that the more violent the story they cover, the more people will watch their news channel. No wonder why there is the newsroom cliché???, "If it bleeds, it leads".

With few exceptions, every television channel broadcasts violence in its daily programs. And remember, this is only the networks. In cable TV, numbers of the violence acts are countless and there are fewer rules that regulate or limit what can be broadcast.

Think for a minute about all the different kinds of television series that bring violence into American homes. Television series like Hercules, Viper and others are good examples. In recent years, these series have been joined by so-called talk shows such as the Jerry Springer show, Jenny show or others that are basically theatres for personal attacks – in world and sometimes in real action.

Television also broadcasts many movies and these are no better than the local news weekly series when it comes to broadcasting violence. In fact, many people might say that they are even worse. The movies tend to give us an heroic male, whom we are supposed to emulate and praise, and who achieves his success through fighting and killing. The hero scorches everything and persecutes his enemies in order to win. Although we are told to consider the hero's enemies as "bad", they are still living beings. Yet, young and old viewers are meant to see them as enemies, worthy only of destroying in the most violent, fiery, explosive, bullet-ridden kind of way.

I can tell you that many boys like to do exactly what they see these action men doing in the movies. We often see young boys acting like their favorite television hero when they are with their playmates – shooting at each other with guns, making fast-car noises, and "blowing up" their own imaginary enemies. We can see these imitation action men on every playground in America.

Unfortunately, this type of warrior is not only limited to boys or men. Entertainers produce more shows which show female warriors doing the same thing that male heroes do. The popular character Xena, for example, punches people in the face, chops off heads and stabs her enemies. Because of this increasingly common image of women carrying out violent acts, we should expect that young girls will begin to act out in similar ways, too. Should we also be surprised when this begins to happen?

However, some people might suggest that children should watch programs designed for them, cartoons for example. But, watching cartoons won't provide an escape from television violence either. Cartoons, especially Saturday morning cartoons, hold the highest violence rate among the other television programs. The study which found young people watching more television also confirmed that the typical Saturday cartoon has "25 violent acts in one hour". How many times have we ourselves laughed when an iron ball is dropped on the head of some cartoon creature or a car runs over another character, leaving tire marks down its back?

Today's cartoons are just as often about mercenaries and space soldiers in search of an enemy as they are about the old-fashioned kind of cartoon character. In fact, a child could see 75-100 violent acts



in one Saturday morning alone. Parents might happily spend their weekends unaware of the lessons of violence that their children are learning.

The same study estimates that the "average child is likely to have watched 8,000 screen murders and more than 100,000 acts of violence by the end of elementary school. By the end of the teenage years, that figure will double." The implication is that high school graduates have seen the most violent kind of acts rehearsed on their television screens and are basically well prepared for any violent act -- if not actually committing such an act, then seeing it take place.

In this case parents shouldn't be aggravated or wonder where their children learn such things when two or three year olds start hitting or dragging each other without any mercy, because the children are only showing for the parents what they have learned. As the time goes by, the young viewers absorb so many of these violent scenes that they become numb to the blood, wreckage, beatings, and even murders. The children or young students are not mature enough to resist the lessons that violent television teaches.

It is no wonder, then, that juvenile crime gets more violent and the number of crimes involving young people steadily increases. According to Dr. Madeline Levine, "America has become the most violent nation in the industrialized world. Homicide is the leading cause of death for large segments of our country's youth, and we have more young men in prison than any other country in the world."

Unless, Americans do something urgently to change the situation, their children are facing a great danger. Dr. Levine also stated that television is "an easily reversible contributor to crime." It will take the effort of many groups of people to make an effective change to this violent education. We cannot hope that television channels or producers will change alone, because television is a profit-making business, and violent programming makes money. Parents, legislators, teachers, and children can all contribute to such a change.

They can start by accepting that the television is a powerful educator. The next step is to decide what kind of a teacher they want it to be.

Thank you for your attention.

#### Materials used

Barry, David S. "Growing Up Violent: Decades Of Research Link Screen Mayhem with Increase in Aggressive Behavior" Los-Angeles: Media & Values. Current topics. 1993.

Levine, Madeline. Viewing Violence: How Media Violence Affects Your Child's and Adolescent's Development. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1996.

Various TV-PROGRAMS viewed in Washington, DC., area during the years of 1996-1999.

Numbers of TV-NEWS on local channels watched in Washington, DC., area during the years of 1996-1999.