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## To Protect Children from a Child Abusive Industry, Legislation, Education, and Public Mobilisation Required

*Jacques Brodeur*

Parents and teachers, as members of civil society, have developed strategies to oppose child abusing techniques used by the marketing industry. The struggle to reduce the influence of advertising and violent entertainment on children and teens has led to victories that have obtained little or no coverage by the press.

### Introduction

Over the last half century, while some industries polluted air, water, and food, the marketing industry increasingly poisoned children's cultural environment. After decades of persistent efforts by civil society, governments have been forced to regulate our physical environment. But few governments have shown capacity to regulate the use of marketing that targets children. The increasing power of the media on public opinion has instilled such fear on decision makers that very few have dared to take action. This has left the industry free to decide what children will watch on television, what products will be offered to entertain them, what strategies will be used to manipulate their wishes, desires, values and understanding of life. In other words, to abuse them. With concentration of ownership, a handful of conglomerates now control 85% of all media.<sup>1</sup> These conglomerates have become the "hidden departments of global culture."<sup>2</sup> They control information, which gives them the privilege to decide what parents will learn about the way that the marketing industry abuses kids and teens and the damages it generates. After witnessing the increasing amount of insidious and sophisticated advertising carried by television, more citizens have searched for and experienced ways to protect children from this commercial form of child abuse. The increasing power of the media over children has inspired resistance from parents, teachers, child rights advocates, and citizens in all regions of North America.<sup>3</sup> Some underreported promising practices have been experienced in Canada and in the U.S.

### The Purpose of Television

Television does not exist primarily to inform and entertain. Television is basically a commercial industry that sells viewers to advertisers. Patrick Le Lay, President and Director of French TV network TF1, declared in 2004 that the role of television is essentially to sell brain time to Coca-Cola.<sup>4</sup> To maximize benefits, broadcasters constantly search for various ways attract and sell more viewers to advertisers who will then agree to pay more to reach them. This type of business is frightening when those for sale are children.<sup>5</sup> Television sells young audiences to advertisers who hire doctors of psychology<sup>6</sup> to learn how to attract children, how to keep them glued and addicted to the tube, how to transform their desires into needs, how to influence their preferences, and teach them how to nag their parents. To understand the importance of advertising for marketers, citizens need to know that commercial messages often cost up to 10 times more to produce than the program we watch despite the fact that they fill only 20% of air time. In North America today, advertisers spend more than \$20 billion per year to reach children, which represents an increase of 2000% in less than 20 years.<sup>7</sup>

Advertisers use many techniques to influence youth, to manipulate their needs during the stages of their growth into adulthood. Some of the more common vulnerabilities that advertisers take advantage of to sell products include young peoples' need for peer acceptance, love, safety, their desire to feel powerful or independent, aspirations to be and to act older than they actually are, and the need to have an identity. Much of the child-targeted advertising is painstakingly researched and prepared, at times by some of the most talented and creative minds on the planet. Advertisers battle over what they chillingly call "mind share" and some openly discuss "owning" children's minds.<sup>8</sup> Every year, an increasing amount of sophisticated ads are used to reach children through television programs, movies, videogames and Internet.<sup>9</sup> As a result, parents and teachers have searched for effective ways to protect children from marketing. Many have lobbied, petitioned, and requested, but very few obtained support from decision makers in the form of legislation. While some have abandoned efforts, others have created their own means of protecting children from mental manipulation and emotional desensitization. Fortunately, some of these efforts have helped reduce the impact of commercial pollution on the cultural environment and protect the mental health of young citizens. But most victories have gone under-reported.

### Legislation, Most Effective Way to Protect Children

In *all* areas of human production and commerce, the most effective way to protect children from child abuse by professional marketers is legislation. Whenever pollution of food, water, or air increases risks to human health and safety, even if polluters deny any responsibility for damages caused by their industry, decision makers are naturally requested to take action to protect the most vulnerable citizens. In

the United States and Canada, as in most countries, all over the world, a vast majority of citizens support the regulation of advertising to children.<sup>10</sup> History has shown that other industries have tried to oppose legislation to protect citizens. The automobile, tobacco, food and oil industries have all expended tremendous amounts of money and energy to deprive citizens of protection as the profiting industry has developed tight commercial links with the industry that controls public information—the media. Therefore, informing the public about child abuse by marketers has become very difficult. Very few countries or states have succeeded in regulating the targeting of children in the marketing industry: Greece, Sweden and Québec are among them.

### Legislation To Ban Advertising to Children

A North American success story was realized in the Province of Québec, Canada. The law making advertising to children illegal in the province of Québec received unanimous bipartisan approval back in 1976. This legislation required not only vision and courage from political decision makers, but also strong support from civil society. Otherwise, it would have been crushed by the media soon after its adoption. By 1980, the rules to enforce the legislation and make it clearly understood were ready. The toy company Irwin Toys Limited chose to challenge the law in the Supreme Court of Canada, arguing that it restricted the company's freedom of speech, protected by the Québec Charter of Rights and the Canadian Charter of Rights. In April 1989, after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars for lawyers, the industry received the verdict stating that the Québec legislation to protect children was fully constitutional. The judges worded their decision quite clearly and considered that the means chosen by the government of Québec were reasonable, proportional to the objective.

- (1) There is no doubt that a ban on advertising directed to children is rationally connected to the objective of protecting children from advertising. There is no general ban on the advertising of children's products, but simply a prohibition against directing advertisements to those unaware of their persuasive intent.
- (2) The ban on commercial advertising directed to children was the minimal impairment of free expression consistent with the pressing and substantial goal of protecting children against manipulation through such advertising.
- (3) Advertisers are always free to direct their message at parents and other adults. They are also free to participate in educational advertising. The real concern animating Irwin Toys is that revenues are in some degree affected.<sup>11</sup>

The Supreme Court decision includes 83 pages which accurately describe how children are vulnerable to sophisticated manipulation techniques used by the marketing industry, why any provincial jurisdiction in Canada has constitutional legitimacy to protect children, why children need such protection until the age of 13, and how marketers and broadcasters are not restricted from advertising to adults.

This legislation made Québec the first, and to this day—30 years after its adoption—the only jurisdiction in North America to protect children from advertising. This raises a few questions. Why did other State jurisdictions in the U.S. and in Canada refuse to take action against child abuse by the marketing industry?<sup>12</sup> Are Quebecers the only people who care enough for their children to use legislation to protect them from this very lucrative and powerful industry? The Canadian Supreme Court Decision offers a rich lesson in the workings of the media.<sup>13</sup> Analysis of the Irwin Toys Decision provides important strategic insights to decision makers all over the world who prepare to legislate, and to lawyers who have to defend the legitimacy of similar legislation in court. Further research is needed to evaluate how the ban affected childhood obesity<sup>14</sup> and other marketing related diseases (MRD) in Québec. Statistics Canada has provided data showing that young Quebecers are less obese than other young Canadians and that Quebecers commit fewer violent crimes than the rest of Canada.<sup>15</sup>

Recently, the American Psychological Association requested similar legislation to protect children in the U.S., along with a coalition of organizations advocating for children's rights.<sup>16</sup> According to the *Washington Post*<sup>17</sup>, a survey conducted in 2006 showed that more than 80% of U.S. citizens agreed that advertising to children under the age of 9 should be prohibited.<sup>18</sup> Commercial Alert campaigned for similar legislation to ban advertising targeting children under the age of 12.<sup>19</sup>

### Impact of Legislation on Quality Programs for Children

During the years following its adoption, while the legislation was challenged in the courts, intensive lobbying by advertisers argued that children in Québec would be punished by this legislation since TV networks were prevented from selling time to advertisers. Lack of income would force broadcasters to reduce the quality and the quantity of programs for kids. Prohibition would punish children instead of protecting them. Fifteen years after the law was enacted, the Government of Québec decided to evaluate the actual impact of the law. Researchers from the University of Montréal investigated the arguments of the industry. Were young viewers rushing for U.S. networks? Had young Quebecers been deprived of the “educational opportunity” to become savvy consumers? Has it been healthy to isolate Québec's children from other young North Americans, and have they suffered rather than enjoy protection from commercial harassment?<sup>20</sup>

Research compared programs offered to children in two Canadian cities: Montréal, where advertising was illegal, and Toronto, where “freedom” existed. The study revealed that programming for children was richer, more diverse, better quality, and more educational in Montreal compared to Toronto. The percentage of young Quebec viewers watching programs from the U.S. never reached more than 10%. The study revealed that ruling out advertising to kids had undeniably proven to be a very efficient and promising practice to protect children. Protection from

advertising did not have a negative impact on the quality of children's programming.

### Child Abusers Portray Themselves as Victims of Censorship

When requests to regulate marketing to children are made public, the industry is prompt to report about it as if freedom of expression had come under attack. Rivalry between media conglomerates suddenly disappears and they rapidly join voices to make government regulation look futile or suspicious, and make the public forget that public airwaves belong to the public. They quote "experts" who belittle damages to children and advocate in favour of free speech for marketers. The fact that more media outlets now belong to fewer owners allows them to reach considerable numbers of viewers, listeners, and readers. Accusing child rights advocates of being pro-censorship is flagrant misrepresentation of the facts, because the use of marketing by big media has nothing to do with freedom of speech.

### Television Feeds Other Marketing Related Diseases

The marketing industry has scrutinized children's needs, hopes, fears, dreams, and desires.<sup>21</sup> In order to sell more young audiences to advertisers, television has looked for more attractive programs. Increasing young audiences has meant enormous monetary profits in the short term for these industries. But media exposure also has enormous short, mid, and long-term effects on children and society. According to the Canadian and American Academies of Pediatrics, studies have linked television with numerous marketing-related diseases (MRD). Links were found between television and obesity, body image, self esteem, violent crime, physical and verbal abuse, anorexia and other eating disorders, smoking, alcohol, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, compulsive consumerism, perilous car driving, etc.<sup>22</sup> What other industry can afford to generate so much damages to children and teens without any consequences? When the bacteria E coli is found in water, meat, or spinach, the public is quickly informed about the risks and the product is taken away from groceries. Why would research about MRDs be deprived of similar coverage and children deprived of similar protection ?

### Violence as a Powerful Marketing Ingredient

Let us consider the use of violence as a marketing tool. Violence is actually one of the most powerful marketing devices used to lure children and teens. Exposure to violent entertainment does not only teach children how to act violently, in the child's inexperienced brain it links inflicting pain with pleasure. After being informed that the use of violence in entertainment helps increase the pain for millions of children around the world, did the industry try to prevent damages? The answer from the marketers was simple: raising children is parents' job, not theirs. The only other

group of individuals who would say that are child abusers: “I know that little girl was 8, but it’s the parent’s job to keep her away from me.”<sup>23</sup> The media industry and the marketing industry are functioning with child abuser logic. In September 2005, the UN Secretary General ordered UNICEF Canada to prepare a consultation document for analysing violence against children in North America. The document states clearly that additional legislation is certainly among promising practices.<sup>24</sup> But legislation alone will be ineffective without mobilization by civil society to counter the enormous power of the media, including the videogame industry.

### Censorship by the Entertainment Industry

Citizens usually view censorship as the action of government to block public access to strategic political information. Sometimes, censorship is also perceived as an old fashion hunt to block scenes of sex in movies. What if censorship was the instrument of the media to give preference to entertainment products that will hurt children, teens, and society? Gratuitous violence is actually the result of censorship by commerce. In North America, most cultural messages are strained through a commercial filter which uses gratuitous violence as an industrial ingredient to keep viewers tuned in, ratings high, and profits up.<sup>25</sup> The first, if not only, rule that big media agrees to respect is the market’s rule. Their argument is simple: if people want to watch violent programs, broadcasters have the right to air them and no government should interfere. If the transportation industry had acted in a similar way, there would be no speed regulation in school areas, no traffic lights for pedestrians, and no prohibition against carrying dangerous chemicals in tunnels. The broadcast of programs unhealthy and unsafe for children is the opposite of freedom. It represents the power of the media to abuse vulnerable children. Between freedom of speech and children’s safety, all civilized societies should give consideration to the most vulnerable.

### Silencing Voices Opposing Child Abuse

Parents, teachers, and child rights advocates requesting regulation of TV programs for children—and the sale of videogames to children—do not promote censorship, they oppose censorship by commerce. By 1997, the Dean Emeritus of the Annenberg School for Communication at University of Pennsylvania had monitored television for over 30 years. After finding Saturday morning children’s programs filled by four times more scenes of violence per hour than prime time television, he described censorship by the media. “When you can dump a Power Rangers on 300 million children in 80 countries, shutting down domestic artists and cultural products, you don’t have to care who wants it and who gets hurt in the process. Mindless TV violence is (...) the product of de facto censorship: a global marketing formula imposed on program creators and foisted on the children of the world.”<sup>26</sup>

Labelling child rights advocates “enemies of freedom” is motivated by the industry’s own attempt at censorship. By accusing them of promoting censorship,

the media try to make citizens forget that public airwaves belong to the public. Citizens have total legitimacy to make child abuse illegal and ban it from public airwaves, just like they have the right to regulate street traffic. Big media do not defend freedom of speech, they systematically impose silence on child abusers opponents. Violent programs are aired because content is controlled by the industry. The choice to show violence is a decision made by somebody, elected by nobody, unknown to the public, hired and paid to give priority to cruelty, aggressiveness and hatred wherever it sells. That is why the Ninja Turtles, the Terminator, Fifty Cent, and South Park are allowed to come into our living rooms and promote anti-social values instead of other healthy programs. Broadcasters receive money for making such decisions. Profits increase after airing violent programs. The industry's censorship exists and millions of children pay the price every day.

### Marketing Violence to Children, Immoral

In the early 1980s, in addition to advertising through commercials, companies produced their own TV programs and paid to have them broadcast on weekdays and Saturday mornings. In 1984 "GI Joe" carried 84 acts of violence per hour and "Transformers" 81.<sup>27</sup> This marketing strategy was so profitable that toy manufacturers reused it in 1989 with the "Ninja Turtles," in 1993 with the "Power Rangers," and in 1999 with the "Pokemons." The primary purpose was to manipulate children so they would nag their parents (and Santa Claus) to give them Hasbro toys. Product placement in television programs for children included fantasies and stereotypes that support an aggressive culture of violence, sexism and war.

### Public Airwaves Actually Used for Child Abuse

Growing public awareness of the dangers of media violence aimed at young people has put pressure on governments to regulate it. In 1995, to prevent government regulation, Canadian broadcasters agreed to regulate themselves and promised that gratuitous violence would be aired only after 9 p.m. Seven years later, research revealed that self regulation not only had failed to reduce violence but also helped private broadcasters increase the number of violent acts by 432%.<sup>28</sup> Violence aired before 9 p.m. had gone up from 53% in 1995 up to 88% in 2002.

During those seven years, two developments helped to neutralize public concern. First, broadcasters provided funding for media literacy programs. Such funding has proven to be a smokescreen to help broadcasters project an ethical image of their industry while increasing toxic doses bombarded at children. A second development was the V-Chip offered to parents working full-time supposedly to help them block violent programs. The V-Chip has shown to help shifting responsibility for regulating TV violence away from polluters onto parents. Governments had given control of pollution to polluters.



### Purpose of Violent Entertainment

Media violence is used by the entertainment industry for the purpose of attracting more viewers. When consideration is taken for their age, it is only to take advantage of their vulnerability. The use of violence is certainly one of the most brutal, cruel and sophisticated form of child abuse. Pokemons, Terminators, Doom, Quake, Basketball Diaries, Grand Theft Auto, Howard Stern, South Parks, and Jackass, like hundreds of other cultural products, have been proven to damage children and teens across the continent.<sup>29</sup> They carry and promote values that help guide and inspire children's attitudes, behaviours, clothing, language and also, unfortunately, the way they relate with each other. Eminem, Fifty Cent, Marilyn Manson, and Snoop Dog were used by the music industry to circulate hate propaganda against women and cash profit from it. These "artists," often portrayed as rebels, are rich and famous slaves, but slaves nonetheless. These guys would still be whining in their garages if it was not for the industry that gave them a microphone, printed their lyrics, sold their albums, promoted them on MTV and honoured them with Grammys.<sup>30</sup> It takes experience, knowledge, critical viewing skills, and empathy to understand that these role models actually teach submission, frustration, humiliation, and anger. Misogyny, violence, fear, sexism, racism, and consumerism have nothing in common with freedom and justice, they are the opposite. They have been enemies of humanity for millennia. How could a child know that?

### Size of the Effect Hidden from the Public

Another form of censorship by the industry is to keep research ignored by the public. Scientists have measured the correlation between what children watch and how they behave. Research revealed that the effect of media violence is bigger than the effect of exposure to lead on children's brain activity, bigger than the effect of calcium intake on bone mass, bigger than the effect of homework on academic achievement, bigger than the effects of condoms as protection against HIV, bigger than the effects of asbestos exposure and second-hand smoke on cancer.<sup>31</sup> Some of these correlations had already been presented by Professor Craig Anderson in his testimony before the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearing in 2001. More recent comparisons were presented by Dr. Doug Gentile in October 2006. Research confirmed short and long term effects.<sup>32</sup>

### FPS Video Games Are Murder Simulators

Video game revenues reach \$10 billion a year, which is more than that of television and movies combined, and is increasing. Half of fourth graders play "first person shooter" (FPS) video games. After playing video games, young people exhibit measurable decreases in social behaviours, a 43% increase in aggressive thoughts, and a 17% increase in violent retaliation to provocation. Playing violent

video games accounted for 13-22% of the variance in teenagers' violent behaviour. By comparison, smoking tobacco accounts for 14% of the variance in lung cancer.<sup>33</sup> Videogames have been used by the U.S. army for the purpose of conditioning young recruits to kill without thinking. Videogames give kids and teens the skill, the will and the thrill to kill.<sup>34</sup> Apart from the tendency of video games to arouse aggression, these games provide little mental stimulation to the brain's frontal lobe, an area that plays an important role in the repression of anti-social impulses.<sup>35</sup> A lack of stimulation prior to the age of 20 prevents the neurons from thickening and connecting, thereby impairing the brain's ability to control impulses such as violence and aggression.

### Media Violence Linked with Bullying and Crime

Time exposure to television is actually linked with bullying. Youngsters who spent a typical amount of time—about 3½ hours daily—in front of the tube had a 25% increased risk of becoming bullies between the ages of 6 and 11. This shows a very clear effect of television on children's bullying.<sup>36</sup>

Since 1985, school authorities in the U.S. have noticed that violence has crept into lower grade levels. In California, from 1995 to 2001, assaults nearly doubled. In Philadelphia, the first part of school year 2003-2004 brought the suspensions of 22 kindergartners. Minneapolis schools have suspended more than 500 kindergartners over the past two school years for fighting, indecent exposure, and persistent lack of cooperation. Minnesota schools have suspended nearly 4,000 kindergartners, first, and second graders for fighting and disorderly conduct. In Massachusetts, the percentage of suspended students in pre-kindergarten through third grade more than doubled between 1995 and 2000. In 2001-2002, schools in Greenville, South Carolina, suspended 132 first-graders, 75 kindergartners, and two preschoolers.<sup>37</sup> In the Province of Québec, the number of elementary school students with troubled behaviors has increased by 300% between 1985 and 2000.<sup>38</sup>

Media violence has also been linked with later criminal activity, as revealed by a 17-year study in which 700 young people were tracked down into their adult lives. Hours of viewing were correlated with acts of aggression. Young viewers watching more TV committed more crimes as adults.<sup>39</sup> In Canada, violent crime rate of youth is growing much faster than adults' and in the Province of Québec, even if violent crime rate is lower than other provinces, violent crime rate of youth is twice that of adults.<sup>40</sup>

### Influence of Toxic Culture Censored by the Media

In 1977, the (Canadian) LaMarsh Commission Report<sup>41</sup> made the analogy of violence to environmental contamination. During the 30 years following the Report, thousands of studies confirmed that violent entertainment influences children. In

1995, a University of Winnipeg researcher found more than 650 studies linking real-life violence to media violence.<sup>42</sup> In 2001, only 4% of violent programs had a strong anti-violence theme, and only 13% of reality programs presented any alternatives to violence or showed how it could be avoided.<sup>43</sup> Epidemiologist Brandon Centerwall estimated that TV violence influenced half of real-life violence in the U.S.<sup>44</sup> With increasing exposure to violent entertainment, children become mentally altered and physically inclined to commit, accept, or enjoy watching real-life violence. Exposure to violent entertainment has shown to reduce empathy.

### Hijacking Media Education a Form of Censorship

Researchers investigated the funding sources of major public health groups, and the studies revealed that after big corporations dump money into their budgets, the groups start promoting the agendas of the corporations.<sup>45</sup> In 2006, when MacDonald's launched its own exercise program to prevent obesity, the PR strategy obscured the negative impact of junk food on children's health. North Americans face a similar problem with media education. Organizations funded by media conglomerates have promoted a kind of media literacy that deflects blame from the media to parents. North American schools receive free kits, including "educational tools" hiding the impact of media violence on youth and society.<sup>46</sup>

### Various Empowering Practices by Civil Society

If society wants to reduce the manipulation of children by marketers and ban violence from TV programs for children, increased legislation is necessary. The entertainment industry has marketed products to children that their own ratings do not consider appropriate for them. Children under 17 can purchase tickets for movies, music recordings, and video games labelled as suitable for adults only. Self-regulation has clearly proven to be nothing but a smokescreen for the industry to continue marketing violence to children.<sup>47</sup> The marketing of violence targeting children contravenes article 17e of the Child Rights Convention making obligation to all States to recognize the importance of the media and protect children from material dangerous for their well being.<sup>48</sup> Attempts to legislate will require wide mobilisation. Coalitions of parents, health professionals, education professionals, grassroots organisations and activists will succeed where legislators alone have failed.

### Experiencing Practices To Improve Parents Awareness

In 2002, researchers surveyed parental guidance over their children's consumption of media, and conclusion showed that it was either very weak or absent. Most parents have little or no knowledge of the harmful effects of media violence on their child. Parents are not aware of the amount of violence their children are exposed

to on television, the Internet and video games. It is obvious that media education is needed for parents. Families are important in reducing the harmful effects of media violence. Children themselves believe they should be protected.<sup>49</sup> Parents need to know why using TV as a babysitter is perilous.

Powerful lobby opposing regulations have inspired some promising practices to protect North American children from media violence. A report sent to the UN Secretary General as a contribution to the *Study on Violence against Children* highlights 20 such promising practices by civil society.<sup>50</sup> Among these innovative practices, the SMART Program and the 10Day Challenge have proven to be very empowering. They have helped parents, teachers, and students come together to oppose the increasing power of commercial media.

### Student Media Awareness to Reduce Television (SMART)

The SMART Program was tested in 1996-1997 by Dr. Thomas N. Robinson in San Jose, California. It consisted of 18 lessons for teachers to prepare third and fourth graders to turn off television and videogames for 10 days and reduce TV viewing to less than seven hours per week during the following months. A study reported in the *Journal of the AMA* in 2001 revealed that SMART helped reduce verbal violence by 50%, and physical violence by 40%.<sup>51</sup> The study also proved that reducing television and videogames helped reducing another damaging MRD: obesity.<sup>52</sup> The SMART Program was widely disseminated in 2004 by the Stanford Health Promotion Resource Center (SHPRC) affiliated to Stanford University School of Medicine.<sup>53</sup>

In 2004-2005, the SMART Program was successfully used in Michigan. Other schools joined in over the next year. Administrators and teachers say short-term results were striking: less aggressive behaviour and, in some cases, better standardized test scores. (55) The school district was granted \$2.3 millions for sharing the program in 2006-2007. The Delta-Schoolcraft School District, based in Escanaba, Michigan, was the first school district to use the SMART curriculum across the entire district. It resulted in an 80% reduction in violence, a 15% increase in math scores and an 18% increase in writing scores when compared to seven non-participating schools. SMART showed to be effective in a controlled experiment conducted by Stanford Medical School.<sup>56</sup> The SMART Program has proven to be among the most promising programs in North America intended to protect children from media violence, but that information was not made available in the mass media. Why was the public so quickly informed about bacteria E coli in spinach from California but so little information was broadcast about damages created by television and effective ways to protect children?

### The 10-Day Challenge, TV and Videogame Free

The 10-Day Challenge was used for the first time in April 2003 in partnership with the Parents Association of the Québec City region, Canada. The Challenge reached all students in 11 participating schools, from K to 6. For the first year, it received funding from the Public Safety Departments of Québec and Canada. In May 2003, the Canadian Press (CP) covered the 10-Day Challenge in St-Malachie where 100 students participated.<sup>57</sup> The Challenge was reported in the Green Teacher Magazine.<sup>58</sup> Since then, the Challenge has been used in more than 50 schools in the provinces of Québec and Ontario. The Challenge was very successful, as shown in the evaluation by parents, students, and teachers from six elementary schools.<sup>59</sup> In April 2004, the Parents Association launched a 20-minute video (in French) and the Canadian Observatory on School Violence Prevention (COSVP) reported about it.<sup>60</sup> In all regions or cities where the Challenge was experienced, it received extensive coverage by the press. In 2005, the Québec Consumers Protection Office added the Challenge on its list of recommended consumer practices.<sup>61</sup>

### The 10-Day Challenge with Teens

In April 2005, on the sixth anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, factors around this dramatic event were scrutinized. Analysis presented in Michael Moore's movie *Bowling For Columbine* was not considered complete. Violent entertainment played an important role in the shooting.<sup>62</sup> When teen students in Louis-Jacques-Casault High School, in Montmagny, Québec, prepared for the 10-Day Challenge, media education actually helped reduce verbal and physical violence. One thousand teenagers attending the high school were encouraged to turn off TV and videogames for 10 days and half of them actually did. Teachers, parents, and students evaluated the outcome.<sup>63</sup> Interviews with teenagers who participated in the Challenge were aired by CBC radio. Further evaluation confirmed the value of the 10-Day Challenge as a "promising practice" with teenagers. It has shown to be a motivational tool, and an efficient way to mobilize the entire community and develop awareness.

### Parents, Teachers, and Students Evaluated the 10-Day Challenge

In the school year 2003-2004, 20 elementary schools in Quebec and Ontario offered media education workshops to prepare students and parents to turn off TV. Tabulation of participation revealed that 1354 students succeeded in saving 19377 hours of TV and videogames.<sup>64</sup> Elementary school students turned TV off for an average of 7 days. In April 2004, teens turned TV off for an average of five days. Three weeks after the turn off, evaluation forms were given to all students, parents and teachers. In 2005-2006, 10 more schools participated and evaluated their

experience, and the results showed an increase in participants' levels of exercise, reading, time with parents and friends, and less fighting and name calling at school and at home. In some communities, the reduction of verbal violence at home was more important than at school. Teachers noticed that homework performance was better and participating students were more attentive in class. All participants said that they wanted to do it again, including parents, students, and teachers.

### Impact on Community as a Whole

The fact that the Challenge is accepted by parents is very important. The Challenge is an adults' mobilisation to support children's decision and motivation. The Challenge generated a precious opportunity to value the family unit.

Preparation for the 10-Day Challenge seems to be more important than the act of turning off the TV. Workshops for students, professional development training for teachers, conferences for parents, follow up activities by teachers and promotional activities in the community, all these ingredients help in making the Challenge a success. The involvement of communities in the 10-Day Challenge increases the reputation of schools, the importance of education, and the child's sense of belonging. Since the challenge is perceived as an equivalent of an Olympic performance, communities express admiration and support for students, thus reinforcing youth's self esteem and pride.

Surprisingly, during and after the 10-Day Challenge, students found themselves in the middle of intense media coverage. Newspapers, broadcasters and magazines reported on their performance in a very appreciative way. In areas where poverty is common, media usually report about crimes and fights. When students organize to stand up against small screens, they attracted attention and admiration for their neighbourhoods. All principals considered the Challenge as an empowering exercise with parents, students, staff and the whole community.

The SMART Program and the 10-Day Challenge are great news for all North American parents. Success obtained by SMART in California and Michigan should be known all across North America. Success obtained with the 10-Day Challenge in Québec and Ontario should be known across the continent as well.

Teachers appreciate this innovative approach to violence prevention. The reduction of exposure to TV and video game violence, along with lessons to motivate children and parents and increase awareness against media violence, have proven to be very efficient ways to prevent violence and bullying in school. All health professionals and education professionals in North America should be informed. By spreading information about these successes, the media can actually contribute to youth violence prevention in the global village.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Less than 10 conglomerates control 85% of all media in the U.S. and all over the world. <http://www.thenation.com/special/bigten.html>

<sup>2</sup> George Gerbner, Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, used to call the big media conglomerates the hidden Ministers of Global Culture. <http://www.mediachannel.org/ownership/moguls-printable-150dpi.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Promising Practices Experienced by North American Civil Society to Protect Children from Media Violence, Child Rights International Network, EDUPAX, 2006. <http://www.crin.org/docs/CRIN%20Promising%20Practices%20Media%20Violence%203.doc>

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Le Lay, President and Director of French TV network TF1. "The business of television is essentially to sell brain time to Coca-Cola." <http://www.ledevoi.com/cgi-bin/imprimer?path=/2005/04/25/80175.html>

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<sup>6</sup> Psychologists and Psychiatrists Call for Limits on the Use of Psychology to Influence or Exploit Children for Commercial Purposes, September 30, 1999. <http://www.commercialalert.org/issues/culture/psychology/commercial-alert-psychologists-psychiatrists-call-for-limits-on-the-use-of-psychology-to-influence-or-exploit-children-for-commercial-purposes>

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