

FOREWORD

During an interview with Bill Moyers on PBS, the American television network, David Puttnam described how the Roman circuses evolved over several hundred years from places of mild entertainment to places where hundreds of thousands of people died. According to Puttnam, the Roman circuses became “more and more bloody, more and more grotesque” as a result of the public’s demand for “more and more” violence.

The words of David Puttnam and Arnold Toynbee remind us that societies can disintegrate from within if the values that these societies cherish are allowed to decay by a slow, subtle attrition. Justice Hall reminds us that a society needs to be vigilant in opposing such an invasion of its democratic values.

The Committee believes that the problems of television violence, and the larger issue of societal violence, could lead to the fraying of the fabric of our modern civilization unless a comprehensive strategy is developed to arrest such insidious progress. The signatures of more than 1.3 million Canadians on Virginie Larivière’s petition in favour of legislation against television violence, and the reaction of the House of Commons and the Minister of Communications to this petition, lead us to believe that the past complacent attitude of this country’s population, institutions and government towards television violence is changing. As our review of previous Canadian efforts to address television violence demonstrates, and as an earlier reference from the House of Commons arising from a motion by Larry Schneider, M.P., calling for a full review of the media’s portrayal of violence also indicates, the current public concern over this issue is not a new phenomenon. What is needed is for government, the federal regulator and broadcasters to act.

The values that a society holds are constantly changing. This is not surprising given that our values are shaped by events occurring around us. Today, with instantaneous communications between cities, countries and continents, our values are shaped by a greater variety of factors than was the case in the not so distant past. With such means of communications, events taking place in other continents have the potential to shape our own values.

In this information age, television has quickly acquired a central place in our homes, both as a source of information and as a means of entertainment. Television offers the potential to shape our values, our beliefs, our knowledge and our attitudes. The power that television has to effect potential societal changes has received increased attention from researchers and governments over the last three decades. To a great extent, this attention has focussed on the effects of television violence on the attitudes and behaviour of the television audience, particularly on the effect television violence may have on children.

Hundreds of studies have shown that there is a positive correlation between television violence and aggressive and antisocial behaviour in individuals, although it is impossible to predict the precise effects on individuals at any given time and place. People who advocate government intervention argue that the scientific evidence is sufficiently sound to warrant the imposition of limits on the freedom of expression of broadcasters. Some even argue that the burden of proof should be shifted to the broadcasters, namely, that the broadcasters should be required to prove that their programming is