

The crimes of TV

By Ruth Ostrow

MY daughter and I watched the latest series of Australian Idol together. It was good bonding time for us. A time for most parents I know to share their kids' aspirations, fantasies and dreams.

In the middle of one of the broadcasts, an advertisement came on for some bloodthirsty crime thriller that was to follow. The ad hinted that a father had sexually abused his little boy and then driven metal spikes or some such thing through the child's skull.

I am foggy on the details, having tried to banish the insanity from my mind, but I remember the forensic expert discussing the perforated skull and blurred sequences of a menacing father clutching the child with a voice-over about the "terrible secrets" that went on in the family home.

Before I could react, the damage was done. My ten-year-old was looking upset. "Mummy, what did that little boy's Daddy do to him?"

I'm no conservative. I will shout from the nearest rooftop that grown-ups should be allowed to watch what they want, smoke what they want, have sex with whomever they want, as long as it harms no-one and is respectful of other people's boundaries.

What infuriates me is when things are done to innocent people, boundaries are not respected and rights are violated - which was happening here both on screen and off. With a captive audience of young people and unsuspecting parents, the network had decided to run this psychological pollution, leaving the parents I spoke to feeling visually assaulted, manipulated and concerned for their kids.

To me, the experience posed many questions. How can seeing titties on Big Brother or Janet Jackson's nipple cause such outrage, yet "entertainment" involving child rape and torture be considered acceptable TV footage? Have we as a society become so immune to brutality that we accept such a storyline as entertainment, let alone it being advertised so proudly? And what do the networks think of subjecting kids to parental paedophilia and homicide at 8pm?

Even now (during school holidays), the 5pm news is on in the background, and a nauseating ad for tonight's 8.30pm SVU has just come on. I can hear the words "horrific crime . . . my son . . . his clothes were drenched in blood" as I type. At Channel Ten, a robotic person gives me the standard: "We are just following acceptable advertising guidelines."

Why are these guidelines acceptable? Most importantly, do we believe the hype that "extreme crime" imports with idiotic names like CSI, NCIS and Law & Order: SVU are adored by millions?

Are Australian people really hooked on cruel, depraved plotlines, or is it simply that we are offered nothing better to watch?

Here are some recent storylines listed on the Special Victims Unit Web site: "An abused seven-year-old girl lies comatose as the detectives investigate members of her family"; "the decomposing body of a sexually molested five-year-old girl is discovered . . ."; "The body of a young boy [is] found in a luggage compartment . . . his pedophile guardian's genitals removed."

In one crime drama I caught the end of, it was the teenage sister who'd been sexually molesting and filming her kid sister before brutally killing the child. Is the punishment of the older girl (herself a victim) what the networks consider a redemptive plotline where good triumphs over evil?

This is my theory. That such programs are fodder for Americans who are war-weary and have been brutalised by global events, 9/11, and home events such as countless tragic shootings in school yards. Research I did while working as a correspondent in Israel during the Lebanon War showed that in times of increased violence and unrest, the purchase of sadomasochistic videos increased dramatically - largely as a cathartic mechanism to help the release of fear, a sense of powerlessness and anxiety.

I don't believe Australia is in this mindset. Thankfully, we don't endure the warmongering or crime rates that beset many other nations. Why then are we treated to their diet of craziness, which really just begets more craziness?

During my time as a radio broadcaster I was named in Parliament as ushering in Sodom and Gomorrah for hosting a radio show at 10.30pm dealing with adult themes. In an open letter to then communications minister Senator Alston in *The Australian*, I asked: "Why do you so obsessively censor the communication of sex in the media when public sentiment on TV/film violence remains unexplored and violent content unchallenged? Why are children's video games getting more violent without protest?"

I am still waiting for my answer from the Government, from the networks, from anyone. But if the latest spate of programs and horror ads are any indication, there is no-one home to answer my call. Maybe they're too busy watching SVU.

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