Eau Claire parents control children’s viewing habits

A survey of Eau Claire parents shows many believe parental control is the best way to reduce the amount of violence children see on television, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire researchers say.

Judy Sims and Joseph Giordano, both associate professors of communication and journalism, conducted research in an effort to find out how, if at all, parents want to address violence on television.

Their work was compiled in the paper “Addressing the Problem of Violent Content on Television: Congression­nal Legislation, Advertiser Boy­cotts, Warnings/Advisories and Par­ental Control.”

The three-semester project began in January 1994 and involved two of Sims’ communication research classes. “I allow students to do hands-­on research in my class,” Sims said. “It’s a great experience for them to be involved in a research effort they find interesting.”

Students reviewed scholarly literature on television violence that Sims collected, and they found out what’s been researched and what hasn’t,” she said. “We chose this topic because it filled a gap in the literature.”

“We were interested in Eau Claire parents’ attitudes toward proposed legislation and other possible solutions to the problem.”

Violent content is a timely topic, she said, noting that two pieces of legis­lation included in the survey have been reintroduced in Congress.

“The research was funded by the UW System Office of University Research, WEAU-TV-13, and the communication and journalism department.”

Students distributed surveys to principals at nine schools, three public and six parochial, Sims said. “We may have tapped into more involved parents than usual with this sample.”

The 877 surveys were administered to parents or guardians of children ages 3-12. Of the surveys, 351 (40 percent) were returned, Sims said.

“The survey was designed to assess representativeness, we featured some of the same questions asked on nationwide television violence surveys,” Sims said. “The results matched for many questions which provides some evidence for the survey’s representativeness.”

The survey had 41 open-ended and closed-ended questions and it was reviewed by 10 experts during the design process, Sims said.

“We conducted a pilot study with a group of local parents to further re­duce measurement error,” Sims said. “We learned of interpretation prob­lems and made adjustments to remedy them.”

Survey results showed that parents ranked parental control as the most effective solution to violent content.

“The Children’s Protection from Violent Programming Act of 1993” was ranked second most effective, she said. The bill, which is being recon­sidered by Congress, directs the FCC to limit violent content to time slots when children would least likely be watching, she said.

Parents ranked warnings/advisories as the third most effective solution, Sims said. They said warnings “greatly influence” their decision to allow their child to watch a particu­lar program, she said.

Parents were also asked about the “Television Violence Reduction Through Parental Empowerment Act of 1993.” Although the bill didn’t pass in 1993, two versions of it have been reintroduced. President Clinton has expressed support for this idea, Sims said.

This bill, also called the v-chip bill, would require new televisions to be equipped with an electronic chip that would recognize a special signal transmitted by broadcasters identifi­ing particular programs as violent. This chip would allow parents to screen violent television program­ming, she said.

The Senate approved a v-chip bill in June and the House approved a v­chip bill in August. Both bodies will meet in late September to reconcile their differences and agree on a single bill, Sims said. When the v-chip bill was presented to Eau Claire parents, 43 percent said they would buy a television with the v-chip, 37 percent said they wouldn’t and 29 percent said they didn’t know. Some reasons par­ents gave for saying no included con­cern about cost and beliefs that par­ental control or individual regulation were better solutions.

Three UW-Eau Claire seniors helped with the project after the class ended. Jayne Hughes from Lancaster, Erik Neudecker from Eau Claire, and Amanda Barnes from Richfield, Minn., designed a poster board and presented the research at UW-Eau Claire’s annual student/faculty re­search day.

“It was a good experience,” Hughes said. “We were part of the process of collecting and analyzing data. We learned a lot that way.”

The paper was accepted by the Communication and Law Commission for presentation at the 1995 Speech, Communication Association Convention in Texas.

“This fall, we will present our re­search at the Northwestern Wiscon­sin Education Association,” Sims said. “And we will discuss the research re­sults with the children, parents, teachers and principals who participated in the study.”

Sims and Giordano will continue to study the data, Sims said. The next part will involve viewing habits of Eau Claire children, she said.

Violence doesn’t appear to be de­creasing on television or in society,” Sims said. “Violent programming can desensitize, teach authoritarianism, stimulate aggressive behavior, cultivate fearful perceptions of the world and threaten the integrity of human beings.”

Years of research indicates that vio­lence on television is problematic, Sims said. “There are ways to address the problem without violating the consti­tutional rights of free speech.”