

MEDIA TARGET: CHILDREN

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As mentioned in last week's column, I wish to share the troubling things that I read in the book, "The Other Parent: The Inside Story Of The Media's Effect On Our Children", by James P. Steyer, an award-winning faculty member at Stanford University, and founder of JP Kids and Children now, a leading national advocacy and media organization for children. And while the book's data came from a survey undertaken in the United States, I think it is about time that we, here in the Philippines who ape practically everything in the U.S., and especially in the way media works, should have a second look too, if we care for our children.

Media already shapes the lives of the youngest and most impressionable of audiences – the youth, from the very young pre-schoolers, to the 'tweeners and teenagers. I think that it is not incorrect to say that in general, the drive to make money and profits is what motivates our press, television stations, advertisers, and movie producers. Of course there is nothing wrong with targeting profits, as no company is ever organized with the end-objective of losing money, but when in the course of targeting profits, these media institutions unabashedly target children, I think parents have to take a stand.

Many parents, of course, in these days of economic difficulties are in most instances both at work, their children left to surrogate parents such as *yayas*, but unwittingly, they have also surrendered to another parent – the media. And the two things that this "other parent" inculcate in the young, especially the very young who are seated in front of the boob tube as *yayas* or maids go about their other duties, are sex and violence, not to mention imprinting in them the current consumeristic culture of our age.

Sex sells. That's what advertisers say when they push products. Long ago, and this would probably be true of many of my readers and friends, when television was a new thing there was an unwritten code about what was in good taste to be shown. When

the “dawning of the age of Aquarius” came and the sexual revolution exploded, traditional notions of what was permissible in movies, television, the theater, books and magazines changed in a defining way. Suddenly, not just “naughty” scenes were shown but explicit sex was being beamed into millions of homes through television, or written about not just in Lady Chatterly-type novels, but in the supposedly merely romantic “Mills and Boon” pocketbooks that teenagers avidly read.

Pre-adolescents and teenagers are sophisticated multi-taskers, bouncing around CDs, computer games, videos, music, television, and the internet – last Sunday’s paper (not the BusinessWorld) featured the results of New Generations Philippines 2009 study: Pinoy kids are becoming more digitally savvy, and that half of young Pinoy netizens use the Internet to assist them with their homework, while 45% visit social networking sites...and the 5%? Do they surf and find other “interesting” sites?

Steyer quotes another author, Douglas Rushkoff, who observed, “the media ‘conducts social electricity...wherever it spreads, its contents are carried, to.’” And these days, Steyer further says, “much of that content is graphically sexual, and kids are steeped in that explicit brew.” This is the cultural environment in which our kids are growing up. Again quoting Steyer who also quotes a remark by actor-director Keenen Ivory Wayans, “We are now dealing with a generation where the cat’s out of the bag in every single subject...Society as a whole has moved into a taboo-free zone.”

A steady diet of media sex can affect adolescents. The fact is that while sex is pervasive in the media, it is rarely accompanied by any discussion of the risks and consequences of sexual behavior. I do not have the statistics for teenage pregnancy, but the answer to this is not to provide them with contraceptives as our misguided “reproductive health” proponents say. Attention would better be paid to what contributes to this problem – the media provides through its storylines, themes, characterizations and dialogues, emphasis on physical appearance and attracting the opposite sex, the “ideal” for an eager audience of young people.

Today, when our young are trying to figure out who they are and what is their place in the larger society, that perception is steadily being shaped by media messages, confusing them at a very early age. Are you not shocked at some noontime shows which depict (through contests) kids ages 5 to 9, gyrating in sexually explicit moves (which they

probably don't even understand) to music which is also laced with explicitly sexual lyrics? And a lot of music these days, by popular singers (are they really singers?), such as the Eminem's song "As the World Turns" (cited by Steyer), marketed to kids who absorb, memorize and mimic them, is not just sexually explicit but sadistically explicit as well.

Let me say this again, that the graphic content of most of music and television shows have less to do with "artistic expression" (as they loudly proclaim) than with commercial profits. These days, young people do have some money in their pockets, and they can buy their own CDs, DVDs, or download anything they want from the internet... and yet, do most parents, supervise their children's music and viewing purchases? I insist that this is troubling, because young listeners and viewers, **are** influenced in their judgment and expectations, especially as when they do not receive any counter-balancing messages to guide them. Thus, Steyer says, "the 'other parent' is shaping the ways kids see the world, with disturbingly little control or supervision."

Steyer further says, "Now it's exclusively commercial interests that determine the content of the media, and explicit sex is a tried-and-true formula to grab audiences – on television, in movies, in music, and on the Net. The problem is that, although most of this material is supposedly targeted at adults, it's actually marketed to and consumed by children. Roaming unsupervised in the media world, many of them are growing up with distorted information and expectations about sex. To a troubling extent, the adults – industry, government, and parents – are letting the media set commercially driven sexual standards for kids – who more than anything, need responsible adult guidance, information, and love."

(to be continued, with discussion on media violence)