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At the 2001 ALA Midwinter Meeting, on recommendation by the Council Intellectual Freedom Committee, Council adopted 2000-2001 ALA CD#19.3, Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement.

At the 2001 Annual Conference, on recommendation by the Council Policy Monitoring Committee, the ALA Council approved Policy 53.9 (Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement) be added to the ALA Policy Manual as follows:

54.9 Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement. The American Library Association endorses Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement, a statement of the Association of American Publishers, Inc. (See "Policy Reference File": Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement, 2000-2001 CD#19.3)

MEMORANDUM

Date: November 29, 2000
To: ALA Council
From: Margo Crist, chair, ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee
Subject: Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement

Since Columbine, legislators on the local, state, and national levels have been focusing on violence portrayed in the entertainment media. In September alone, the Senate Commerce Committee held hearings and various members threatened legislation unless the movie industry stringently regulates itself; the Federal Trade Commission reported that movies rated "R" and video games rated "M" are marketed to much younger people; and the Senate Commerce Committee passed a bill that would ban television shows with graphic or gratuitous violence from daylight viewing.

One result of these recent attempts to establish a correlation between violence portrayed in the entertainment media and real violence is a renewed urgency in the book community to complete and issue "Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement" (attached).

The Association of American Publishers (AAP) took the lead in developing this statement, asking for (and receiving) input from both the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee and the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE). On November 29, the statement was issued jointly by the ABFFE, American Society of Journalists and Authors, AAP, Association of American University Presses, Authors Guild, Freedom to Read Foundation, and PEN American Center. The document will be reissued at a major press conference in late January or early February.

The statement promotes ALA's long-held belief that the "cure for problems created by speech is more speech, not censorship," which also is the conclusion of "Shooting the Messenger: Why Censorship Won't Stop Violence" (<http://www.mediacoalition.org/STM-main.htm>). This report, prepared for The Media Coalition, "analyzes and synthesizes dozens of studies and statistics, debunking the myth that there is a link between violence in the media and real-life violence by demonstrating that while research indicates numerous causes for violence, none of them link directly to media violence."

"Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement" both affirms that however legitimate the concerns about violence are in our society, the proposed cures of legislated censorship are "worse than the illness" and reminds us that our society must continue to guarantee free and unrestricted access to all expressions of ideas, including those that portray violence. The statement expresses this in six principles:

1. Censorship is not the answer to violence in society.
2. The First Amendment protects the widest range of expression.
3. It is not properly the role of the government to evaluate the merits of expression.
4. Evaluating the worth of expression is subjective.
5. Portrayals of violence in the media reflect a violent world.

6. Individuals, not the government, bear responsibility for determining what materials are appropriate for themselves and their children.

Since these principles comply with ALA's intellectual freedom policies, the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee asked the ALA Executive Board to endorse "Violence in the Media: A Joint Statement" at its fall meeting last October. During that meeting, the Board decided to ask the ALA Council to discuss the statement prior to the 2001 ALA Midwinter Meeting and to determine whether to endorse it in Washington, D.C.

Please keep in mind that the statement is a joint one issued by several organizations; the request is for the ALA Council to endorse the statement as it is. The ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee had substantial input into the statement and encourages Council to endorse it.

Thank you for your time and assistance. The committee looks forward to Council's discussion and endorsement of the statement at Midwinter.

VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA: A JOINT STATEMENT

The undersigned organizations, whose members represent a broad cross-section of the community of the book in America, believe that concerns being expressed over portrayals of violence in the media, including films, television, music, and video games, as well as communication via the Internet, are generating demands for action that threaten core First Amendment freedoms. The frenetic search for ways to deal with this perceived problem has produced "solutions" that involve either direct government regulation of content or offers to stay the government's hand if the media "clean up their act," that is, engage in self-censorship or labeling practices.

However legitimate the concerns, the proposed cures are worse than the illness. They would extract an unacceptably high price in terms of eroding our fundamental guarantees of free expression. The authors, publishers, booksellers, and librarians who have joined in this statement have often faced criticism over the allegedly harmful effects of the books that they write, publish and make available- books that deal with all aspects of human experience. Our consistent response has been to remind our critics – and interested legislators and judges – of the fundamental precepts of free expression that must guide our society's judgments in these matters.

These first principles, which have allowed the book world to flourish, apply equally to all media of expression. Among them:

1. Censorship is not the answer to violence in society. The root causes of violence in society lie beyond violent portrayals by the media. This being so, the search for solutions must go beyond facile censorship initiatives, which inevitably compromise our fundamental freedom of expression, and instead seek out and attack these root causes. The problem is complex; so, too, are its solutions. There is no "quick fix," and we deceive ourselves if we embrace the view that stifling the media messenger will blot out the sometimes disturbing messages it conveys.

2. The First Amendment protects the widest range of expression. The First Amendment, whether embodied in the freedom to speak, to read, or to communicate through electronic media, is grounded in the proposition that the widest possible array of views and expression must be protected. The strength of the First Amendment lies in the diversity it promotes – the freedom to speak one's mind, to read or watch what one pleases – however out-of-favor, offensive, or irreverent it may be.

3. It is not properly the role of the government to evaluate the merits of expression. An underlying premise of free expression is the recognition that no individual or group, let alone a governmental body, possesses the wisdom to separate "good" from "bad" speech (violent or otherwise); to identify valid versus invalid premises in the elusive search for truth; nor to gauge what speech will promote a better body politic or enhance individual self-fulfillment. This enlightenment is, instead, left to the outcome of a cacophony of speech, clashing – often brilliantly, sometimes banally – in the "marketplace of ideas." It is by exposing, confronting, and addressing controversial speech, not by hiding it beneath a veil of censorship, that the merits of that speech can be tested. In the words of the great Justice Brandeis, the best antidote for false speech is "more speech, not enforced silence."

4. Evaluating the worth of expression is subjective. The controversy over depictions of violence in the media underscores the futility of attempting to define "acceptable" content. Few if

any argue that portrayals of violence play no proper role in works of expression. Rather, most critics take issue with certain portrayals of violence in certain works. Every critic, however, has a unique parade of horrors; no two critics' lists are the same. Indeed, works that some critics deem to be the least "worthy" are deemed by others to be of great value. Judgments as to what constitutes "good" versus "bad" portrayals of violence often tell us more about the sensibilities or politics of the critic than about the "intrinsic worth" of the expression. Experience counsels, moreover, that public tastes and standards of "acceptability" shift dramatically over time. Many books, plays and movies that once were targets of censorship are today revered as classics. If sure-footedness along the path of "desirable" and "undesirable" speech has eluded us for more than 200 years, it is highly improbable that we are now graced with clear vision as to what constitutes desirable and undesirable expression in the form of media portrayals of violence.

5. Portrayals of violence in the media reflect a violent world. Book authors, publishers, booksellers and librarians, along with those engaged in creating and distributing other media, strive to enrich the quality and diversity of thought and expression. But it is also evident that authors, composers, and other creators draw centrally on both history and contemporary culture as sources of inspiration. Before we too quickly condemn media portrayals of violence, we must ask ourselves the degree to which they mirror life experience. One need only turn on the nightly news to be reminded of the pervasiveness of violence in our society. Nor are commentaries on and depictions of violence a recent phenomenon. Throughout history, violence has been a matter of public fascination and absorption, as the Bible, *The Iliad*, and the works of Shakespeare attest. That today's media continue to reflect this enduring aspect of our culture is neither surprising nor a basis for condemnation.

6. Individuals, not the government, bear responsibility for determining what materials are appropriate for themselves and their children. Parents must play the primary role in shaping their children's media choices, and they must prepare their children for the wide range of material and information to which they will be exposed in a free society. The answer to perceived gratuitous violence or demeaning portrayals in the media is not the heavy hand of government censorship, but the conscious control of one's (and one's children's) consumption and choices. The freedom to read, watch, and listen also entails the privilege not to do any of these and to discourage or prohibit one's children from reading, watching, or listening to particular materials – at all or in excess. If the media misread the degree of public interest in or tolerance for particular fare – violent or otherwise – surely the swiftest way for the public to get that message across in our free-market economy is at the box office, the book or record store, or via the channel selector of a television set.

The foregoing principles apply with equal force to the Internet. Even in its early development, the Internet offers unique promise as a communication medium. The very novelty of the Internet affords breathtaking new speech vistas; at the same time, its ubiquitousness has fueled rash censorship initiatives that would severely limit, if not block from attainment altogether, those new speech horizons. As with our treatment of the media that preceded it, the Internet must be left to develop with an appreciation that concern for our children and fundamental speech freedoms are not mutually exclusive, and that we do not have to sacrifice one for the other, but can – and must – find ways to nurture both.