

A disconnect between violence and television

By David Bauder

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PASADENA, Calif. (AP) - If there's any soul-searching among top television executives about onscreen violence contributing to real-life tragedies like the Connecticut school shooting, it isn't readily apparent.

All say the horrors of Newtown and Aurora, Colo., rocked them. But during a series of meetings with reporters here over the last 10 days, none offered concrete examples of how it is changing what they put on the air, or if that is necessary.

"I'm not a psychologist, so I'm not sure you can make the leap (that) a show about serial killers has caused the sort of problems with violence in our country," said Robert Greenblatt, who put "Dexter" on the air when he ran Showtime and is now overseeing development of a series on the notorious creep Hannibal Lecter for NBC. "There are many, many other factors, from mental illness to guns."

All of those points are being considered by Vice President Joe Biden as he prepares to make recommendations Tuesday to President Obama on ways to curb violence. When entertainment executives met with Biden in Washington on Friday, makers of blood-spurting video games like "Call of Duty" and "Mortal Kombat" dominated attention. In theaters, "Texas Chainsaw 3-D" dominated box office receipts during its first week.

Television's biggest influence is its omnipresence; the average American watches more than four hours of TV a day.

In recent days, only FX President John Landgraf said he was in favor of further study about any correlation between entertainment and real violence. Previous studies have been mixed.

Landgraf has sons aged 15, 12 and 9 and said he doesn't let them play video games in which the player is shooting.

Everything the entertainment industry does should be fair game in a discussion about violence, he said. But he pointed out that the zombie series "Walking Dead" and brutally violent "Sons of Anarchy" are both very popular in England and that country has far fewer gun murders than the United States. The availability of powerful assault weapons and ammunition are most responsible for the difference, he said.

The Newtown shooting was heartbreaking, said Paul Lee, ABC entertainment president. "We welcome the conversation as to how we as a culture can make sure that we don't let these events happen again," he said.

He said ABC has strong standards for what it broadcasts, stronger than its competitors.

"We talk about it all the time," he said. "We are storytellers. We have to tell stories that are vibrant and passionate, but we want to make sure that the stories that we tell are done with integrity, you know, there's no gratuitous action that goes out there, that it's driven through the stories and the characters, and that we have a moral compass in what we do."

The appetite for "Walking Dead" and "Texas Chainsaw 3-D" among young viewers is not lost on any TV executive, and bottom line pressure speaks most loudly to them. Broadcast networks feel a particular need to push the envelope when they see cable programs making noise with an ability to show more explicit scenes.

The same week that Lee talked about ABC's standards, the network's hit "Scandal" had a scene depicting waterboarding.

Fox has a highly anticipated series due later this month, "The Following," about a serial killer who recruits deadly disciples, and its gruesome scenes include a woman who commits suicide by gouging her eye and piercing her skull with an ice pick, and a man set on fire at a coffee stand.

Kevin Reilly, Fox entertainment chairman, said that given all of the media choices, the impact on real life is a broad and complex conversation. "It trivializes it to try and link it to television, or broadcast television in particular," he said.

"Part of entertainment, part of what we do on television, is to provide escapism," Reilly said. "Escapism comes in many forms. It could be laughter. It could be fantasy. It is also your worst nightmare come to life. And it makes our palms sweat and it moves us emotionally and puts us on the edge of the seat. We are engrossed in it and we forget ourselves for an hour."

When a network is putting a thriller on the air, it has to be able to compete on an intensity level, he said.

Being publicly questioned about the level of violence on the air clearly annoyed Reilly, however. Asked if Fox had made any changes to the promotion or content of "The Following" after the Newtown school shooting last month, he snapped, "No," and said he wouldn't address any more questions on the topic.

He was wrong, by the way: Fox later said it had replaced a billboard showing a woman with an ice pick with an image of series star Kevin Bacon, and combed its on-air promos to make sure there was no gunplay.

Reilly wasn't alone in his impatience. CBS Entertainment President Nina Tassler also called a halt to questions on the topic Saturday after being asked several. Tassler was unhappy with NBC's Greenblatt, who said that CBS' "Criminal Minds" was worse than "Dexter" ever was in terms of content. She said it was a mistake to allow the discussion "devolve into my show versus your show."

CBS is on pace to be the nation's most-watched television network for the 10th time in 11 years, and has done so with a huge fictional body count. The network's prime-time schedule is dominated by procedurals that usually involve solving violent crimes. Tassler said CBS would begin promoting on the Super Bowl a summer series based on a Stephen King book about a town trapped under an invisible dome, the promo clip shown to reporters included drawings of body parts dropping from the sky, a pacemaker bursting out of a man's chest and a bloody hammer being cleaned in a sink.

NBC illustrated a similar disconnect. As its executives said NBC wasn't a "shoot `em up" network, a highlight reel of "Revolution" was shown that that included a swordfight, a standoff between two men with guns, a gunfight and a building blown up with a body flying through the air.

Tassler said CBS will show "awareness and sensitivity" as it moves the process of making pilots and selecting series that will run on the network in coming years.

"Nothing that is on the air is inappropriate," she said. "And our attention is always to continue to be a broadcaster that creates content for a vast, diverse audience."