

Prepared Statement of Senator Joe Lieberman
Media Research Forum
April 9, 2003

I want to thank the Children's Digital Media Center, and in particular Sandra Calvert and Ellen Wartella, for convening this distinguished gathering of experts to discuss what we know and don't know about the impact of the ever-present electronic media on our children's development.

Some might ask why are we talking about virtual dangers when we are engaged in a very real war. The short answer is that leadership demands facing more than one issue at a time. We must continue responding to other problems here at home as we fight abroad. And the fact is parents remain very concerned about the cultural climate their kids are growing up in today, and very curious about what the future holds.

That's understandable. More than three decades worth of research, much of it conducted by people in this room, has firmly established that the electronic media has a powerful influence on the attitudes, values and behavior of America's children, and that this influence has only grown larger as the amount of time young people spend consuming media has grown greater.

Often this has been a positive force – helping kids learn everything from the alphabet to the intricacies of other cultures. And too often, I am afraid, it has been a negative force – bombarding our children with images of sex and violence. The most extreme expression of that today is a disturbing and irresponsible new trend in top-selling video games – most notably Grand Theft Auto Vice City – to link sex with violence and reward players for degrading and killing women.

We know conclusively that heavy consumption of media violence can have harmful developmental consequences -- desensitizing children to the effects of real-life violence, making them more prone toward aggressive behavior, and encouraging them to treat violence as an acceptable and effective way to resolve conflict.

Just last month, researchers at the University of Michigan published a longitudinal study that added significantly to this body of evidence, demonstrating that prolonged viewing of violent television by children was directly linked to later aggression as young adults. Both men and women who were high TV-violence viewers as children were significantly more likely to have engaged in some form of violent behavior and committed some type of criminal act – even after controlling for a broad range of other risk factors.

But while what we know already can hurt us and our children, what we DON'T know in this case may in fact hurt us even more – and rob us of the power of these media to educate and enlighten our kids. The reality is that children spend more time watching TV, surfing the net and playing video games than do they listening to either their parents

or teachers -- which is a pretty good indicator on its own of the important role the culture plays in shaping the lives of young people – and the media environment they inhabit is evolving at a dizzying rate. Yet our understanding of the risks as well as the rewards is not keeping pace, and is in fact relatively limited.

That's true for many kinds of media messages that have been identified as potential risk factors for unhealthy behaviors – from early sexualization to eating disorders to drug and alcohol abuse – where we know enough to raise real concerns but not enough to draw hard conclusions.

But it's also true for the positive possibilities of electronic media. Younger and younger children are using computers these days – does that hold the educational benefits assumed by many parents? Do video games help hand-eye coordination and spatial relations? Are the pro-social messages being included in entertainment shows today having their intended effect?

This research gap makes it hard to have an informed debate about what most researchers and children's advocates are convinced is a serious issue, but what many media producers still contend is an unsettled question. And it makes it even harder to reach consensus on what the appropriate response should be – what parents should be watching and asking for, and what advocates and policymakers can do to help.

That's not to say there is no agreement or been no progress. Like most in this room, I have always strongly believed that censorship and content regulation legislation are unacceptable responses to our concerns about media messages. It is the responsibility of parents, not the government or the entertainment industry, to decide what media children consume. But just the same, there are some proactive steps we can take together with the entertainment industry to help empower parents and make the hard job of raising children today a little easier.

I have challenged the entertainment industry to set higher standards and act more responsibly, particularly in stopping the marketing of adult-rated products to children. And I am grateful that the entertainment and Internet industries have responded by working with us to give parents more tools to exercise more control over their children's media diets – such as new technologies like the V-chip and Internet filtering software to help parents limit their children's access to inappropriate or harmful materials, and better rating and labeling systems to help parents make more informed decisions about the products they buy for their kids.

Yet despite these advances, the fact remains that too many conversations about media and children still get stuck on the realness of the risks – on if it can be damaging, not what to do to prevent it. And as a result, too little attention is being paid to how we can minimize the potential for harm and maximize the benefits of our children's media use.

It is imperative that we begin to fill this research gap. Today's forum is a critical first step in that process, by helping to educate the public and policymakers about what the

existing body of research can and can't tell us about the media's impact on children, to flag the biggest holes in our knowledge, and identify the areas where additional inquiry is needed the most. For that I want to applaud both our panelists and our guests – I know that it takes great courage for an academic to admit, in public no less, the full breadth of what they don't know.

But it's not enough to just raise awareness – we must increase our knowledge. That means putting our money where our minds are and investing in new research. This is clearly an issue of national interest, and will only grow more relevant as our country fully transitions to a fully digital society and the electronic media expands its reach into every nook and cranny of our lives. Today DVD's in minivans. Tomorrow who knows.

With that in mind, Senator Brownback and I are announcing today that we will soon introduce legislation that would provide some long-term answers to the immediate questions we're asking. Our plan would establish a new program within NIH that would focus funding on a wide range of studies examining both the positive and negative consequences of children's media use.

Our hope is to not only learn more about the hot button questions regarding violent and sexual messages, but about how the electronic media more broadly influences children's behaviors, their cognitive development, and their educational achievement.

We are particularly interested in the impact on children six-and-under, now that they are being exposed to media at unprecedented rates. Some children will soon be learning their ABC's from Elmo on their parents' cellphones. We are particularly interested in the value of media literacy programs, which seek to teach children how to deconstruct the media they digest and become more critical consumers.

And we are particularly interested in the impact of interactive media on our kids, now that the Internet has become such a staple and video games sales have surpassed movie box office receipts. For one thing, we should know whether games like Grand Theft Auto that celebrate violence against women, beyond being sick and offensive, are actually leading to more violence against women.

These can be complicated questions to answer. But knowing the extraordinary brainpower in this room and in labs around the country, and the great work that's already been done, I am confident that if we make this a priority, we can provide clarity – not just about how the media affects our kids, but about how we can best protect them.