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Talking Dirty on TV: America's Obscenely Low Standards

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"The glance has become a glare; the glimpse has become a stare. American network TV has changed dramatically over the past decade—and so, it seems, has viewers' tolerance." TV Guide observes that something significant has happened over the last decade, as principles and policies have given way to a moral anarchy on the TV screen.

Steven Daly, author of the magazine's article, "Blue Streak." comments: "Anyone who surfed the prime-time channels this past season and on through the summer will have felt a distinct swell in the number of affronts to what was once considered good taste." Even during the so-called "family hour," jokes and off-hand comments about specific sexual acts are common. As Daly notes, "Network dramas sally forth with even more intense shock tactics—and no longer at the standard 10 pm watershed."

In postmodern America, many Hollywood writers and producers clearly think that the only way to get attention is to transgress moral boundaries and offend viewers. With amazing honesty, Max Mutchnick, the co-creator of "Will and Grace" acknowledged: "We're trying to make the world safe for dirty jokes." TV Guide noted that Mutchnick's comment was made "only slightly in jest."

Why would the television networks stoop to this level? Mutchnick explains that the networks are desperate to attract younger viewers, who are now tempted by more explicit programming available on cable networks. TV Guide offers a more specific line: "Any show that delivers the 18-49 year old demographics, as ["Will and Grace"] routinely does, will be rewarded with greater freedom." Or, as Mutchnick asserts, "The more success you have, the more you can get away with."

Any look at prime-time television reveals that the networks are getting away with a lot. As a matter of fact, the present television season features an unprecedented number of shows that feature little more than sex and misbehavior as the theme. Just 50 years ago, "I Love Lucy" tested the moral boundaries of its day by acknowledging that star Lucille Ball was pregnant. Her on-screen character also gave birth to a baby written into the story line—and Hollywood braced for the controversy.

Now, virtually every sexual act and lifestyle has found expression on the screen. Homosexuality is now common fare and both male and female homosexual couples are shown in romantic situations and kisses.

Just a few years ago, such affronts to traditional sexuality morality brought coast-to-coast protests. Those days are no more. TV Guide explains that protests "seem to have quieted down since the days when Ellen's gay kiss could engender a media poop storm and station-affiliate withdrawal." As a matter of fact, the article claims that "girl-on-girl smooching is now an acceptable and trusted ratings booster; homosexual has become promo-sexual."

Where is the outrage? Randall Murphree of the American Family Association simply explains that Americans have grown desensitized to the culture. He says that too many Americans think, "I am overwhelmed, and I get the feeling my voice won't be heard no matter how loud I scream." On the other hand, there doesn't appear to be much screaming in the first place.

Steven Daly warns that the coming season will bring further tests of television's limits. "There seem to be few limits to what network TV might get away with in the next season and beyond," he comments, "as audience splinter and tolerance grows." He goes on to ask: "Have we been reduced to a nation of desensitized zombies, surfing for cheap thrills?"

Maybe so. The hard fact of the matter is that the networks would not be filling their precious airtime with shows no one is watching. The pattern is now familiar. The media press the limits to the points of offensiveness, and then withdraw only slightly to appease the public. In the following season, the same pattern is repeated with the inevitable result that the boundaries are eventually pressed so far into the distance that they are meaningless.

Fenton Bailey of World of Wonder Productions brags, "Television will not rest until it has shown us everything. With every year, as the shock of the new becomes the yawn of the old, television shows us more and more, like a rising tide." Bailey ought to know, for TV Guide identifies his company as the producer of "outrageous global TV sex clips." According to Bailey and his colleagues, the public can do nothing to stop the inevitable slide of standards on television.

Further evidence of his point is found in a recent article from the Chicago Tribune. Rodney Ho of Cox News Service reports that the Federal Communications Commission is easing its policy on the use of vulgar language. In his article, Ho promises that the strongest form of sexual expletive is soon to be commonplace on television.

In a demonstration of the convoluted reasoning that can make sense only to an addled bureaucrat, David Solomon, chief of the FCC's enforcement division, explained that the rock singer Bono could legitimately use the most vulgar sexual term without censorship.

Solomon explained that the word may be "crude and offensive," but "in the context presented here, did not describe sexual or excretory organs or activity."

So, Solomon and his enforcement bureau have decided to allow the use of the word, no matter how offensive it may be, simply because Bono's use of the term did not relate to a specific sexual act. As further evidence that the Federal Communication Commission has lost its mind, Solomon went on to state: "Moreover, we have previously found that fleeting and isolated remarks of this nature do not warrant commission action." There you have it—your government at work.

This further coarsening of America's public life helps to explain the language now routinely heard at the shopping mall and at Little League baseball games. Children are hearing this language on the television and from the entertainment industry—and they are using it with abandon.

At times, the networks do get their hands slapped. A November 6th release from Reuters News Service reports that two of the most sexually explicit prime-time television series have just been cancelled. NBC cancelled "Coupling" and, just a few days later, Fox announced the demise of "Skin," demonstrating that though these shows may not be sufficiently offensive to cost the network's viewers, they may not attract the younger viewers the networks are going after.

"Skin" was described by Reuters as "a Romeo-and-Juliet tale of romance between the daughter of an adult entertainment kingpin, played by Ron Silver, and the son of a Los Angeles district attorney who is prosecuting him." This steamy romance was itself pornographic, even as it tried to feature the pornography industry in a positive light.

Who knows where television will go next? Anyone with even the slightest degree of moral insight should have given up on most prime-time television a long time ago. Parents must now shield their children from this invidious assault on sexual morality, marriage, and decency. Turning our children over to the television set is the equivalent of setting them down in the pornographer's den.

America's popular culture reveals a deep sickness in the American heart. When even TV Guide is offended, we can be

sure we are in very big trouble.

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