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By the Skins of Their Teeth — Is a New MTV Series Child Pornography?

Does “Skins” cross the legal line of criminal child pornography? Just imagine the moral culpability of a network whose executives even have to ask the question.

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MTV turns 30 this year, and it is wasting no time as it rushes headlong into a mid-life crisis. The cable network, first known as Music Television, pioneered the music video as constant entertainment and, from the beginning, it pushed the boundaries of morality and taste. Indeed, it pushed far past those boundaries.



The network, now older than many of its young viewers, first flouted parental concerns with music videos that featured explicit sexuality. Later, it added racy programming to its mix, effectively competing against more traditional networks for viewers. The programs brought more viewers — and plenty of controversy as well.

In recent years, the network has been less controversial, but this says far more about a shift in social standards than about MTV itself. Once a transgression goes commercial, it loses some of its shock value.

Until now, that is. In recent days, news reports indicate that MTV is having second thoughts about one of its prized new programs, “Skins.” The MTV product is modeled after a popular program of the same name in Britain. Nothing quite like it has ever been seen on U.S. television screens.

The problem? MTV is evidently worried that its prized new product might violate laws against child pornography. Here is how Brian Stelter of *The New York Times* reported the issue:

Child pornography is defined by the United States as any visual depiction of a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct. In some cases, “a picture of a naked child may constitute illegal child pornography if it is sufficiently sexually suggestive,” according to the Justice Department’s legal guidance. Anyone younger than 18 is considered to be a minor. The youngest cast member on “Skins” is 15.

The sex acts portrayed on “Skins” pretty much cover the waterfront of modern sexuality. There is no question that MTV will draw an audience. The big question confronted by the network is whether the show will draw child pornography charges as well.

David Carr, author of “The Media Equation” column at the *Times*, explained that “the series is meant to provoke.” He suggests, plausibly enough, that MTV executives did not “set out to make child pornography,” but they clearly did not set out *not* to make child pornography, either.

Evidently, the concerns are rather urgent at MTV’s headquarters. As Brian Stelter reported last week:

It is unclear when MTV first realized that the show may be vulnerable to child pornography charges. On Tuesday, a flurry of meetings took place at the network's headquarters in New York, according to an executive who attended some of the meetings and spoke only on the condition of anonymity. In one of the meetings, the executives wondered aloud who could possibly face criminal prosecution and jail time if the episodes were broadcast without changes.

It should tell you just about everything you need to know that MTV executives “wondered aloud” if they might do jail time for child pornography by broadcasting the series. Have you ever worried about that at your office or place of work?

It is at this point that David Carr levels his most serious argument. “In a cluttered programming era, controversy is oxygen, so MTV was undoubtedly happy with the tsk-tsking the show incited in advance. But objectifying teenage pathology, along with teenage bodies, is a complicated business — and the business that MTV is in.”

Objectifying parental nightmares is indeed “the business that MTV is in.” And, as Carr — the father of a 14-year-old daughter — suggests, “since its inception, MTV has pushed this boundary as hard as any major media company ever has and may finally have crossed a line that will be hard to scramble back across.”

MTV is owned by media giant Viacom, and that conglomerate is now complicit in this mess. MTV executives may or may not change the upcoming third episode of the series (the episode of greatest current concern), but they appear determined to stand behind their product. The series may or may not draw criminal child pornography charges, but the fact that executives worry about this possibility reveals the moral bankruptcy at the heart of the enterprise.

And, as is so often the case, MTV may even find a way to benefit from this very controversy. After all, “controversy is oxygen.” As with all pornography, the market runs by supply and demand. In a fallen world, the distortions of sexuality always seem to draw an audience. In this case, the audience is mostly made up of young people who are told that the drugs and sex on “Skins” are “realistic.”

Sadly enough, in far too many cases, this series might actually *be* realistic. That should break our hearts, but not our resolve to protect our children — and as many young people as we can reach — from this kind of “realism.”

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I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Brian Stelter, “[A Racy Show With Teenagers Steps Back From a Boundary](#),” *The New York Times*, Thursday, January 20, 2011.

David Carr, “[MTV's Naked Calculation Gone Bad](#),” *The New York Times*, Monday, January 24, 2011.

