

WASTELAND

HOW TODAY'S TRASH

T E L E V I S I O N

HARMS AMERICA



Dialogue

"Oh my God, they killed Kenny. You bastard!"

BY KARL ZINSMEISTER

"A vast wasteland." "The boob tube." "The one-eyed monster." "The idiot box." As these venerable descriptions suggest, low-quality television programming is a problem of long standing.

But recently, this old problem has taken on some troubling new dimensions. Thirty years after he coined the phrase "a vast wasteland," former FCC chairman Newton Minow remarked that what TV now offers is a "vast *toxic* wasteland."

It isn't just nags or fanatics who are disturbed by the harsh new face of TV programming in the late 1990s. Here's what the *New York Times* had to say in an April 1998 front-page story:

Like a child acting outrageously naughty to see how far he can push his parents, mainstream television this season is flaunting the most vulgar and explicit sex, language, and behavior that it has ever sent into American homes.

A banner headline in the *Wall Street Journal* warned not long ago that, "It's 8 P.M. Your Kids Are Watching Sex on TV." *U.S. News* summarized the trends this way:

To hell with kids—that must be the motto of the new fall TV season.... The family hour is gone.... The story of the fall line-up is the rise of sex. Will the networks ever wise up?

A wide spectrum of Americans are appalled by what passes for TV entertainment these days. A 1998 poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that fully two-thirds of all parents say they are concerned "a great deal" about what their children are now exposed to on television. Their biggest complaint is sexual content, followed closely by violence, and then crude language.

Parents are more upset now than they were even just a few seasons ago. The proportion of parents saying they're concerned "a great deal" about TV's sexual content, for instance, has jumped from

four out of ten to seven out of ten parents in just the last two years. Two-thirds of the American public say TV programming has *deteriorated* over the last decade.

One result of this mounting dissatisfaction is that Americans are distancing themselves—at least psychologically—from their sets. By a margin of 70 percent to 23 percent the American public now feels it has "very different values" from the TV industry.

That's not such a surprising reaction when you look at what the industry is pumping out. Take, for instance, the matter of language.

A Southern Illinois University study that analyzed two weeks' worth of prime-time network programming in 1990 and then again in 1994 found that the amount of foul language on TV increased 45 percent during those four years. On average, sitcom viewers now endure one dirty word every five minutes. Words like *bitch*, *suck*, and *shit* are now regularly on the airwaves. A typical installment of the drama "Public Morals," shot for a 9:30 P.M. time slot, contained the word *whore* 15 times, *penis* four times, *ass* twice, plus a variety of other choice phrases like *boobs*, *dyke*, and "riding the pony."

AND then there's violence. Consider some of the graphic excesses now depicted on TV:

- One recent CBS drama opened with a scene of a demented father crushing the skull of his young daughter with a shovel.
- An NBC show depicted a doctor slicing open a dead man's head and finding a tentacle wriggling in the brain.
- A Fox drama featured a man buried alive in a bag containing other human body parts.

The most vicious fantasy violence and extended gunplay are now routine. And in today's worst cases, TV

violence is literally sickening. In recent months, the national airwaves have been home to gory depictions of impalings, beheadings, exploding bodies, mass gunnings, and even a bloody crucifixion. Cable shows are especially savage.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs has tallied all the violence appearing on the nation's top ten channels during a single day of broadcasting, doing this once in 1992, and then again in 1994. Their snapshots showed that the number of violent scenes on TV increased by 41 percent during that two-year period—to an average of 15 acts of violence per hour per channel, from 6 A.M. until midnight.

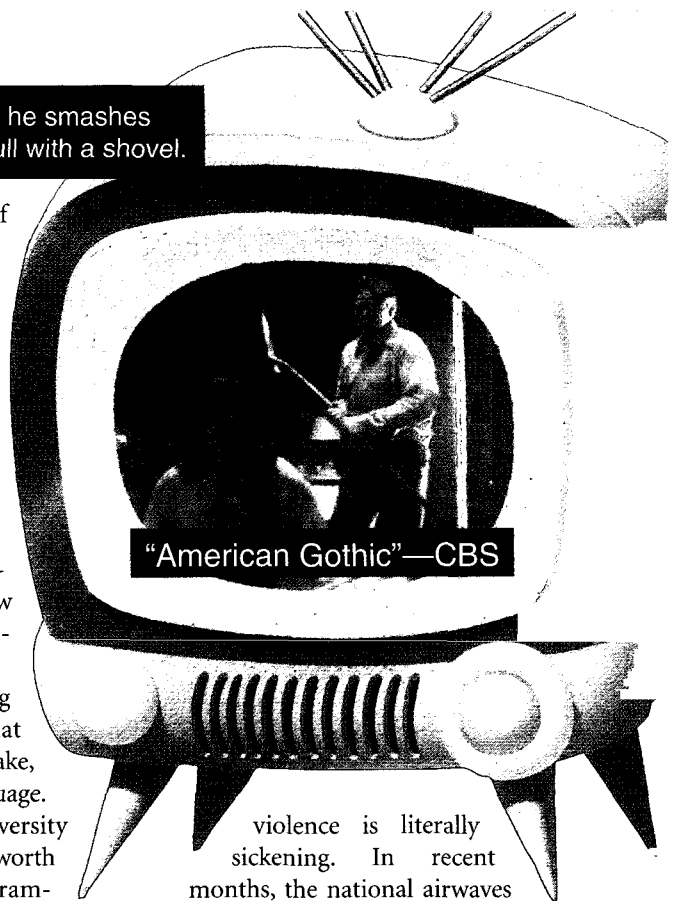
Worse, a recent multi-million-dollar study funded by the cable TV industry itself found that in three-quarters of all TV violence, the perpetrators go unpunished. In six cases out of ten no pain is depicted. Fully 84 percent of the time, TV programs show no long-term negative consequences whatever.

Does this matter? Sure it does. There are now more than a thousand separate studies establishing that TV violence encourages undesirable real-life behavior in people of all ages.

Sensing this, more than seven out of ten Americans say they think the TV in-

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Father just before he smashes his daughter's skull with a shovel.



Dialogue

Actress: "You don't ask a woman who's giving a b---job what she's doing."

Actor: "She couldn't have answered anyway."



Dialogue

"Did Richard Gere ever have sex with a gerbil? Any truth to that?"

"Howard Stern Show"—CBS

dustry needs to do more to reduce the amount of violence it unleashes on the public. In fact, when asked to name measures that would reduce violent crime "a lot," the public ranks restrictions on TV violence higher than gun control.

Americans tell pollsters they believe TV is even more culpable in another social problem: irresponsible sexuality. And sexual exploitation is featured more prominently in the late 1990s than any other category of TV sleaze.

■ A sitcom that debuted in fall 1998 was set in Abraham Lincoln's White House and had the President drinking an aphrodisiac that inspired homosexual fantasies of soldiers going off to war with "big biceps" and "washboard stomachs."

■ The CBS show "The Nanny," which pitches itself to kids, shows the nanny stumbling home drunk and crawling into bed with her over-medicated employer. The next day neither of them can remember if they've had sex.

■ On another CBS series, a mother accuses her 12-year-old daughter of "spending all morning staring at your little hooters." After hearing the tales of a promiscuous friend, the same mother asks, "My God, don't you ever get your period?"

■ On Fox, an oversexed teenager describes a bus ride this way: "Almost every man on the bus offered me his seat...though nobody was willing to stand up to let me have it. Then, one delightful turban-clad chap...asked me if I wanted to rub his 'magic lamp' and watch the genie come out."

Woman impaled on a spike.

Cheap sexual references like these are now a TV staple, and sometimes the imagery is virtually pornographic. Indeed, on the Howard Stern and Jerry Springer shows, some afternoon soap operas, and cable shows like "Silk Stalkings," "Stories of Passion," and "Hot Springs Hotel," today's TV sex can be *literally* pornographic.

The average American now watches 14,000 TV references to sex every year. And as with TV violence, it's not just the pervasiveness of TV sex that is troubling, but the context. A *USA Today* investigation of sex scenes on the four major networks found that only nine percent were between married people. The rest were adulterous, teen, homosexual, or otherwise non-marital.

A UCLA study finds that three out of ten prime-time shows aimed at children now include sex talk and sexual behavior.

"Xena"—USA

ior. Sex, it summarizes, is generally now depicted as a competition, and an "exciting amusement for people of all ages." University of North Carolina professor Jane Brown, who has studied this subject in depth, concludes that TV is "so filled with sex it's hard for any kid,

THE NEW YORK TIMES

New TV Stretches Limits of Taste

From an April 6, 1998 article by Lawrie Mifflin in the New York Times:

This television season's stretching of the boundaries of taste has reignited opposition from some public figures. Teachers and school principals have sent notes home warning parents about certain shows, like the cartoon "South Park."

"I'd say there's been a quantum leap downward this year in terms of adolescent, vulgar language and attempts to treat sexuality in shocking terms," said Robert Lichter, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan research group in Washington. "People used to complain that television was aimed at the mind of a 12-year-old. Now it seems aimed at the hormones of a 14-year-old."

Network executives tend to dispute that anyone is deliberately pushing the envelope of pop-culture propriety to attract viewers. Stations and cable operators make the calls on what is acceptable fare, and they say television reflects the culture, which has grown more permissive.

In Seattle, one group of 15-year-olds has a "Dawson's Creek"-watching party each Tuesday, despite the reluctance of their parents.

"We tried to put the kibosh on it," said Nancy Stokley, whose daughter has had friends over to watch it and has gone to others' homes. "We said, 'Hey, this is a school night, you know. This is ridiculous.' But they are all quite into it. It has hit a nerve."

Carol Orme-Jackson, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, also found out through a reporter's inquiries that her 14-year-old daughter watches "Dawson's Creek" at friends' houses. Ms. Orme-Jackson said she was not worried by the talk about sex *per se*, but "that this kind of trashy life style becomes glamourized."

Seeking Family-friendly Programming

From a September 4, 1998 article by Brian Steinberg and Tara Parker-Pope in the Wall Street Journal:

Are the world's biggest advertisers powerful enough to take the sleaze out of television?

Hollywood may soon find out. A coming meeting of some of the world's biggest advertisers will test the limits of how much influence Madison Avenue has over TV programming. The group includes Procter & Gamble Co., Johnson & Johnson, Coca-Cola Co., Sears, Roebuck & Co. and Ford Motor Co. The forum plans to meet to talk about ways advertisers can join together to influence the shows network executives put on the air.

"We want access to high-quality, family-friendly programming that attracts a mass audience," says P&G spokeswoman Gretchen Briscoe. The company already influences programming by the shows it supports with its advertising dollars, but P&G is "only one advertiser," says Ms. Briscoe. "It's going to take a collective industry effort."

Together, the advertisers would wield remarkable clout. In 1996 P&G spent \$1.2 billion to advertise on broadcast TV, cable and radio. The same year, Ford spent \$536 million, Sears spent \$364 million, J&J almost \$663 million, and Coke weighed in at \$306 million.

"It's a formidable group because of the people who have agreed to do it," says Ave Butensky, president of the Television Bureau of Advertising, a trade association funded by U.S. television stations. "Whether it has any teeth will depend on their ability to put it together in a meaningful fashion."

John Costello, Sears' executive vice president in charge of advertising, says the retailer views the coming meeting as a chance to "have a dialogue" on what can be done "to encourage a greater selection of family-oriented programming."

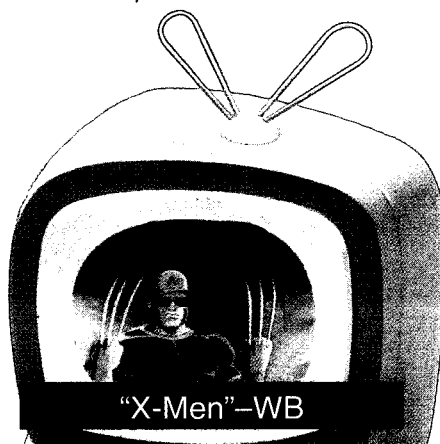
Currently, advertisers compete against each other for placement on popular family-oriented shows. "Everybody would like to be out there" on Hallmark made-for-TV movie presentations and similar family programs, says Lois Wyse, president of Cleveland's Wyse Advertising, who worked for 30 years as the ad agency for jelly maker J.M. Smucker Co. "It's hard to get on, and it's hard to stay on."

even a critic, to resist. I think of the media as our true sex educators."

A *U.S. News* poll found that 83 percent of all Americans are now troubled by TV depictions of sex. More than seven out of ten say TV encourages immorality in this area, according to an *L.A. Times* poll.

Unfortunately, the men and women stoking TV's sexual flames could hardly care less. On that same survey question where 83 percent of the public expressed concern over TV sex, only 38 percent of the Hollywood elite had any reservations at all. Writer and director Lionel Chetwynd notes that "The idea that family viewing includes

some sense of sexual propriety doesn't seem to have sunk into the Hollywood community."



Cartoon slasher about to attack



Dialogue

Actor: "Who's the naked guy in the bathroom?"

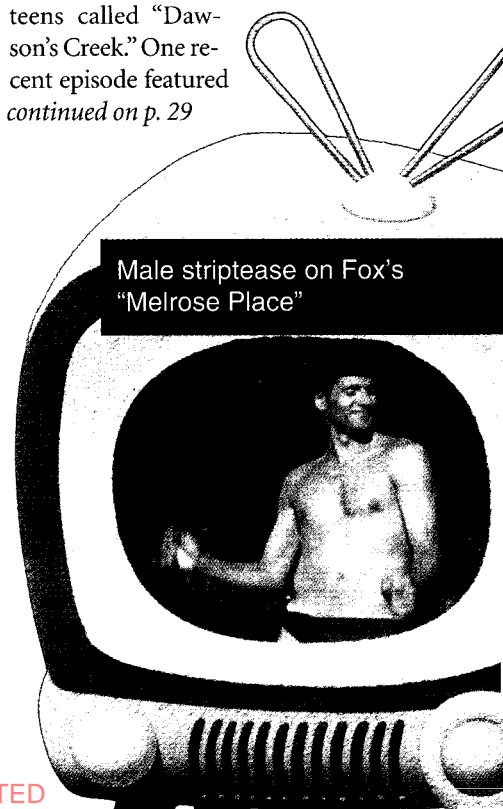
Hungover Actress: "It's starting to come back to me..."

Playful Actress: "You're such a slut!"

Hungover Actress: "I'm not a slut! I'm just a quick judge of character."

THE collapse of all standards on television has taken place across every program category, channel, and broadcast time. At 8 P.M., right in the middle of what used to be known as the family hour, you can now find a sex-soaked program for teens called "Dawson's Creek." One recent episode featured

continued on p. 29



Standards in the Age of Anything Goes

From a September 20, 1998 article by Warren Berger in the New York Times:

Last week, Fox ran an on-air promotion for a pair of sitcoms. To make the point that the shows were sassy and sexy compared with tamer Friday night programming on other channels, a voice-over announced, "We ran the censors off, and boy, does it show!"

It's easy to see the appeal of such a sales pitch to the much-coveted youth audience. But for more mature viewers who've been battered by Jerry Springer's cat fights, Howard Stern's genitalia gags, "South Park's" scatological cartoon children, and "Dawson's Creek's" libidinous teen-agers, the idea of one more television guardian who has turned tail and run for cover may not be particularly comforting.

Certainly, there has been no shortage of public and media outcry as raunchy programming has begun to pervade television in recent months, spanning the dial and the daily schedule from Springer in the morning to scantily clad porn stars on the E! channel in the afternoon, from "Ally McBeal" salivating over a well-endowed nude male model during prime time to late-night sex-obsessed gabfests on CBS's "Howard Stern Radio Show" and MTV's "Loveline." Even veteran media watchers are expressing dismay.

"When it comes to violating traditional canons of taste, it seems that anything goes on television right now," observes Mark Crispin Miller, a professor of media studies at New York University. "In fact, tastelessness is the new orthodoxy."

Rarely, though, has anyone asked what happened to the censors. As Mr. Stern and Mr. Springer parade all of those naked, only slightly pixelated strippers before the camera, where are the eagle eyes who, just a few years ago, fretted about glimpses of David Caruso's rear end on "NYPD Blue"?

Actually, many censors skipped town more than a decade ago, as the broadcast networks drastically reduced the size of their internal Standards and Practices departments. These in-house watchdogs held sway at the big three networks [until they] were cut in half in the 1980s—partly for budgetary reasons but also in response to a changing television landscape. The real pressure came from the new cable channels, which faced less government regulation than broadcasters and took the position that their programming could be more risqué because viewers had signed up for the service and knew what to expect.

As network standards departments weakened, producers stepped up the assault on censorship rules. The rules were first broken "by classy, well-written, intelligent shows like 'Hill Street Blues' and 'St. Elsewhere,'" says Robert Thompson, director of Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television. (The challenge of getting around the censors may have actually pushed those shows to be more creative and subtle when exploring adult themes.) However, says Mr. Thompson, once these shows claimed new territory in terms of what could be shown and said on the networks, "that opened

everything up for the sleazier shows to move in and take over."

Which brings us to today's landscape and raises the question: Were the censors all bad? The search for alternative means of regulation, like the rating system implemented last year, doesn't seem to be going great guns. "The people who wanted ratings to put the brakes on this new explosion of raunchy television saw just the opposite happen," says Mr. Thompson. "Anybody should have seen this coming. If you give producers the opportunity to use a TV-MA rating, it's an invitation to make TV-MA programs." Indeed, by affixing an MA rating on "South Park," a channel like Comedy Central, whose Standards and Practices department consists of exactly one person, can feel that it has acted responsibly.... That seems reasonable enough—except to parents whose children are clamoring, and perhaps sneaking off, to watch the show because it is topic A in the schoolyard.

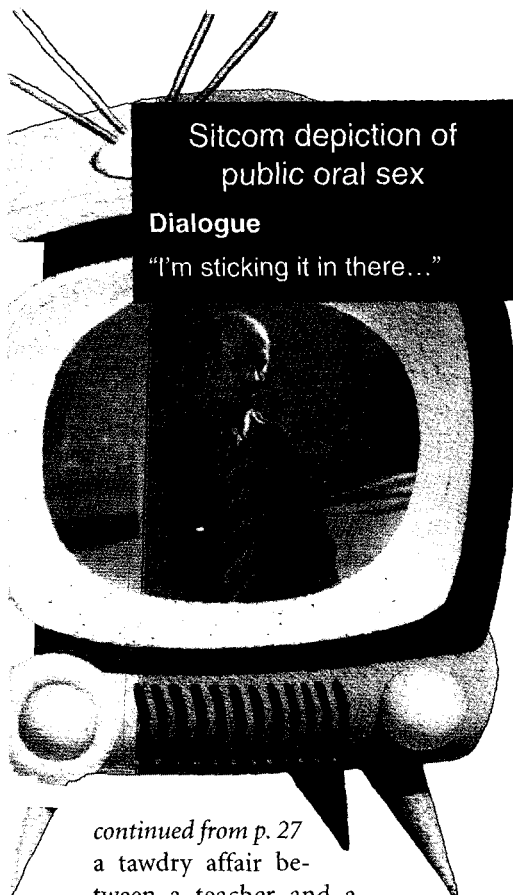
To some extent, the rating system provides broadcasters and cable networks an opportunity to wash their hands of monitoring and occasionally censoring content, thereby freeing them from any esthetic responsibility for what they transmit into living rooms. [So] gobs of sleazy content have slithered under the gates in the past year....

As Mr. Miller points out, most advertisers have overcome their old fears of sex because such programming delivers the young-adult demographic and tends to stop channel surfers in their tracks. (How many can cruise past Mr. Stern's show without at least taking a peek to see what he's up to?) In some ways, raunch is the safest kind of programming right now.

Meanwhile, there has been an odd reversal. While it once required courage to decry the censors, now it takes backbone to uphold any kind of censoring standards. Out there alone on the last front lines of censorship are local station owners and network affiliates, who must decide when to redraw the line that has been all but erased by the networks, cable channels, and syndicators....

It seems likely that the task of minding the gates of good taste will increasingly fall not just to the local station managers but also to series creators. With less outside censorship, they are forced into being censors of their own work. Philip Rosenthal, executive producer of "Everybody Loves Raymond," says he imposes his own limitations on what characters can and can't say "because it's too easy to just go for the raunchy line," he says.

"I haven't even seen anyone from Standards and Practices the whole time I've been working on the show," he says. "That gives you freedom, but it also makes you pause. Who is going to censor you if not yourself?"



continued from p. 27
a tawdry affair between a teacher and a high school student.

The most popular comedy show among kids today is a cartoon called "South Park" that features foul-mouthed third-graders in episodes bearing titles like "Cartman's Mom Is a Dirty Slut." Every week, one of the children in "South Park" dies a horrible death. In May 1998, a 12-year-old boy from Ocean City, Maryland, killed himself and left a note telling his parents to watch "South Park" to understand why. Comedy Central, which airs the program, issued a press release expressing its sorrow.

Mid-day talk shows are another TV genre that scraped to new lows in 1998. "The Jerry Springer Show," which is heavily promoted to teenagers via specials on MTV and other means, now regularly features on-camera brawls (many of them apparently staged) among panelists confessing sexual and other misdeeds. On one show, the host offered audience members dollar bills to disrobe and act out on camera, with various body parts lightly

That's Entertainment?

From a November 13, 1998 essay by Steve Allen in the Wall Street Journal:

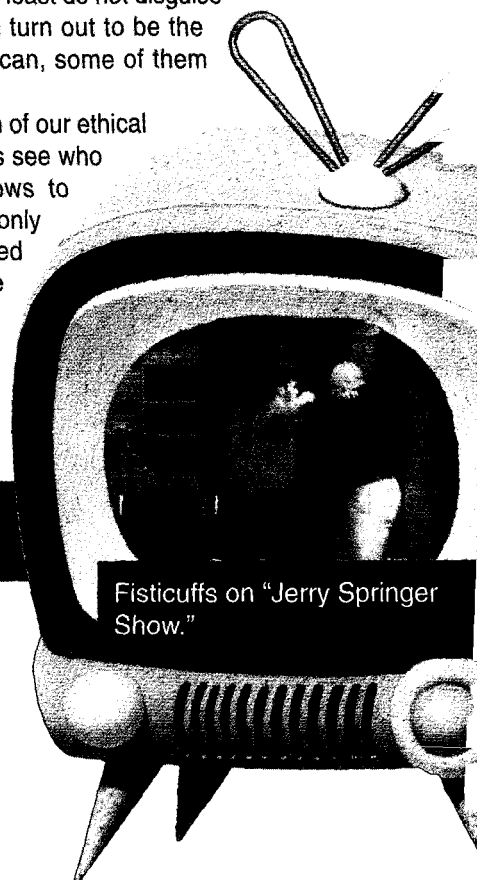
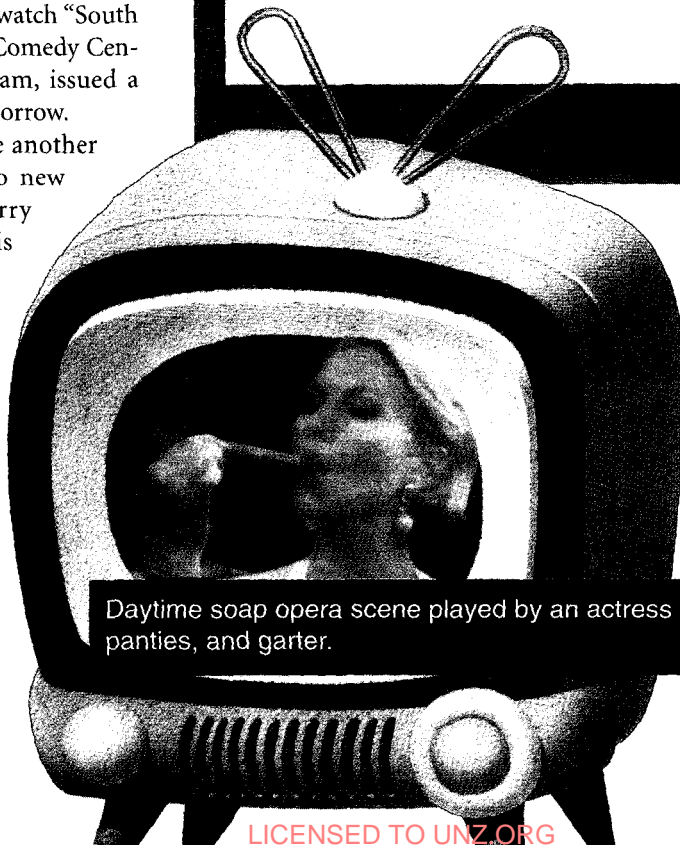
All across the political spectrum, thoughtful observers are appalled by what passes for TV entertainment these days. No one can claim that the warning cries are simply the exaggerations of conservative spoil-sports or fundamentalist preachers.

I have been hearing from dozens of colleagues who agree that the sleaze and classless garbage on TV in recent years exceeds the boundaries of what has traditionally been referred to as *Going Too Far*. Popular comedians such as Mort Sahl, Bill Cosby, Bob Hope, Sid Caesar, Tim Allen, Milton Berle, Tom Poston, Louie Nye and Bob Newhart—to name only a few—are horrified at what has happened to the beautiful and socially necessary art of comedy. Obviously some of these gentlemen occasionally work a little rough in a nightclub—none of us are saints—but we draw the line when it comes to TV and radio.

In 1993, Ken Auletta wrote an insightful feature in *The New Yorker* reporting the answers of the film industry's top executives to the simple question of whether they would want their own children to see some of their productions. Many of the executives dodged and weaved—and implicitly answered "no." Since then, the problem of cultural coarsening has only gotten worse. Mr. Auletta's question must continue to be asked.

Our radio and TV stations and networks, after all, are not owned by Larry Flynt or Al Goldstein—two pornographers who at least do not disguise what they are doing. The offenders often turn out to be the country-club elite, many of them Republican, some of them proudly conservative and church-going.

Let us, by all means, direct the beam of our ethical concern on this till-now dark corner. Let us see who scurries away, or—if we are lucky—vows to mend his ways. That will happen, though, only if the finger of public disapproval is pointed at specific individuals and entities. There are hundreds of other organizations that might join in. This is an occasion for doing the right thing.



fuzzified by special effects just to keep things family-friendly.

Turning to late-night, the big news in the 1998-99 season is Howard Stern's new show on CBS, opposite "Saturday Night Live." In announcing the program Stern promised that "we'll have sex and nudity and lesbians. Standards have gone down to an all-time low, and I'm here to represent it."

It isn't only on entertainment shows that television producers have started acting like salacious voyeurs. Earlier this year three Los Angeles TV stations broke into some *children's* programming to provide voyeuristic live news coverage of a stand-off between police and an unstable man. They aired close-up video as the man went to his pickup, took out a shotgun, and blew his brains out.

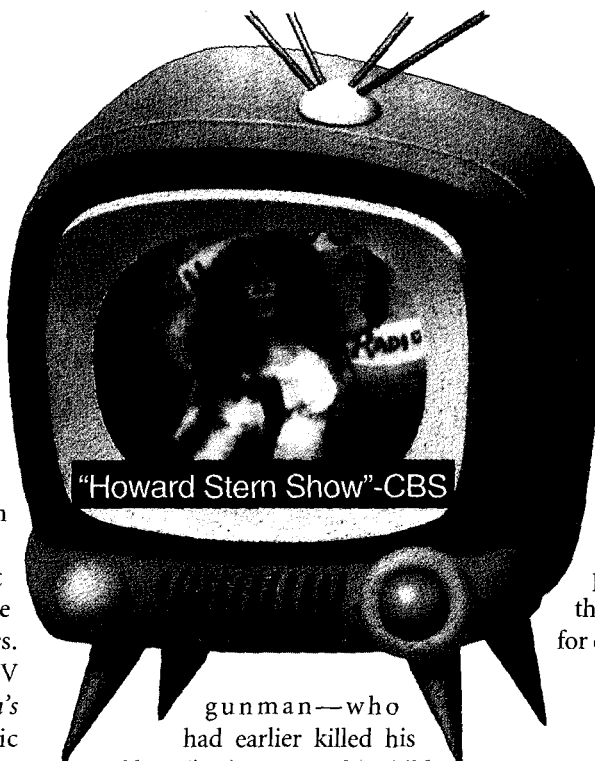
A few weeks later, when a hostage crisis developed in Tampa, Florida, the police found they couldn't get

through by phone to the

dialogue

and you would know all about that Mr. Six F---ing F---ings a Day."

Cable sitcom
"Rude Awakening"



gunman—who had earlier killed his girlfriend's four-year-old child and three policemen. It turned out the line was busy because the criminal was being interviewed by the local media. In the interview, which was played over and over on radio and TV, the gunman promised to kill himself. He later did just that.

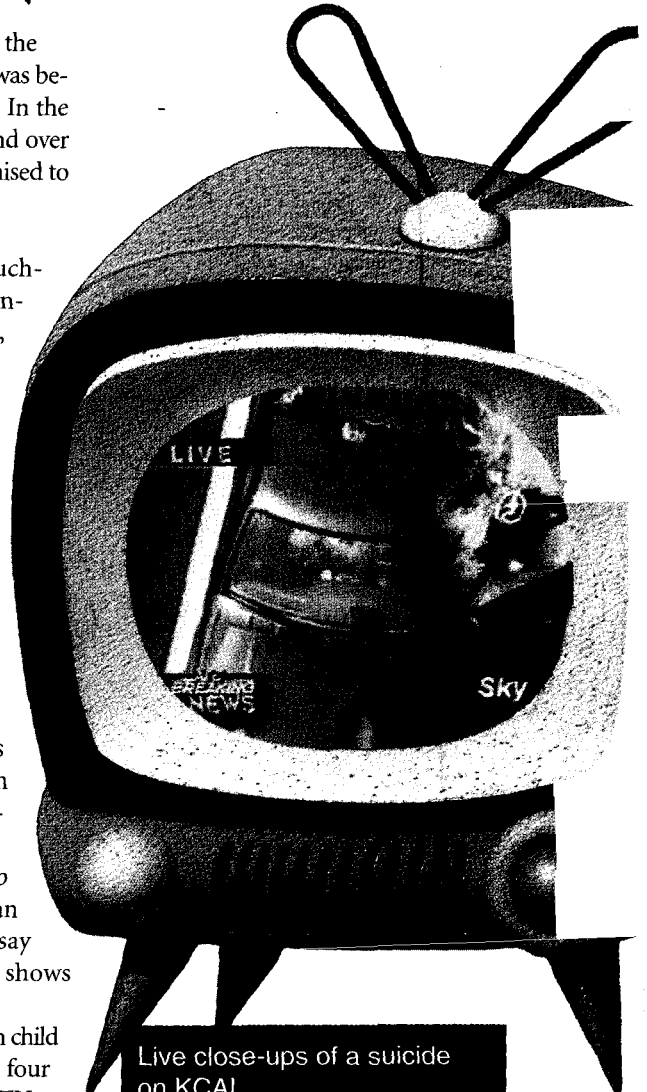
Does all of this televised debauchery—fantasy, real-life, and in-between—have effects on people, and on our nation's future? As you think that question over, consider a few simple facts:

- Most homes now contain three or more TVs.
- 54 percent of children now have their own sets in their bedrooms.
- Only 30 percent of children say their families have rules prohibiting them from watching certain kinds of shows. And of those who *do* have rules, more than four out of ten say they've seen those shows anyway.
- The average American child now spends nearly four hours a day watching TV.
- A typical teenager has spent far more hours watching the tube than he has

spent over the course of his life in school.

■ And the average adult, by the time he's ready to meet his maker, will have invested more time on television than on all the jobs he's ever held combined.

Given the time people commit to television, how can we believe they are not influenced by it? And if this great, all-powerful medium appeals to the worst in us rather than the best, what will the consequences be for our future?



Live close-ups of a suicide on KCAL

Wasteland

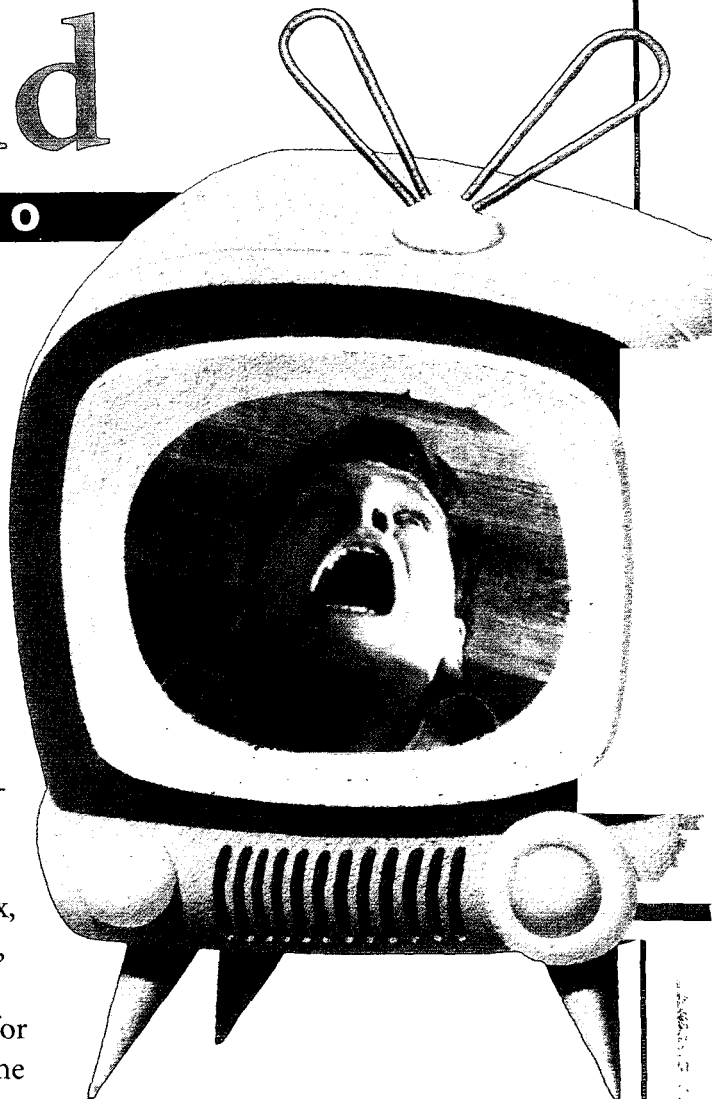
T H E V I D E O

THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE has produced, in conjunction with the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a powerful 20-minute video that combines the facts and figures presented in Karl Zinsmeister's article with actual footage from approximately 50 different current television programs.

This polished and sobering documentary, narrated by film critic and author Michael Medved, provides convincing firsthand evidence of the scope of today's TV Trash problem. It will interest many TAE subscribers and is appropriate for screening before community, business, educational, and philanthropic groups concerned with this issue.

Warning: Because it documents the graphic violence, sex, and obscene language now common on TV programming, this video is not appropriate for viewing by children.

As a public service, TAE is making this video available for \$8, the cost of copying, shipping, and handling. Follow the instructions below to order.



Send me the video

"Wasteland: How Today's Trash TV Harms America"

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THREE U.S. SENATORS SPEAK OUT: WHY CLEANING UP

T E L E V I S I O N IS IMPORTANT TO THE NATION

These remarks are from presentations to the conference on TV programming held in Washington, D. C. in December by the Center for Media & Public Affairs and The American Enterprise.

SENATOR PAUL SIMON (D-Illinois, retired)

I got into the effort to clean up TV accidentally. I checked into a motel in Lasalle County, Illinois, and turned on my television set. All of a sudden there in front of me in living color someone was being cut in half by a chainsaw. Now, I'm old enough to know it wasn't real, but it bothered me that night. I thought, what happens to a ten-year-old who watches this?

So I called my office the next morning and said, "Someone has to have done research on this; find out what research has taken place." My staff came back with all kinds of research showing that entertainment violence harms us.

I called a meeting of representatives of the TV industry and said, "I don't want government censorship, but I think we have to recognize we have a problem, and I'd like you to come up with the an-

swers." One of those present said, "Violence on television doesn't do any harm." I replied, "You remind me of the Tobacco Institute people who come into my office saying they have research that cigarettes don't do any harm." Then they said, "Well, we can't collaborate on this because it would violate the antitrust laws."

That led me to introduce a bill that included an exemption in the antitrust laws for television violence, and to give you some sense of the breadth of interest in this, my co-sponsors eventually included Senator Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Senator Howard Metzenbaum (D-

Ohio). Now that's a broad philosophical spectrum.

The industry opposed my bill. The ACLU opposed my bill. But we finally got the bill passed. George Bush signed it. And both broadcasters and cable operators began to adopt standards. I have to say they were fairly anemic, but they were better than nothing.

On the broadcast side, there has been progress. Arthur Nielsen of the Nielsen ratings says there have been significant improvements in terms of violence on the broadcast side—not going as far as needed, but still improvements. On the cable side, improvement is not perceptible.

At a meeting of about 700 TV and movie executives where I spoke, I said, "Many of you disagree with my conclusions. Why don't you do your own analysis of TV violence." And to their credit, both the broadcast and the cable industries authorized three-year studies. That research has recently come back, and I think they got more than they bargained for. The many damaging findings included the fact that three-quarters of all entertainment violence shows no immediate adverse consequences for the person

