



# Parents Television Council



**William E. Saracino**

*CPR Editorial Board member William E. Saracino is  
chief operating officer of the Parents Television Council.*

An organization whose self-proclaimed goal is to “bring responsibility to the entertainment industry” cannot be accused of being a shrinking violet or lacking in ambition. Hopelessly naïve about the possibility of bringing some sense of order and goodness back to our twenty-first century America, perhaps. But that combination of ambition and belief that the society and culture are worth the effort to preserve are principally what drove me to join with the Parents Television Council (PTC).

On February 1 of this year I became the chief operating officer (my friends may now call me “coo”) of the PTC at its office in Los Angeles. I had some familiarity with the PTC through an acquaintance of many years with its founder and president, Brent Bozell, and through newspaper ads it had run featuring the late, great Steve Allen. It was only after deciding that the job matched my desire to return to Los Angeles however, that I discovered, one, how degraded the medium had actually become and, two, how successful the PTC promises to be in changing that.

My television viewing habits had fallen into the comfortable pattern of Fox and CSPAN for news; all ESPN and Fox-Sports stations simultaneously for leisure; Turner Classic Movies and American Movie Classics for entertainment; Emeril on The Food Channel to keep me humble about my own culinary prowess; and the occasional foray into Nick at Night to “I Love Lucy,” the Three Stooges, and other high-minded diversions. Commercial television had almost ceased to exist, at least as far as my remote and I were concerned.

Being the typical male, I, of course, landed on the commercial networks occasionally as I endlessly power-surfed through the gazillion channels now offered. But being of sound mind I almost never stopped and actually watched what they offered. So I was an innocent in the matter of how low commercial television had sunk. But a quick mention to relatives with children aged anywhere from three to mid-teens quickly disabused me of any notion that the problem wasn’t serious. The news of





my new position was universally greeted by these folks with a laundry list of what was wrong with television, especially that aimed at kids, and their own personal horror stories.

I could fill all 36 of this publication's pages to describing those horrors. Of particular concern to PTC is what used to be called "the family hour," the first hour of prime time, from 8 — 9 pm. One wag has described most of what passes for entertainment on a nightly basis as "a trip through a sewer in a glass bottom boat." Steve Allen made the point somewhat differently but equally effectively. He said families ought to be able to send their children from the dinner table into the family room without having to worry that every single value and moral lesson that has been communicated around that table would be contradicted and trashed from the TV tube. That seems a reasonable thing to expect, does it not? Yet any venture into nightly commercial television will quickly show how unrealistic that expectation would be.

If Marshall McLuhan was correct that the medium is the message, then the medium of television has become a trough of vulgarity, gratuitous sex and violence (portrayed as totally free of consequences), and a showcase to present authority figures from parents to teachers to businessmen to clergy of all denominations as morons, predators, and worse.

So what's to be done?

First, PTC recognizes and promotes the fact that it is the prime responsibility of parents to take responsibility for their children, and that, of course, includes what they watch on television. That seems a cliché, but is worth repeating, as it is sometimes

overlooked and, of course, is the ultimate and most effective means of protecting your children from infection through the 27- or 37-inch diagonal black hole in your family room.

Second, PTC opposes attempts at governmentally-sanctioned solutions to this problem. Government at any level deciding what you can watch (or read or say) opens a Pandora's box of potential problems, which, once unleashed, could have far-reaching and exceptionally negative consequences.

The PTC approach is to galvanize public opinion, then use that public force to work with the networks and sponsors to improve the fare offered through the tube.

Thanks in large part to Steve Allen's Herculean efforts, the PTC's national membership is approaching 700,000. These people are by definition activists — they took the time to join us — as well as people concerned about helping us drain the swamp of nightly television. But what, specifically, is there to galvanize these folks about?

That's where the PTC research and analysis division comes in. PTC records every hour of prime time shown on the six major networks and several of the major cable channels each night. Then, next day, our researchers analyze the shows for content, with this analysis entered into our Entertainment Tracking System database. Our ETS database currently has more than 70,000 hours of prime time television analyzed and archived for easy retrieval and comparison.

The results of our analyses are then communicated to our members and others through our website — [www.parentstv.org](http://www.parentstv.org) — our monthly newsletter "The In-



sider,” and our E-alerts sent through the Internet, and to the general public through press releases and press conferences. Concerned members and parents can quickly and easily learn a show’s rating — and the reason for it — through any of these means.

**O**ur flagship publication, the “Family Guide to Prime Time TV,” is widely distributed not only to our members but also to commercial sponsors, network executives, and the entertainment media. Its exclusive TV show rating system is the most comprehensive source of information available about network TV’s prime-time fare from a family values perspective, and is the only content-based guide in existence for all prime time television shows currently appearing on ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN, and WB. (As an aside, we also monitor the newest network, PAX, but its stated mission of bringing family-friendly fare to television indicates it will appear on our “good things” list, not our “avoid” list. Readers should be sure to find PAX and give it a viewing).

The “Family Guide” is updated weekly at our website. It gives parents and TV sponsors the critical information they need to make family-safe viewing and sponsorship decisions.

And speaking of sponsorship decisions, that brings us to the work the PTC attempts to do with the networks and the advertisers. Frankly, the networks almost always pretend to be interested in our concerns, but also almost always are really concerned, first and last, about their own bottom line. Content is secondary to them — seen only as a means to achieve a solid profitability.

That, of course, is where the sponsors come in. Their advertising dollars create the networks’ bottom lines. Sponsors must be concerned about the views of their products’ consumers and potential consumers. The PTC has a growing army — almost 700,000 consumers nationally — and that, frankly, is how we catch advertisers’ attention. The late Senator Everett Dirksen had a saying about politicians, that sometimes “in order to make them see the light, you need to make them feel the heat.” Our members are our means of making sponsors “see the light.” Our ability to alert our members to put pressure on advertisers either to stop sponsoring trash or start (or continue) sponsoring family-friendly shows has allowed PTC to succeed in several recent efforts. We have promoted good programming like “Touched By an Angel,” “Seventh Heaven,” and, most recently, “DOC,” the PAX network’s newest offering.

But we have also succeeded in convincing national sponsors to withdraw advertising or stay away from offensive programming like Howard Stern’s gross-out

show on CBS, “Action,” “WWF Smackdown,” “Temptation Island,” and most recently “Boston Public.” Additionally, the PTC-inspired wave of national protests against trash TV (again, especially in early prime time from 8 - 9), resulted in more than 40 major TV sponsors — with combined advertising budgets in the billions of dollars — forming the Family Friendly Programming Forum, dedicated to spending their sponsorship dollars to give families more wholesome programming choices.

It’s actually a wonderful lesson in the free enterprise system. A sponsor that hears from thousands of consumers around the country must, as a matter of survival, listen to them. PTC may provide the target and the suggested message, but it is our 700,000 members who give that message the power to impact the target — television sponsors.

We at PTC are proud of what we have accomplished in the six short years of our existence. Yet we realize we have only scratched the surface and that the battle will be long. We have ambitious plans to continue to grow our membership and make them an even more effective grass roots force for quality TV programming.

We are currently expanding our ETS database system, and converting our 70,000 hours of programming from video cassettes to DVD format to prevent deterioration and loss of the taped originals. We intend to expand the number of cable channels we record and analyze on a nightly basis to provide even more comprehensive guidance for concerned parents and advertisers. We will continue to issue exhaustively researched and extensively documented reports on the trends — mostly disturbing — in prime-time TV. These reports are widely, and increasingly, used by the television, radio, and print media in the burgeoning national debate about the link between popular entertainment and violence, especially among our young people. We are renewing this year our national campaign to restore the 8 - 9 pm “family hour” as a safe haven parents can rely upon for family friendly programming.

**A**nd our goal of forming a productive working relationship with both networks and sponsors is of course a work in progress. To many of these folks we are still the new kids on the block. However that is changing with our aggressive efforts to make the networks and sponsors understand our members’ concerns. More importantly, we aim to make them understand, one, that we are serious about cleaning up television and bringing responsibility to the entertainment industry and, two, that we are here to stay.

Ambitious? Challenging? Heck yes. But who’d want it any other way?

CPR



# The *Budget* Perfect Storm

by Ray Haynes

**T**HE ANDREA GAIL captain's decision to make one last fishing trip was a fatal mistake. Wisdom and history told the old fishermen in last year's film *The Perfect Storm* not to leave port so late in the season. Bad weather was always a factor that time of year, but the captain thought he could handle it, knowing he

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*Republican Whip Ray Haynes represents California's 36th state Senate District.*

had the best vessel in port and that he was the best captain. So he made his fatal decisions to go and then to head further to sea. He could have made it had his radio worked, allowing him to learn of the storm earlier. He could have made it had his refrigerator worked, allowing him to wait out the storm. In fact, he and his crew could have made it had any of several factors tilted their way. But the key factor was the first decision: leaving so late in the season invited the disaster that was