

# ANYTHING GOES:

## Moral Bankruptcy of Television and Hollywood

*One network executive sums it up. "Little by little, everybody has gotten a little less afraid of the old taboos. . . . It seems we're able to go a lot further than we have, even considering the conservative swing the county has taken."*

by Joe McNamara

**I**N 1961, Newton N. Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, challenged executives of the television industry "to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book, magazine, newspaper, profit-and-loss sheet or rating book to distract you and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland. . . .

"Is there one person in this room who claims that broadcasting can't do better? Your trust accounting with your beneficiaries is overdue."

More than three decades later, an intelligent teenage viewer laughs uncontrollably as a dog gnaws on a brain growing outside the head of a young man, who then embraces a number of women dressed in white, spattering them with blood. When asked

why he's laughing, the viewer-my son-replies, "Because it's funny"

Jerry Seinfeld claims that dropping candy into an incision in an operating room after saying, "All right, just let me finish my coffee and we'll go watch them slice this fat bastard up," was a turning point on "Seinfeld" because, "Once that happened, it was like the horses were out of the barn. We thought, if we can get away with *this . . .*" (emphasis his). The series' acme, according to critic Jay **McInerney** (who called the episode "brilliant"), involved doing an entire show about masturbation without ever referring to it by name as "four friends compete to see who can remain 'master of [their] domain' the longest."

In a bowling alley, Homer Simpson's decapitated head rolls slowly down the lane towards pins impaled with spikes, driving one of them into the skull, which pops open to reveal a note: "I owe you one brain. Signed, God." **Bart** Simpson's grace before meals runs, "Hey, God, we did all this ourselves, so thanks for

nothing." Lisa Simpson mockingly describes prayer as "the last refuge of the scoundrel."

To all of these incidents, and countless others, my 12-year-old son, with the nodding agreement of his three brothers, proclaims: "Don't worry Dad, none of that is real; it's just television."

Yet, it is real, very real, and much, much more than "just television." For those in their early teens, it is seeing 15,000 sexual acts or innuendoes and a total of 33,000 murders and 200,000 acts of random violence in a single year, according to the American Family Association.

While more than 3,000 studies have documented the inexorable nexus between TV violence and socially aggressive behavior, no one has desisted the relationship between humor and disappearing moral standards, though the behavioral keys involved are identical. According to psychologists, these are observational learning (attention, retention, motivation, and potential reproduction) and the selection of a model one chooses to imitate.

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Studies conducted in Oak Park, Mich., in 1977 and followed up in 1992 showed that “women who watched violent television shows as children in **the** 1970s are more physically aggressive and more capable of committing criminal acts today” The women who scored at the top of categories “watched aggressive female heroines in the media as children and continued to do so as adults.” These results “confirmed some of our worst fears,” indicates L. Rowell Huesman, a psychology professor and researcher in the Aggression Research Group at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, AM Arbor.

Another study by the same institute documented the rise of and rationale for playground bullies. After studying the viewing habits of a group of children for 30 years, the researchers concluded that TV violence desensitizes the very young and noted that television “played a larger role in children’s aggression than poverty rate, or parental behavior.”

Demeaning an important American art form may be bad enough, but abusing children to make a profit at, the same time defies comprehension. Syndicated columnist Suzanne Fields noted that “Our children face an unusual enemy of childhood today, grownups who conduct a carpet bombing of information and images against kids who simply don’t have the maturity to understand what they see and hear.” Understand it they may not, but enjoy it they do, and remarkably few major critics—with the exception of Diane and Michael Medved; William Bennett; columnists Bob Herbert and Kirk Nicewonger; and Harvard University’s Alvin F. Pouissant—will say a word.

Humor has become a form of Psychological violence, but Hollywood’s lethal silence among the writers, producers, studios, and critics who lack the courage to face the truth and do what is right remains virtually intact. There are, after all, millions of dollars to be made in exploiting the vulnerabilities of children whose values are not yet

formed and who are looking for leadership and role models.

In **the case** of situation comedies, their laughter directed towards premarital or extramarital sex constitutes positive reinforcement with documentable—some would say detestably corrosive—consequences. Apparently, **the** worst mistake young men or women can make involves choosing abstinence when everything around them reflects the sexual obsession that supposedly typifies life in America.

“With sex-starved Amandas and out-of-the-closet ‘Friends’ crowding early prime time, would homespun TV characters stand a chance today?” asks TV *Guide*, already knowing the answer. “Friends” has the concept of the traditional family squarely and effectively in its sights. “Living Single” offers racial and ethnic stereotypes that might even shock Archie Bunker, as well as the thousands who have invested their lives in something called the civil rights movement. The characters on “Melrose Place,” as someone once said of an oft-married Hollywood figure, “could find sex in the crotch of a tree.” “Melrose Place” producer Frank South, choosing an unfortunate metaphor for his show’s promotion of homosexuality, says, “We’ll keep pushing.” Do the songs of fools now outweigh the rebukes of the wise? Check out “sweeps” months and find out.

In fact, Hollywood’s advocacy of gays and lesbians exposes a glaring double standard. The author of *The Celluloid Closet* proudly boasts that “Hollywood. . . taught straight people what to think about gay people and gay people what to think about themselves. No one escaped its influence.” United Features Syndicate critic Kirk Nicewonger notes, “Aren’t many of those who would nod solemnly in agreement with these sentiments the same people who scoff at concerns about movie violence influencing real-life behavior?” Humor influences as well and perhaps more effectively because it is

**not** perceived as a form of violence or even as an attempted influence.

By 1980, the out-of-wedlock birth rate reached a total of 18% of **annual** births and then jumped to slightly over 30% by 1992. While the **per-**centages are frightening enough, **the** real numbers are numbing: in 1992, 1,224,876 babies were born to single women, and white females between the ages of 20 and 30 constitute the fastest-growing group. At this rate, by 2015, 50% of all children born will be born out of wedlock No “Murphy Brown” this, but the reflection of a generally acidic attitude toward the traditional views of marriage and morality

Situation comedies can not be singled out as the sole cause of such a decline, but **the** attitudes they spawn and constantly reinforce contribute directly to the problem. Researcher Robert Maginnis reports that, when individuals between the ages of 18 and 30 were “asked to assess the degree to which today’s movies, television, and music lyrics encourage teenage sex,” 63% said “**a great deal**” or “quite a lot.”

Raunchily destructive comic attitudes toward traditional virtues and families did not assume center stage overnight. For centuries, laughter was seen as a method of teaching, following French playwright Moliere’s belief that the comic sought “to correct through amusement.” Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, according to author J.Y.T. Grieg, thought that “comedy performed no useful social function even at its best, and might at its worst lead directly to corruption and immorality”

Yet, Grieg also mentions, and partially endorses, Max Eastman’s *The Sense of Humor*. Eastman sees humor as an instinct and claims that there is “a certain range of feelings which can be enjoyed playfully just a certain wave-lengths can be perceived as light, and if you pass beyond this laugh spectrum at either end the humor disappears.” He goes on to assert that “Aggression jokes derive their peculiar delightfulness from the fact that we have cruel impulses

which we cannot unleash in a serious life, cultural standards being here at variance with our instincts, and they sneak forth and take a drink of satisfaction when we play" Moreover, "Jests often liberate the surging wishes **prisoned** in us. They remove the lid of **our culture**, and let us be, in fun at least and for a second, **animals**."

Traditional cultural standards do supply the guidelines that make civilized life possible and safe, sometimes even despite our own **instincts**. However, when Eastman sees the function of comedy as some sort of relief valve which can "remove the lid of **our culture**" and allow us to be animals "in fun at least and for a second," he has put his finger on the **dilemma**. The second has been stretched into minutes, to half-hour shows, to entire years of television production, and, for some, to a way of life.

Humor as a basically harmless interchange between equals has given way to **brutal** vulgarizations with no end in sight. As Rabbi Daniel Lapin of Toward Tradition once explained to me, if a British barrister falls down once, it may be funny. Repeated falls, though, must contain **increasingly** **bizarre** elements to keep the audience "entertained." The same may be said for American humor and its attendant profanity and **vulgarity**, set on a deliberately downward course by writers **directors**, executives, and actors. The **real** matter here is money, and some in the entertainment industry driven by fear of failure, **will** do anything **even-or** perhaps especially-to vulnerable children to boost the bottom line.

Screenwriter John Gregory Dunne's lunch with a Hollywood producer took an odd turn when the producer pretended to grab a **small** animal from under the table and asked Dunne if he saw "the monster" and recognized it. Stunned Dunne replied that he neither could see nor name the imaginary **animal**, and the producer exclaimed, "It's **our money**." Dunne describes the resultant **Six** years, four contracts, and

27 drafts of one movie script in his book, *Monster: Living Off the Big Screen*. The script concerned the tortured life of TV newswoman Jessica Savitch, up to her drowning in the muck of the Delaware Canal. The finished version, six years **later**, "though it bore absolutely no **resemblance** to the raw material from which it had been wrenched, did what [the Disney studio] **wanted** it to do: It made money, thereby feeding the monster."

Apparently, Hollywood has little or no compunction about feeding kids to the monster. Michael and Diane Medved's book, *Saving Childhood: How to Protect Your Children from the National Assault on Innocence* argues forcefully that youngsters; need to be protected from the pessimism that dominates television and motion pictures. The Medveds acknowledge the inevitability of observational learning: "The deepest problem with this material isn't the possibility that children **will** imitate the behavior they see on screen, though we know that this sort of imitation does occur. The more **universal** threat involves the underlying message conveyed by these **ugly**, consistently dysfunctional images, **encouraging** self-pity and fear." Although they refer here to **Hollywood's staccato** drumbeat that things **always** will get worse, they base their **conclusions** on the notion that "prolonged **exposure** to the dysfunctional **elements** in **our culture**" **will** cause **reviews** to "lose faith, confidence and resistance . . . to the plague of pessimism."

More often that not, situation comedies celebrate **dysfunctionality** by rejecting the very things that make civilized life possible: discipline, self-control, hard work, delayed gratification, faith, and a commitment to genuine families. Yet, one network executive recently claimed: "**Little by little**, everybody has gotten a little less afraid of the old taboos. . . . It seems we're able to go a **lot further** than we have, even considering the conservative swing the country has taken." These executives have rav-

aged the roots of cultural **traditions**, professing not dismay, but dollar-driven self-satisfaction at the **moral** mudslides that inevitably follow such deliberate destruction of America's religious roots.

The writers and producers responsible for such destruction could give their audiences much more, but they choose not to. They have **opted** for the dollar-laden low road, competing to see who can get away with the most first, afraid not to **follow** the pack for fear of being characterized as out of step with Hollywood leadership. Instead of intelligence, integrity, and inspiration, viewers get what one producer ordered: "We were told to **lose** the contrived plot stuff. . . and [add]. . . more big hair and breasts." What drives some of the most **talented** people in the world to such **demi-moronic** nihilism? These very same people have shown, time and again, they can produce laughter combined with sophistication and **optimism**, but they will not. Instead, we get the boobonic plague.

There are exceptions, but their ranks are thinning. Actor Michael J. FOX won't let his own **children** watch his new show, "Spin City." Everyone in the industry could **learn** a lesson from director Spike Lee: "Sometimes art should be about elevation, not just wallowing in the same old [crap]. . . . Life is valued cheaply I definitely wanted to offer another view."

Given time, however, **those** titers and executives who lower the level of intelligence and discourse with brainless sex, profanity nudity and vulgarity have anesthetized, and eventually **will** annihilate, the ability of an audience to react positively to anything higher or ennobling. "I don't think audiences know how to be audiences anymore," producer Norman Lear told Nancy Hass of The *New York Times*. "They just want to hoot and make sounds." Lear still doesn't get it, because he insists that television's **sexual** saturation is not a moral issue: "The **biggest** problem with how much sex there is on TV isn't whether it's of-



fensive. . . . It's that most [of it] just isn't **funny**. It's stupid and boring." Hass agrees that "many people within the industry-and no doubt many viewers think that the real issue is variety, not morality. No wonder **she** entitled her article, "Cheap, Easy, and Moronic."

Prominent industry leaders know they are destroying **the** medium for those who will follow, but they simply refuse to acknowledge that reality. When they talk about "pushing the envelope," they really mean filling it. The money's too good and the audience too easy to exploit, so executives, writers, and producers follow the very same predatory practices that they in their scripts and lives, usually attribute to business executives and **religious** figures. Favorite targets include corporate officials, Roman Catholic priests and nuns, and **evangelical** leaders.

We have gone from stand-up comics **Mort Sahl** and **Lenny Bruce** to the literate sophistication of **Mike Nichols** and **Elaine May**, through roundly mocked, "sugar-coated" **Jackie Gleason** and **Lucille Ball** to the brainless profanity of **Dennis Miller** and sexually laden and insulting racist, ethnic and religious stereotypes. Humor on many shows has become a form of **cultural** and psychological violence, but no one looks at it that way **because** vulnerable young audiences respond **corporate** sponsors chuckle and **congratulate** themselves, and everyone associated with the industry laughs all the way to the bank.

A half-mile wide and 27 miles long, **Malibu, Calif.**, justifiably can claim that "nowhere in the world is there such a concentration of wealth and stardom," a belief few would **refute**. Those five beaches and six **canyons** hold the future of an art form. With a generation of viewers and an **important** aspect of America's **cultural** integrity in them, but the occupants are in debt and refuse to admit it. An entire generation of young-

sters has been taken hostage and doesn't know it. There will be no ransom note, only commercials from corporations who apparently care more about market share than our children's future.

## Accountability

**No one has the courage** to offer the "trust accounting" demanded by **Newton Minow** more than 35 years ago or to address his most recent concerns: "In 1961, I worried that my children would not benefit much from television, but in 1991, I worry that my grandchildren will actually be harmed by it. . . . In 1961, they didn't make PG-13 movies, much less NC-17. Now, a six-yearold can watch them on cable."

In **his** 1991 Gannett Foundation Media Center revisiting of the "vast wasteland" speech of 1961, **Minow** quoted journalist **E.B. White's** reaction in 1938 when he first saw the new technological then-oddity called television: "We shall stand or fall by television, of that I am sure. I believe television is going to be the test of the modern world, and that in this new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision we shall discover there either a new and unbearable disturbance to the general peace, or a saving radiance in the sky."

Must television and motion **pictures** **remain** **Minow's** "reactive mirror of the lowest common denominator" of society? Must the men and women invested with such power pursue only their dollar-denominated death-spiral? Must they continue to **degrade**, deny and eventually destroy **White's** "new opportunity to see beyond the range of our vision"? Must there be "a new and unbearable disturbance to the general peace" because those responsible for it haven't the courage to see the source of the disturbance in their **Malibu** mirrors? Imagine trying to justify applying

the phrase "**saving** radiance in the sky" to the morals of today's situation **comedies**.

There is plenty viewers can do to protest this trend. Just three of the 25 best-selling videos of all times have an "R" rating. Go buy the other 22 and show them repeatedly. Watch many of the classics made before the first "R" rating in 1968, because 60% of the films made after that were "R" or worse. Look for the Dove Foundation's blue-and-white label on videos the **Grand Rapids, Mich.**, organization rates as "family friendly" or sponsor a low-cost, multi-film festival they can help you set up.

Open that most radical of books, the Bible, and talk about the **revelations** of Revelation. Get some of the best of PBS, like "Shadowlands" and **Ken Burns**, and ignore most of the ideology-laden **glop** they throw at you. Explain to your kids that masterpieces teach you something new about yourself every time you see them, and then watch them again. Revisit older musicals and newer versions (after viewing the latter yourself first). Watch historical footage, especially of combat, with older kids, and explain that all this was done in the name of freedom. Convert your church social hall or service club to a mini-theater and offer a weekly film festival of your own. Keep cheesy film-gossip magazines out of your house and out of your life.

Work to establish a money-back guarantee at motion picture theaters. Most honest merchants have one. If you leave the movie within the first 20 minutes, you should have a right to get your money back because you were dissatisfied with what your ticket bought you.

The real trick is how to do this without seeming to be overbearing and out of touch with your children and their friends. There are usually no fanfares or overtures for unsung heroes. The best music comes later.