

Children, TV and the FCC

By Deborah Taylor Tate

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Congress this week sent a bill to President Bush to strengthen the ability of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to enforce the indecency law. This bill is just a small part of what must be a larger effort to see that television -- and indeed all media -- can be a positive influence on the minds of our children.

Our children's minds are our nation's most valuable resource. Our children will produce the next great ideas, great inventions and great art. If television is to be so pervasive in shaping their minds, it is in our national interest to vigorously protect them. In the modern world, it takes more than a village to make television a positive influence for children, it takes a society -- parents, educators, advocates, broadcasters, producers, and yes, government regulation.

U.S. law prohibits the broadcast of obscene, indecent and profane material over the public airways. That law has been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court, and it is the duty of the Federal Communications Commission to enforce that law. As an FCC commissioner, I put my hand on a Bible and swore to uphold the law. I have and will continue to work to vigorously enforce it.

Our children are exposed to an enormous amount of media in their lives. Television, radio, Internet, and books and magazines bombard children with information and entertainment from all sides. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, 81 percent of children between ages 8 and 18 watch television in a typical day, and 8- to 18-year-olds watch television on average 3 hours and 4 minutes a day. A recent study published in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics found children exposed to more sexual content in media are likelier to engage in sexual intercourse between ages 14 and 16 than those children exposed to less sexual content.

But we hardly need a study to tell us that: Common sense can tell any parent TV has a substantial influence on our children.

The government cannot and should not take the place of parents. Parents must use the resources available to them to better control their children's viewing habits. Parents have numerous options for controlling what their children see -- the V-chip, parental controls in your cable box, "family tier" packages from your cable company, etc.

More importantly, parents need to watch television with their children and help their kids understand what they are watching. Sometimes, parents just need to turn off the television and take their kids outside or read to them from a good book.

But parents cannot do it alone. Even a parent using the V-chip, cable box controls, or actually sitting in the room would not have been able to prevent their child from being exposed to the brief nudity that was the culmination of a sexually charged halftime

performance during the 2004 Super Bowl. What sensible parent would have thought they had to be on their guard for something like that during a football game broadcast to tens of millions of Americans from 6-10 p.m. on a Sunday? Broadcasters have a responsibility to viewers to ensure that what they broadcast to a family audience is appropriate, and the fines levied by the FCC will provide an incentive for broadcasters to take more care in the future.

I have met with representatives of the networks, numerous other broadcasters, and the National Association of Broadcasters since coming to the FCC, and I have found them to be good people who genuinely want to entertain, enlighten and inspire their audiences.

But they also have to run a successful business that can compete in a television world that continually pushes the envelope to distinguish itself in an increasingly crowded marketplace. However, they are willing and able to listen if parents and communities tell them they want more quality, wholesome programming children can watch.

For example in January, in response to numerous viewer complaints, an NBC affiliate in Nashville, Tenn., decided not to run the television show "Book of Daniel" because the station determined the content was not "appropriate for broadcast television in this community." The affiliate ran a special about the Monroe Carell Junior Children's Hospital and other programming in that timeslot instead. Broadcasters are willing to listen, if we -- parents -- are willing to speak up in the interest of our children.

During my term as an FCC commissioner, I intend to be a voice for families and start a discussion about just how we can encourage the media to be a positive force in our children's lives. Families need to ask some questions of broadcasters, advertisers, producers, cable and satellite providers and their government:

- How can I have more choice in the cable and satellite channels that are coming into my home?
- What tools are available to me to monitor and control what my children watch on television?
- How can I support the production and broadcast of more quality, educational children's programming?
- How can I teach my children to not just passively watch television, but instead to watch it critically and learn from what they see?

Edward R. Murrow said, "This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends." Television has and can continue to be a force for good. However, it is going to take more than a village to make it so; it is going to take a society.