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BOZELL: TV's contempt for marriage

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COMMENTARY:

Doug and Annie Brown became a hot topic of conversation in June when his book came out, called "Just Do It." The married couple from Denver made a decision to do something dramatic to their marriage and have sex for 101 days in a row. They called it a "sexpedition."

They expressed surprise at how much closer they became, relishing conversations, holding hands and strengthening their marital bond. They felt like courting each other the way they did when they first met in their twenties.

On the jokey surface of our popular culture, we consistently encounter the idea that marriage ruins sex. But pop culture is just plain wrong. Study after study has shown that married people have higher rates of sexual activity and satisfaction than singles.

The problem for Hollywood in all that is that marital sex just isn't naughty enough for envelope pushers. Like overgrown teenagers, TV producers are stuck in arrested social development, and seemingly can't visualize Mom and Dad having an active and fulfilling sex life. They would rather visualize the crazy and the kinky side, featuring the single swinger.

The Parents Television Council studied the first month of prime-time programming during the fall 2007 season, and found that across the broadcast networks, verbal references to non-marital sex outnumbered references to sex within marriage by nearly 3 to 1. Scenes depicting or implying sex between non-married partners outnumbered scenes depicting or implying sex between married partners by a ratio of nearly 4 to 1.

Never mind the impact this warped worldview has on impressionable youngsters, so many of whom are hit with these messages early in the prime-time hours. Consider the effect on teenagers and young adults, the kind of demographic over which TV advertisers drool. In most cases, they are unmarried, but close to the age when marriage could happen. If they're watching television, the prospects of a happy, healthy marriage with sexual fulfillment in it look horrendously dim. Consider a few examples:

c On ABC's sitcom "Big Shots," a married man proclaims, "I'm the only person in America having G-rated sex. And that was six months ago."

c On the ABC sitcom "Carpoolers," a married man laments, "I haven't seen my wife naked in two years." He adds, "When you've been married as long as I have, seeing your wife naked is having sex," and starts to cry.

c On ABC's drama "Boston Legal," William Shatner's character, a stereotypical dirty old man, proclaims, "Here's the thing about monogamy. It only works if you cheat."

c On the CBS smut-com "Two and a Half Men," a married woman describes married life as one long honeymoon. Another woman cracks, "That's because she bangs a different groom every night."

Several programs featured plotlines with formerly married couples discovering a passionate sex life - but only after their marriages fizzled. They dread remarriage as a return to the frozen tundra. Obviously, TV writers can mine the existence of a sexless marriage, or a cheating spouse or a dirty old lawyer. But when you put all the puzzle pieces together into a Big Picture, there's a fraudulent message being sent: Marriage is a prescription for boredom and gloom.

The opposite is also true, according to Hollywood. While marriage is marginalized on television, all kinds of immoral sexual behaviors are exploited, from the fantasies that many singles giggle about (threesomes, partner-swapping) to sick thoughts that most people consider disgusting. Pedophilia, necrophilia, bestiality, incest - all have been raised on television.

The PTC found in its one-month study period that NBC had only one reference to marital sex, compared to 27 references to all the immoral sexual behaviors. It certainly says something about the formula NBC believes is required for getting eyeballs to new shows.

Let's take the example of incest. It is now acceptable comedic fodder. On CW's "Aliens in America," two male twins tell a boy he should love his sister's breasts: "You don't love those? What are you, gay?" When the boy objects, a twin urges on incest: "Man, if she were our sister, I'd be up in her room every night." On the Fox cartoon "American Dad," the teenage son Steve is portrayed as masturbating to a nude picture of his older teenage sister.

Perhaps the most disturbing thought on all this is that TV shows come and go with all kinds of bizarre sex plot lines, and when one fails, network executives won't think it might be the bizarre plots that flopped. They have the opposite reaction: It wasn't offensive enough. They think nothing succeeds like

excess.

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