Censorship for the Common Good

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In 1975, the average American household watched six hours and 49 minutes of television each day. Almost as much time is spent by critics who flog television programming and document its deleterious effects on the next generation of Americans. Television may be “junk food for the mind,” as Steve Allen recently put it in U.S. News and World Report, but there is no shortage of recipes for its improvement. At present, there are many proposals for upgrading the general quality of television consistent with its principal purpose: entertainment. Some of these proposals are intelligent. Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television, A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, however, is not.

The USCCR wants the Federal Communications Commission, which has the power to grant or withhold licenses, to enforce the pledge of the television stations to operate in “the public interest,” and to “undertake an inquiry and... rule making regarding the portrayal of minorities and women on network television.” The FCC has already responded that for it to “oversee the day-to-day content of entertainment programs, judge role models... preview scripts,” and the like could lead to the censorship of free speech. It has suggested to the USCCR that “however serious the problem may have been (or is), the suggested cure would be worse.”

This struggle is likely to go on for some time, and it is worth taking note of the ground for the USCCR’s strong convictions on the matter. The report is 181 pages long; I shall restrict myself to a small but representative sample of the “data” and the “evidence” presented.

One example, a “review” of television’s treatment of American Indians, led the authors to agree with a resolution of the Association of American Indian Affairs that broadcasters must “improve the portrayal of Native Americans.” The USCCR approaches this problem by analyzing the evidence: the content of Westerns on television, beginning with the early days of the medium. One of the shows, “Wagon Train,” was noxious, according to the report, because it showed Indians “as drunken cowardly outlaws. Indians are...
usually attacking wagon trains.” Another show, “Laramie,” was no better: Indians are portrayed “holding white girls captive, in addition to other brutal actions.” In a third show, “Overland Trail,” Indians are presented as “unbelievably stupid savages believing in the most ridiculous witchcraft.” According to the USCCR, the portrayal of Indians has not significantly improved since then; it therefore backs the recent recommendation of the Association of American Indian Affairs calling for an “accurate depiction of Native Americans” on television. This recommendation reads as follows:

Accurate portrayal . . . requires that the American Indian be presented as a brave defender of his homeland and of a way of life as good and free and reverent as the life dreamed of by the immigrants who swarmed to these Eastern shores.

It is one thing to say that in many shows there was a tendency to present all Indians as bellicose and superstitious. It is another thing to urge that no Indians should be so depicted, and that all should be presented as peaceful and sober. For example, in the view of the USCCR, if “accurate” programming would not show Indians attacking wagon trains in brave efforts to defend their homeland, what would it show? Would it show Indians defending wagon trains from attackers? Who would then be the attackers? White outlaws, perhaps? Nazis? Police? The Ku Klux Klan? The point of the recommendation, of course, is not to portray accurately, not to bury the hatchet—but to have it cut only one way. In the USCCR’s view, it is evidence of discrimination if Indians on television are interested in firewater, supernaturalism, or brutality, when whites are not—and even, there is little doubt, when whites are as well. “Accurate” programming, according to the authors of this report, simply consists of replacing a one-sided view of Indians with its opposite, substituting all good Indians for all bad Indians.

There are similar objections to the offensive misportrayal of other minority groups on television, and we learn that the bad seeds of these misrepresentations were also planted years ago. According to the USCCR, there were many things wrong with the early portrayal of Asian Americans: First, the characters were often played by whites in “yellow face” (that this is bad is presumably obvious). Second, they tended to be either “Fu Manchu-type villains operating with cunning slyness and inscrutability” or (like) Charlie Chan, who was a super-good, super-wise, self-effacing detective.” (Is his virtue offensive because he is “really” a white man?) Third, Charlie’s “‘Confucius say’ aphorisms” are singled out for special contumely, because they reveal the “intelligent but non-aggressive stereotype of the Chinese people.” Consider the “self-evident” damage resulting from hearing Charlie say, “Confucius say man should never hurry except to catch flea,” or “Confucius say a good wife is the best household furniture.”

The USCCR points out that many of these offensive movies
are shown even today. The reader is encouraged to take heart and to act, because “when ethnic groups protest vociferously enough, some local television stations cut particularly offensive scenes or simply shelve certain films.” In the report, a Mexican-American group is lauded for its success in convincing local stations to stop broadcasting *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, allegedly a very degrading movie. I have not seen it, but friends tell me it is a good film. It is possible that I have been kept from viewing it by the enlightenment of my local television station or the activities of local pressure groups. In fact, I may never get to see it, and thus may never be able to form my own opinion of it. Is my loss of that opportunity supposed to be balanced by the benefits I gain by not being exposed to and corrupted by the movie?

Typical of the report’s perspective is the case of the “Frito Bandito,” which they regard as important enough to be given separate billing in the table of contents. Here is how the USCCR presents the problem:

The Frito-Lay campaign was launched in 1967. It was built around the “Frito-Bandito,” who was a reincarnation of the Hollywood film stereotype of Mexicans: He had a Spanish accent, a long handlebar mustache, a huge sombrero, a white suit tightly covering a pot belly, and he used a pair of six-shooters to steal corn chips from unsuspecting victims. The Bandito sold a lot of corn chips, but he also resurrected the image of the Mexican bandit, one of many negative Mexican stereotypes offensive to the Chicano community. The Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee called the campaign “probably the most subtle and insidious of such racist commercials.” Numerous protests called for banning the Bandito from the air.

The report goes on to say that the anti-Bandito campaign was finally successful in late 1971, and Frito-Lay will not let him ride again. But at the end of this discussion appears an observation made only as a point of information. Professional research organizations have discovered that in five major cities with heavy Mexican-American populations, the “Frito Bandito” was liked by more than 90 percent of the Chicano respondents, but “the company does not plan to use the Bandito character in future ads.” Here, as elsewhere, the government authors must face the resistance democracy presents to their plans.

The report swings its biggest punches at the portrayal of blacks and women. After a blistering account of “Amos ‘n’ Andy,” the report notes that blacks did begin to appear with more frequency on television in the 1970’s. But this did not improve the situation of blacks. One show, “Julia,” focused on a black woman, played by the very attractive actress Diahann Carroll. The idea for “Julia” belonged to an NBC producer who argued that the show might accomplish something of social value: “It would be the first situation comedy since the opprobrious ‘Amos ‘n’ Andy’ to be built around a
black person.” “Julia” was a “rating success,” like the “Frito Bandito,” the report notes, but “its social value as a response to the racial strife of the late 1960’s was questionable.” The title character was presented as a very well-adjusted and attractive individual with commonplace problems. Her situation simply did not have the political implications the reformers sought, despite the possible benefits of the character as a sound role model for black children.

Equally flawed in the view of the USCCR are other “black shows.” Citing authorities, the commission reports that “Sanford and Son” is offensive because it reflects “white versions of black humor,” “Good Times” because its heroine does not work and so “she resembles more closely the middle-class white housewife,” and “That’s My Mama” because one episode showed the son drunk and portrayed a young black woman as a pickup in a bar. The report thus endorses the indictment of all these shows offered by the National Black Feminist Organization—that “Third World peoples are consistently cast in extremes.” Again, these three shows are consistently among the most highly rated in surveys of non-white households. So once again, the “demeaned” do not agree with their spokesmen about what is good and bad for them.

This discussion reveals how the authors want it both ways, or no way at all; they will not be satisfied with what television programmers put on, unless the programmers accept the dictates of the USCCR. Thus, “Sanford and Son” and “Good Times” are unsatisfactory because, like “Julia,” they represent blacks as too respectable. But if programmers try to represent blacks as less than respectable—as being drunk or sexually available—they are charged with racial stereotyping and condescension. It’s a no-win game.

In the view of USCCR, the only unqualifiedly good force for the portrayal of ethnics on television is Norman Lear, the creator of “All in the Family.” Oddly, this show, which is thought by many to stand for the proposition that prejudice and racism are funny, does not offend the commission. Lear has evidently explained to the commission’s satisfaction that “portraying Archie as a loveable bigot allows viewers to see the prejudice which lurks within us all.” (Presumably, it is the weekly cathartic unmasking of prejudice that accounts for the show’s towering ratings.) According to the report, Lear has been seminal in “establishing a trend of realism in situation comedy.”

As for the portrayal of women on television, the authors can barely contain their outrage: “Television drama continues to portray women in traditional, stereotyped, and often demeaning roles.” This situation is interpreted as a holdover from the 1950’s, when women were presented in the undignified positions of “homemakers or sex objects.” Television commercials are also guilty in this regard; like drama, they perpetuate “sexual stereotypes.” The writers of the report approvingly cite the judgment of the National Organization for Women that women are generally “portrayed as dependent, unintelligent, submissive creatures who are adjuncts of men.” The report cites the following specific evidence: “Mary Tyler
Moore calls her boss ‘Mr. Grant,’ even though everyone else calls him ‘Lou’... Edith scoots into the kitchen to fetch Archie a beer... and Louise Jefferson’s desire to seek employment has been both criticized and impeded by her husband, George.” As the authors say, “the pattern of male dominance lingers.” They thus rest their case.

It is not sufficient to say what is obvious about this report—that it is ludicrous and silly, that it is a grand megaphone for particular ideological interests, that it would be funny but for its total humorlessness, that it is incorrect about what is actually on television in the 1970’s, that it does not speak for those whom it claims to represent, and that it is crudely presented. The report is foolish, but that is not its worst feature.

In the conclusion of Chapter 4, entitled “The Federal Communications Commission: Regulation of Programming in the Public Interest,” the USCCR states that the FCC should consider “a variety of regulatory alternatives” aimed at overcoming the “present stereotyped portrayals of minorities and women.” This prescription should remind the reader of the important issue at stake and the grave situation it poses.

Incredible as it may seem, what we have here is nothing less than an official agency pressing for government censorship of television programming in the United States. And no one seems to be complaining about it. Neither television nor democracy will be improved by having the government tell the people what to watch. It is to be hoped that the FCC will stand its ground and that others will come forward to stand with it.