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CAN RATINGS PRODUCE BETTER TV?

It looks like the Nielsen ratings won't be the only television ratings during March, April and May. Thousands of citizens will be marking their rating sheets and forwarding them to the Coalition for Better TV (CBTV).

The Nielsen ratings tell only how many television sets are tuned to specific programs, but that doesn't reveal whether the viewers enjoy or approve the programs. CBTV is designed to provide that information from the monitoring of prime-time programs by tens of thousands of Americans.

The CBTV form will rate the programs on sex, violence, and profanity. It asks such questions as "would the program build good character in youth and children?" and "would you be willing to purchase (or boycott) products from advertisers for helping to sponsor this program?"

At the end of the three-month rating period, and the computerized collation of what by then will be hundreds of thousands of ratings of individual prime-time programs, CBTV will single out the advertiser which has sponsored the most sexual-violent-profane programs and ask consumers to boycott its products for a year. CBTV will also select one or more advertisers who sponsor quality programs and ask Americans to buy their products.

CBTV is a coalition of at least 150 organizations claiming to represent three to five million Americans. It is the brainchild of Donald E. Wildmon, who has been working for four years on the problem of improving TV through his own organization, the National Federation for Decency.

Many prominent people have been concerned about the trend of television programming and its adverse effect on our culture and morals. The late Senator Hubert Humphrey said in a speech on June 14, 1977: "There are many reasons for the breakdown of the family unit -- loosening of morals, a changing and highly mobile society, religious indifference and even television."

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In his last published article before his death, Bing Crosby wrote: "It became apparent to me that, very slowly and very subtly, writers and producers are working nudity, permissiveness, irresponsibility, profanity, scenes of semiexplicit sex, provocative dialogue, smutty innuendoes and situations into their shows. ... I voiced my sentiments to a TV executive and he said, 'We are only depicting life as it is.' I fear they are depicting life as it is going to be if they are not diverted."

Erma Bombeck made a good answer to that specious argument in one of her columns: "You told me violence was necessary because it was 'real.' Throwing up is 'real,' but I don't want to see it in color."

As to the claim that sex and violence don't affect the viewer, Red Skelton answered: "They sell violence. They say this doesn't affect your mind in any way whatsoever, but if you can subliminally sell a product in 30 seconds, what does one hour of filth or violence do to your brain?"

Harvard University's Project on Human Sexual Development reported that 70 percent of the allusions to intercourse on television occur between unmarried couples or involve a prostitute. The report added, "Much of TV's erotic activity involves violence against women." Lucille Ball put it this way: "Television's treatment of sex has gone too far ... romance has been taken out of sex."

The people who have a vested interest in television the way it now is will no doubt cry "censorship" at the mere announcement of the Coalition for Better TV. But CBTV doesn't have the power to censor anybody; CBTV isn't even asking for the power to censor anybody. CBTV's plan of action is wholly voluntary and has no coercion connected with it.

The networks have the right to air what they want and the advertisers have a right to sponsor what they want. But CBTV also has a First Amendment right of free speech to monitor and rate the programs, to identify which advertisers are sponsoring immoral and violent programs, and to give this information to consumers who in turn have a right to spend their dollars for the products of the advertisers they like and to withhold them from the products of the advertisers they don't like. That's as American as apple pie.

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