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Gay People on Television

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This is the text of the statement made at a public hearing on sex and violence on television held in Los Angeles by the Subcommittee on Communication of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, and entered in the committee print of said hearing (Y4.In4, 94-140). Dr. Deiter was at this time a member of the Gay Media Task Force, formed in the early 1970s by members of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is Newton Deiter, and I am here to make a statement on behalf of the Gay Media Task Force, an organization which was established to work on behalf of fair, impartial, and balanced treatment of the lifestyles of gay men and lesbians presented on television.

We, on the Gay Media Task Force, recognized that the approximately 20 million gay women and men in the United States, because they represent a cross section of Americans, are as concerned with presentation of sex and violence on television as are other Americans. We are, at the same time, concerned about first amendment rights guaranteed to all people, including, but not limited to, the writers, producers, directors and creators of television programming.

Some years ago, the Honorable Newton J. Minnow, former Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, referred to television as a vast wasteland. Since that time, we have observed that television has ceased, in large part, to serve the American public a diet of sugar-coated pap. It has shown a willingness to deal with pressing social issues, and to provide the American public with a more realistic picture of the society in which they live and the problems which plague that society.

At first, this willingness manifested itself in documentaries, primarily limited to the Sunday "Ghetto Hour" programming. Programs of this nature were later moved into television prime time. More and more, the creators of television drama and comedy have dealt with issues of social relevancy in

their material, and have, in our view, enormously increased the three-dimensional view of American life thus presented. It is our view that this sort of presentation should and must continue.

We base this statement on our belief that television has the potential for being the most important educational medium the world has ever known. It has the capacity to bring into the home a host of ideas, a view of the world which may lie outside the personal experience of its viewers. In doing so, it can provide its viewers with views of their fellow Americans as human beings, which they may not otherwise be able to obtain.

A farmer in Maine, for example, may better understand the problems of a ghetto dweller in the city, the problems faced by people who live in a world he has never seen, and will, in all likelihood, never have the chance to see; all through the common humanity which binds them both. In a simple, subliminal fashion, ideas of peace, friendship and acceptances of differences in people have been, and can continue to be, propagated by television creators.

There are those, today, who feel that the pendulum has swung too far, and that television has become far too graphic in its presentation of social issues which it brings into American homes. In certain regrettable instances, this may be so. We hold, however, that these occasional lapses of good taste and judgment should not be permitted to cause blanket condemnation of socially relevant programming and its creators.

There are those who feel that divorce, childhood pregnancy, prostitution, the hell that is our penal system, denial of educational opportunity, racial and religious prejudice, the moral question of abortion, the rights of women to determine their own destiny, and the rights of gay men and women to lead happy and productive lives, are not fit subjects to be brought into the American home. We do not agree with this contention.

We believe that social evils are born of ignorance of conditions; that many of these problems and situations do, in fact, exist in American homes, and that the American public has the right to receive a fair and honest presentation of the society around them. We believe that those, who would terminate social relevancy in television programming, are engaging in the same sort of specious reasoning which once banned sex education from schools and the books of Hemingway and Salinger from library shelves to protect American children from the vivid realities of the life for which they were being prepared.

It is our belief that television has the obligation to inform and to educate, and that those who have been granted a license in the public interest have, in fact, an obligation to present sensitive and emotionally charged material on that medium.

We believe that, up until a year ago, the television industry, on a national, regional and local level, was making dramatic efforts to live up to the responsibilities the Communications Act requires of them.

A little more than a year ago, the creators of television programming discovered that an evening time line has been drawn. Earlier hours were reserved for family viewing, a period of time, during which certain kinds of issues were banned from the airwaves. Prior to the time line, and afterward, the rules remained unchanged, and sensitive or controversial subjects could still be explored. All this despite the fact that children come home between the hours of 3 and 4 in the afternoon and are free to watch the evening news shows, which frequently carry subliminal messages about excesses of human behavior which social psychologists have discovered, frequently, have more negative effects on children than dramatic presentations.

Children, these professionals have found, draw a distinction between the real as represented by news programs and make-believe as represented by written dramas and comedies, and the effects of news accounts of murders, such as the Manson slayings, of riots, of political corruption, coverups, and sex scandals, and of the grim effects of war, because they are real events, have more capacity to engender violence in children than do programs which they recognize as mere representations of life.

The institution of family hour viewing created a problem for networks and suppliers of products as well. The networks recognized that the Federal Communications Commission could exercise a large degree of moral persuasion by their granting or withholding licenses to network-owned and operated stations, and was able to persuade the networks to self-censor the products they allowed on their airwaves.

Insofar as the sellers of program material—studios, production companies, and individual products—were concerned, they felt that they would now have to steer a safe course. They had to assure themselves that the product which was being sold for viewing before 9 P.M. would be safe and acceptable, instead of deciding whether a project had merit and was worth developing. Their thought processes had to change from, "Does the project have merit?" to "Does this project have merit before 9 P.M. or after 9 P.M.?"

Obviously, if they developed a product that was adult in its approach, they had 2 hours in which it could be presented. If, however, they developed a product that was safe for family hour, they then had the possibility of all three hours in which the product could be bought; therefore, the opportunities to sell safe products are greater due to more flexible programming scheduling.

The result was stultification. With few exceptions [writers] became cautious in the presentation of their product to their buyers, the networks. Packers of shows already on the air assigned to the 8 and 9 P.M. hour became

far less adventuresome in the development of scripts for production. Conversation all over Hollywood revolved around, "What is acceptable for family viewing?"

No one really had the answers. Not the networks, writers, producers, no one. One network executive said, "Oh, it was simple to solve the problem. We just told the producers to deliver just what they delivered before, except pitch it lower for the whole family." I don't know if the members of this subcommittee know what that means, but the producer to whom the remark was addressed confessed utter confusion.

Insofar as gay men and women were concerned, with the notable exception of one segment of producer Danny Arnold's *Barney Miller*, appearing on ABC, no presentation of gay people, in any way, appeared during the 8 to 9 hours all last year. The networks indicate that they had no blanket prohibition against the portrayal of gay people, or situations involving gay people during these hours, and that they would evaluate each request for clearance of this subject matter on a case-by-case basis.

On the surface, a fair standard; in actuality, producers selling product to all three networks have told me that before 9 P.M., the subject of homosexuality or lesbianism in any way, shape or form is taboo. Since their livelihood depends on delivering to the networks what they perceive the networks want, in effect, gay people disappeared from television during that hour, and from other time slots, as well. We believe this to be in direct contradiction to the obligation which television has to inform and educate its viewers. For the simple fact is that Americans of all ages, in all walks of life, come into contact with gay women and men every day of their lives.

Gay people teach in schools, work in offices, are manual laborers, and work in factories. Gay people are, in fact, born into families and participate in family life. Just as with Jews, blacks, Chicanos, and native Americans, prejudice practiced against gay people arises from ignorance of the common humanity which is shared with the other 180 million people who live in these United States.

We are very troubled by the fact that the existence of more than 20 million people, most of whom lead lives which are as productive and constructive as those of other Americans, has been eliminated from one-third of the hours available for network programming. This elimination, linked as it is with the entire matter of a blanket prohibition against sex and violence in the early evening, seems to us akin to using an atomic bomb to destroy a fly. It will certainly do the job, but the cost appears to be out of line with the desired outcome.

There is, built into the American free enterprise system, and in particular, television, a simple mechanism for showing one's displeasure with a product or service. If one is displeased, one ceases to buy or to patronize; and, if,

in fact, the overwhelming majority of the American viewing public wants bland programming between 8 and 9 P.M., it will very quickly make the networks aware of the fact by not watching programming that they believe has an excessive display of violence, is blatantly sexually oriented, or is otherwise offensive.

Self-policing and the intelligent use of the airwaves is a responsibility incumbent upon the networks, and certainly, by law, upon the owners and operators of individual television stations.

These stations that persist in presenting programming not in the public interest, or offensive in subject matter or content, to a majority of their audiences, would soon find their licenses under assault from groups within their own communities. Sponsors who buy time in programming segments would find, we believe, that if this programming were offensive, they would hear from the consumers of their products, and would quickly remove commercials from these programs. Since networks are dependent on time sales for their income, the economic pressure would be quickly felt, and programming changes would be made.

We cannot believe that network personnel are unaware of this. They use these same tools to cancel programs which are not accepted by the public, and if they are able to do it very quickly, these tools can be used, also, to determine when viewers find programming content to be distasteful and unacceptable. To exclude subject matter by inaction and misdirection denies the creators of television programming their right to explore, in the public interest, all facets of American society in the last quarter of the 20th century.

As gay people, we do not ask that we be the recipient of special programming, or that our concerns be given special handling. Just the opposite. We ask, and, in fact, insist upon, fair presentation of our lives, lifestyle, existence as Americans, in the same manner as that of any other minority group or subcultural group.

I thank the subcommittee for its attention and am ready to respond to questions.