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Video Contraception

By Alfred F. Moran

Provocative sexual innuendo dominates prime-time television and prestigious magazines. Films made to attract teen-age audiences are blatantly erotic. So, too, the lyrics of popular songs, as well as the passionate plot lines of soap operas.

Of them all, television is perhaps the most successful exploiter of sex. Toothpaste ads promise a sexy smile. Skin-tight jeans promise popularity. Automobile manufacturers hint at suggestive relationships with one's car. Diet sodas make the pitch for sensuous bodies, while sensuous bodies are sirens for faraway places.

With all this sexual provocation, how does the television industry justify the hypocrisy of "blacking out" advertising for contraceptives? It cannot be the personal nature of the product — feminine hygiene products and pregnancy test kits blend into prime-time programming without comment.

Television's focus on sex to build audiences and sell goods grows out of our relatively recent openness about sex. No one wants to return to the hypocritical pseudo-morality of the Victorian age, nor do most people believe that television should be censored, as some have proposed.

What we do need to recognize, however, is that hazardous, premature pregnancy among teenagers is an inevitable byproduct when our sexuality is exploited by the sales pitch. The television industry short-sightedly declines to commit money or time to address these unintended consequences of its advertising.

While no one puts all the blame on television's doorstep, it must share some responsibility for the tragic pregnancy statistics for teenagers: In New York State, almost 25,000 girls under 18 get pregnant every year, resulting in just under 10,000 births and almost 15,000 abortions.

In 1977, New York Telephone's Yellow Pages was similarly short-sighted about teenage pregnancy. Though display ads for astrologers, massage parlors and sex therapists were allowed, an ad for Planned Parenthood of New York City listing reproductive health care was to be denied publication. As with television today, New York Telephone did not recognize the right of consumers to know about birth control. Fortunately, the phone company relented in the end.

That same year, the United States Supreme Court, in *Carey v. Population Services International*, struck down laws prohibiting the advertising and display of contraceptives. In that decision the court acknowledged that contraceptive advertisements were not likely to encourage teenage sexual activity. In fact, tasteful television ads for contraceptives would provide a sober contrast to the overt suggestiveness of advertisements for designer jeans.

In 1982, the National Association of Broadcasters dropped all codes prohibiting birth control advertisements. The association's members include the three major television networks and over 4,000 radio stations. These broadcasters are now free to set their own policy, but they continue to ban contraceptive advertising, judging it "too controversial."

In a Planned Parenthood of New York City survey, 43 percent of the city's teen-age girls said they were sexually active, 25 percent by age 15. But only 9 percent used contraception every time they had sex, and 12 percent never used it at all. It was not surprising to find, in the same survey, that television scored a zero as a source of information about contraception.

The best protection against sexual exploitation and unwanted pregnancy is education. Much of that must come from families, sex education courses, and the community. However, television is a powerful communicator of information and creator of attitudes (which is why advertisers use it so extensively). Given the fact of sexual activity by teenagers, the television industry must allot time for getting crucial messages across. Teenagers must learn the risks attached to sex, be helped to avoid exploitation and learn they can say no. Most importantly, if they are sexually active, they need to know how to avoid pregnancy.

If the 1980's are to be the decade of deregulation (the most recent decision of the Justice Department to drop restrictions on television commercials is an example), then a good way for television to start constructive self-regulation is by recognizing its obligations to America's youth.

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