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# BARACK OBAMA

PRESS RELEASE



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**Remarks of U.S. Senator Barack Obama as prepared for delivery  
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I want to start by thanking the Kaiser foundation for the work you've done not only on today's report, but on making these issues of media and family a part of the national conversation.

This is a subject many of us come to not as politicians or policy makers, as but as parents most of all.

Because it's one thing to discuss sex and violence on television within the larger context of the culture wars – as a values debate between First Amendment crusaders and those who believe government should decide what we can and cannot watch – but it's another thing altogether to be faced with these issues while you're sitting in front of the TV with your child.

I watch with my daughters, Sasha and Malia, and I can tell you that when we're in the middle of a family program and a commercial for Cialis comes on, it's more than troubling to find yourself wondering how you'll explain certain medical conditions that last longer than three hours to a four-year-old and a seven-year-old.

From the time they're young, we try to instill in our children a sense of what's right and wrong; a sense of what's important, of what's worth striving for. As best we can, we also try to shield them from the harsher elements of life, and introduce them to the realities of adulthood at the appropriate age.

But the concern shared by so many parents today – a concern that frankly hasn't been taken seriously enough by some on the left – is that raising your children this way has become exceedingly difficult in a mass media culture that saturates our airwaves with a steady stream of sex, violence, and materialism.

Revolutions in information and technology over the last few decades have caused this stream to grow exponentially, as we're bombarded at every turn with sounds and images from DVDs, iPods, video games, and websites that we can't always control.

At the center of it all sits the television, which still consumes the vast majority of our media use – even more so for our children. And as we're spending more free time immersed in this media culture, the amount of questionable content spilling across our screens is growing by the year.

Still, it's important for us to realize that the real problem we're facing is not simply one of quantity, or even the existence of sex and violence in the media per se.

After all, the adult content in *Schindler's List* is far different from the type on *Desperate Housewives*, and the violence in *Saving Private Ryan* is not the same as the kind our kids try to imitate in some of the most popular video games.

Rather, as your study today demonstrates, the larger concern here is one of message; it's what the media is teaching our kids about what is ok and what is not; about how to treat others and how to treat themselves.

It's a concern that mass media is contributing to an overall coarsening of our culture.

That with all the time our children are spending in front of the television, with all the choices they have to see whatever they want whenever they want, the content of their viewing is not enriching their minds, but numbing them; not broadening intellectual curiosity or appreciation for the arts, but trivializing the important and desensitizing us to the tragic.

It may seem to some that the effect on our children has been overstated. But the studies coming in from the NIH and others show that the connection is real. When children are exposed to sex without consequences, they're more likely to have it.

When they are shown the risks and responsibilities that go along with sex, at least one major subgroup – African-American youth – are more likely to abstain. Mindless violence and macho aggression on television begets the same behavior in our kids. And when eighty percent of African-American teens in a city like Washington think that they'll be rich and over half think they'll be famous, it hurts to hear them say that the path to success lies with the hoop dreams and rap careers glorified on television.

We don't teach our children that healthy relationships involve drunken, naked parties in a hot tub with strangers – but that's what they see when they turn on *The Real World*. We don't teach them to express their anger by seeing how much blood they can draw with a round of ammo – but that's what they learn in the most popular video games. And we don't teach our kids that the height of success is inheriting a family fortune to buy Gucci bags without ever working a serious day in your life – but that's how Paris Hilton gets by on *The Simple Life*. You can say that kids know this isn't real, but when they're fed a

steady diet of these depictions over and over again from the time they're very young, this behavior becomes acceptable – even normal.

So what do we do about this? What do we do when bad television becomes the enemy of good parenting?

We start by turning off the TV altogether. Our children now spend an average of three hours a day in front of the television – for African-American children, it's four hours. Two out of every three households have the TV on during meals.

This is too much – period. And so I think it would help if parents start setting down stricter rules on how much TV their kids watch and limit their hours. I know this is difficult. At the end of a long day, when Michelle and I are tired, it's easy to just sit the kids in front of the television and relax.

But I think that as parents, we have an obligation to our children to turn off the TV, pick up a book, and read to them more often.

Beyond that, when our kids do watch television, we should be watching it with them – this means finding programming that everyone can watch as a family and being there to answer any questions it may raise with our kids.

Now, at a time when both parents are more likely to work longer hours outside the home, this is a lot easier said than done. We try to compete with these media messages, but it's nearly impossible to be there every moment our kids are watching television.

And so there's a broader responsibility here.

We know that with the pervasiveness of mass media today – the existence of so many means of communication that are so easily accessible all over the world – it's very difficult to regulate our way out of this problem. And for those of us who value our First Amendment freedoms – who value artistic expression – we wouldn't want to.

But that doesn't mean we have to accept this coarsening of our culture.

Decades ago, when television was still in its infancy, we provided broadcasters free use of the public airwaves, which they were to operate as trustees for the public. And just last week, the Senate voted to set a final date for the transition to digital television.

Today, we need to make it clear that the free use of the public airwaves continues to come with certain specific obligations. But we also need to make it clear that for both broadcasters and their competitors there are larger civic obligations to the American public. Obligations to reflect not the basest elements of American culture, but the profound and the proud.

Obligations to seek not just the quick buck or the bottom line, but healthy discussion and debate in the public square of the information age. Obligations to our children; to our families.

Today, we have far more choice in what we watch than we could have ever imagined – more channels and more programming. As we move further into the digital age, the transformation of entertainment will be even more dramatic than the one from stage to screen.

And yet, with all these new choices for consumers, there has been remarkably little done to give parents the tools and the information necessary to make their own informed choices about what their children are watching.

This is what the industry must do today. As we move towards a digital environment, there is a golden opportunity for them to do it on their own – to use the latest in technology to give parents more information and more choice.

For example, this technology could make it possible for parents to create their own family tier just by programming their television to block certain channels, block certain genres of programming like dramas, or block television at certain times of the day. There's no reason the industry can't make it as easy to find family-friendly television as it is to program TiVo.

But if the industry fails to act – if it fails to give parents advanced controls and new choices – Congress will.

I know that Senator Stevens and Senator Inouye are putting pressure on both broadcasters and cable companies to do a better job fighting indecency, and I'm fully behind their efforts to get the industry to change. I also applaud their announcement that they will be convening a summit on these issues with the goal of achieving immediate, meaningful reforms.

But I'd like to outline some additional reforms that I think can make a difference for parents today.

First, parents should be able to get better information right away – by improving the voluntary rating system we currently have. Right now, our television ratings involve nothing more than a tiny box containing some letters and numbers that flashes in the upper left-hand corner of the screen for a few seconds at the beginning of each program. It's hard to understand and easy to miss. Broadcasters must improve this system to include a full-screen, detailed rating that gives parents a more precise understanding of exactly what content will be shown in the program.

They must also ensure that promos for horror movies and ads for the show *Las Vegas* aren't being shown in the middle of a cartoon or a family sitcom with a more restrictive rating.

Beyond simply blocking out negative messages, however, we also know from Kaiser's studies that television has the power to promote positive messages that can influence behavior and raise awareness.

Public service announcements have actually led to reductions in teen pregnancy, and we should all be proud of the media initiative undertaken by the Kaiser Foundation with Viacom, BET, UPN and other networks to eradicate ignorance about HIV and AIDS.

There has been a long debate about what obligations broadcasters will have to the public in this new digital age. The FCC took a first step in defining these obligations by requiring that broadcasters air children's educational programming on all their digital streams.

As they continue this process, the FCC must make sure they spell out these obligations before the transition to digital programming is complete.

When they do this, they need to make sure that broadcasters have a concrete obligation to provide public service announcements at times when people can actually see them, as well as better coverage of elections. They should donate the public service time to a third-party like the Ad Council that works with reputable non-profits. If they do not do this, Congress should.

In addition, we should also fight to prevent any attempt to gut funding or support for the Public Broadcasting System – positive television with educational messages that generations of children have been raised on.

Finally, there's current legislation out there that would promote further studies – like this one – which would study the effects of media on the health and development of our children. This will provide parents with even more information, it's got bipartisan support in Congress, and I think it's a good idea to pursue.

In Newton Minow's famous "Vast Wasteland" speech to the National Association of Television Broadcasters, he told them that,

"It is not enough to cater to the nation's whims – you must also serve the nation's needs."

Four decades later, we find ourselves immersed in a mass media culture that is at once more vast and more wasteful than ever before. And so once again, we find ourselves asking those in charge to serve the needs of a nation that has a higher calling than simply peddling indecency and materialism for profit.

We don't have to accept what we see today as inevitable. We can all work together to make media a place where big ideas and great debates are communicated. We owe this much to ourselves, and we certainly owe it to our children. Thank you.

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