

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
Washington, D.C.

OFFICE OF COMMISSIONER
JAMES H. QUELLO

April 5, 1989

David Levy, Executive Director
The Caucus
760 N. LaCienega Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90069

Dear Dave,

Your Hollywood Reporter ad is right on target. It is hard to believe we have 60,000,000 illiterate or semi-literate Americans. I always had the silly notion we were the most educated nation on earth!

I plan to quote from your ad in one of my next major speeches. It may seem pretentious for me, an old beat-up war veteran who has heard, seen and done about everything, to moralize about the persistent degeneration in TV programming. However, I'm concerned about the gradual erosion of American moral sensitivity and educational development caused in large part by the all pervasive TV influence. The tremendous potential for good in TV is so neglected.

I have a title and a few quotes as worthy punch lines in mind. The networks and program producers may not be overjoyed by what I say. But they have a first amendment right to program whatever they choose (except total obscenity) and I have a right not to like it.

Dave, I'm afraid (remember I'm living in the murder capital of the world) eventually we will regard rape and murder as acceptable risks in society on the level of misdemeanors. Also, our very young people are fed a daily TV-cable diet of sex, etc.

A laugh line gag phrase I have used like "WSEX-TV, Slime Time programming in the Public Interest" is becoming more and more a reality and accessible every day to the impressionable juvenile TV audience. I'm not for government intrusion in programming, but I would like to activate public participation.


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David Levy
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Here I am sounding like an old over-the-hill amateur philosopher. What do you think?

Thanks for sending me a copy of the ad and keep up the good work.

Best,


James H. Quello

Saving

CAN YOU READ THIS PAGE? 60,000,000 AMERICANS CAN'T

"Twenty-five million American adults cannot read the poison warnings on a can of pesticide, a letter from a child's teacher, or the front page of a daily paper. An additional 35 million read only at a level which is less than equal to the full survival needs of our society. Together, these 60 million people represent more than one-third of the entire adult population...The United States ranks forty-ninth among 158 member nations of the U.N. in its literacy levels."

Jonathan Kozol
"America" 1985

These are frightening statistics, and they must evoke depressing forebodings as to the future health, or even survival, of this society. Television alone can't reverse this condition, but those of us who help shape its content can possibly take some effective steps toward a solution - perhaps as atonement for inadvertently being part of the problem. There can be no question that television, by its pervasive nature, constitutes the largest distraction to the centuries' old custom of reading.

It would not be the first time that television has attempted to deal deftly and constructively with troubling social problems. Characters are rarely seen smoking now, and the incidence of drug and alcohol use/abuse in television has markedly decreased. Characters are now seen buckling their seat belts with increasing frequency. Isn't it possible, that on occasion they could also be seen reading a book?

Although television has, at times, dealt honestly and constructively with the inherent dramatic situation of the illiterate American adult, there is a less theatrical but equally dangerous condition - the insidious decrease in reading skills and reading interest, particularly among the young.

Without dictating content, there *are* subliminal messages that television could deliver to both the young and not-so-young viewer - messages that say it's all right to have books as a part of your life and that reading them can be both pleasurable and rewarding.

Experts say the visual impact of books actually being *seen* on television can have a positive effect. A character, with whom the audience identifies, reading a book is not necessarily less dramatic than that character watching television. The presence of books lying on tables, the inclusion of book shelves in a living room or den set, or even an occasional scene set in a library or book store (as opposed to a coffee shop or park bench) - all these can be accomplished without compromising a show's dramatic integrity or incurring additional costs.

Younger characters on television could occasionally do their homework without the customary complaints - they could even be shown actually enjoying a moment of intellectual enlightenment. Again, the visual presence of books in a child's room or showing a child reading for pleasure subtly tells the youthful audience that reading is not necessarily a prehistoric or nerdy avocation.

Obviously, there are other ways in which the benefits of reading could be presented in an understated and non-moralizing manner, but awareness on the part of the television creative community as to the enormity of the problem is the first step. Remember, one-third of America's adult population would be unable to read these remarks. And that percentage is probably increasing.