

# VIEW FROM THE CHEAP SEATS

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## **Desperate Housewives and Desperate Senators**

*If cable TV gets fined for indecency, will advertising be next?*

Last month, Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska proposed that cable TV, satellite TV & satellite radio—things you pay for--be subjected to the same “indecency” standards that broadcast programming is held to. Which means, much like what the FCC did to Howard Stern, the government would be empowered to impose fines on pay services.

“The problem is most viewers don't differentiate between over-the-air and cable,” Stevens said. “Cable is a greater violator in the indecency arena...there has to be some standard of decency.”

Frankly, I don't think an 81 year-old Senator from Alaska has the clarity of mind to make such presumptuous statements or determine what a standard of decency would be. His TV diet probably consists of Andy Griffith reruns and “Antiques Roadshow.” Hell, he is a one-man antique roadshow.

But more and more, attention is being turned toward entertainment and the values it reflects. A growing chorus of people are claiming that Hollywood doesn't represent the values of mainstream America.

We've seen plenty of recent examples of how Congress wants to stick its collective noses into the private lives and choices of people—and this is not much different, pay services being a choice consumers willingly make. And if “Madison” and “Vine” are truly converging, it won't be a far leap to go from enforcing decency in broadcast programming to enforcing decency in broadcast advertising.

So let's think for a minute: What values does the advertising industry reflect?

There's no simple answer—our industry is a bizarre confluence of both progressive dreaming and ass-backwards reality. Whether you live in a city or out in the 'burbs, on one of the coasts or in Kansas City, chances are your ad agency is housed in an urban area, or at least the busy part of town. And although I've met a handful of backwards thinkers and puritanistic Bible-thumpers in the ad business, most of us deliberately explore the edges of the popular culture—because in the constant quest for new ideas, advertising often co-opts edgy culture and mainstreams it for mass consumption.

In the end, the work we do reflects the conservative culture of Corporate America more than our personal tastes. Because our clients are the ones we have to satisfy. And many clients fear great ideas simply because they're afraid of consequences---like angry phone calls from consumers and idiotic statements from politicians such as Ted Stevens.

So the values of advertising are rooted in mainstream business. But you don't need to be a Boeing, Enron, or ChoicePoint stockholder to realize that corporations, no matter how small or large, are not the keepers of a virtuous value system. Which begs the question---what's indecent, anyway? Mickey Rooney's bare ass? Or is indecency something more subtle---like selling super-sized fast food meals to blubbery teenagers? How about convincing people to take out a second mortgage to buy a new Hummer to drive to the grocery store?

Advertising is, of course, somewhat regulated right now. There are claims we can't make and competitors we can't bash. Plus, a media outlet has the right to refuse to run an ad it doesn't deem appropriate.

But if we don't keep advertising on a higher ground, treating people with intelligence instead of condescension, and protecting the industry from outside attack, folks like Ted Stevens will turn their sights to more regulation of advertising.

Because the more desperate we and our clients get in our tactics, the more desperate the government will be to do something about it.