

November 2, 2009

Dear [Name]:

By now you must be aware of reports in *Entertainment Weekly* and elsewhere that the November 9th episode of the teen-targeted drama *Gossip Girl* will feature major characters in a sexual threesome.

To include a story line like this on a program that is expressly targeted to impressionable teenagers is reckless and irresponsible. I appeal to your highest sense of decency, respect and common sense in urging you to preempt this episode.

Television is profoundly influential in the lives of children, especially when it comes to sexual decision making – it has even been described by one researcher as a “sexual super-peer” – signifying television’s power to amplify, many times over, the peer-pressure teens are already feeling to engage in high-risk sexual behaviors.

When television portrays attractive, popular teenage characters as sexually active, it sends a powerful message to young viewers that they, too, should be sexually active and in fact, there might be something wrong with them if they aren’t.

Teens are aware that television influences their behavior. According to one survey, a third of youths 12 and older say the media encourages them to have sex by making it seem like “everybody does it.”

At least half a dozen studies in the past few years have documented a strong correlation between exposure to adult media content in childhood and early onset of sexual activity among teens. Viewing of sexual media content has even been found to be predictive of teen pregnancy.

As one researcher who has seen these effects first-hand observed, “Children have neither the life experience nor the brain development to fully differentiate between a reality they are moving toward and a fiction meant solely to entertain. Children learn from media, and when they watch media with sexual references and innuendos, our research suggests they are more likely to engage in sexual activity earlier in life.”

Gossip Girl routinely depicts teenage characters engaging in promiscuous and consequence-free sexual behavior, and that’s bad enough. But will you now be complicit in establishing a precedent and expectation that teenagers should engage in behaviors heretofore associated primarily with adult films? Behaviors that not only increase health risks, but which are emotionally and psychologically damaging to participants, as well? I certainly hope not, and I’m sure members of your community and parents of children who watch your network expect more of you.

May I also remind you that it is the affiliate, not the CW network, that will bear the financial burden of an FCC fine should any of the content of the November 9th episode be found to violate broadcast decency laws.

Finally, you must ask yourself, how does airing this program serve your obligation to serve the public interest?

In a declaratory ruling last year, the FCC affirmed affiliates' ability to pre-empt any network programming that is "unsatisfactory or unsuitable or contrary to the public interest." The record on this is clear: contracts between networks and their affiliates may not legally prevent preemption of programming that does not meet LOCAL COMMUNITY standards. As a station manager you not only have a right, but an obligation to preempt programs like *Gossip Girl* that fail to meet that standard.

Please be advised that the PTC will monitor this episode very closely. Our members will not hesitate to contact local and national advertisers; and if this program violates broadcast decency law, rest assured that our members will contact the Federal Communications Commission.

Sincerely,

Timothy F. Winter,
President
Parents Television Council

Cc: PTC Membership

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