

US television network CBS pulls program to please corporate sponsor

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CBS, the US television network, decided not to broadcast a rerun of its drama series *Family Law* August 13 after consumer giant Procter & Gamble refused to advertise on the episode. The show, originally aired in the spring, involves the program's leading character (played by Kathleen Quinlan as a family attorney) helping a woman fight manslaughter charges after her eight-year-old son accidentally shoots and kills his older brother with her handgun.

CBS apparently withdrew a number of episodes of *Family Law* in deference to Procter & Gamble, including ones dealing with the death penalty, abortion and interfaith marriage. Because the network had only planned to re-broadcast 8 to 10 episodes during its summer schedule out of 24 available, it simply replaced the "controversial" shows with others Procter & Gamble found unobjectionable.

Executives at CBS defended this blatant instance of corporate censorship as a normal business practice. Leslie Moonves, president of CBS Television, told the *New York Times* that the network's decision to reduce the list of possible repeats to those that would not offend advertisers was "totally common and done during the summer at every network."

CBS spokesman Gil Schwartz commented, "This was an ordinary, internal decision in the process of scheduling summer reruns. If you only plan to repeat a few episodes of a series, it is common business sense to rebroadcast the episodes with the most sales potential."

Officials at other networks confirmed that certain episodes were sometimes skipped due to "revenue considerations," but apparently the omission of several shows because of opposition from an advertiser was unusual.

One television executive told the *Times* that decisions on what repeats to run are generally made on the basis

of "which are the best episodes." A naive notion! And indeed the episode originally planned for August 13 was the only one for which *Family Law* received a nomination for an Emmy award.

Procter & Gamble had refused to advertise on the episode when it was originally aired, but CBS found other advertisers to take up the slack. Procter & Gamble has a screening agency that monitors every television program on which it purchases commercial time, looking for possibly controversial material. The firm (headquartered in Cincinnati, Ohio) is a consumer products giant and major advertiser, with \$40 billion in sales, marketing 300 brands to nearly five billion consumers in 140 countries, including Tide detergent, Crest toothpaste, Vicks products, and so on. It recently announced plans to reduce its workforce by 17,400 over the next three years, from 110,000 in 46 countries.

A Procter & Gamble spokesman blandly denied that the company had applied direct pressure, which it probably had not: "We know that *Family Law* is the type of show that will occasionally present content issues for us and if we have issues with a particular episode, we don't advertise. We would not, and have not, ever approached a network to suggest that they air a less polarizing episode."

John Wells, president of the Writers Guild of America West, characterized the CBS decision as "a serious threat to the creative rights of all artists in our industry. One advertiser, regardless of its size, does a disservice to the entire nation when it attempts to manipulate what Americans can watch through its advertising budget. On behalf of all writers and creative artists, I urge both CBS and Procter & Gamble to reconsider this regrettable decision."

CBS, like the other television networks, is facing a slump in advertising dollars. According to one

commentator, the networks at present are experiencing “one of the weakest advertising seasons in a decade.” Under those conditions, when a large advertiser reacts negatively, network executives spring into action. In that sense, it is no doubt true that CBS’s decision was business as usual.

The network is particularly sensitive to the concerns of Procter & Gamble because the latter signed a \$300 million deal May 31 with Viacom Plus—the marketing unit of Viacom, CBS’s parent company—to place advertising on 12 Viacom television networks: CBS, MTV, MTV2, VH1, Nickelodeon/Nick at Nite, CMT, BET, UPN, TV Land, Paramount Television, King World and Comedy Central.

This kind of “cross-platform marketing partnership,” according to a breathless Procter & Gamble press release, offers “advertisers ‘one-stop shopping’ to leverage and integrate brand messaging across a media company’s full range of advertising-based assets. According to industry estimates, cross-platform agreements will represent up to 40 percent of all media agreements in the coming years.” Until recently companies negotiated advertising contracts with individual media outlets.

In June, Tricon, the conglomerate that owns Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell, announced a \$90 million deal with Fox to place advertisements on Rupert Murdoch’s broadcast and cable networks.

The statement by the Writers Guild’s Wells (also executive producer of the NBC network programs *ER*, *The West Wing* and *Third Watch*) cited above ignores the reality that television, as an industry, has always danced to the advertisers’ tune. As far as network executives are concerned the various dramas, comedies, “reality” shows and news programs are fillers between commercials. As the Procter & Gamble press release puts it, quite bluntly, CBS-parent Viacom “is the No. 1 platform in the world for advertisers.”

There are countless examples of the television networks caving in to pressure from large corporations. CBS obviously has learned nothing from the exposure of its behavior (fictionalized in the film *The Insider*) in 1995 when the network initially killed an episode of *60 Minutes* that included an interview with former tobacco executive Jeffrey Wigand.

In 1998 Disney-owned ABC News suppressed a

20/20 segment about Disney World in Florida that exposed problems with its hiring practices. Disney chief Michael Eisner is notorious for his remark: “I would prefer ABC not cover Disney. I think it’s inappropriate for Disney to cover Disney.”

In May 1999, NBC executives expunged from the heavily advertised mini-series *Atomic Train*—about a runaway train that causes a nuclear catastrophe in Denver—any references to nuclear waste. They did so just days before the program was to be aired. The network claimed the program contained inaccurate information. A consumers advocacy group, Public Citizen, suggested the “more likely scenario is that the nuclear industry—including the network’s corporate parent, General Electric—leaned hard on NBC.” GE has built about one third of the nuclear plants in the US, including some identified as the most dangerous.

CBS News rebuked one of its *48 Hours* correspondents, Roberta Baskin—who had exposed Nike’s labor practices in Vietnam in 1996—for protesting when CBS on-camera correspondents wore the Nike logo and Nike gear during coverage of the 1998 Winter Olympics.

In March 1998 *Saturday Night Live* aired a short cartoon clip satirizing the concentration of media ownership. The cartoon included corporate logos with octopus tentacles altering the news and selling products. Executives at GE were apparently not amused. When the program was repeated a few months later, the cartoon had been removed.

A Murdoch/News Corp.-owned station in Florida fired two of its on-air reporters, Jane Akre and Steve Wilson, for refusing to water down their investigative report on Monsanto’s bovine growth hormone. When the reporters resisted story changes, which they believed were false and misleading, they were allegedly told by the station manager, “We paid \$3 billion for these television stations. We will decide what the news is. The news is what we tell you it is.”



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