Say What You Will About the Moronic Duo, They've Helped to Cement MTV's Identity with Viewers and Advertisers

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By JOSEPH TUROW

"Beavis and Butt-head" is a cutting-edge example of a profound change taking place in television’s relationship to its audience.

If you haven’t seen the MTV series, imagine a rather primitive cartoon with two messy teen-age boys reveling in a TV-inspired urge to mud-wrestle gorgeous females. Picture two social misfits who spend their time commenting grossly on rock videos and getting into trouble—maiming animals, getting sent to the principal’s office, harassing a neighbor, wreaking havoc with a buzz saw, pecking into vans at the drive-in.

Accompanying their activities are "huh-huh" grunting phrases like "it sucks" and sizzling sexual innuendo—a nonstop parade of what most parents and other authority figures consider highly objectionable in "adolescent" behavior. A person who has grown up with the program traditions of a three-network world can’t help but mutter, "They wouldn’t allow that on ABC, CBS, NBC or even Fox."

That is the distinction MTV is clearly trying to sell to the young adults and adolescents who make up its target audience. The broadcast networks generally still want viewers to know that they pursue broad cultural sensibilities on their airwaves. Cable planners, on the other hand, increasingly hope video pilgrims will see them as creating space for narrower cultural communities that deserve a loyalty they don’t grant to "regular" TV. With episodes that appear at both ends...
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As those examples suggest, the tweaking of authority by television's fools has actually been quite mild. Federal oversight, advertiser caution and omnipresent monitoring by advocacy groups have made ABC, CBS and NBC programmers quite a bit more responsible than in past years. Mere threats of sanctions often deter them from airing material that might offend viewers. This is not to say that all programming is safe for all audiences. But the self-regulation is working, and it has been a success story. The networks have stepped up their efforts to provide programs that are both entertaining and responsible. This is a sign of progress and hope for the future of television. 

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