



**Remarks of U.S. Senator Barack Obama
At a Kaiser Family Foundation Forum:
“Sex on TV”
Washington, DC
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TRANSCRIPT - AS DELIVERED:

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): I want to start by thanking the Kaiser Foundation for the work that you've done not only on today's report, but on making these issues on the media and family a part of the national conversation.

You know, this is a subject many of us come to not as politicians or as policy makers, but mostly as parents. Because it's one thing to discuss sex and violence on television within the larger context of the culture wars – as a values debate between First Amendment crusaders and those who believe government should decide what we can and cannot watch – it's another thing to be faced with these issues when you're sitting in front of the TV with your kids. I occasionally watch with my daughters, Sasha, who is four, and Malia who is seven, and I can tell you that when we're in the middle of a family program and a commercial for Cialis® comes on, it's more than a little troubling to find yourself wondering how you'll explain certain medical conditions that last longer than three or four hours.

From the time that they're young, we try to instill in our children a sense of what's right and what's wrong; a sense of what's important and what's worth striving for. As best we can, we also try to shield them from some of the harsher elements of life, and introduce them to the realities of adulthood at an appropriate age. But the concern shared by so many parents today – concerns that were reflected in these studies that Drew put up on the board; a concern that I think frankly hasn't been taken serious enough by some on the left – is that raising your children this way has become exceedingly difficult in a mass media culture that saturates our airwaves with a steady stream of sex, violence, and materialism.

Revolutions in information and technology over the last few decades have caused this stream to grow exponentially, [as] we're bombarded at every turn with sounds and images from DVDs, iPods, video games, websites... We can't control a lot of what comes through those media. And at the center of all of this sits television, which still consumes the vast majority of our media use – even more so for our children. As we're spending more time immersed in this media culture, the amount of questionable content spilling across our screens is growing by the year.

Now, it's important for us to realize that the problem we're facing is not simply one of quantity or even the existence of sex and violence in the media per se. This echoes, I think, something Drew mentioned. I'm not a prude. I won't lie to you, I like watching *The Sopranos*. I also think that the adult content in *Schindler's List* is far different from the adult content in *Desperate Housewives*. The violence in *Saving Private Ryan* is not the same kind as our kids try to imitate in some of our most popular video games. Rather, as I think your study speaks to, the larger concern is one of message; it's what the media is teaching our kids as to what's ok and what's not ok; about how to treat others and how to treat

themselves. It's a concern the mass media is contributing to an overall coarsening of our culture. That with all the time our children are spending in front of the television, with all the choices to see whatever they want, whenever they want, the content of their viewing is not enriching their minds, but numbing them; not broadening intellectual curiosity or appreciation for the arts, but trivializing the important and desensitizing us to the tragic.

It may seem to some that the effect on our children has been overstated. But the studies coming in from the NIH and others show that the connection is real. When children are exposed to sex without consequences, they're more likely to have sex with consequences. When they're shown the risks and responsibilities that go along with sex, at least one major subgroup – African-American youth – are more likely to abstain. Mindless violence and macho aggression on TV begets the same behavior in our kids or at least reinforces it. And when eighty percent of African-American teens in a city like Washington think they will be rich and over half of them think they will be famous, it hurts to hear them say that the path to success lies with basketball and rap careers glorified on television.

We don't teach our children that healthy relationships involve drunken, naked parties in a hot tub with strangers – that's what they see when they turn on *The Real World*. Hopefully we don't teach them to express their anger by seeing how much blood they can draw with a round of ammo – but that's what they learn in the most popular video games. We don't teach our children that the height of success is inheriting a family fortune to buy Gucci bags without ever working a serious day in your life – but that's how Paris Hilton gets by on quote, *The Simple Life*.

You can say that kids know this isn't real, but when they're fed a steady diet of these depictions over and over again from the time they're very young, this behavior becomes acceptable. It starts seeming normal.

So, what to do about this? What do we do when bad television becomes the enemy of good parenting? Let me say, and you know I say this with all due deference to the Fox executive who's going to be here, let's start by turning off our TV sets once in a while.

Our children now spend an average of three hours a day in front of the television – for African-American children it's four hours a day. Two out of every three households have the TV on during meals. It's too much TV. I think it would be helpful if parents start setting stricter rules on how much TV their kids watch and limit their hours. I know this is difficult. I come home from a long day, Michelle, my wife, comes home from a long day, we're tired. We're spent. It is very tempting just to flop in front of the television set or at least let the kids flop in front of the television set. And I know that every parent here knows that feeling. But the fact of the matter is that as parents, we have responsibilities and I think that part of the issue here is us [being] willing to take those responsibilities seriously. We have an obligation to our children to turn off the TV, pick up a book, and read. Or, [an] even more novel recommendation, have a conversation with them. Beyond that, when our kids do watch television, we should be watching it with them – this means finding programming that everyone can watch as a family and being there to answer any questions it may raise with our kids.

Now, at a time when both parents are more likely to work longer hours outside the home, this is easier said than done. We try to compete with the messages coming over the media, but it's nearly impossible to be there every moment our children are watching television. So there's a broader responsibility here. We know that with the pervasiveness of mass media today – the existence of so many means of communication that are so easily accessible all over the world – it's very difficult to regulate our way out of this problem. And for those of us who value our First Amendment freedoms – and our freedoms of artistic expression – we wouldn't want to. I used to teach constitutional law and I care deeply about the value of free expression, but that doesn't mean that we can't talk about these

issues, and it doesn't mean that we automatically have to accept the coarsening of our culture. That too is part of our first amendment obligation.

Decades ago, when television was still in its infancy, we provided broadcasters free use of the public airwaves, which they were to operate as trustees for the public. Just last week, the Senate voted to set a final date for the transition to digital television. Today, we need to make clear that the free use of the public airwaves continues to come with certain specific obligations. And we also need to make clear that for both broadcasters and their competitors there are larger civic obligations to the American public. Obligations to reflect not the basest elements of American culture, but the profound and the proud. Obligations to seek not just the quick buck or the bottom line, but healthy discussion and debate in the public square of the information age. Obligations to our children; and to our families.

Today, we have far more choice in what we watch than we could have ever imagined – more channels, more programming. As we move further into the digital age, the transformation of entertainment will be even more dramatic than the one from stage to screen.

And yet, with all these new choices for consumers, there's been remarkably little done to give parents the tools and the information necessary to make their own informed choices about what their children are watching.

This is what I think the industry needs to do today. As we move toward the digital environment, there's a golden opportunity for them to do it on their own – to use the latest technology to give parents more information and more choice.

For example, this technology could make it possible for parents to create their own family tier just by programming their television to block certain channels, block certain genres of programming like dramas, or block television at certain times of the day. There's no reason the industry can't make it as easy to find family-friendly television as it is to program TiVo.

But if the industry fails to act – if it fails to give parents advanced controls and new choices – Congress will.

I know that Senator Stevens and Senator Inouye are putting pressure on both broadcasters and cable companies to do a better job fighting indecency, and I'm fully behind their efforts to get the industry to change. I also applaud their announcement that they'll be convening a summit on these issues with the goal of achieving immediate, meaningful reforms.

I'd like to outline some additional reforms that I think can make a difference for parents today. First, parents should be able to get better information right away – by improving the voluntary rating system we currently have. Right now, our television ratings involve nothing more than the tiny box containing some letters and numbers that flash in the upper left-hand corner of the screen for a few seconds at the beginning of each program. For those whose eyesight is getting a little worse, they're hard to spot; it's hard to understand; they're easy to miss. Broadcasters need to improve the system to include full-screen, detailed ratings that give parents a more precise understanding of exactly what content will be shown in their programs. This is already done on some of the premium channels like HBO. It's not that difficult to do. It would not be an extraordinarily costly burden on broadcasters or cable operators. It makes sense.

They also need to ensure that promos for horror movies and ads for the show *Las Vegas* aren't being shown in the middle of a cartoon or a family sitcom with a more restrictive rating. That includes, by the way, the Superbowl; I would like to just note that I was watching that with my kids this past year.

Beyond simply blocking out negative images, however, we also know from Kaiser studies that television has the power to promote positive messages that can influence behavior and raise awareness.

Public service announcements have actually led to reductions in teen pregnancy. I think you'll hear more about that from the panel. And we should all be proud of the media initiative undertaken by the Kaiser Foundation with Viacom, BET, UPN and other networks to eradicate ignorance about HIV and AIDS.

There's been a long debate about what obligations broadcasters will have to the public in this new digital age. The FCC took a first step in defining these obligations by requiring that broadcasters air children's educational programming on all their digital streams. As they continue this process, the FCC must make sure they spell out these obligations before the transition to digital programming is complete. When they do this, they need to make sure that broadcasters have a concrete obligation to provide public service announcements at times when people actually see them, as well as better coverage of elections. They should donate the public service time to a third-party like the Ad Council that works with reputable non-profits. If they do not do this, Congress should.

In addition, we should also fight to prevent any attempts to gut funding or support for the Public Broadcasting System – positive television with educational messages that generations of children have been raised on.

Finally, there's current legislation out there that would promote further studies like this one, which would study the effects of media on the health and development of our children. This will provide parents with even more information; it's got bipartisan support in Congress, and I think it's a good idea to pursue.

In Newton Minow's famous "Vast Wasteland" speech to the National Association of Television Broadcasters, he told them, "It's not enough to cater to the nation's whims – you also must serve the nation's needs." Forty years later, we find ourselves immersed in a mass media culture that is [at] once more vast and more wasteful than ever before. So once again, we find ourselves asking those in charge to serve the needs of a nation that has a higher calling than simply peddling indecency and materialism for profit. You don't have to accept what we see today as inevitable. We can all work together to make media a place where big ideas and great debates are communicated. I think we owe this to ourselves, and I certainly think we owe it to our children. Thank you very much. And I am happy to take some questions.

[Applause]

Any questions? ... This is good. Yes, in the back.

MALE SPEAKER: Since someone has to ask a question. You talked about PBS and the difference between good and bad television and to some extent that may be true but on the other hand, almost all the programming that deals with young people on PBS also are marketing tools in the same way that they are trying to be educational. In your opening part of your statement, you talked about television, sex, violence and materialism. So how do you equate the two? I mean you go in to any toy store and every place you look there's an Elmo or there's a Dora the Explorer. So, that's commercialism. It's almost like the television shows are lost leaders for the other side of the marketplace.

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): Well, look, I think you make an important point, particularly anybody who has a seven-year-old or four-year-old and has to buy all these things. I'm certainly sympathetic. I'll be honest with you; part of what's happening with public broadcasting is that these things get

marketed in part to finance their operations. And if we were doing a better job, I think, supporting public broadcasting then we wouldn't see commercial aspects drifting in to the programming elements.

You know, having said that, the truth is that you know the programming – the children's programming in particular on public broadcasting – is still some of the best television around for kids. And I feel extraordinarily confident when I'm sitting there watching – when I was, they're a little older now, but when I was watching Elmo – that basically the information that was coming, the values that were being transmitted through these programs were ones that were consonant with what I was trying to communicate to my kids.

Although I will say – what were those little sort of alien-looking... Teletubbies. I never quite got that one. [Laughter] And I'd watch those and I really didn't understand what was going on. There was some weird transmission going on to the kids there.

MALE SPEAKER 2: [Inaudible] ...the FCC has dropped as of June 30th. This study is also being released as it notes at a time when teen pregnancy rates are dropping and even the findings of sex on TV are mostly dialogue as opposed to action. I'm wondering whether we are sort of hollering wolf at a problem that is sort of taking care of itself on television.

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): No, I don't think we are. I think that's part of what the study here today is about. I do think that there is the possibility of this debate unfortunately getting caught up in cultural wars and political wars and being jammed up for political purposes and I am always wary of that. But what I also think is that the concern about how we communicate values to our children is one that is shared across the board. You can talk to the most liberal democratic parent and first amendment absolutist and they will still cringe when they see some of the programming that's on television today.

Conversely I think that, you know, you may have religious conservatives who aren't interested in shutting down quality dramas that are communicating important realities about our lives, but they may at least want the option of saying, you know, tell me ahead of time so that my children, so that I can make a decision about whether I think this is appropriate for my children. The problem we have right now is there is so much noise coming at us from all directions that if we don't have the information and the tools to control that flow then we start feeling overwhelmed. And that I think is probably more true now than it was several years ago. I don't think that problem has lessened at all. But I do think that it's important not to... you know part of the problem I think about American culture is we tend to, in everything, go from a hysteria to trance, right? So, Nicole Sheridan will come on with her towel and everybody is all aflutter and then we just keep on doing the same things that we've been doing until the next time. And that is I think a habit to break. What we want is some sustained serious, concerted efforts to deal with this issue and empower parents without getting hysterical. [Inaudible audience comment] ...It gets worse doesn't it?

FEMALE SPEAKER: [Inaudible] ...coming somewhat late. I can't believe that you think there's not an issue with sex and in fact teenage kids think well maybe intercourse maybe I'll wait but oral sex isn't sex and it's done all the time. So I think this is hopefully not too late. But it's definitely on the late edge for my kids and I'm one of those parents who didn't let them watch a lot of stuff. And I'm very skeptical that the television networks will do anything because all they want to do is make money.

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): Well, I think this is an important question. Look part of my job is legislative. Now Drew and I were talking before coming up here and I think we agreed on an important point. Not everything that is important lends itself to legislative solutions. Sometimes just talking about the issue in a way that can draw a consensus maybe embarrasses networks into doing

the right thing; makes parents more mindful that there's a problem taking place; allows us all to take some responsibility without coercion. And I think that's important. I will also say that Congress is sufficiently concerned about this that if broadcasters, the cable industry and so forth don't provide parents the tools to deal with this that I would expect legislation to come up. And I will tell you that although many of the pieces of legislation that come up may end up being blunt instruments, that are not crafted the ways I would like to see them crafted, I would probably end up voting for most if not all of them. Simply because it's important for me to send a strong message that this is an area that I think is important and that I care about. So one of the things that I think is important particularly for progressives – and I have a lot of friends in Hollywood and as I said before I'm somebody who thinks that Shakespeare was full of a lot of sex and violence and as were most of the Greek tragedies so I'm very sensitive to the fact that we don't want to in any way inhibit creative expression. But when I talk to friends of mine who are in the entertainment industry, who are in Hollywood, my constant suggestion is let's try to preempt what may end up doing damage to the first amendment by recognizing that this is a legitimate concern and don't hide behind artistic expression when a lot of the programming that's on television is not particularly artistic. It's formulaic, tawdry, cheap stuff. And I recognize the dangers of getting into judgments about what's good and what's bad and what's artistic and what's not. But we all know that some of the stuff that we see up here is not designed to elevate the mind. It's designed to move product.

Let me take one last question, two, couple. Go ahead.

FEMALE SPEAKER 2: As a mother of seventeen year-old twins, I grew up African-American with BET. I have to say there was some very intelligent programming on BET when I was a seventeen year-old. It is a thing of the past now. Since Viacom owns BET now and countless other media outlets. It's just... it's unbelievable the amount of trash...

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): It's nasty.

FEMALE SPEAKER 2: ...it's just nasty. In the middle of the day, lunchtime, on Saturday morning I'm with my kids and we are trying to find something to watch and there are naked women, you know, shaking in music videos. Why are there music videos on at eight o'clock in the morning and then again at 10 and then again at noon? It's ridiculous. They can't think of any other thing, any other type of programming and I know it's been presented to them 40 times a day. There are wonderful people doing wonderful things. And these shows can never get any airtime at any of the Viacom outlets. Who makes them responsible?

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): Well as I said, I think this is a conversation that Congress will take on and if the industry is not giving parents like you options then I think Congress will move fairly aggressively on this. You know in some ways this is also similar to some of the debates around rising childhood obesity. There's this argument somehow that well the marketplace is just going to give people what they want. That may be true. What's also true is that people often times want what they're given or what is only made available to them. There have been recent studies showing that if you go into poor, inner-city neighborhoods, [and] you try to buy some fresh fruit anywhere or healthy lunch options for kids, you can't do it. They just don't exist. You've got Popeye's, you got Mickey D's, those are your only options. So yeah, people will eat bad if that's what's there but they might try something else if something else was available. So, I think that's something that we're going to have to continue to talk about.

MALE SPEAKER 3: Two weeks ago, we had the launch of the video iPod. And we now have *Desperate Housewives* on mobile devices in our trains. There's already an Internet site where housewives desperate to show themselves will do so on your video iPod. I think that in two years' time when this research comes back, we're going to be looking at the explosion of the availability of digital content

on mobile devices, which is a far greater challenge to us as parents, you as legislators and so on. And I believe that the tools that you're talking about will have to somehow bridge that gap of the different forms of media and the delivery devices upon which they come.

SENATOR BARACK OBAMA (D-III): Right, well I think you are making a terrific point and you know technology will always outpace attempts to completely control information flows. In some ways that's a good thing in the sense that it prevents the kinds of ham-handed censorship that say the Chinese government engages in. So, we want to make sure those information flows are available. I think what's important to note though in some of the figures that were flashed up here, is that people still get a huge amount of information just from television. I mean TV is still... for all the Internet, iPods and this and that and the other, the vast majority of families and their children still find television the most alluring, powerful mechanism by which they get their information. Broadcast television and now cable television which is sort of blurred—you know it's... whatever's on the clicker that can be easily accessed is where people are going to... it's the easiest way for them to get information. And so I don't think it's adequate to say because all these other media are proliferating that we should just throw up our hands and do nothing. I think we would make enormous progress if broadcast and cable TV, satellite TV, whatever was offered in a standard package that comes into the home shows some recognition that parents are concerned and gives the parents the technology and the tools they need to control what comes into the home. That's not going to negate the need for parents to still monitor what information their kids are receiving from other venues. But TV matters and that's something we're going to have to focus on.

Thank you so much, everybody.

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