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The Government Doesn't Belong in Television **by Scott McPherson**

Any material element or resource which, in order to become of use or value to men, requires the application of human knowledge and effort, should be private property — by the right of those who apply the knowledge and effort.

— Ayn Rand, “The Property Status of Airwaves” (1964)

Outrage over Janet Jackson’s racy half-time performance during Super Bowl XXXVIII did not go unnoticed by television’s government overseers. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is actually considering fining CBS for the broadcast.

According to the February 3 *Washington Times*, “Federal Communications Commission Chairman Michael Powell ... ordered an investigation of the Super Bowl halftime show.... ‘I am outraged at what I saw ...,’ Mr. Powell said.” So-called pro-family groups and a number of talk-radio hosts are likewise disgusted with the Super Bowl show.

Okay, so people found the show revolting. But what does that have to do with the government?

A lot, unfortunately. Ever since the 1934 Communications Act was passed, the federal government has ruled the airwaves. Naturally, it was dressed up as a way of protecting the “public interest” — whatever that means — but what it really boiled down to was government control of another industry, at a time when government was racing to control everything.

A February 3 letter to the editor of the *Washington Post* sums the problem up perfectly. A reader complained, “I thought that the Federal Communications Commission was created in part to keep trash off the airwaves and to allow the free expression of ideas.”

What those who like government regulation of the airwaves don’t realize is this: “trash” is as much a part of the “free expression of ideas” as anything else. It’s the contemptible end of the spectrum that helps us to properly identify the praiseworthy end of the spectrum.

Neither the FCC nor any other branch of government has any business harassing broadcasters or regulating their industry. Government exists to protect people's rights — and no one has the “right” to “good” TV. Television stations are private property — as are the frequencies they broadcast over — and don't require any assistance from government busybodies.

Of course, there is no way of guaranteeing that TV will be “trash-free” without a government regulator — but then again, there is no way of guaranteeing “trash-free” TV even *with* government in charge. A quick glance at the overwhelming majority of prime-time TV programs is proof enough of that.

Still, people want to feel as if their government is looking out for them, making sure that the programs they and their children watch will be “good.” The fact that the definition of “good” changes over time really means this: the programs they and their children are watching are better identified at any given time as “government-approved.”

Is that what a free society is about?

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