

FCC Chief slaps networks on sex, violence

by Christopher Stern
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WASHINGTON - Stepping up his criticism of the broadcast industry, Federal Communications Commission Chairman William E. Kennard said that television networks have failed the educational needs of children and have increased the amount of sex and violence in prime time.

"Broadcast standards have coarsened," Kennard said Monday as he convened a hearing on the public interest obligations of broadcasters.

"There is indisputably more inappropriate content - more questionable language, sex and violence - in today's prime time."

Three years ago, the FCC began requiring TV stations to air at least three hours of educational and informational programming for children each week. Then-chairman Reed Hundt led the effort, citing a lack of high-quality educational shows on commercial networks.

Now Kennard is looking toward a time when broadcasters will use their new digital channels to deliver a variety of services. The agency wants to ensure that as broadcasters get into new businesses, such as data transmission, they don't relinquish their obligations to provide educational television.

The FCC is considering rules that would require broadcasters to air additional educational programming in return for the digital airwaves they received in recent years.

Kennard's power to impose new regulations on the industry are limited because he is expected to step down from his appointed position in January even if Vice President Al Gore wins the election. Any proposal he makes will likely be reviewed by the next chairman.

Last week he criticized NBC and Fox for failing to carry full coverage of the presidential debates. NBC carried the debates on its own stations but gave affiliates the option of carrying a baseball game. Fox has not aired the debates.

Broadcasters maintain they meet their public service obligation, in part by providing billions of dollars worth of free advertising for public service announcements and by raising millions for charity.

"Saddling stations with additional regulation cannot be justified, given the billions that broadcasters provide annually in public service," said Dennis Wharton, a spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters.

At Monday's hearing, James Steyer, chief executive of JP Kids Inc., which produces children's programming, agreed that most net-

works are doing a poor job providing educational programming.

The networks, he said, are looking for "inoffensive programming that you can slap an educational label on."

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-William E. Kennard,
Federal Communications
Commission Chairman

Another panelist, Susan Altman, who produces "It's Academic," a local trivia contest for high school students, said TV stations can make money from educational programs, but not as much as they can from shows that draw larger audiences. In the current, highly competitive marketplace, broadcasters are interested in airing only the most profitable programming, she said, adding, "It could be an infomercial, it doesn't matter." Competition has become so fierce

that broadcasters have all but forgotten their obligation to the public, Kennard said. "I don't think we can rely on the corporate responsibility of broadcasters," he added.

Competition has led programmers to increase the amount of sex and violence on television, Kennard suggested. Several panelists confirmed that sexual and violent themes continue to permeate programming, although it is not clear if such adult-oriented content is increasing, as Kennard said.

Dale Kunkel, a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, studied the content of more than 8,000 TV shows that aired between 1994 and 1997 and found that the amount of violence depicted on television remained stable over the three years, with 58 percent to 61 percent of programs including some violence.

A separate study, conducted by Kunkel for the Kaiser Family Foundation, found that more than 50 percent of shows include sexual themes. In prime time, when the television audience is the largest, two-thirds of programs include sexual content, the study found.

Kennard and other members of the FCC called on broadcasters Monday to promote the content rating system, which surveys have shown is not used by most parents.

There's something fishy going on here...



Above: Fishing boats sit docked in Futo Bay awaiting word of a dolphin sighting to begin the annual hunt. A kill of 22,000 has been approved by the Japanese government. Like the Japanese whaling that has prompted a global outcry, this hunt is being carried out in defiance of international protests.



Right: Fisherman Naohito Hiyoshi, 43, says Japan's culture calls for "eating seafood, just like the U.S. culture is to eat beef."

WASHINGTON POST PHOTO BY DOUG STRUCK

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WORLD & NATION

In Brief...

Below: Missouri Commissioner of Higher Education Kala Stroup, right, her daughter Megan Sappington, and Grandchildren Annika Sappington, 2, left, and Skylar Sappington, 1, leave flowers at the Governor's Mansion in Jefferson City, Missouri Tuesday. Missouri Gov. Mel Carnahan, campaigning for a seat in the U.S. Senate against incumbent John Ashcroft, was killed when the plane shuttling him to a campaign rally crashed in rainy, foggy weather Monday night 25 miles south of St. Louis, Missouri.



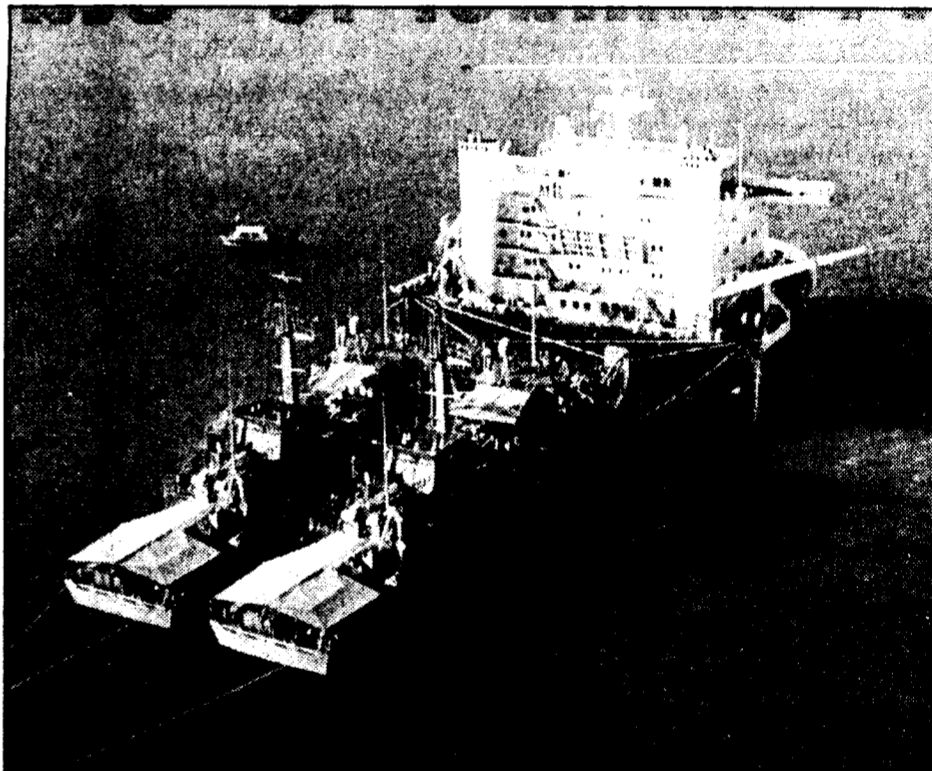
PHOTO BY FRED BLOCHER/KANSAS CITY STAR



PHOTO BY JULIE JACOBSON/KANSAS CITY STAR

Above: File picture of Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan seen here glancing out the window of his moving campaign train, July 21, 2000. Carnahan, campaigning for a seat in the U.S. Senate against incumbent John Ashcroft, was killed when the plane shuttling him to a campaign rally crashed in rainy, foggy weather Monday night 25 miles south of St. Louis, Missouri.

Below: File photograph shows the coastal mine-hunters USS Cardinal, left, and USS Raven resting above the submerged deck of the commercial motor vessel Blue Marlin prior to de-ballasting operations that will lift the mine-hunters onto Blue Marlin's deck in Ingleside, Texas in July 2000. The commercial motor vessel MV Blue Marlin is en route from Dubai, United Arab Emirates, to Yemen to aid in returning the stricken U.S. Navy destroyer USS Cole to Norfolk, Virginia.



KRT PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U.S. NAVY

British see Earth between a rock and a hard place

by T. R. Reid
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LONDON - Concerned that NASA may have dropped the ball, a blue-ribbon scientific panel here has recommended that Britain take the lead in defending the people of our planet from an overhead threat of literally cosmic dimensions: killer asteroids.

A recent report from the Task Force on Potentially Hazardous Near Earth Objects calls for spending as much as \$100 million on a defense system against space objects, with a blueprint similar to the military's missile defense systems - an early detection network coupled with some means to stop an incoming threat.

With thousands of objects flying near enough to our planet to be considered risky, panel members said the possibility of global destruction posed even by a relatively small asteroid should be enough to justify the expenditure. "I would think the prospect of imminent death would con-

centrate the mind remarkably," said Harry Atkinson, the task force chairman.

"This is not science fiction," said Britain's science minister, Lord Sainsbury, as he endorsed the report and promised swift government action to implement it. "The risk is extremely remote ... but it is real. We put a lot of money into astronomy. It's sensible to put just a little bit into making certain we know if there is any danger of an object hitting our very fragile planet."

Asteroids and their smaller cousins, comets, are chunks of flying debris left over from the formation of the solar system about 4.5 billion years ago. Some are huge; the potato-shaped asteroid Eros is bigger than the whole of Washington, D.C. When they hit the Earth, the results can be cataclysmic. A single asteroid that hit

what is now Mexico about 65 million years ago wiped out most ani-



WASHINGTON POST GRAPHIC BY PATTERSON CLARK

mal life around the world and is believed to have ended the age of dinosaurs.

The British panel warned that "the Earth is hemmed in by a sea of asteroids."

One problem is that astronomers don't know how big that sea might be. The report says there may be as many as 2,000 space objects crossing Earth's orbit that are bigger than 1 kilometer (about half a mile) wide. Impact by a single object that size could kill up to a quarter of our planet's population, the panel warned.

But while the damage can be massive, the actual risk is minimal. Asteroids don't hit us all that often; "we are talking about once every 100,000 years for a very seri-

ous incident," Sainsbury said. Still, the report concludes that the potential harm is so great that preventive measures should be taken - particularly because mankind now has the technological skill to protect itself.

"Near Earth Objects" - the term "near" is a relative one here, referring to space debris within a third of the distance to the sun - pose a threat to all nations. Why, then, is it the British who are pushing the cause of asteroid defense? One reason is that the homeland of Isaac Newton has a long astronomical tradition. The other is that island nations face a particular risk; a large asteroid landing in the Atlantic could launch a tsunami that would sink the British Isles (not to mention the East Coast of the United States) within minutes.

The British panel's warnings echo several studies issued by NASA in recent years about asteroid dangers. Under pressure from Congress, NASA promised in 1995 to identify all dangerous space objects by 2005. NASA currently spends about \$2 million annually on that task, but has

fallen far behind the original schedule. That's a key reason the British have decided to push ahead.

The task force report urges construction of new telescopes - particularly in the Southern Hemisphere, which has fewer astronomical installations than the northern. The panel recommended spending about \$24 million immediately on a new 10-foot telescope somewhere south of the equator. The team also suggested launching "Spaceguard" satellites to watch for incoming destruction.

With improved vigilance, the study says, an asteroid racing toward Earth might be spotted a year, a decade, or even a century before impact. Rather than just sit around awaiting destruction, the team suggests that humans might be able to destroy or turn away the unwelcome visitor. The report doesn't provide specifics, but U.S. nuclear scientist Edward Teller has suggested using nuclear bombs in space to nudge an asteroid off a collision course with Earth.