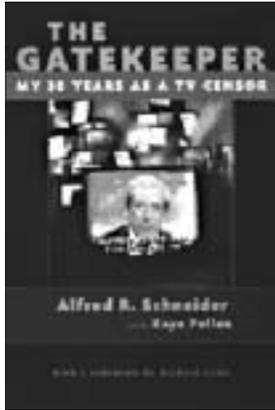


BOOK REVIEW

ELAINE REISS



The Gatekeeper: My 30 Years As a TV Censor

Alfred R. Schneider with Kaye Pullen
Syracuse University Press (2001)
http://sumweb.syr.edu/su_press/index.htm
232 pages; \$26.95 (cloth)

Alfred Schneider served as chief censor for the ABC broadcast network. In this book, Mr. Schneider writes with great fondness about the “near distant” past in the world of television broadcasting when the American public received daily television entertainment and news primarily from the three broadcast networks. In response to the FCC-imposed obligation to serve the “public interest, convenience and necessity,” each of the networks established departments of broadcast standards. The departments at CBS, NBC, and ABC had different names but they performed the same tasks: reviewing programming and advertising for approval for broadcast both on the network and on their owned-and-operated and affiliated stations.

The book provides great insight into how ABC and Mr. Schneider undertook

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the task, which is a valuable contribution because society continues to struggle with the same social policy issues as in his day. We remain concerned about representations of sex and the appropriateness of messages seen by children. We worry about the amount of violence in society and the role that the media play in it. What has changed is the communications environment. As Mr. Schneider states, “Diversity of distribution systems, television on the Internet, the advent of the V-chip to supplement the new ratings system, the maturation or indifference of the audience, and the digitization of the broadcasting signal contribute to a vast wave of change that is sweeping over the communications business.”

He continues:

From a legal and practical standpoint, how do you censor the Internet? Providers and search engines are nothing more than common carriers, and only limited technological controls are available to police the Internet. The First Amendment does not apply internationally, and with millions of web sites already on line, it's impractical to apply editorial standards to existing or future web sites.

For more than thirty years, Al Schneider and his colleagues policed the broadcast media. Through the National Association of Broadcasters, they established standards that governed what you could say and show on television. The book does not go into the prohibitions that existed during that period. However, as an advertising agency attorney for much of it, I can attest to the fact that undergarments could not be shown on live models, that one could not discuss the purpose of sanitary napkins, and that Bob Dole's advertisements for Viagra would never have appeared. Advertising speech was censored. Indeed, the book talks about the “editing” of movies and shows for words that were not deemed appropriate, like “hell” and “damn.”

The work is provocative because it raises the very policy issues that continue to plague us. What are the parameters of regulation in a democratic society

that honors free speech? What role should government play in determining what content is appropriate? Does it make sense to have a “fairness doctrine” or “family viewing hour”? Can good taste or ethics be legislated? Schneider states that “[s]elf-regulation is more efficient in a democratic society than government-imposed rules.” He truly believes that he was part of self-regulation. I always have viewed it as broadcast regulation, particularly in the era when advertising directed to children had to be approved by the NAB code authority before it could be aired. At that time, there were mandated scenes in both food and toy advertising.

The broadcast industry through the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) code authority believed it was fulfilling its requirement of operating in the public interest, yet when it began to deal with multiple-product announcement regulation (how many products could be included in a commercial), it ran afoul of the antitrust laws. I believe that many of the rules, although well intentioned, were established by the three networks to help them in their business, i.e., keeping their licenses, and had little to do with real public interest.

However, this book reveals the manner in which policy decisions are made within media organizations. Schneider discusses his role and his relationship with the production community and senior executives at the network, as well as the interface with Congress and the FCC.

The chapters on movies made for television and docudramas deal with the difficulties of balancing social policy and business interests. They provide great insight into the debates within our society. This is a must read for anyone interested in how television was regulated. 