

Media malfunctions: We are co-conspirators in culture's corruption

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

CBS television has had a bad year. Dan Rather was snookered into broadcasting a story about a fake document and the network was fined \$550,000 for baring an intimate part of Janet Jackson during the Super Bowl half time. Rather will survive, though tarnished, and a half million dollars is chicken feed for a corporate giant. But what do these moments in our recent history reveal about our national moral corruption?

Dan Rather made a bad call on a document he did not verify. Janet Jackson's slight striptease does not even remotely approach the obscenity of television reality programs, which do not draw fines but which are eagerly copied by rival networks. This fall, as just one example, HBO will offer *Family Bonds*, a new series for Sunday night viewing.

The *New York Times*, in a blatant promotional advance feature, promises that *Family Bonds* will reveal the "most intimate moments" in the life of the Long Island, New York, family of eight-year-old Frankie Evangelista. Those moments will include real-life segments of Frankie "crying as he learns to ride a bike, his mother listing how many times a night she has sex with Frankie's father and Frankie's older sister giving birth, including a close-up shot of the baby emerging from her vagina."

How does Frankie respond to the show? He tells an interviewer, "All I know is that I'm going to be famous," a testament to the intimate relationship between fame, profit and the exploitation of children. *Family Bonds* arrives on our television screens as another diversion from a mass media-supported war that should not have been fought, and an occupation that is even more costly than the war itself.

What does this say about our present condition? "Bread and circuses" comes immediately to mind. By providing the local populace with food and gladiators battling lions, Rome's rulers were able, in Neil Postman's phrase, to "entertain" their citizens to death as they pursued their greater goal of empire-building.

Spend a little time on the road, as I have done recently, and you begin to discover that the people who come to hear lectures on religion almost all deeply abhor what is done to and for us in the name of patriotism and escapist entertainment by political decision-makers and the media. I meet very few people who are buying into this pious huffiness over Janet Jackson, this television exploitation of eight-year-olds, and this blind willingness to be deceived into supporting a tragic war and a doomed occupation. So who does buy it?

The easy answer is to say that such folks don't come to hear visiting lecturers on religion. But we know better. After peace candidate George McGovern lost the presidential race in 1972 to Richard Nixon, Pauline Kael wrote: "How could this happen? I don't know a soul who voted for Nixon." She was being ironic. She wanted her readers to know that she, and they, were deceiving themselves if they thought they could live in a self-contained enclave of the righteous.

There is no such enclave; there is only a self-righteous refusal to see the consequences of our common inaction in the face of moral corruption and commercial exploitation. Surely we remember that the Jesus who tells us to look beyond the signs of heat and rain and see the signs of the times is the same Jesus who insists that "demons" are present in all of us, not just in the troubled outcasts. We all have our demons of passivity, denial and indifference when it comes to our membership in a culture in which a network pays the parents of eight-year-old Frankie to open their home for an invasion of their family's privacy.

We know these people because they are us. Have we ever chosen to stop buying products from corporate sponsors of corrupting television shows? Maybe there are choices that fall short of folk singer's John Prine's admonition to:

Blow up your TV, throw away your paper
Go to the country, build you a home
Plant a little garden, eat a lot of peaches
Try and find Jesus on your own.

We are co-conspirators in culture's corruption. So if we don't want to retreat to the country and plant a little garden, we have to remember that Jesus told us to follow that which is good. The good is always relative, but that gives us no license to stop striving for the mature personhood that will enable us to identify and resist the corruption that comes from what Ephesians calls "the cunning of men [and women],

by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.”

In this election season we have no “good” choice for president. Both candidates employ cunning and deceit. But not to vote is not really an option if we want to be members of our common community. We choose between the better of less than adequate choices; last time I checked, Jesus Christ was not on the ballot.

It remains for us to address the question posed by the victorious Senate candidate at the end of the old film *The Candidate*: “Now what do we do?” There is no easy answer. If we don’t want to throw away our TV and cannot single-handedly shut down HBO, we can at least confess our complicity in a corrupt society, go vote, and then set about doing some serious atoning work.