

TV's foolish PSA wrangle

IN FIGHTING EFFORTS by the Advertising Council and others to devote 60 seconds a night to old-fashioned public service announcements, broadcasters are making a big mistake. They have picked a ridiculous fight that will win them no friends and could cost them dearly in Congress.

The background here is simple: Over the past decade, the TV networks and local stations have beefed up heavily on their own on-air promotions at the cost of outside PSAs. To some extent they replaced these PSAs with public service-type messages from their paying advertisers and began using generic pro-social messages featuring network TV stars, thereby promoting their own shows while claiming credit for "public service."

The upshot of all this, according to one recent report, is that even as the onslaught of network on-air promos has climbed to 12 minutes a night during prime time, the amount devoted to old-fashioned PSAs has dropped to less than 30 prime-time seconds a night.

In a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters last month, Ad Council Chairman Alex Kroll begged broadcasters for just one minute a night for messages that focus on inspiring help for inner-city kids. He made his case altruistically, based on the long-term benefit to marketers of helping these kids, but he might have been more effective if he had framed his message in stark political terms.

The NAB, after all, is involved in intensive lobbying in Washington to keep hold of both its old analog spectrum and its gift from the public of new multi billion-dollar digital spectrum; to keep from having a family viewing hour established; to keep from having to give away lots of free time to political candidates and much more.

In the midst of all these delicate negotiations, how can the NAB seriously propose that broadcasters thumb their nose at running traditional, non-marketing-driven PSAs? Every viewer (and legislator) can see that prime-time is stuffed with self-serving promotions. Is there nowhere in this enormous clutter that an actual non-commercial public service announcement might fit?

Of course there is. This is just greed at work in an unusually obvious way. What's amazing is how much broadcasters are willing to risk in Congress over this. What other business would jeopardize its entire future just to avoid doing 60 seconds of charity work? □