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## To Catch A Predator, Call A Cop

By DAVID FINKELHOR

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"What are you doing here?" asks NBC's Chris Hansen, as he steps into the room to confront would-be child molesters in the fabulously successful "To Catch a Predator" series. But as the show now takes its extended national tour into Florida, having left Texas with one suspect dead and one district attorney fuming, perhaps it is time to ask Hansen and his colleagues the same question.

Is it really a good idea to have a TV program conduct undercover sex crime investigations? Simple as it may seem to impersonate a 13-year-old online and attract a swarm of felons, undercover police work in this field is a highly technical business. It requires knowledge of the legalities concerning entrapment and the admissibility of evidence.

It requires awareness of complex state laws around sexual solicitations of minors. It merits professional understanding about the dynamics of sex offenders, and appreciation of the possible dangers to innocent neighbors, show staff and the suspects themselves. The Texas DA believes that if local police had not been catering to "Dateline's" cameras and entertainment priorities, they might have averted the suicide.

A large corps of law enforcement professionals, the Internet Crimes Against Children Task Forces, funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, are engaged in hundreds of these undercover investigations around the country. They are well-trained specialists with detailed protocols to handle these cases. Most of them want nothing to do with "To Catch a Predator."

Is the program promoting vigilantism? We all want to be crime fighters. You can bet that dozens of folks in living rooms and office suites are now plotting sequels to this new reality TV blockbuster.

But law enforcement should not be a free enterprise zone, where any combination of public citizen and media enterprise can stake out a claim. It is the quintessential function of government, because there are risks to our freedoms if this function is abused, and we want careful legal structures and public accountability to govern its operation.

Is it a good idea to make a public spectacle out of vengeance and humiliation? Part of what attracts the millions of viewers to this show is a chance to see a person completely and totally humiliated, as their dirty little sexual secret is exposed to the judgment of the whole world. It is a degradation ceremony we only tolerate against someone we judge to be completely beyond any claim to any decency or compassion, which is how we are entitled to feel about would-be child molesters in the logic of the program.

People guilty of committing these acts should be punished. However, this massive and irrevocable punishment is being meted out well before the careful deliberation of the justice system has had a chance to deliver its verdict.

But even if these offenders were certifiably guilty, is public humiliation the proper punishment? There is no question that millions of Americans would tune in to watch murderers being put to death in Texas or Florida. It used to be argued that such public executions were a strong deterrent against crime. But they were discontinued in the United States after 1936 in part out of the sense that it is not consistent with our values and in the public interest to mobilize outpourings of vengeance and to exacerbate the strong primal passions that swirl around heinous crimes. The public humiliation of sex offenders especially in the absence of any legal process belongs in the same historical dustbin.

Chris Hansen and "Dateline" have performed an undeniable public service in alerting the world to the dangers that lurk on the Internet and the need for energetic efforts to police and protect in this domain. But this show should not become an institution. It is time to declare their mission accomplished and turn the job over to the professionals.

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