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TV Hoist by Own Sendup: Pedophilia Is Explosive

By SARAH LYALL

LONDON, Aug. 2 — The complaints started pouring in as soon as the television program, intended to lampoon what its creators view as public hysteria about pedophilia, began.

Some viewers objected to the program's use of vulgar language and provocative imagery. Some didn't appreciate the humor, as when the narrator was shown putting his children to bed in a filing cabinet to shield them from sexual predators ("Are your children safe?" he asked. "Mine are.") Others simply found the whole thing offensive, no two ways about it.

Whatever the reason, the broadcast of the program, an episode of the satirical series "Brass Eye," has provoked a furor of unusual proportion in a country that always relishes a good public fight about morality and censorship.

Almost 3,000 people have lodged official complaints against it, more than for any television broadcast before, and newspaper columns have been filled with outraged letters. The Home Secretary has denounced it, as has a flotilla of other government officials, including a spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair.

And The Daily Mail has found a new target of hate: "Brass Eye," or, as the conservative paper put it, "the sickest TV program ever."

"It was the most grievous breach of taste I have ever witnessed on TV," wrote a Mail columnist, Simon Heffer, "and a program that only a

small percentage of the psychologically sick could have found enjoyable."

The reason for the vitriol was just 30 minutes long and shown late last Thursday on Channel 4, a commercial station that is one of the five non-cable channels on British television. It was fashioned as a spoof public-affairs program about the evils of pedophilia, but its real aim, its creators

One newspaper's reaction: 'The sickest TV program ever.'

said, was to lampoon the vigilantism that often greets the subject here.

Last year, for instance, The News of the World, a raucous Sunday newspaper, embarked on a campaign to "name and shame" sex offenders who had been released from prison. The campaign led to lynch-mob attacks, firebombings and rioting in at least 11 communities, with vigilantes in some cases attacking people who looked like the men pictured or who had been incorrectly identified as past offenders. In one town, the home of a pediatrician was attacked when anti-pedophile campaigners got their spelling confused.

In a statement, Channel 4 said that

it was sorry if "Brass Eye" had caused offense, but that Chris Morris, one of a group of socially critical comics in Britain and the man responsible for the program, had not meant to make fun of pedophilia as such.

"His target was the dangerous sensationalism and exploitation that can characterize media coverage of the issue," Channel 4 said, adding that it was part of its responsibility "to ask hard questions about the way society and the media deal with its most difficult problems."

Fast-paced, with jangly music and quick cuts from image to image, "Brass Eye" has drawn critical public attention before. (In a previous episode, for example, Mr. Morris tricked members of Parliament and animal-rights campaigners into denouncing a new drug called "cake.")

This time, Mr. Morris played a news anchor presenting a series of pedophilia-related news items. After an introduction in which parents were urged to herd their children into stadiums for safety from molesters, a mob outside a fictional prison was shown seizing a newly released sex offender, strapping him to an enormous flammable phallus, and setting it on fire.

In several scenes, fake pedophiles were shown ogling children. And in a sequence that was vintage Morris, a number of celebrities were presented with fictional scenarios about the pedophile problem, and somehow persuaded against all common sense that the scenarios were real ones.

"Using an area of the Internet the size of Ireland, pedophiles can make your keyboard release toxic vapors that can make you more suggestible," said Syd Rapson, a Labor member of Parliament. Playing an anti-pedophile recording by the made-up rock group Smash My Brother's Face In, he looked at the camera and said, "If you listen to this at night, behavioral psychology tells us that in the morning you'll be 17.8 percent safer."

Gary Lineker, a soccer star, and a popular disc jockey, Dr. Fox, were also shown delivering fictional messages about pedophiles.

The celebrities were furious and said they had been misled. "I was approached to participate in a video which would be released to schools and young people to advise them on the dangers of the Internet and its misuse by pedophiles," Mr. Rapson told Radio 4. "We had to use gobble-dygook language. They said that unless you used some of their terminology, young people wouldn't take it as credible."

Beverley Hughes, the child protection minister, said even though she had not seen the entire program, on account of being too disgusted, she had read about it and found it "unspeakably sick." And Tessa Jowell, the culture minister, said she would review the public complaint process against objectionable television shows.

But then the backlash against the opposition began. The Independent Television Commission, which re-



Chris Morris, a socially critical comic, is dodging brickbats in Britain. He's the man behind the television lampoon of pedophilia fears.

ceived 962 complaints about the program (Channel 4 got more than 2,000; the Metropolitan Police got some, too), said that 411 calls had come in to support the program. A disparate group of free-speech advocates — including the Conservative opposition — denounced the specter of government censorship of television, filling up another set of newspaper columns with pro-"Brass Eye" letters and editorials.

What happens next is in the hands of the Independent Television Commission, the body that sets standards for the industry and reviews public complaints. If it finds that Channel 4 breached the industry code on taste

and decency, for instance, it can issue a public condemnation or impose a fine on the station.

Meanwhile, the furor continues, and it seems hard to escape the conclusion that what Mr. Morris said were his basic points — that the subject of pedophilia causes upset that can lead to hysteria, and that famous people have a habit of denouncing things without knowing much about them — have been well borne out.

"How Mr. Morris must be laughing," Harry Owen of Horley, Surrey, wrote in a letter to The Daily Telegraph. "Perhaps Channel 4, instead of apologizing, should have simply said, 'We rest our case.'"