

Franken's Porn-O-Rama Is No Satire

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In the last few months, I've gotten a flood of emails from readers suggesting stories about Al Franken and his follies. This vein could be a rich one to mine, given Franken's years of motor-mouthing on Saturday Night Live and Air America Radio, and his collisions with taxing authorities across the country.

But I've let the Franken stories blow by, overwhelmed by their number. However, things changed last week when Franken's 2000 Playboy article -- "Porn-O-Rama" -- got stuck in my e-mail filter.

I know what you're thinking: Kersten's got one of those prudish, Jerry Falwell-style family filters designed to snare anything that would raise a slight pink on your grandmother's cheeks. Not so. Mine seems to screen primarily ads for male enhancement products and overly creative animal films.

Why then did my e-mail filter crash closed on Porn-O-Rama?

In his Playboy romp, Franken fantasized about oral sex delivered by a machine, as well as sex with combinations of females who fit the Playboy view of women as big-breasted automatons, panting at the prospect of servicing the likes of Franken. That's why they call it fantasy, I guess.

I wonder how many DFL officials will be able to pull Porn-O-Rama through their Internet filters and read it before the party endorses its candidate for U.S. Senate this weekend. I wonder, too, whether folks like Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Attorney General Lori Swanson, whose campaigns took money in 2006 from Franken's so-called Midwest Values PAC (yes, you read that right) will feel compelled to return those bucks on truth-in-advertising grounds.

Last week, spokesman Andy Barr articulated the Franken campaign's official defense as follows: "Al understands, and the people of Minnesota understand, the difference between what a satirist does and what a senator does." Key Democrats like Reps. Betty McCollum, Tim Walz and Keith Ellison already have rejected Camp Franken's attempt to explain away Al's excellent adventures in Playboyland. Will others follow?

We've often heard Franken described as a "satirist." The label makes him sound respectable, even sophisticated. We associate satire with some of literature's greatest names. If applicable, the term explains and excuses Franken's work, placing it squarely in the literary mainstream.

Does Franken qualify as a satirist?

To find out, I pored over dictionaries and literary compendia. Webster's online dictionary was typical. It defined satire as "trenchant wit, irony or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly."

In other words, satire is serious business. A satirist mocks a problematic situation in order to bring it to public attention, correct or reform it. He blends comedy and censure in the service of mankind's improvement.

Take Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," perhaps the most famous satire in the English language. In this work, Swift, an eighteenth century Irishman, suggested that poverty-stricken Irish families could survive by selling their numerous children to wealthy landlords to eat. Swift's grim humor is a vehicle for what he called his "savage indignation" at England's grievous injustice regarding the Irish.

The Greek dramatist Aristophanes used a lighter touch in his classic satire, "Lysistrata." In this ribald play, the women of Sparta and Athens withhold sex from their husbands for a larger purpose: to bring an end to the Peloponnesian War.

Porn-O-Rama is no satire. Franken doesn't condemn Hugh Hefner's pornographic world -- he embraces it. The piece is a celebration of the Playboy philosophy, laced with effusions about the glories of Internet porn.

Today, parents and teachers are struggling to prevent such smut from overwhelming our culture. Ellison reacted to Franken's lewd Porn-O-Rama joke about his sixth-grade son's supposed report on bestiality by saying, "I have to ask myself, can I explain it to my 11-year-old daughter? I'd have considerable difficulty."

How about Barr's second point -- that Minnesotans will "understand" that Franken's conduct as a "satirist" is irrelevant to his potential conduct as a senator?

While a man's sense of humor is only one part of his personality, it tells us something essential about him -- it bears the DNA of his character, you might say. That's why you would be surprised to learn, for example, that a friend you believed to be a devoted father and husband -- respectful of his wife and a model for his children -- was guffawing publicly about his fantasies of sex with other women.

We understand instinctively that the lives of real human beings cannot be separated into compartments.