

I. Introduction

The passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 signaled the beginning of a new era in the relationship between American families and television. For the first time, parents would be empowered with the knowledge and the tool that would enable them to exercise better control over their children's television viewing. The v-chip, working in conjunction with a ratings system, would facilitate the blocking of programs parents find inappropriate for their children. Championed by children's advocates and policy makers from both sides of the aisle, the v-chip was destined to forever change the way children view television.

Children Now is a non-partisan, independent voice for America's children. Using innovative research and communications strategies, Children Now promotes pioneering solutions to problems facing America's children. The Children & the Media Program was established at Children Now in 1993 to improve the quality of news and entertainment media both for and about children.

Children Now's commitment to children and families led to its active involvement in the policy debate surrounding the passage of the v-chip legislation. Since then, Children Now has worked diligently to ensure that the television ratings serve the interests of America's families.

II. Research Findings on Children and the Media

A vast body of research has established a causal link between televised violence and aggressive behavior. By the time most children leave elementary school, they have seen approximately 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other acts of violence on television.¹ The v-chip legislation was originally inspired by the growing alarm engendered by these statistics about the amount of media violence children are exposed to and its impact.

To contribute to this knowledge base, Children Now has conducted several original studies. The findings support the need for a ratings system that gives parents full information about television program content. Last December, Children Now released

¹ *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*, University of Nebraska Press, 1992, p.54

“Sex, Kids and the Family Hour” a ground-breaking content study that examined the changes in the amount and nature of sexual content found in programs broadcast during the traditional 8-9 PM “family hour.” The study found that 61% of today’s family hour programs contain sexual behavior, up from 48% in 1986 and only 26% in 1976. Unfortunately, televised messages about the risks and responsibilities of sex have not kept pace with its depiction in the family hour. In 1996, a mere 9% of the scenes that included sexual content were accompanied by the mention of issues such as contraception, abstinence, abortion, AIDS or sexually transmitted diseases. Furthermore, in the cases where actual sexual intercourse was depicted, there were no discussions of risks and responsibilities--nor were any precautions taken.

As a companion piece to the content study, Children Now conducted a nationwide poll of parents to find out how they feel about the messages television sends. Seventy-one percent (71%) reported that they are concerned about the amount of sex on TV. Similarly, 75% expressed concern about the amount of violence on television.

These findings confirm that parents harbor serious reservations about the material their children are exposed to through television. But how do children feel about what they see on TV? In Children Now’s continuing mission to act as a conduit for children’s voices, a 1995 Children Now poll asked kids about the values television communicates to them. In *“Sending Signals: Kids Speak out About Values in the Media,”* 66% of the kids polled said that they think their peers are influenced by what they see on TV. Sixty-two percent said that sex on TV and in movies influences kids to have sex when they are too young. Furthermore, the kids reported that 55% of them usually watch TV alone or with friends and 54% have television sets in their rooms.

These data and numerous national polls illuminate why parents seek more information about television programs. The v-chip would provide parents with the means to supervise their children’s exposure to sex, violence and adult language when they are unable to be there to change the channel or turn off the television themselves. For parents who work outside the home, the v-chip would be an important tool. But its success is completely dependent upon how well the ratings system is designed.

III. The Nation's Experts Agree: Ratings Should Tell Parents the Content of Television Programs

Soon after the television industry agreed to develop a voluntary system for rating television programs, Children Now commissioned a survey of eighteen of the nation's leading experts on the relationship between the media and children. The survey asked them how a ratings system should be designed to maximize its benefit to families. Overwhelmingly, the experts agreed that an optimal ratings system would tell parents the type of content that a program contains. Children Now shared the results of this survey with the industry committee charged with developing the ratings. Unfortunately, the industry chose to ignore this advice--and that of many other advocates, academics, and children's experts--and instead based their ratings system upon age categories.

Rather than providing parents with the information about the content of programs and allowing them to decide whether such material is consistent with their values and suitable for their children, the industry's system leaves those judgments to network executives. This "one rating fits all" approach effectively limits the control that parents can exercise over TV viewing by making them dependent upon subjective, and largely unqualified, assessments of the age-appropriateness of television programs.

In contrast, a ratings system based upon program content would tell parents the amount and intensity of sex, violence and language in a program before it aired. Once the v-chip is available, parents would be able to set it to block out those programs whose content exceeds the levels they are willing to have their children watch. Thus, parents who particularly object to violence, but who are less concerned with adult language, would be able to program their v-chip to make that distinction. Under the industry's system such a distinction would not be possible.

IV. The Industry's System: Failing in Prime Time

Since the ratings went into effect on January 1, approximately two-thirds of all prime time programming has been rated 'TV-PG'. Unfortunately, the 'TV-PG' rating does not give parents the information they need: specific information about program content.

For the February 27th Senate Commerce Committee hearing on the television ratings system, Children Now produced a videotape that illustrates the wide range of material

encompassed by the 'TV-PG' rating. The industry states that, "TV-PG *may* contain infrequent coarse language, limited violence, some suggestive sexual dialogue and situations." Using examples from prime time programs broadcast on CBS, ABC, Fox, and NBC, the tape showed what some of these programs *did* contain. The clips were illuminating. For example, the January 29th episode of *NewsRadio* found the owner of the radio station complaining, "I'm tired of getting my ass sued every time some damn employee pinches some other damn employee's ass." The February 11th episode of *Spin City* found a woman matter-of-factly declaring to a man she had just met, "You're a man, I'm a woman, it's Valentine's Day--there's no reason we shouldn't have sex." But most disturbing was a January 23rd episode of *NY Undercover* in which a little boy is gunned down during a robbery. Minutes later, a vigilante slashes the throat of one of the robbers.

All three programs were rated 'PG,' the first presumably due to its "infrequent coarse language," the second for its "sexual dialogue" and the third for its inclusion of "limited violence." In its defense, the industry might argue that the *NY Undercover* episode should have received a stronger rating (i.e. TV-14). However, Children Now's position is that bumping programs up from 'TV-PG' to 'TV-14' does not rectify the central problem with the ratings system. Poll after poll shows that parents seek basic information about a program's content: how much violence, sex or adult language does it contain? 'TV-PG' masks the answer for the majority of prime time programming. Without specific content information, parents using the v-chip would have no choice but to block out the vast majority of prime time programs. Such a system fails to serve anyone's interests--parents, broadcasters or advertisers.

The irony in all of this is that the industry's system already includes content descriptors for how much sex, violence and language is in a program. When networks evaluate their programs in order to assign a rating, they have to make determinations about content. But once they assess the kind of content a program includes, they keep that information from parents. Instead, they attach a rating that says the show *may* contain sexual content or *may* contain intense violence, but they never tell what it *does* contain. Why not tell parents?

V. The Industry Knows Whether Programs Contain Violence, Sex or Language: Why Not Tell Parents?

In answer to the essential issue -- why not tell parents? -- the industry raises several objections.

First, the industry says that a content-based ratings system won't work because it would be too complicated for parents to use. But for the past ten years, HBO and Showtime have used very specific content indicators to rate each feature film and original program they air. These stations indicate that their subscribers appreciate the system and don't find it confusing at all. Used with the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings where applicable, the cable channels' content indicators such as 'BN' (brief nudity) and 'MV' (mild violence) tell parents exactly what to expect in the upcoming program. Why should the rest of the television industry utilize a ratings system that is considerably less informative?

Next, the industry argues that a content-based system could not work with the v-chip. But according to the Telecommunications Act, the FCC must adopt technical standards for the v-chip that ensure its capacity to work with whatever ratings system is implemented. The v-chip is not tied to any ratings system now--the industry's or any other. It is flexible. Children Now urges that as the FCC considers the technical specifications for the v-chip, it maximizes the technology's future flexibility. Ultimately, the v-chip must be designed to fit the ratings-- not the other way around.

Then the industry claims that their system already includes content. They say that each age category is linked to specific levels of violence, sex and language. But we've seen that their levels are not specific at all. They don't tell parents why a program was rated the way it was, preventing parents from making the very decision the Telecommunications Act empowered them to make. Their own system already requires the industry to determine a program's content--all they have to do is go a step further and tell parents what they found.

So, then they say that their system has only been in place for 90 days and it should be given a chance to demonstrate that it can work. But this argument assumes that the *misapplication* of ratings is the primary problem with the industry's system. The current ratings are inadequate because they are based upon age rather than content--not because

they may have occasionally been incorrectly applied during the first few months. The fundamental issue-- that the industry's system does not provide parents with the information they need to make viewing decisions for their children-- is not going to change with time.

Next, they contend that a content-based system would obscure the differences between programs. They say that under such a system, an episode of the highly regarded *Touched by an Angel* that included hugging and kissing would get the same 'S' label as the sex-laden thriller *Basic Instinct*. But this is a simplistic argument. There are many different ways that content information could be conveyed. Conceivably, the industry could add content labels to their existing system, so that *Basic Instinct* would be labeled 'M-S,' indicating that it is appropriate for mature audiences only and contains the "explicit sexual content" that the current 'TV-M' rating connotes. Clearly most parents would not want their young children to watch it. On the other hand, a 'PG-S' rating for *Touched by an Angel* would simply alert parent to the fact that a particular episode of the usually family-friendly show includes some "suggestive sexual situations" from which they might choose to shield their children. Taking into account their own values and their own children's development, parents would be the final arbiters.

Then the industry argues that their system is modeled after the Motion Picture Association of America's movie ratings system--a system parents have loved for the past 27 years. But recent polls have shown that parents would prefer a content-based television ratings system. In two separate surveys, approximately 80%² of parents favored content ratings while a third poll found that 61%³ of parents felt that the MPAA ratings don't give them enough information to know whether movies are appropriate for their children. In the most recent poll of parents, 69%⁴ were in favor of a ratings system that would assign TV programs two ratings--one for violence and one for sexual content.

Finally, the industry says that newspapers won't print lengthier ratings. But thirty-six of the nation's major newspapers published editorials criticizing the industry's proposal and calling instead for a content-based system. Children Now believes that it is safe to

² Media Studies Center survey, released December 12, 1996, reporting that 79% of parents with children prefer a ratings system that gives details about content over an age-based system; National PTA/Institute for Mental Health Initiatives poll of parents, released November 12, 1996, reporting that 80% of parents prefer a system that provides separate ratings for violence, sex and adult language rather than by age group.

³ National Institute on Media and the Family, released February 12, 1997.

⁴ *New York Times*, February 22, 1997.

assume that since these papers favor content ratings, they would be willing to print them in their television guides. Moreover, each year newspapers and *TV Guide* find room to print additional information about television programs⁵. In addition, a system that describes content does not have to take up any more room than the current system. But above all it is important to remember that the ratings system is not just for parents to read in the newspapers -- it is specifically for use with the v-chip which is able to accommodate content advisories.

The question remains: **Why won't the industry tell parents which type of content television programs contain?** It's not because it's too complicated for parents, and it's not because it won't work with the v-chip, and it's not because they need more time to refine it, and it's not because it can't be designed to differentiate the intensity of content, and it's not because parents love the system as it is now, and it's not because newspapers won't print it. The question remains: Why won't the industry tell parents which type of content television programs contain?

VI. A Simple Change for the Industry, A Huge Benefit for Parents

Throughout the ratings debate, Children Now has maintained that the industry should be responsible for developing the ratings system. Although the industry's current ratings system fails to meet the needs of families, it could be made much more useful to parents with a simple--yet significant--change.

In order to assign a rating, networks already analyze each program's content. Since they know the kind of content a program includes, all they need do now is tell parents the basis of their rating. By building upon the work they are already doing and adding content indicators, the ratings would help parents make more informed judgments as they guide their children's television viewing.

Children Now believes that the FCC should defer its final decision on the acceptability of the industry's system until after a 10 month trial period during which a content-based ratings system would also be tested. The FCC should review the results of an

⁵ *TV Guide* and some newspapers display: the program title; a 'CC' for closed captioning; an 'R' if it is a repeat; program length; the VCR programming code with anywhere from 3-8 numbers; a description of the episode; and any guest stars appearing that day.

independent evaluation of *both* systems before deciding whether to accept or reject the industry's ratings system.

At the Senate hearing, the industry representatives indicated that they were open to making changes to their system. Children Now is hopeful that they will listen to parents' wishes and heed the expert's advice and agree to tell parents whether programs contain violence, sex, adult language or some combination thereof. If at the end of the trial period they steadfastly refuse to do so, the FCC has no alternative but to declare the current ratings system "unacceptable."

Making Television Ratings Work for

CHILDREN

and

FAMILIES

The Perspective of Children's Experts



A Children Now Report
June, 1996

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About Children Now

Children Now is a nonpartisan, independent voice for America's children. Through innovative research and communications strategies, we promote pioneering solutions to improve the lives of America's children. Our programs reach parents, lawmakers, concerned citizens, and business, media and community leaders, building partnerships to affect positive change. Focusing particular attention on children who are poor or at-risk, our mission is to improve conditions for all children by making them the top priority across the nation.

The Children & the Media Program was established at Children Now in 1993. The goal of the program is to improve the quality of news and entertainment media both for and about children. We work to accomplish that goal through outreach to members of the media industry, independent research, and development of public policy.

Acknowledgments

This report is a product of the Children & the Media Program of Children Now. The Children & the Media Program is made possible by the generous financial support of The Carnegie Corporation of New York, an anonymous donor, the Miriam and Peter Haas Fund, and the Gap Foundation. Substantial support for specific efforts of the Children & the Media Program is also provided by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Luke B. Hancock Foundation. We are extremely grateful to each of these donors for their generosity and their commitment. Our contributors are not responsible for the statements or views expressed in this report.

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I. Introduction

By this time next year, the television industry of the United States will have adopted a system for rating television programming. What that system looks like, and how well it serves the interests of children and families, is of tremendous importance. Yet so far in the debate over the design of that system, the voices of children's advocates and the experts who know the most about the effects of television on young people have not been heard.

This report presents the results of a comprehensive survey of expert opinion from the nation's leading specialists on children and television. It is offered to the members of the television industry who are developing the rating system, for their consideration as they struggle with the complexities of designing and implementing TV ratings.

In April, 1996, Children Now commissioned detailed surveys of eighteen of the top communications and children's media experts from across the country. Our participants include the deans of two major schools of communication, academics who are recognized as the leading experts in their field, the authors of numerous studies on the impact of media on children, and advocates who have worked on issues concerning children and the media. Each survey has been carefully reviewed and analyzed, and this report is offered as a summary of those interviews, focusing on areas of consensus and highlighting various priorities and themes that emerged.

Children Now was a strong supporter of the v-chip legislation. We were very pleased when representatives of the television industry decided to voluntarily develop a television rating system to accompany the v-chip, and we commend them for taking this important step.

It will be an enormous challenge to develop a rating system that is practical, fully safeguards artistic freedom, and works to serve the interests of children and families. Children Now

Summary of Recommendations

1. Children's cartoons should be rated. Other than sports and hard news, all television programming should be rated, including "reality" programs.
2. The rating system should not simply designate the age-appropriateness of the programming, as the current movie ratings do, but should also include ratings for specific categories of content such as violence, sexual content, and adult language. This will maximize the amount of information available to parents, allowing them to make their own choices about what they believe is appropriate for their children.
3. Any age-based ratings that are used need to start well before the movie system's PG13, and should be more narrowly targeted for younger children.
4. For children, a program's "scariness" is a factor that should be incorporated into the rating system, perhaps in the violence category.
5. How the rating system is explained to parents is critical. The industry should invest in an expansive public education campaign and should monitor parents' use of the system. The system should be evaluated after an introductory testing period and, if necessary, revisions should be made in the years ahead to maximize parental use of the system.
6. Unlike the current movie rating system, the ratings given to television programs watched by children should be based on scientific information available from the study of child development, rather than on perceived parental norms.

believes that television industry representatives are the most appropriate group to take on this challenge and design a rating system. We also believe it makes great sense for those industry representatives to seek a wide range of input, especially from those who have spent a lifetime devoted to studying children and media. This report is offered to them in that spirit.

In our interviews, we found strong consensus on several key issues. However, the report that follows does not necessarily reflect the views of any single individual who participated in our survey. Several of those we surveyed had not been supporters of the v-chip or of a rating system for TV. In preparing this report, we selected the issues our respondents considered the highest priorities, and focused on areas where there was the closest consensus. Where there was disagreement, it has been duly noted in the report.

II. The Goals of a Television Rating System

Virtually every one of our experts agreed that the goal of rating television programs should be to provide parents with as much information as possible, in as simple and understandable a format as possible. How the system can maximize information and remain simple and understandable at the same time is where the challenge lies.

Karen Jaffe, Executive Director of KIDSNET, echoed many respondents when she noted that "The goal of the v-chip is to limit children's exposure to inappropriate programming. The v-chip and its rating system are another tool for parents to help make them more aware that there are choices and to give them a way to make these choices." University of Wisconsin Professor Joanne Cantor noted that the goal is to "give parents information about the content of programs, so they can choose what is appropriate for their child." Like Professor Cantor, many respondents stressed that providing parents with as much information about tele-

The following experts and advocates were interviewed for this report:

Gordon Berry, Professor, UCLA Graduate School of Education
Joanne Cantor, Professor, Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin

Peggy Charren, Founder, Action For Children's Television
Jeffrey Cole, Director, UCLA Center for Communication Policy

Aimee Dorr, Professor, UCLA Graduate School of Education
George Gerbner, Professor and Dean Emeritus, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

James Hamilton, Director, Duke Program on Violence and the Media, Duke University

Aletha Huston, Professor, Department of Human Development, University of Kansas

Karen Jaffe, Executive Director, KIDSNET

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Dean, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

David Kleeman, Executive Director, American Center for Children's Television

Dale Kunkel, Professor, Department of Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara

Newton Minow, former Chairman, Federal Communications Commission

Kathryn Montgomery, President, Center for Media Education

Arthur Pober, Executive Director, Entertainment Software Rating Board

Elizabeth Thoman, Executive Director, Center for Media Literacy

Ellen Wartella, Dean, College of Communication, University of Texas, Austin

Barbara Wilson, Professor, Department of Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara

vision content as possible should be the top priority, allowing the parents themselves to determine what is appropriate for their children.

Several of our experts stressed the point that the v-chip and the rating system should not be used to limit the availability of certain types of programming on television, but rather to provide greater information about that programming. The Director of the Entertainment Software Rating Board, Arthur Pober, put it clearly: "The role of ratings is not to censor or dictate taste, the role is to give objective descriptive information." David Kleeman, executive director of the American Center for Children's Television, also stressed this point. "I think a rating system needs to acknowledge very clearly that not all shows are meant for children," he argued. "It needs to do that in a neutral way so that advertisers that choose to advertise on programs meant for adults, such as *NYPD Blue* or *Law & Order*, are not stigmatized or targeted for boycotts and protests. There needs to be risk-taking for adults," he continued. "If we take the values away from the ratings, so we're not saying 'This program is indecent or obscene,' but rather 'this program is not meant for children,' then it seems to me we would take away the stigma."

Our survey group also universally recognized that television ratings will not in and of themselves solve the problem of the negative impact of television violence and sexual content on children. All agreed that parents, programmers and advertisers will not be absolved of their responsibilities once the v-chip is in place — we will all have to continue to do our part to maximize the positive contributions of television and minimize the negative. As one respondent put it, "The biggest message I want to send is that ratings are not the answer to all of our concerns about TV content."

The group also noted that the v-chip and its accompanying rating system will do nothing about what many of them perceive to be missing from commercial broadcast television today — a solid supply of high quality, entertaining pro-social or educational programming for children.

III. Discussion of Key Recommendations

1. Children's cartoons should be rated. Other than sports and hard news, all television programming should be rated, including "reality" programs.

One of the strongest points our group of experts made was that it is vital that all children's programs be rated, including cartoons.

Kathryn Montgomery, President of the Center for Media Education, noted that "Children's television must be given the same serious attention as prime time, and not treated as a separate category where ratings don't apply, or where ratings are softer." The vast majority of our experts felt strongly that violence in children's cartoons needed to be flagged for parents. Dale Kunkel, Professor of Communication at the University of California Santa Barbara, explained that "One of the contextual elements that is important in shaping the effect of violence on the audience is the viewer's perceived reality of that action. To the young child, everything on television is 'real.' Therefore you cannot draw the conclusion that cartoon violence is acceptable or excusable merely because it is presented in a fantasy setting or context. Cartoon violence or violence in fantasy settings can still pose significant risks of antisocial effects for child viewers, and therefore should be rated accordingly."

In fact, several respondents felt that cartoons were particularly important to rate. The former Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, George Gerbner, expressed strong concern. "The assumption that cartoons are less real than a drama is spurious," he noted. "The humor is a sugarcoating that makes it an easier pill to swallow. Cartoons are the worst offenders in the global market." Aletha Huston, Professor of Human Development at the University of Kansas, felt that rating cartoons would be especially helpful in informing parents. "One of the good things about such a rating system," she said, "would be to alert people to just how much violence there is in cartoons." And Peggy Charren, a longtime television activist and the founder of Action for Children's Television, told us that "As far as I am concerned, these ratings should mostly deal with cartoons. To help kids think it's funny to hurt someone is the worst message of all."

It should be noted that a handful of our experts disagreed with this assessment of the importance of rating cartoons, and felt that rating reality programs would be more important. One professor noted that "violence portrayed as realistic has been shown to be more harmful to children in terms of their aggressive behavior." David Kleeman noted that "the kind of violence that is usually committed in cartoons will probably prove to be the kind that is less harmful to young children over the long term." And Gordon Berry, Professor of Communication at the University of California Los Angeles told us that "Real life violence tends to have a greater impact on the individual than fantasy violence does. But we have to be careful about violence in any form, in any genre."

Our experts did agree that for children old enough to distinguish between the two, realistic portrayals

of violence pose a greater danger than fantasy violence. For this reason, several of them made the strong point that reality programs on TV should also be rated. On balance, the respondents agreed with the industry's assessment that sports and hard news should be exempted from the rating system. There was deep concern about the impact that graphic, realistic violence on the news has on children, but our experts recognized that mitigating concerns argued against rating hard news programs. But there was the sense that reality programming such as *Cops* should be rated, so that parents are aware of the often violent content of those shows and the powerful, negative impact such depictions can have on children.

2. The rating system should not simply designate the age-appropriateness of the programming, as the current movie ratings do, but should also include ratings for specific categories of content such as violence, sexual content, and adult language.

The vast majority of the experts we surveyed felt very strongly that in order to provide parents with sufficient information to make good choices for their children, the rating system needed to go beyond age-based categories to provide specific information about the content of the programs. Of the eighteen academics and advocates we interviewed, only one felt that age-based categories would be sufficient, and one argued for a system based exclusively on content. The remainder felt that a combination of age- and content-based categories was highly preferable.

One limitation of a system that is based exclusively on age categories, such as the MPAA movie-rating system, is that parents may not know why a show received a particular rating — was it the presence of

violence, of inappropriate language, or of sexual content? For example, adults who go to an R-rated movie don't know whether the movie received that rating because of sexual content, or because of a high level of violence. As Kathryn Montgomery noted, "I may love to see an R movie, but not a violent one. Provocative content is fine for me, but I don't want to sit through a blood bath. The R-rating doesn't tell me the level of violence."

Another argument against a system based exclusively on age is that it dictates to parents what is appropriate for their children, rather than offering them a choice of their own. The Food and Drug Administration label on a food product tells us the amount of various ingredients in that item — how much sugar, how many calories, how much fat and salt and vitamins. Consumers can then make their own choices about whether that product is appropriate for them. The TV rating system could work the same way. The Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, pointed out that "When we buy a candy bar we can read the label to check for ingredients which may provoke allergic reaction. We should be able to do the same with TV viewing."

Parental values vary widely. One parent may find adult language especially offensive, another may only want to protect their child from violence, and yet another may be especially concerned about sexual content. It may be that a network will assess a show as appropriate for most twelve-year-olds, but a parent with adequate information about that show's content may find it inappropriate for their own child. The University of Kansas' Aletha Huston agreed. "It seems to me that a rating system ought to be more value neutral," she argued. "One dilemma is that the thing I might consider most dangerous for my kids is not necessarily the thing you

might consider most dangerous for your kids. So I would rather see ratings that are more like reviews, based on certain categories of content, rather than some kind of scale going from Innocuous to Dangerous." UCLA's Gordon Berry echoed this concern: "What is appropriate in one household may not be appropriate in another."

Almost all of the experts we interviewed stressed the importance of rating programs for several categories of content, preferably including violence, sex and language. Most respondents felt that the MPAA movie-rating system gives greater weight to sexual than violent content, and expressed the hope that the television rating system would offer separate ratings for those categories.

UCLA Graduate School of Education Professor Aimee Dorr argued that the rating system should be "desegregated." "It needs to be easy for parents to know the basis for the rating for each particular element," she stated. "For example," she continued, "I don't care about nudity or language, but I do care about violence." Professor Barbara Wilson of the University of California Santa Barbara noted that "Parents want information about different types of portrayals, so a rating system shouldn't just look at violence, it should also consider sex and language."

While the vast majority of the experts we interviewed made the case for a rating system that combines age and content categories, one felt that for reasons of simplicity, the rating system should rely on age-based categories alone. He argued that the rating system should be "the most easily understood system, and that probably points to the MPAA system, one which parents are already familiar with, with some modifications."

Others disputed the notion that a rating system with multiple categories of content would be too complex for parents. One professor who has been looking at the issue of television ratings closely made the point that the v-chip technology minimizes the effort parents need to make. "With the v-chip," he noted, "you are basically asking parents to think about this once, when they set the rating, rather than having to continually process four different categories and multiple levels."

3. Any age-based ratings that are used need to start well before the movie system's PG13, and should be more narrowly targeted for younger children.

Virtually all of the experts and advocates we surveyed felt strongly that if the rating system developed by the industry includes categories based on age, there needs to be much greater precision in those categories than is currently used by the MPAA movie-rating system. As Jeffrey Cole, the Director of UCLA's Center for Communication Policy noted, "A seven year old rarely walks into the movie theater by himself, but a four year old, at the latest, certainly does turn on the TV." Professor Kunkel pointed out that the need for more categories in a television rating system than a movie rating system "is a function of the differences in medium. Television comes into the home and is easily accessible to children. In contrast, film is an out-of-home experience that children experience less frequently and under greater parental control."

Most of the experts argued for four or five categories for children under 17. These categories would be based on the stages of child development, which the academics we interviewed classified as pre-school, early elementary, late elementary, early teen, and teen.

4. For children, a program's "scariness" is a factor that should be incorporated into the rating system, perhaps in the violence category.

Several experts made the case that the MPAA movie-rating system does not take sufficient account of the impact on children of frightening forms of entertainment, whether they are violent or not. One mentioned problems encountered by parents who took young children to see *Jurassic Park*, unaware of how terrifying some of the scenes could be. Under the MPAA system, *Jurassic Park* received a PG rating. This professor noted that "scientific evidence makes it very clear that the kinds of depictions in that film pose some problems for very young children. A TV rating system should not make that same mistake."

5. How the rating system is explained to parents is critical. The industry should invest in an expansive public education campaign and should monitor parents' use of the system. The system should be evaluated after an introductory testing period and, if necessary, revisions should be made in the years ahead to maximize parental use of the system.

Many of those we spoke with felt that how the new rating system was communicated to the public was of the utmost importance. KIDSNET's Karen Jaffe, for example, advised that "It is critical that the definitions used in the rating system are disseminated to the public, so they know what they are and what they mean. The ratings should be published in as many places as possible so they have utility and validity." Elizabeth Thoman, director of the Center for Media Literacy, felt that this public education campaign could be a real benefit in raising parental awareness about television. "There needs to be an educational agenda," she noted, "a five to ten year process during which we use the rating system as a

springboard for discussing parenting and what is appropriate for children at different stages of their development." Professor Dale Kunkel advised that "The criteria to be employed in rating the programs must be publicly identified and disseminated, and the process by which the ratings are applied should be open to public scrutiny and evaluation."

The Entertainment Software Rating Board director, Arthur Pober, noted that when his organization began rating computer and video games, "We made tremendous outreach in retail outlets, we put posters in Wal-Mart, we did a lot of interviews, we produced brochures for dissemination with retailers, we worked with KIDSNET and the PTA, and we have an 800 number and a Web Site for parents to get more information on our system." Many of our respondents hoped that the television industry would adopt a similar public information campaign. Some suggested that the ratings be listed in *TV Guide*, in program promotions, and on air at the time of broadcast. Another argued that the rating symbol or symbols should be on screen throughout the programs.

6. Unlike the MPAA rating system, the ratings given to television programs watched by children should be based on scientific information available from the study of child development, rather than on perceived parental norms.

A number of the experts we spoke with felt strongly that the criteria for the ratings ought to be based on the knowledge we have gained from social science about the effects of television on children, rather than being based on perceptions of what parents will find appropriate. As Elizabeth Thoman noted, "The psychological development of the child should be used to determine and develop ratings." David

Kleeman also advised that "First and foremost, the rating system should reflect the best knowledge about child development. Whether you build it around age-based ratings or around describing content, the more you understand about how children perceive the world around them and what they are capable of understanding, the better it will serve young people and families." One leading academic noted that "a problem with the MPAA ratings right now is that they are based on what is offensive to parents rather than on what is harmful to children." Another echoed that concern, stating that the MPAA's movie ratings "focus on what is thought to be objectionable rather than what we know poses risks."

IV. Unresolved Issues

1. How a rating system could effectively take into account the context of violent and sexual content on television.

Most of our respondents felt that the context in which violence or sexual content is shown on television is very important, and hoped that a rating system would be able to take that context into account. However, there was less consensus on how a rating system could accomplish that.

Peggy Charren made the case for the importance of context. "The amount of violence is not a real measure of what you want your kids to see," she argued. "Don't take the violence out of MASH, which shows the trauma of war, and which many teenagers should see." The University of Pennsylvania's George Gerbner agreed: "A mechanical counting of violence is mindless. It makes no sense, provides no valid information to the viewer." Professor Barbara Wilson argued that "Rather than only taking ac-

count of how much sex or violence is in a show, there needs to be a focus on how the sex and violence is treated.”

Among the factors that the experts we spoke with felt were most important were the degree of graphicness and its intensity, whether the consequences of the actions in question are shown, whether the perpetrator of violence is treated as a hero, whether violent behavior is rewarded or punished, whether the content is integral or important to the story or just tacked on, and whether violence is glorified or made to seem exciting.

One person we spoke with suggested that “Perhaps there could be some way to indicate difficult material that is considered historical, informational or educational versus material that isn’t.”

On the other hand, a few of those we interviewed felt that no credible rating system can effectively make those value judgments. Professor Huston argued that the criteria for the rating system need to be as objective as possible. “The rating system needs to be based on something you can define as concretely as possible,” she told us, “so there would be agreement among a group of different people applying the rating system to the same show. When you get into judgments about literary value or social import, that is a realm of judgment that is very, very much more difficult to agree upon.”

Another professor pointed out that if the rating system doesn’t take into account the socially-redeeming nature of some violent depictions, that wouldn’t be a big problem since parents could rely on reviews and advertisements to determine if they may want to override their blocking device and let that programming into their homes.

This professor noted that “As a parent, you can override the v-chip very easily. So that with a movie like *Schindler’s List*, if you wanted your child to view it, that would be a simple process.” This professor also argued that the problem of a parent setting their v-chip at a level where it accidentally blocks a movie such as *Schindler’s List* would be an infrequent occurrence. “If you look at the violence on television,” he noted, “it is much more likely to bear a resemblance to *Rambo* than to *Schindler’s List*.”

2. How a rating system can help guide parents to the many high quality shows on TV they might like their children to see.

While the technology of the v-chip may not allow it, almost all of the experts we interviewed hoped that there was a way the rating system could help parents find good programs for their children that they might otherwise be unaware of. David Kleeman from the American Center for Children’s Television noted that “To my mind the most important thing is to guide parents to the programs appropriate for kids as much as to steer away or prevent kids from viewing programs that a family deems inappropriate. A rating system that could navigate parents through to find the things that are intended for young kids as well as blocking other shows would be a great service.” Dean Jamieson echoed this thought. “Parents need to know how to find good programming that is appropriate for their children,” she said. “The v-chip could increase viewership for a whole category of children’s programs that parents have trouble finding.”

Peggy Charren put it a little differently. “There is a need for another button that says *terrific program*,” she argued. “On the other hand, I don’t know how to get quality in [to the rating system], when one

person's idea of quality is not someone else's. Perhaps the rating system should come with a big warning that we are *not* dealing with quality, unless we can have an excellence button, determined by critics outside the industry and outside the government, perhaps a synthesis of professional opinion from mainstream newspaper and magazine critics."

Although the current blocking technology upon which the v-chip is based may not accommodate a way to direct parents toward good children's shows, there was the strong hope that somehow the technology could evolve to the point where it could offer that service.

V. Conclusion

All of the experts interviewed for this report recognized the difficult nature of the task facing the industry board that is developing the rating system. It was understood that many competing factors must be taken into account, including logistical concerns, the interests of writers and producers, and other industry needs. It was also understood that the industry board wishes to maintain a high degree of independence as it develops the rating system. However, all of our respondents emphasized that a high priority must be to ensure that the rating system that results is one which effectively serves the interests of children and families, and they expressed the hope that the industry board will seek and utilize the input of those most experienced with studying the impact of television on children.



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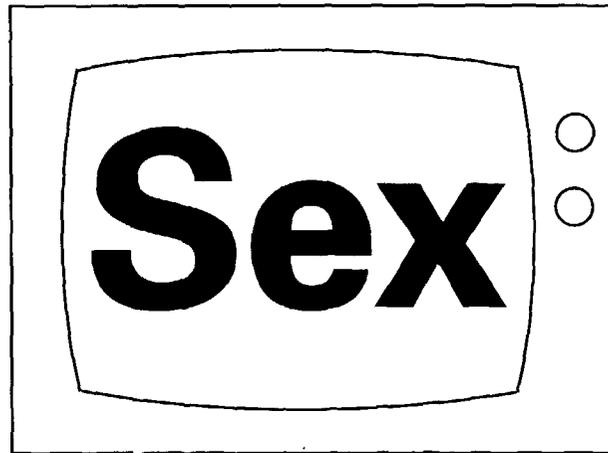
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