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**UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT MEMORANDUM
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION**

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DATE: June 6, 1997

TO: William F. Caton
Acting Secretary

FROM: JoAnn Lucanik
Chief, Policy & Rules Division
Cable Services Bureau

THROUGH: *JK* John Logan

RE: Video Programming Ratings (CS Docket No. 97-55)

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Federal Communications Commission
Office of Secretary

Please include the attached document in the public record of CS Docket No. 97-55:
"Report on a Classification System for Violence in Television Programming to be used in
conjunction with V-Chip Technology, Report to the Canadian Radio-television and
Telecommunications Commission from the Action Group on Violence on Television."

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

cc: Meredith Jones
Bill Johnson
Rick Chessen
Larry Walke

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Canadian Radio-television and
Telecommunications Commission

~~Conseil de la radiodiffusion et des
télécommunications canadiennes~~

CS 97-55

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Legal Counsel

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Federal Communications Commission
Office of Secretary

Canada

Report to the
Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission



from the

Action Group on Violence on Television

Report on a
Classification System
for
Violence in Television Programming
to be used in conjunction with
V-chip Technology

April 30, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

The Action Group on Violence on Television (AGVOT) is pleased to submit this report to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, in response to CRTC Public Notice 1996-36 *"Respecting Children - A Canadian Approach to Helping Families deal with Television Violence"*, and Public Notice 1996-134 *"Revised Timetable for the Implementation of the Television Program Classification System and V-chip Technology"*.

This report is the culmination of more than a year's work, representing an unprecedented co-operative undertaking strongly supported by all elements of the Canadian broadcast industry: over-the-air television services, both private and public, English and French; the cable industry; specialty and pay services; the independent film and television production industry, and the advertising industry.

In Public Notice 1996-36, the CRTC detailed its expectations of the Canadian broadcast and cable industries, in regards to "protecting children from the harmful effects of television violence while preserving freedom of expression for creators and choice for adult viewers".

The Commission said that by September 1996, Canadian broadcasters would be responsible for applying a classification system for violent content to children's programming, drama programs, "reality shows" (reality-based dramatic programs), and feature films, as well as promotional spots for any of these types of programs and advertisements for theatrical releases. At the same time, Canadian cable companies, and other distributors, would be required to make V-chip technology available to any subscriber who wanted it.

The CRTC assigned the responsibility of developing the rating system to AGVOT, with the direction that input should be sought from the public, programmers and distributors.

As it became apparent the September 1996 objective could not be met, on July 31, 1996 AGVOT requested additional time for the development of a classification system and the introduction of V-chip technology. The Commission requested a full report by September 6th, detailing the reasons for the extension request, and with firm commitments for a revised timeline. AGVOT complied as requested, and on October 4, 1996, the CRTC issued PN 1996-134, in which it established a new implementation date of September 1997 for program classification and V-chip rollout.

Over the following pages, AGVOT will describe how the Classification System which it is recommending to the Commission was developed. We will report on the consultative process, in which we sought the views of the Canadian public at large, and of organizations concerned about the issue of violence on television and its effects on children, on the proposed Classification System. We will also report on progress in resolving the technical issues AGVOT brought to the Commission's attention in its report of September 6, 1996, and which were part of the 1997 V-chip field trial, the largest of its kind in the world.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In Public Notice 1996-36, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission designated The Action Group on Violence on Television (AGVOT), to develop a simple, parent-friendly rating system for violence in television programming which would be compatible with V-chip technology.
- In a subsequent Public Notice, 1996-134, the CRTC approved AGVOT's request for a one year extension to the original implementation date of September 1996, based on the need for four major technical issues to be dealt with before the classification system and V-chip could be successfully launched.
- The Commission required AGVOT to submit its proposed classification for approval, by April 30, 1997.
- AGVOT is filing a seven level classification system for use by over-the-air broadcasters and specialty services, for violent content in children's programming, drama programs, "reality shows" (reality-based dramatic programs), and feature films that is informative, user-friendly and fulfils the mandate assigned to it by the CRTC.
- The broadcast industry is proposing to exceed the expectations of the CRTC, by implementing a comprehensive Canadian Television Rating System which will include other content elements in addition to violence, in order to assist parents in making informed viewing choices about which programs are suitable for their families.
- The comprehensive Canadian Television Rating System has been tested extensively across the country, and in the field in a five week V-chip trial. It is strongly supported by those who will benefit from it the most - Canadian families.
 - ❖91% of Canadians support a comprehensive television rating system, which rates programming mainly according to the level of violence, but which also takes into account the presence of coarse language, sexual content or nudity.
 - ❖84% of Canadians approve of the comprehensive Canadian Television Rating System designed by the Action Group on Violence on Television.
 - ❖80% of V-chip trial participants found the comprehensive Canadian Television Rating System easy to use and understand.
- Once the violence classification system is approved. Canadian programming services can begin classifying and encoding their programming, after which cable companies can begin to make available V-chip technology to those consumers who request it.

- AGVOT cautions the CRTC that the introduction of the rating system faces complicating factors over which the industry has little control.
 - ❖ There are still significant technical and software problems for both cable companies and programming services. For example, the programming encoding software cannot properly react to scheduling changes. It is not 'robust' and has proven to be susceptible to failure.
 - ❖ Reliable transmission of encoding data for promotional materials and movie advertisements is not currently possible.
 - ❖ Older generation compression and scrambling technology affects the ability of some specialty, pay and distant signal services to be encoded.
 - ❖ There are still too many rating systems to be compatible with North American standards for V-chip devices that will be incorporated into television sets.
 - ❖ Not all North American rating systems have been finalized, affecting the timetable for manufacture of the V-chip boxes.
 - ❖ Consumers who have tested the V-chip in retrofitted converters and more recently in standalone boxes show little interest in using the V-chip in those configurations. 64% of V-chip trial participants said they would prefer the blocking device be built into their television sets.
 - ❖ Canadians' attitudes have changed in the past two years. While 75% still are concerned about the level of violence on television, interest in technology to block programming has declined significantly from 66% per cent to 55% per cent.

- AGVOT submits the Canadian Television Rating System to the CRTC for its approval, and hopes to continue its co-operative approach with the Commission in working towards a successful introduction of this innovative means to protect Canadian children.

MEETING THE REQUIREMENTS OF CRTC PUBLIC NOTICE 1996-36	
CRTC Expectations	Industry Response
-the Commission designates AGVOT to develop a rating system, that is informative and readily understandable to the viewer, consisting of 4-6 levels	-the Action Group on Violence on Television has submitted a 7 level, (including exempt) easy-to-use and easy to understand system to the CRTC
-the system will rate the violence in the programs they (programming services) broadcast	-AGVOT has submitted a classification system which will rate violent content in programs -AGVOT intends to incorporate the ratings for violence into a comprehensive Canadian Television Rating System, which has violence as the most important content consideration when assigning a rating, but includes information about other content elements such as coarse language, nudity and sex
-the classification system will be compatible with V-chip technology	-the rating system tested by AGVOT in the 1997 V-chip trial works with V-chip technology
-development of the rating system should involve input from the public, programmers and distributors	-development of the classification system involved representatives from broadcasters, both private and public, specialty channels, the cable industry, and the independent production community -the rating system was evaluated by the public in a national public opinion survey; and nearly four hundred Canadian families who worked with it in their homes with V-chip technology -community groups, and professional associations concerned about violence on television were consulted
-the rating system should be informative and readily understandable to the viewer	-all research undertaken by AGVOT demonstrates the system is easily understood by families

The Action Group on Violence on Television - Report to the CRTC - April 30, 1997

CRTC Expectations	Industry Response
-the Canadian industry should" work with US counterparts to promote a common North American classification system that is user-friendly and effective"	-AGVOT established and maintained links with the US Implementation Committee -research conducted by AGVOT indicates strong public support for harmonization between the Canadian and American ratings systems
-the Commission wanted to be informed whether the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) will act as a clearing house for the exchange of ratings information and as an arbiter in case of dispute	-the CBSC has indicated to AGVOT that it will perform these functions
-the Commission encourages the industry to work towards integrating the rating schemes	-both French language and Pay and Pay-per-view services were represented on the AGVOT classification committee

A CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR VIOLENT CONTENT

The Action Group on Violence on Television is a pan-industry organization, formed in February 1993 to co-ordinate broadcast and cable industry strategies and initiatives to deal with the issue of violence on television.¹ In response to CRTC Public Notice 1996-36, the Action Group re-activated and expanded its Classification Committee in April 1996. A co-ordination secretariat was established and a budget struck. Financial support for the project was provided by all sectors of the industry.

The Classification Committee's mandate was to develop a simple, parent-friendly rating system for violence in programming, which would work with the V-chip technology. As per PN 96-36, the classification system would apply to children's programming, drama programs, "reality shows" (reality-based dramatic programs), and feature films; as well as promotional spots for any of these types of programs, and advertisements for theatrical releases.

Under the direction of the AGVOT Executive chaired by Trina McQueen, President of the Discovery Channel, the Committee was asked to determine how many levels should be developed, keeping in mind a four to six level system seemed to be viewed as being most useful based upon the public hearing process, and previous consumer research undertaken by AGVOT. The Committee was also asked to explore means to make the Canadian system compatible with the one under development in the United States, given the extensive cross-border flow of programming. Research from previous V-chip trials had also indicated that consumers thought compatibility with the American system was very important.

In PN 1996-36, the Commission acknowledged the reality of multiple classification systems in Canada for the immediate future. It agreed that Quebec French-language broadcasters and their viewers, already familiar with the Régie du cinéma ratings system, would continue to employ that system for the classification of their television programming.

The CRTC also acknowledged in PN 1996-36, that premium movie and pay-per-view services, which already were classifying their programming based on provincial theatrical ratings systems, could continue to use these ratings for their unedited feature films at this point in time.

Therefore the ratings system being developed by the AGVOT Classification Committee would be used by English language conventional (over-the-air) stations and networks, and by English language specialty services.

Membership in the Committee was structured to involve all elements of the Canadian broadcasting industry to ensure a diverse range of views would be brought to the table as the system was built.

The following corporate groups, programming services and industry associations were active participants in the work of developing a classification system: Baton, CanWest Global,

¹ See Appendix 10 for AGVOT membership information

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CITY/CHUM, WIC, the CTV network, CBC television network (English), Rogers (CFMT-Multilingual), Télé-Métropole (TVA); Bravo, Showcase, YTV, WTN, Vision, SuperChannel/MovieMax, Super Écran, Rogers Cable, Shaw Cable, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, the Canadian Cable Television Association, the Canadian Film and Television Production Association, the Association of Canadian Advertisers, and the Telecaster Committee.²

Given the future role of the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (CBSC) in adjudicating complaints about violence classification, a representative from the CBSC attended the Committee meetings with observer status.

Beginning in May 1996, the Committee met in full formal session a total of five times over an eight month period.³

As protection of children has been the underpinning of how Canada has addressed the issue of violence on television, the first key question for the Committee was to deal with content in children's programming. As the Classification System will function as a component of the industry's *Voluntary Code on Violence in Television Programming*, it was important to build the ratings for children's programming on the foundation of the Children's Section of the CRTC approved Code, where there are strict rules clearly established for the portrayal of violence in children's programming.

While the Commission itself defined children as all youngsters under the age of twelve, the Committee felt that a single children's category would be too broad an age spectrum, and needed to be divided into two levels. Committee members, many of whom are parents themselves, turned to research undertaken by Dr. Wendy Josephson of the University of Manitoba. In her study prepared for the Department of Canadian Heritage⁴, she noted that age eight has been identified as a watershed period for the effects of television violence on children, particularly in terms of being able to distinguish reality from fantasy.

With these two categories in place, establishing the levels of the rating system for non-children's programming emerged over subsequent committee sessions. In the end, the committee agreed that four classification levels could accommodate the range of programming from that designed for a broad general audience, to programming intended for adult audiences.

The guidelines for violence content were built word by word, to provide useful information for parents. The descriptive information was deliberately kept concise, to ensure ease of comprehension and use. The violence guidelines begin with "minimal and infrequent" in the first of these four classifications. The content gradations conclude at the fourth level with "violence intended for adult audiences", the description used in establishing the criteria for violence in programming which must be scheduled no earlier than the 9pm "watershed hour", in the industry's voluntary code.

² See Appendix 2 for Classification Committee Membership

³ See Appendix 1 for Chronology

⁴ Television Violence: A Review of the Effects on Children of Different Ages.

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The challenge in building the classification system was substantial. It would have to be capable of dealing with the wide range of programming offered by English-language services through over-the-air local stations, national networks, and cable-delivered specialty services, ranging from children and youth-oriented services such as YTV to services such as Showcase, and Bravo!.

The committee finally concurred on the following classification system for rating the level of violence in the designated program categories: children's programming, drama programs, "reality shows" (reality-based dramatic programs), and feature films; as well as promotional spots for any of these types of programs, and advertisements for theatrical releases.

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EXEMPT	CTR-E
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DESCRIPTIVE

Exempt programming includes: news, sports, documentaries and other information programming; talk shows, music videos, and variety programming.

CHILDREN	CTR~C
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DESCRIPTIVE

Programming intended for children with this designation must adhere to the provisions of the Children's section of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) Voluntary Code on Violence in Television Programming.

As this programming is intended for younger children under the age of 8 years, it will pay careful attention to themes which could threaten their sense of security and well-being. As programming for children requires particular caution in the depiction of violence, there will be no realistic scenes of violence. Depictions of aggressive behaviour will be infrequent and limited to portrayals that are clearly imaginary and unrealistic in nature.

Violence Guidelines

-might contain occasional comedic, unrealistic depictions

CHILDREN over 8 years	CTR ~ C8+
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DESCRIPTIVE

This classification is applied to children's programming that is generally considered acceptable for youngsters 8 years and over to view on their own. It is suggested that a parent/guardian co-view programming assigned this classification with younger children under the age of 8.

Programming with this designation adheres to the provisions of the Children's Section of the CAB Voluntary Code on Violence. These include not portraying violence as the preferred, acceptable, or only way to resolve conflict; or encouraging children to imitate dangerous acts which they may see on the screen.

Programming within this classification might deal with themes which could be unsuitable for younger children. References to any such controversial themes shall be discreet and sensitive to the 8-12 year age range of this viewing group.

Violence Guidelines

- any realistic depictions will be infrequent, discreet, of low intensity, and shall portray the consequences of violence.**
- violence portrayed must be within the context of the storyline or character development.**
- might include mild physical violence, comedic violence, comic horror, special effects; fantasy, supernatural, or animated violence**

FAMILY	CTR ~ FAM
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Considered acceptable for all age groups. Appropriate viewing for the entire family.

DESCRIPTIVE

This is programming intended for a broad, general audience. While not designed specifically for children, it is understood that younger viewers may be part of the audience. Therefore programming within this classification shall contain very little violence, either physical, verbal or emotional.

It will be sensitive to themes which could threaten a younger child's sense of security, and will depict no realistic scenes of violence which minimize or gloss over the effects of violent acts.

Violence Guidelines

- minimal, infrequent**
- may contain comedic, unrealistic depictions**
- contains no frightening special effects not required by storyline**

ADULTS	CTR~18+
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Intended for adults 18 years and older.

DESCRIPTIVE

This classification applies to programming which could contain content elements that would make it unsuitable for viewers under the age of 18.

Violence Guidelines

-contains depictions of violence which, while integral to the development of plot, character or themes, are intended for adult viewing, and thus are not suitable for audiences under 18 years of age.



THE ACTION GROUP HEREBY SUBMITS THIS CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM TO THE COMMISSION FOR ITS APPROVAL, IN RESPONSE TO CRTC PN 1996-36, BELIEVING THAT IT MEETS THE CRTC'S REQUIREMENT OF "AN INFORMATIVE AND USER-FRIENDLY VIOLENCE RATING SYSTEM."

THE CANADIAN BROADCAST STANDARDS COUNCIL

In its report to the Commission of September 6, 1996, AGVOT indicated that the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council was prepared to act as an intermediary to resolve disputes between programming services and their viewers regarding classification levels applied to programs.

The process would be identical to the CBSC's current role in ensuring adherence to industry Codes. Any viewer who believed that a programming service did not classify a program correctly would have the right to have their complaint referred to the CBSC for adjudication, if the disagreement was unable to be resolved satisfactorily between the viewer and the programming service.

As the Commission is aware, 93% of Canada's conventional over-the-air private television stations are CBSC members. In addition, those specialty programming services which are owned by broadcasting companies, such as Much Music, Bravo and WTN are also automatically entitled to CBSC membership.

The Council is in the process of expanding its membership to include other specialty programming services. Vision TV has just confirmed its participation as a member, and most, if not all, other specialty services are expected to be part of the CBSC by the time the classification encoding process is rolled out.

Discussions have also been held with the CBSC, in regards to the Council serving as a clearing house for sharing program classification information, as mentioned in CRTC Public Notice 1996-36. As the Commission may be aware, the CBSC maintains an information-filled Website on the Internet and sees that facility as the best way to facilitate exchanges of programming ratings information.

Once the classification regime is in place and operating, all CBSC members would be able to file ratings information for programs in their schedules in a section of the Council's Website. All CBSC members would subsequently be able to access data filed by other stations and services, to see how programs and feature films were rated, and on what basis. This function would obviously get to be more important as time went on and shows were being re-licensed or syndicated to other broadcasters.

The CBSC is currently working with its Website provider to develop this membership feature of the Council's Website.

Parental Advisory

CTR ~ PA

DESCRIPTIVE

This programming, while intended for a general audience, may not be suitable for younger children (under the age of 8). Parents/guardians should be aware that there might be content elements which some could consider inappropriate for unsupervised viewing by children in the 8-13 age range.

Programming within this classification might address controversial themes or issues. Cognizant that pre-teens and early teens could be part of this viewing group, particular care must be taken not to encourage imitational behaviour, and consequences of violent actions shall not be minimized.

Violence Guidelines

- any depiction of conflict and/or aggression will be limited and moderate; it might include physical, fantasy, or supernatural violence.**
- any such depictions should not be pervasive, and must be justified within the context of theme, storyline or character development.**

OVER 14 YEARS

CTR~14+

DESCRIPTIVE

Programming with this classification contains themes or content elements which might not be suitable for viewers under the age of 14. Parents are strongly cautioned to exercise discretion in permitting viewing by pre-teens and early teens without parent/guardian supervision, as programming with this classification could deal with mature themes and societal issues in a realistic fashion.

Violence Guidelines

- while violence could be one of the dominant elements of the storyline, it must be integral to the development of plot or character.
- might contain intense scenes of violence.

A COMPREHENSIVE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM

The CRTC mandated AGVOT to develop a classification system that would rate only violent program content.

However, as they built the system which we have submitted for Commission approval, it became clear to the committee of experts who purchase, schedule and promote programming on Canada's television services, that a rating system which focused only on violence would not adequately serve the needs of viewers, particularly parents.

These programmers, who regularly deal with both compliments and complaints from the viewing public, said audiences would find a system that rated only violent content deficient in providing useful information upon which to base their viewing choices. There would be occasions when a program would contain no violence, yet not be suitable for younger audiences due to language, nudity, sexuality, and/or mature themes, and a violence-only rating system would not be functional in informing parents about this other content.

Furthermore, in research conducted for AGVOT in 1994⁵, seventy per cent of respondents strongly agreed that coarse language, nudity, depictions of sexuality and mature themes should be included in a television classification system which had violence as the most important content element to be rated.

The Committee then developed a ratings structure which would blend all of these content elements into a comprehensive classification system, in order to provide even more information to parents than had been requested by the CRTC.

At each stage of development of the comprehensive system, the programmers "road tested" it against their current schedules, to determine whether it would be effective in categorizing program content in a manner that would be informative for viewers, particularly parents.

⁵ "Canadian Public Attitudes Toward A Classification System for Television"
Enviroics Research Group, June 1994

Canadian Television Ratings

A COMPREHENSIVE CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM
FOR VIOLENCE AND OTHER PROGRAM CONTENT
FOR USE BY
CANADIAN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING SERVICES

Developed by the
Action Group on Violence on Television
(AGVOT)

April 30, 1997

EXEMPT	CTR~E
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DESCRIPTIVE

Exempt programming includes: news, sports, documentaries and other information programming; talk shows, music videos, and variety programming.

CHILDREN	CTR~C
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DESCRIPTIVE

Programming intended for children with this designation must adhere to the provisions of the Children's section of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) Voluntary Code on Violence in Television Programming.

As this programming is intended for younger children under the age of 8 years, it will pay careful attention to themes which could threaten their sense of security and well-being. As programming for children requires particular caution in the depiction of violence, there will be no realistic scenes of violence. Depictions of aggressive behaviour will be infrequent and limited to portrayals that are clearly imaginary and unrealistic in nature.

Violence Guidelines

-might contain occasional comedic, unrealistic depictions

Other Content Guidelines

Language -no offensive language

Sex/Nudity -none

CHILDREN over 8 years	CTR ~ C8+
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DESCRIPTIVE

This classification is applied to children's programming that is generally considered acceptable for youngsters 8 years and over to view on their own. It is suggested that a parent/guardian co-view programming assigned this classification with younger children under the age of 8.

Programming with this designation adheres to the provisions of the Children's Section of the CAB Voluntary Code on Violence. These include not portraying violence as the preferred, acceptable, or only way to resolve conflict; or encouraging children to imitate dangerous acts which they may see on the screen.

Programming within this classification might deal with themes which could be unsuitable for younger children. References to any such controversial themes shall be discreet and sensitive to the 8-12 year age range of this viewing group.

Violence Guidelines

- any realistic depictions will be infrequent, discreet, of low intensity, and shall portray the consequences of violence.**
- violence portrayed must be within the context of the storyline or character development.**
- might include mild physical violence, comedic violence, comic horror, special effects; fantasy, supernatural, or animated violence**

Other Content Guidelines

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Language | -no profanity
-might have infrequent use of language which may be considered by some to be socially offensive or discriminatory, and then only if employed within the context of storyline or character development. |
| Sex/Nudity | -none |

FAMILY	CTR ~ FAM
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Considered acceptable for all age groups. Appropriate viewing for the entire family.

DESCRIPTIVE

This is programming intended for a broad, general audience. While not designed specifically for children, it is understood that younger viewers may be part of the audience. Therefore programming within this classification shall contain very little violence, either physical, verbal or emotional.

It will be sensitive to themes which could threaten a younger child's sense of security, and will depict no realistic scenes of violence which minimize or gloss over the effects of violent acts.

Violence Guidelines

- minimal, infrequent
- may contain comedic, unrealistic depictions
- contains no frightening special effects not required by storyline

Other Content Guidelines

Language -may contain inoffensive slang,
 -no profanity

Sex/Nudity -none