

THE RATINGS RANT, V-CHIP GYP, AND TV VIOLENCE SHUFFLE; WHAT
ARE THE REAL ISSUES?

By George Gerbner

The much-ballyhooed television program rating game is on. Signs like TV-K and TV-M have been flickering on the upper left corner of your screen since January 1, 1997. Maybe you haven't even noticed. But the debate about these ratings will soon become much more visible.

Representative Edward Markey (D. Mass.) and Senator John McCain (R. Ariz.) are among those who question the rating system and plan to hold hearings. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D. N.Y.) calls it "a turkey." A bipartisan group in Congress and the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Media Education are requesting the FCC to call public hearings.

It is dawning on many people that the age-based movie-style rating system is an uninformative scheme that deceives the public and protects the industry from parents rather than the other way around.

The political process that drove through the rating system was orchestrated by Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, Inc. It included a series of "consultations" with parents' and children's advocacy groups. I attended one of these meetings as President of the Cultural Environment Movement, a coalition for equity and fairness in media.

All organizations present urged him to design a system that provides reasons for the ratings such as sex, violence, foul language, etc., so that parents can make informed decisions. But Valenti made it clear that, like it or not, his age-classification movie-style rating is the system we get.

The next thing we saw was the picture of Jack Valenti in the White House, where president Bill Clinton's praised Valenti for developing the ratings a year before it will be programmed into the now legally mandated V-Chip, an electronic device that is supposed to block unwanted programs..

The system that has thus been rammed down the public's throats has four fatal flaws.

First, it ignores what public opinion polls and public-interest groups have demanded: information about the reasons for the ratings rather than only age classifications.

Second, it confuses the choices made in movie-going with the very different decisions of television viewing.

Television is watched more by the clock than by the program. To monitor your child's viewing you have to be a full-time television watchdog. Opening credits (when the ratings flash on) are not the decisive choice points in television viewing.

Third, producers rating their own programs results in inconsistencies. For example, "Tonight Show with Jay Leno" was given a TV-14, but "Late Show With David Letterman" a TV-PG.

Fourth, ratings designed by the industry and programmed into the V-Chip is like letting the fox (no pun intended) guard the chicken coop.

Ok, let's get real. Our children are growing up in homes where television is on an average of seven hours a day and tells most of the stories. Before they go to school, which used to be the first time they encountered the larger culture, they are integrated into a television view of the world. That is not the view of creative people with something to tell. It is the view of a handful of global conglomerates with something to sell.

That radical change has altered the socialization of children and transformed the mainstream of the cultural environment. Our Cultural Indicators (CI) research project has monitored those changes for the past 30 years. We found prime time television saturated by an average of five scenes of violence per hour. Over twenty scenes of violence per hour fill Saturday morning children's programs.

Violence, whether serious or humorous, is essentially a demonstration of power. It shows who can get away with what against whom. We found that, in general, women, children, young people, poor people, disabled and Asian Americans are at the bottom of the television violence "pecking order."

We have also found that those who watch more television in every group express a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and insecurity than do light viewers in the same groups. We call this the "mean world syndrome." Viewing violent television cultivates fears and dependencies that make some groups more vulnerable than others to exploitation and victimization. Ultimately, therefore, marketing mayhem contributes to domination and repression.

Can the ratings now in place alleviate the human, social, and political fallout of the "mean world syndrome?" On the contrary, they conceal information even about the frequency of television violence, let alone its meaning and consequences.

Can ratings at least keep viewers from flocking to violent programs? Wrong assumption again. Another well kept secret is that violence on television is not popular. Our CI project has documented the fact that violence depresses the Nielsen ratings. What drives it is not popularity but global marketing. As TV production costs are climbing above what domestic advertising markets can support, producers and syndicators reach for the global market.

What is the dramatic ingredient best suited to the global market? It is one that needs no translation, that is image-driven, that speaks "action" in any language, and that fits into any culture. That ingredient is violence.

What global programmers may lose domestically by saturating programs with violence, they more than make up by selling it cheap to many countries. When you can dump a Power Rangers on 300 million children in 80 countries, shutting out domestic artists and cultural products, you don't have to care who wants it and who gets hurt in the process.

Mindless TV violence, then, is not an expression of artistic freedom or of any measure of reality. On the contrary, it is the product of a *de facto* censorship: a global marketing formula imposed on program creators and foisted on the children of the world.

Media watch groups, children's and parents' advocates, and other public interest organizations should make their voices heard on the real issues. They are issues of gender equity and general diversity in media ownership, employment, and representations. They are issues of marketing-driven media monopolization, homogenization and globalization.

Citizens own the airways. We should demand that it be healthy, free, and fair, and not just "rated."

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