

Ratings for Program Content: The Role of Research Findings

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Ratings for Program Content: The Role of Research Findings

By JOANNE CANTOR

ABSTRACT: In response to the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the television industry devised a program-rating system designed to be used with the V-chip, a device whose purpose is to permit parents to block reception of harmful programs. The industry's age-based system, which debuted in January of 1997, was criticized by researchers and child advocates for being inconsistent with parents' preferences, for failing to communicate useful information, and for making restricted programs more attractive. This article reviews the research that is relevant to these criticisms and that was used by advocacy groups to pressure the television industry to modify its ratings. The amended rating system, which includes content information in addition to age recommendations, began being used on 1 October 1997.

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THE Telecommunications Act of 1996 contained provisions designed to permit parents greater control over the television content that enters their homes. The act mandated that, within two years of its passage, new televisions be manufactured with a V-chip, which will permit parents to block objectionable content, and that television programs be rated or labeled to provide information that will be readable by this device. The usefulness of the V-chip to parents, however, rests heavily on the adequacy of the rating system that is adopted. Shortly after passage of the act, entertainment industry executives agreed to develop a rating system that would be in effect by January 1997.¹ The new system was released to the public on 19 December 1996 and began being implemented in January of 1997.

The new rating system, referred to as "the TV Parental Guidelines," was based on the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings that have been used for movies for almost 30 years. Although it involved a separate, two-level rating for programs that are considered to be designed for children ("TV-Y: all children," and "TV-Y7: directed to older children"), other programs were designated with one of four ratings that are very similar to the MPAA ratings: "TV-G: general audience," "TV-PG: parental guidance suggested," "TV-14: parents strongly cautioned," and "TV-MA: mature audience only." These ratings did not provide information about the content of individual programs but, rather, offered guidelines regarding the age of the child who should be permitted to see them.

The new rating system was mired in controversy even before its official release. Headed by MPAA president Jack Valenti, the Ratings Implementation Group engaged in a very public process of soliciting advice from child advocacy organizations such as the National PTA, health organizations such as the American Medical Association, and academic researchers from a variety of universities. Contrary to the expectations of the implementation group, almost all the groups consulted advocated a program-labeling system that indicated a program's content rather than providing age recommendations. Many groups advocated modeling the TV rating system on the system currently available on the premium cable channels HBO, Cinemax, and Showtime. The HBO system indicates the level of sex, violence, and coarse language in a program.

The controversy over the new rating system was based on the advocates' belief that the new system would not meet the intended purpose of the "Parental Choice" section of the Telecommunications Act, that is, to help parents protect their children from programs they consider harmful. This article summarizes the research relevant to this view and that ultimately was used by the guidelines' critics to elicit revision of the system.

WHAT TYPE OF RATING SYSTEM DO PARENTS WANT?

National surveys conducted between August of 1996 and March of 1997 showed that parents overwhelmingly preferred content-based

over age-based ratings for television. In August of 1996, *U.S. News and World Report* commissioned a survey of 373 parents of children under age 18 (Silver and Geier 1996). Respondents were asked which type of TV rating system would be more useful: a system naming specific age groups, like the motion picture ratings, or a system identifying the content of the program, such as adult language or violence. In this poll, 27 percent of the respondents favored age-based ratings, while 62 percent favored a content-based system. Succeeding polls have indicated even stronger preferences for content-based ratings. In a nationwide survey conducted in September of 1996, using a random sample of 679 parents who were local-unit members of the National PTA (Cantor, Stutman, and Duran 1996), 80 percent of the parents preferred a system that specifies the content of programs, while only 20 percent favored a system indicating the age of the child who should see it.

In early December 1996, the Media Studies Center and the Roper Organization conducted a poll asking 1000 respondents essentially the same question (Media Studies Center/Roper 1996). In their analysis of all respondents, 73 percent preferred content labels, compared to only 15 percent preferring age-based ratings. In their sub-analysis including only those respondents who were parents, the preference was even stronger, with 79 percent favoring content and 16 percent favoring age.

In February of 1997, the *New York Times* conducted a nationwide poll of 394 parents and assessed similar attitudes with a different question

(Mifflin 1997). The question read, "Should television programs receive just one rating as movies do, or should they get two ratings—one for how much violence they show and one for sexual content?" The *Times* reported that 69 percent favored two separate ratings, while 26 percent preferred just one age-based one. From late February to early March, the Family Channel conducted a survey with Yankelovich Partners that questioned 1001 parents with children at home (Bash 1997b). Of these, 70 percent preferred a content-based system and 18 percent favored an age-based system.

The only independent polls that seemed to show parental approval for the new system did not compare the new system to any others. For example, at the end of February in 1997, *USA Today* reported a poll of 1036 respondents, which indicated that of parents who had heard of the new rating system, 52 percent agreed that the system helped them monitor their children's viewing, while 44 percent disagreed (Bash 1997a). Polls such as this may in fact have reflected support for the idea of TV ratings in general rather than for the age-based TV Parental Guidelines specifically.

One comparative study, conducted by Peter Hart Research Associates to coincide with the release of the TV Parental Guidelines (Hart 1996), did report greater support for the new age-based TV rating system (54 percent) than for content ratings (41 percent). This study was commissioned by the Ratings Implementation Group and unfairly characterized the competing, content-based system as

TABLE 1
NATIONAL POLLS COMPARING PREFERENCES FOR
CONTENT- VERSUS AGE-BASED RATINGS

Source and/or Researcher	Dates of Polling	Percentage Favoring Content	Percentage Favoring Age
<i>U.S. News and World Report</i>	12-14 August 1996	62	27
National PTA, Institute for Mental Health Initiatives, and University of Wisconsin Media Studies Center and Roper Organization	5-23 September 1996	80	20
Ratings Implementation Group and Hart	2-10 December 1996	73	15
<i>New York Times</i>	16-18 December 1996	41	54
Family Channel and Yankelovich	18-19 February 1997	69	26
	21 February-1 March 1997	70	18

indicating the presence of sex, violence, or coarse language in a program without indicating whether it was mild, moderate, or graphic in intensity.

In summary, in landslide proportions, parents said they preferred a rating system that provides information about the level of violent, sexual, and language content in a program, similar to a system currently used on HBO and Showtime, over one that provides a recommendation as to the age of the child who should see it, as exemplified in the MPAA ratings and the TV Parental Guidelines. Table 1 summarizes these results.

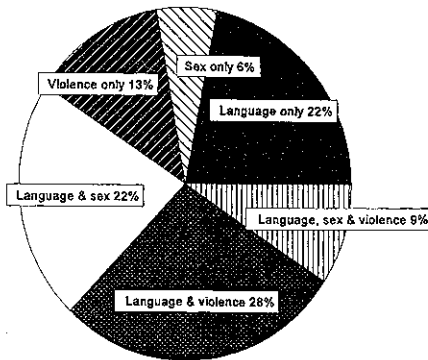
HOW WELL DO AGE-BASED RATINGS COMMUNICATE CONTENT?

A second question about the TV Parental Guidelines is how well age-based ratings convey useful content information for parents. Survey results suggested that the guidelines would not provide the information that parents need in order to limit

their children's access to programs they, the parents, consider harmful. Surveys indicate that different parents feel differently about the impact of televised violence versus sex versus coarse language on their children (for example, Cantor, Stutman, and Duran 1996). In addition, there is much more research evidence regarding the psychological harm of exposure to violence (see, for example, Center for Communication and Social Policy 1997) than there is about the effects of sexual depictions or coarse language. For this reason, it seems important for a rating system to specify which programs contain violence as distinguished from other forms of content.

Although the content of programs with different TV Parental Guidelines ratings has not yet been studied systematically, research on the MPAA ratings suggests that such age-based ratings give very little advance notice of the type of content to expect in programming. In a content

FIGURE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF LANGUAGE, SEX,
AND VIOLENCE IN PG-RATED
MOVIES ON TELEVISION, 1994-95



SOURCE: Data are from *National Television Violence Study* (1996), vol. 1, using movies shown with MPAA ratings and HBO and Show-time content codes.

analysis of television programs that were sampled randomly for the National Television Violence Study (NTVS),² we investigated television movies that were transmitted with both an MPAA rating and codes from the HBO system, which indicate a program's level of sex, violence, and coarse language. Looking at the movies that were rated PG, we found a wide diversity of content. In the analysis of data for year 1 of the NTVS (Cantor, Harrison, and Krcmar forthcoming), 22 percent of the PG-rated movies had codes for neither sex nor violence but only adult language. Another 22 percent had language and sex codes, and 28 percent had codes for language and violence. Figure 1 shows this distribution of content. A similar diversity of content was found in the year-2

NTVS report (Cantor, Harrison, and Nathanson 1997).

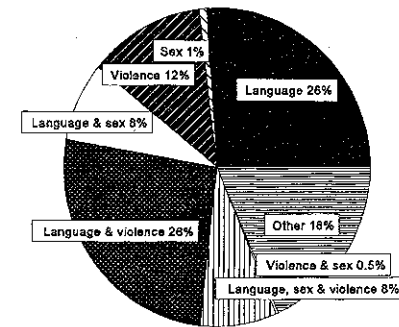
A new analysis (Cantor, Nathanson, and Henzl 1997) involving all movies rated by the MPAA over the past two years reveals a similar lack of informativeness of the PG rating. To determine the proportion of PG-rated movies that contained various types of content, we analyzed all the movies rated by the MPAA during the years 1995 and 1996 using information provided in the *Motion Picture Rating Directory* (1997). Since January of 1995, the directory listings have indicated the reasons why movies have received their ratings, for all ratings beyond G.

Our analysis showed that over this two-year period, 1410 feature-length movies received ratings from the MPAA. Two-thirds of the movies were rated R, while 16 percent were rated PG-13, 14 percent were rated PG, and only 3 percent were rated G.

For all of the PG-rated movies, we coded the content reasons listed in the directory.³ Figure 2 shows how the various content combinations were distributed across the movies that were rated PG over the two-year period. As the figure shows, 26 percent of these movies were classified PG as a function of language only, 26 percent had violence and language, and another 18 percent had no sex, violence, or language.

Extrapolating from these findings, it was expected that the content of a program rated TV-PG would be totally unpredictable—parents would not know whether it contained content they consider harmful. They thus would not have the advance information needed to decide whether

FIGURE 2
DISTRIBUTION OF CONTENT IN PG-RATED
MOVIES RELEASED IN 1995-96



SOURCE: Data from *Motion Picture Rating Directory* (1997).

they should shield their child from it or not.

EFFECT OF RATINGS ON CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN PROGRAMS

A third area of research relevant to the new television ratings deals with the effect of ratings on children's desire to see programs. While a major issue has been whether parental advisories and ratings have their intended effect, that is, to help parents protect their children from being exposed to problematic content, there has been concern that these labels might have a boomerang effect. That is, the labels might make the content seem more interesting and exciting to children and attract a larger child audience.

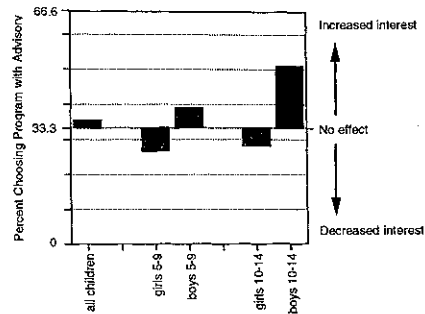
Previous research on this question has produced mixed results. Herman and Leyens (1977) reported that movies shown on Belgian television with

sex or violence advisories enjoyed larger audiences than those without them. In contrast, Austin (1980) showed that adding different MPAA ratings to the same film descriptions did not affect high school students' interest in seeing them. In further contrast, Christenson (1992) concluded that the label "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics" reduced adolescents' interest in music albums. Moreover, Hamilton (1994) reported Nielsen data indicating that movies broadcast on national television with viewer-discretion warnings showed a reduction in the number of viewers in the 2- to 11-year-old category but that these warnings had no effect on audience size among adolescents or adults.

In our first year of research for the NTVS (Cantor and Harrison 1996), we explored the effects of those ratings and advisories that seemed most prevalent on television. We tested four advisories: "parental discretion advised," "contains some violent content; parental discretion advised," "viewer discretion advised," and "contains some violent content; viewer discretion advised." We also included the four major MPAA ratings that are associated with movies shown on television: "G: general audiences," "PG: parental guidance suggested," "PG-13: parents strongly cautioned," and "R: restricted."

The participants were 297 schoolchildren in Madison, Wisconsin, between the ages of 5 and 14 years. They were given a TV-programming guide booklet and were instructed to choose one program to view from the three described on each page. They were told that their viewing choices

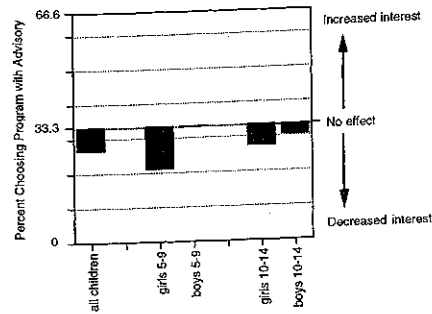
FIGURE 3
EFFECT OF "PARENTAL DISCRETION
ADVISED" ON CHILDREN'S
INTEREST IN PROGRAMS



SOURCE: Data are from *National Television Violence Study* (1996), vol. 1.

NOTE: If advisory had no effect, 33.3 percent of children would have chosen program with advisory (chance outcome). Boys 10-14 significantly different from chance at $p < .01$.

FIGURE 4
EFFECT OF "VIEWER DISCRETION
ADVISED" ON CHILDREN'S
INTEREST IN PROGRAMS



SOURCE: Data are from *National Television Violence Study* (1996), vol. 1.

NOTE: If advisory had no effect, 33.3 percent of children would have chosen program with advisory (chance outcome). Girls 5-9 significantly different from chance at $p < .05$.

would help us decide which video clip to show them and that their "votes" were anonymous. All booklets contained the same programs with the same descriptions. However, in different booklets, different programs had the advisories. In addition, the same movie was given different MPAA ratings in different booklets.

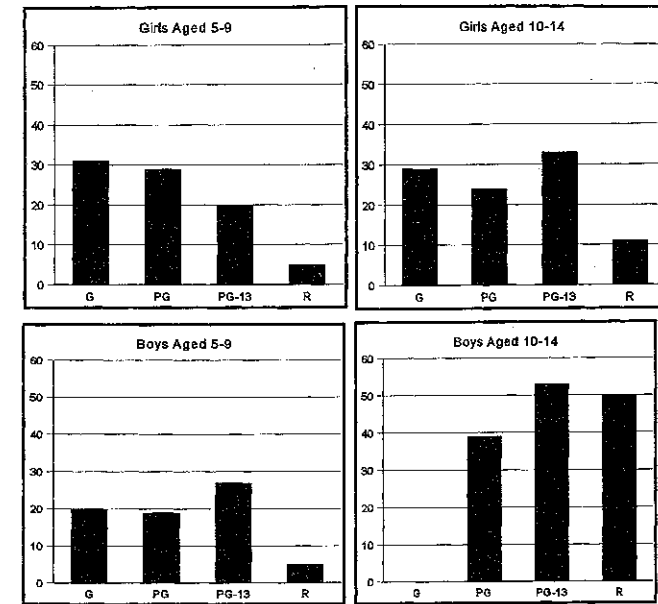
What we found in year 1 was that the ratings and advisories had strong effects on children's viewing preferences and that the nature of these effects varied with the type of rating and the age and sex of the child. The advisory "parental discretion advised" did not significantly affect girls' interest in programs, but it made boys want to see a program significantly more. This effect was particularly pronounced among boys

in the older group (aged 10 to 14). Figure 3 shows these results.

In contrast to the parental advisory, "viewer discretion advised" did not make programs more appealing to any group. In fact, as can be seen from Figure 4, this advisory led girls to be significantly less interested in a program, and the effect was especially strong for girls in the younger group (aged 5 to 9). The findings also indicated that the addition of "contains some violent content" did not increase children's interest in shows with either the parental or the viewer advisory.

Finally, we found that the MPAA ratings exerted significant effects on children's interest in movies and that the effects again varied with the age and sex of the child. Older children as

FIGURE 5
PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN CHOOSING TARGET MOVIE
AS A FUNCTION OF MPAA RATING



SOURCE: Data are from *National Television Violence Study* (1996), vol. 1.

a group, and boys as a group, were more interested in the same movie when it had the more restrictive ratings of PG-13 and R. Figure 5 shows these results for the four age-by-sex groupings. What is remarkable is the choices of the boys in the older group. In this group, not one of the boys who were told the movie was rated G selected it, but 53 percent of those who were told the same movie was rated PG-13, and 50 percent of those who were told it was rated R, wanted to see it.

In summary, the first year of research for the NTVS showed that the phrase "parental discretion advised" and the more restrictive MPAA ratings attracted many children to the

objects of its warnings. However, the phrase "contains some violent content" did not increase the allure of programs with advisories.

For the second year of the NTVS research (Cantor, Harrison, and Nathanson 1997), we continued the exploration of the effects of TV ratings and advisories on children's viewing choices. This time, we ran our experiments in Milwaukee in order to include a more ethnically diverse population of children. In year 2, we decided to subject eight rating systems to the same test, to determine whether most systems produce similar forbidden-fruit effects, or whether ratings can give parents needed information without enticing

youngsters to view problematic content. We again tested the MPAA ratings and two advisories, "parental discretion advised" and "viewer discretion advised" (with and without the phrase "contains some violent content"). The phrase "contains some violent content" was tested alone as well. We also included tests of the effects of three content-based systems: the violence codes used by the premium cable channels HBO, Showtime, and Cinemax (for example, "MV: mild violence"), the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC) ratings used for video games (for example, "violence: creatures killed"), and the violence ratings used in Canada in conjunction with early implementation of the V-chip (for example, "brief violence"). In addition, we evaluated two types of ratings that have been discussed publicly but are not currently in use: age indicators, which simply indicate the age-appropriateness of a program (for example, "not for kids under 8"), and another label that indicates that a program has won various types of awards (for example, "Teens' Choice Award"). Table 2 shows the ratings and advisory systems that were tested.

We also explored how background variables such as aggressiveness, television-viewing habits, and parental involvement influence the effect of advisories and ratings. Finally, to explore whether ratings affect children's interest in programs via the so-called forbidden-fruit effect or simply by providing information about content, we also asked children to indicate the age they thought each

program was appropriate for and how violent they expected each program to be.

The experiment involved 374 children between the ages of 5 and 15. The children were given booklets describing eight different television programs and movies and were asked to indicate how much they wanted to see each one. Every booklet contained the same programs and movies with the same brief descriptions. What was varied at random, from booklet to booklet, was the rating or advisory that was assigned to a particular program. The programs appeared in the booklets in two different orders.

The findings revealed that most of the rating systems did not significantly affect children's interest. However, as we observed in year 1, "parental discretion advised" affected boys and girls differently. For younger children (aged 5 to 9), this admonition tended to increase the interest of boys but decrease that of girls. Figure 6 shows these findings. Neither the advisory "viewer discretion advised" nor the phrase "contains some violent content" affected children's interest.

None of the other rating systems increased the appeal of programs for younger children. For the older children (aged 10 to 15), there was only one system that significantly affected interest in programs: the MPAA ratings. The more restrictive ratings of PG-13 and R increased a program's attractiveness, and the lowest rating, G, decreased it (see Figure 7). This result is very similar to what we found in year 1. The preference for

TABLE 2
ADVISORY AND RATING SYSTEMS TESTED
IN THE NATIONAL TELEVISION VIOLENCE STUDY, YEAR 2

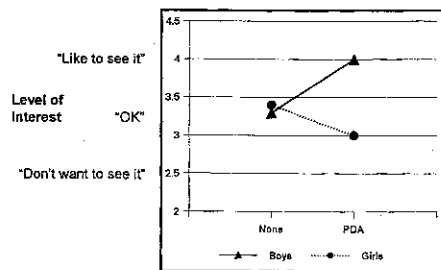
Parental advisories:	None	
	Parental discretion advised	
	Contains some violent content	
	Contains some violent content; parental discretion advised	
Viewer advisories:	None	
	Viewer discretion advised	
	Contains some violent content	
	Contains some violent content; viewer discretion advised	
MPAA ratings:	None	
	G: general audiences	
	PG: parental guidance suggested	
	PG-13: parents strongly cautioned	
	R: restricted	
Premium codes:	None	
	MV: mild violence	
	V: violence	
	GV: graphic violence	
RSAC ratings:	None	
	Violence: creatures killed	
	Violence: humans killed	
	Violence: humans injured or killed; blood and gore	
	Violence: wanton and gratuitous violence	
Canadian ratings:	No violence	
	Comedic violence	
	Mild violence	
	Brief violence	
	Violence	
	Graphic violence	
Age indicators:	None	For all ages
	For age 8 and up	Not for kids under 8
	For age 13 and up	Not for kids under 13
	For age 17 and up	Not for kids under 17
Awards:	None	
	Parents' Choice Award	
	Teens' Choice Award	
	Kids' Choice Award	

movies with more restrictive ratings was observed among both boys and girls in the older group.

The only other significant effect of ratings on children's interest in pro-

grams was that of the premium channel violence codes on younger children. However, rather than increasing interest in the movie, the content codes of "MV: mild violence" and "GV:

FIGURE 6
EFFECT OF "PARENTAL DISCRETION ADVISED" ON YOUNGER CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN A PROGRAM



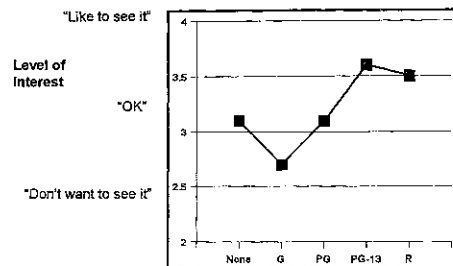
SOURCE: Data are from Center for Communication and Social Policy (1997).

graphic violence" reduced children's interest in it.

We also observed that certain background factors exacerbated the effect of restrictive MPAA ratings. Although MPAA ratings did not affect younger children overall, those who said they get into fights more often and those who said they liked to watch television the most were the most attracted by the more restrictive MPAA ratings. Among older children, beyond the overall magnetic impact of restrictive MPAA ratings, the more children said they liked watching violent TV, the more they were interested in seeing a movie rated PG-13. These relationships were observed even after controlling for the child's sex.

On a more encouraging note, among younger children (aged 5 to 9), those who said their parents watched and discussed TV with them more often were less interested in a program labeled "contains some violent content." This suggests that parental

FIGURE 7
EFFECT OF MPAA RATINGS ON OLDER CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN A MOVIE



SOURCE: Data are from Center for Communication and Social Policy (1997).

involvement may encourage children to internalize their parents' viewing standards.

The ratings and advisories had very few significant effects on younger children's expectations of what would be in a program. The higher-level RSAC ratings and some of the Canadian ratings led to expectations of greater violence in the programs. However, these expectations did not translate into greater interest in seeing the programs.

Older children's expectations about content were affected by many of the rating systems, however. Specifically, older children generally expected more violence as the MPAA ratings became more restrictive. They also expected more violence in the higher-level ratings of the premium channel codes and the Canadian system. Only the MPAA ratings and the age indicators affected older children's expectations of the age for which a show was appropriate, with higher levels leading to the expecta-

TABLE 3
COMPARISON OF MPAA RATINGS AND TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES

MPAA Ratings	TV Parental Guidelines
G: general audiences	TV-Y: all children
PG: parental guidance suggested	TV-Y7: directed to older children
PG-13: parents strongly cautioned	TV-G: general audience
R: restricted	TV-PG: parental guidance suggested
	TV-14: parents strongly cautioned
	TV-MA: mature audience only

tion of appropriateness for older groups.

These findings suggest that ratings or advisories that urge parental control based on the implication that the children are too young to see a program seem the most likely to produce the forbidden-fruit effect. Both the "parental discretion advised" effect on younger boys and the effect of PG-13 and R on older children fit these criteria. The age indicators, which simply stated the expected age of viewers without calling for parental guidance, did not produce the same effect. None of the ratings that influenced expectations of violence without suggesting who should see the program increased children's interest. The television industry's new rating system, like the MPAA system, provides guidance on the appropriate age for viewing while exhorting parental control over children's access to programs.

Research by Brad Bushman and his associates at Iowa State University confirms that restrictive warnings make a program more enticing than labels that simply describe violent content (Bushman and Stack 1996). In three experiments, Bushman found that warning labels consistently increased the selection of

violent programs and movies by children and adults, but violence labels did not. In addition, a program labeled as containing "extreme violence" was neither more nor less attractive than one described as containing "some violence."

This research should not be interpreted as indicating that children, or people in general, will never be attracted to a program by a violence label. What it does indicate is that the enticement power of restrictive ratings (for example, "PG-13: parents strongly cautioned") is apparently much more universal and much stronger than that of a descriptive label (for example, "GV: graphic violence").

RELATIONSHIP OF MPAA RATINGS TO TV PARENTAL GUIDELINES

Although no systematic research had been conducted on the effects of the TV Parental Guidelines on children's viewing interest, the TV Parental Guidelines were similar conceptually to the well-tested MPAA ratings in two crucial ways: they both indicate the appropriate age for viewing a program without specifying the program's content; and they both urge parental guidance of children's viewing. We found the combination of

these two characteristics to be the most likely to make restricted programs more attractive.

Moreover, the two rating systems were nearly identical in wording. Although the MPAA ratings do not have levels for specifically child-oriented movies, the four main levels of the two systems were so similar that one wonders about the reasons for the trivial changes beyond the addition of the letters "TV." Table 3 compares the two systems.

CONCLUSION: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The research findings included in this article are uniformly critical of the TV Parental Guidelines' ability to serve the needs of parents. First, in five out of six national surveys that compared content-based to age-based guidelines, overwhelming majorities of parents voiced a preference for content-based ratings. Second, analyses of the content of movies with MPAA ratings showed that a rating such as PG encompasses a wide diversity of content and leaves the content of a particular program or movie unknown in advance of viewing. Finally, research on a variety of rating systems showed that restrictive ratings and advisories such as the MPAA ratings of PG-13 and R made programs much more tantalizing to children than straightforward information about violent content, such as the HBO ratings of "MV: mild violence" or "GV: graphic violence."

In short, the original guidelines the television industry provided were unpopular with parents; they failed to provide adequate information for

parental decision making; and they risked making parental control of television viewing harder by increasing children's interest in the very programs parents wanted to shield them from. The intense criticism these guidelines received from child advocates and parents was justified by the research.

The compromise system

Because the criticism of the TV Parental Guidelines was grounded in research and widespread among parents, because the major child advocacy groups led by the National PTA were unrelenting, and because influential members of the House and Senate, particularly Congressman Ed Markey of Massachusetts and Senator John McCain of Arizona, kept the pressure on, the television industry finally agreed to a compromise system on 10 July 1997, which added content indicators to the age-based guidelines. All the major networks with the exception of NBC agreed to the compromise and began using the amended system on 1 October 1997.

In the compromise system, the ratings of TV-PG, TV-14, and TV-MA are now supplemented by any or all of the following content indicators: V, for violent content; L, for crude language; S, for sexual content; and D, for sexual dialogue or innuendo. In addition, programs aimed at older children, designated with a TV-Y7, may be supplemented with an FV, for fantasy violence.

The compromise is a great step forward because it does answer parents' demands for content informa-

tion about specific programs. Although the advocacy groups did not receive the more concrete definitions of the various levels of content that they had pushed for, the compromise at least provides some indication of the type of content to be found in programs.

The compromise system does not, however, answer all of the criticisms. First, the age guidelines ensure that the forbidden-fruit effect will continue and thereby make parents' jobs harder by adding to the allure of restricted programs. Second, the age-based structure makes the rating confusing when different contents exist at different age levels within the same program. Under the compromise plan, for example, if a program is rated TV-14-L because it has "strong coarse language," but it also has "moderate violence," which would otherwise give it a PG-V rating, the program will be designated simply as TV-14-L. No mention will be made of the violent content. To do otherwise, it is argued, would be too complicated. But if the industry had been willing to give up the age-based structure and had agreed to adopt a simple content-based system, a program could easily be designated as having different levels of different contents, thereby allowing full disclosure of its controversial aspects.

Finally, the industry's insistence on using euphemisms, rather than describing content clearly and accurately, was a major complicating factor. Refusing to accept the three levels of sex, violence, and coarse language that most advocacy groups had recommended, the industry in-

sisted upon adding D for situations in which sex is talked about but not shown. In addition, they balked at using the word "violence" to refer to the mayhem that goes on in many children's shows, such as *Power Rangers* or *The X-Men*. Instead, they use the letters "FV" to refer to fantasy violence—whether the violence is indeed of the impossible variety or whether it is quite realistic but simply performed by animated characters. In the case of both D and FV, the change was insisted upon by the industry to reduce the possible loss of advertising revenue that they expected the word "sex" on the one hand, or "violence" on the other, would cause.

The complication of the new system represents a challenge to the advocacy community, which will need to work to raise parental awareness and understanding of the new labels. But in spite of the complication and the educational challenge that the new system represents, the revisions represent a major breakthrough for parents and children. With the backing of research findings, parents' voices were heard, and parents will begin to reap the benefits of better information and greater control over some of the content that enters their homes.

Notes

1. The television industry's creation of a rating system was voluntary. However, the act specified that if the television industry did not create its own rating system within one year of passage of the act, or if the Federal Communications Commission did not find the industry's rating system "acceptable," the commission should appoint an advisory committee to study the issue and make recommendations

for such a rating system (Telecommunications Act of 1996 §§ 551(b), (e)(1)).

2. The NTVS is a three-year program of research funded by the National Cable Television Association. The purpose of the study is to provide independent "violence monitors," who provide a yearly report card to Congress, to the television industry, and to the public on the state of television violence. Although the funding comes from the television industry, the research remains independent of industry control. An advisory council representing 18 organizations reflecting national leadership in public health, education, law, and child advocacy as well as the creative community oversees the project and ensures the independence and integrity of the study.

3. The reasons stated for each movie's rating were categorized by one coder, and a second coder independently categorized the reasons for 20 percent of the movies, selected randomly. The categories were as follows (with reliabilities calculated as Cohen's kappa): violence, including action (kappa = .98), sexual behavior or situations (.99), language (1.00), or none of the above. The "none" category was subdivided into "thematic elements" (1.00), drugs (1.00), crude or sexual humor (.94), and "other."

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