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# Study beats up on violence content-ratings

By RICHARD HUFF

Daily News Staff Writer

**A** SURVEY issued yesterday suggests that parents shouldn't bother using the new content-ratings system to judge violence levels in TV shows, because the different labels hardly seem to make a distinction.

The survey was immediately and roundly panned by network executives.

"If parents think that using the guidelines will protect their children from violence, they're crazy," said George

Gerbner, professor of communications at Temple University.

According to Gerbner's survey of programing last fall, there is little difference in the number of violent acts per hour in shows rated TV-G (for general audiences), TV-PG (unsuitable for younger children) and TV-14 (unsuitable for folks younger than 14).

However, a broadcast standards executive responded that Gerbner's methodology was flawed and contrary to previous surveys on violence.

"I have no idea what

Gerbner was looking at," said the executive. "He doesn't specify if it was, broadcast, cable or pay cable."

Gerbner's study of 50.5 hours of prime-time network dramas indicates that TV-G-rated shows contain just one-third fewer scenes of violence than those rated TV-14.

"This from the man who several years ago called the 'Laugh In' reunion that year's most-violent program," said another network executive.

Gerbner's researchers defined violence as the "overt

use of force against one's self or another person" in a manner meant to hurt or kill. "There were no ambiguous references," he said. "If you say, 'I'll kill you,' and it's a joke, we don't count it."

The survey found that TV-G-rated drama programs contain 2.4 incidents of violence per hour; TV-PG carry 4.1 acts per hour; and TV-14 contain 3.6 acts of violence per hour.

However, Gerbner's study found that the V, S and L letter designations to warn of strong violence, language or sexual

content were more helpful. Dramas with a V label were found to have more than three times more violence — one scene every 11 minutes — compared with those without the designation, which had violent acts every 38 minutes.

"This is a man who counts," said an executive. "As you move from G to PG to 14, there is an escalating intensity. To me, this is just vintage Gerbner not taking context into account. With him, the violence on 'Touched by an Angel' is just as bad as 'NYPD Blue.'"



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ON TELEVISION

## V-chip may mean victory for parents and ratings system

203LT Temple Univ.  
By Steve Johnson  
TRIBUNE TELEVISION CRITIC

Reports of the demise of the television ratings system ought to carry an "F" label, for fantasy.

Yes, the hodgepodge of letters and numbers, instituted by the television industry under pressure from Congress and parent-advocacy groups, has been both ignored and derided since its debut in January 1997 and refinement last fall.

One recent study, conducted by the Associated Press, found that 7 of 10 adults were paying it little or no mind. Many major newspapers, including this one, have not been publishing the ratings in their television programming guides.

Parents at a congressional hearing in Peoria last spring ripped into the

SEE RATINGS, PAGE 3

## Ratings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 K

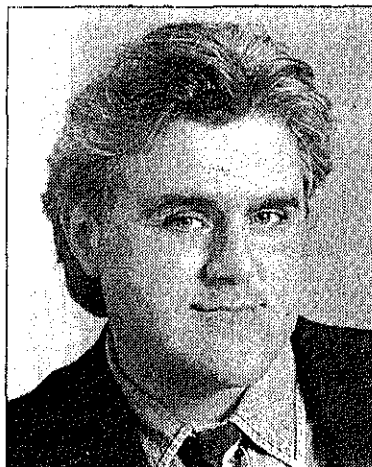
original ratings, which only labeled shows movie-style, based on recommended ages for viewers. When the rest of the industry agreed after Peoria to add content indicators to the age-based ratings, the most popular network, NBC, refused to do so.

But all of that has a chance to change with the news last week that the FCC has given the ratings the agency's necessary official seal of approval and given television manufacturers the technical standards they need to include in their new sets the V-chips that can make the ratings effective.

Advocates compare ratings without the V-chip to a car without gas: You can't say the car is a lemon until you've given it a chance to get off the lot. "Parents with small children will soon have both working parts of a safety system that provides a little control for a change," says U.S. Rep. Ed Markey (D., Mass.), the leading congressional proponent of the V-chip and the man who coined the term.

And the force of law plus marketing realities—TV makers now have to include the chips, and they want to sell people new sets—mean the chip-and-ratings pairing will get a fair test in the marketplace. Look for pre-Christmas ads to push V-chip-equipped sets and set-top boxes hard.

The boxes, which resemble cable-signal boxes, should be in stores much, much sooner, certainly by the time the broadcasters start including the ratings not just as on-screen labels but as part of the signal they send out. This development, which will actually allow people to use the V-chip to block shows bearing certain ratings, is expected to occur within 90 days.



The TV ratings have some obvious inconsistencies, such as Jay Leno's talk show being a TV-14 and David Letterman's a TV-PG.

### Age ratings

TV-Y: All children  
TV-Y7: Age 7 and older  
TV-G: General audience  
TV-PG: Parental guidance suggested  
TV-14: Age 14 and older  
TV-MA: Mature audience only

Meanwhile, the flip side of that vaunted AP study is that saying 7 of 10 adults don't pay attention to the ratings is like trying to make big news out of the fact that 7 of 10 adults don't buy Pampers, in the analogy of Markey.

When the questioners asked parents if they were using the ratings to make viewing decisions, 40 percent said "just about always" and another 22 percent said "sometimes."

This does not jibe with anecdotal reports from TV stations and networks, who say they have heard almost nothing from the public about the ratings. But the lack of feedback may just mean that viewers have not been strongly dissatisfied with the ratings, despite such obvious inconsistencies as Jay Leno's talk show being a TV-14 and David Letterman's a TV-PG.

"I think by and large they are applied carefully and with the thought they deserve," says David Kleeman, executive director of the Des Plaines-based American Center for Children's Television, an advocacy group.

To many observers, all of this is secondary to the question of the overall television environment.

Noted academic critic George Gerbner considers the V-chip mostly a "cop out" that protects the industry as it keeps doing what it has been doing and puts the pressure on parents to program the new sets.

"It's a step in the right direction, but the thing to do is make programs more fair and more diverse," says Gerbner, Bell Atlantic Professor of Telecommunication at Temple University and director of the Cultural Indicators Project, which has been monitoring prime-time network television programming for more than 30 years.

A recent Gerbner study of 50 hours of prime-time programming found that even in programs rated TV-G, for all audiences, there were an average of 2.4 violent acts per hour, compared to 4.1 acts in TV-PG and 3.6 in TV-14 shows.

More helpful, he found, were the content descriptors. Shows labeled with a V for violence contained about three times the violence as shows not bearing that label.

But still, despite the proliferation of randy dialog and formerly forbidden words, despite Jerry Springer and the "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers," there are signs that the TV environment for children is improving where it counts most.

### Content ratings

S: Sexual content  
V: Violence  
L: Offensive language  
D: Sexually suggestive dialogue  
FV: Fantasy violence (for children's programming only)

Most experts agree that decades of academic research are clear: Television violence does have a harmful effect on children. And the amount of violence in prime time and in children's programming has been on the decline, according to a

major ongoing UCLA study funded by the networks.

Even Gerbner allows that it has at least leveled off, although he says it is not time to rejoice and there is still too much violence of the type he labels "happy violence," depicted without a serious context or consequences.

Meanwhile, the law that went into effect last fall mandating a certain number of hours of educational programming seems to be having a positive impact.

There are 30 new shows on TV since September that would not be there otherwise, says Jeff Chester, executive director of the Center for Media Education, which lobbied for the law.

The expanding TV universe has made it easier for broadcasters to produce shows that attract a more narrow audience. The hurdle for success is not as high as it once was, which reduces the impulse to produce lowest-common-denominator, mass-market schlock.

Counteracting this, though, say critics, is the increasing globalization of entertainment. The shows that translate easiest to other countries contain the universal excitors of sex and violence.

Television ratings is a complicated question, asked at the intersection of free speech, art and commerce. But the FCC move of last week at least puts the ratings into forward motion again.

Now newspapers that were waiting for the official sanction have to decide if and how to start incorporating the labels. Now broadcasters—especially holdouts NBC and cable's BET—will begin to see whether the V-chip and ratings have an economic impact on them.

And parents will be able to vote with their wallets on whether they really want the kind of TV control that they tell pollsters they do.

And if they do prove to want that control, if they do buy the new V-chip devices, they will be able to punch a few buttons and feel they are doing something positive.

"Now in some sense it's sort of classic media economics," says Chester. "Let the viewer beware. The viewers have to exercise their choice."

The irony is that, after all the furor that resulted in the V-chip, it will soon enough be bypassed by better technology.

# CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

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## Mean world syndrome

**Professor George Gerbner of Temple University:** Our Cultural Indicators research project . . . has monitored the world of prime time and Saturday morning children's programs for the last 30 years. We found prime-time television saturated by an average of five scenes of violence per hour. . . .

We have discovered that those who watch more television express a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust and insecurity than do light viewers. We call this the "mean world syndrome." Violent television cultivates fear. . . .

What drives violence on the airways is not popularity but global marketing. What you see on TV is not what people want. It is what the advertisers think will attract a worldwide audience at the least cost: violence.

## A forgiving community

**South African Bishop Desmond Tutu in "Crying in the Wilderness" (1982):** We witness . . . by being a community of reconciliation, a forgiving community of the forgiven.

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*Compiled by Jane McAlister Pope,  
deputy editor of the editorial pages*



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# violent viewing



## TV, movies, videos bombard kids; parents fret

FRONT PAGE

By **TERRY JACKSON**  
Herald Television Critic

*Temple of  
203LT*

Concerned about the violence your children see on TV, in the movies, on their computer screens, in the video arcade?

Many parents are. And you may worry that repeated exposure to violent entertainment could make your children more aggressive, or more prone to using violence to solve problems, or just plain fearful of life because of a warped perspective they could be getting from the media.

For many, such fears grow in the face of horrific incidents like the shooting spree in Jonesboro, Ark., where an 11-year-old and a 13-year-

- TV SHOWS KIDS LIKE MOST, 16A
- VIDEO GAMES GET VIOLENT, 17A
- TIPS FOR FAMILY TV VIEWING, 17A

old are accused of setting a fatal trap for classmates and a teacher.

Though what set off that schoolyard tragedy isn't known, it is raising new questions about gun control, the challenges of parenting today — and the impact of violence in all forms of media.

"What happened in Jonesboro the other day was two boys playing the ultimate video game," said Florida

**IMAGES UNLEASHED:** Examples of violent viewing, clockwise from top left, include the video game *Resident Evil* (the 'uncut, more gore' version); a warrior in the film *Starship Troopers*; a creature in the video game *Quake*; a pistol-packin' character in the video game *Laura Croft*; a scene from TV's *Brooklyn South*. Parents have a variety of tools to control their kids' media diet, but many aren't using them.

PLEASE SEE VIOLENCE, 16A

## VIOLENCE, FROM 1A

State University professor Murray Krantz, a specialist in early childhood development. A bill pending in the state Legislature, and endorsed last week by Gov. Lawton Chiles, would make violent video games off-limits to minors at video arcades. It would also prohibit those under 18 from buying violent video games at retail stores.

### An old debate

Debate on the effects of media violence on youngsters has been ongoing for more than 50 years. (In one notorious South Florida case in the late 1970s, 15-year-old Ronnie Zamora claimed temporary insanity to a murder charge because he watched too much violence on TV. He lost.)

Yet over the decades, virtually all forms of entertainment have moved toward more graphic depictions. It's not going away.

Nonetheless, there is also a new, positive trend: Through technology and political pressure, parents have more ways than ever to control the media diet of children.

V-chip television sets and control boxes that allow parents to bar offensive TV shows from their homes are coming on the market starting this summer; cable and satellite TV services offer devices to block unwanted programs; an alphabet soup of TV content ratings give parents fair warning about what's about to come on the air; computer games carry parental warning labels; and movies continue to have ratings aimed at keeping youngsters away from inappropriate films.

But will parents use these tools? So far, the track record isn't good.

According to an Associated Press poll, 51 percent of parents said they pay little or no attention to the year-old TV content ratings, such as TV-PG or TV-14. In another survey, an electronics industry group found that as many as 60 percent of children under 13 had a television set in their bedroom, where they could watch what they liked without parental supervision.

### 'R' is no deterrent

At theaters, some parents with children in tow show up for R-rated films like *Starship Troopers*, a 1997 movie that featured decapitated and crushed bodies, or *Face/Off*, in which dozens of people were mowed down during numerous gunfights. The excuse most often given: The parents can't afford the cost of a sitter and a movie.

When it comes to violent computer games, where the object often is to kill as many people as possible, a survey by the National Institute on Media and the Family found that very few parents knew what was in the games, or that there is a content rating system.

There have been more than 3,000 studies on entertainment violence — mostly about television — and nearly all say that something must be done to curb media violence, or at least keep it from children.

Researchers like Dr. Leonard

Eron of the University of Illinois have been leading the charge with dire warnings. "Heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society," he told Congress in one report, based on more than 30 years of study.

Not every expert in child psychology agrees.

"All these experts that want to blame the Jonesboro murders on the media, video games or guns have failed to understand the research on violence and children and the role of personality in creating these youngsters," Los Angeles psychologist Robert R. Butterworth says.

He says that most children who commit violent crimes are motivated by family problems and personality disorders that surface when the child is as young as 3 or 4.

### Warnings resonate

Nonetheless, warnings about dangers children face from a diet of violent TV shows, movies and computer games ring true with many parents.

"I am appalled by what's out there for children to see, what TV, movies and computer games are telling them about the world and what's appropriate behavior," says Connie Lyons, a South Dade mother of two boys, ages 3 and 6, and past president of the South Florida Preschool PTA.

But how to fight it?

Since the 1950s, the primary strategy of researchers, child welfare groups and activist parents has been to lobby advertisers, producers and, ultimately, Congress to tone down or eliminate objectionable material.

That has had limited success.

"In a free, consumer-oriented society, efforts to impose some form of censorship on the entertainment media are never going to

be very successful," says Sissela Bok, a Harvard professor whose new book, *Mayhem: Violence as Public Entertainment*, is due out this month.

"But that doesn't mean children should have unrestricted access to violent entertainment."

Some experts say it's time for parents to recognize that they can do something to diminish the influence that media violence has on their children. They say that it won't be easy, but that it can be done.

### 'Helpless' parents

"The sad truth is that many parents feel helpless and don't act because they see the problem as overwhelming," says Linda Ellerbee, a longtime advocate for positive children's programming and host of a Nickelodeon cable show. "But the stakes are very high, and parents should act."

Apart from buying one of the new V-chip TVs, or a V-chip box that works with your present set to block programs based on their content label, a concerned parent can use published TV and movie ratings to get a feel for a program or film's content.

Although the ratings systems haven't garnered total approval from child advocacy groups, they can be useful signposts for parents.

On computer games, parents can check the content ratings before buying or renting. A helpful resource is *KidScore, a Parent's Guide to Software and Video Games*, which can be ordered free from the National Institute on Media and the Family at 1 (888) 772-2264.

Then combine all of this with home-based strategies, such as smart use of the VCR, talking to children about the context of the violence they do see on TV and at the movies, and helping them discern between the fantasy of computer games and the real consequences of violence.

"We've got to stop focusing on the hope that all of these violent influences will just go away, and take control," says Lauryn Axelrod, a former teacher, filmmaker and author of the book *TV-Proof Your Kids* (Citadel Press, \$12).

One of the first things parents must do, experts say, is give a clear and consistent message to children. When it comes to entertainment violence, we are very schizophrenic.

We rent violence-laden films at the video store and leave them around for children to watch. Unable or unwilling to find a baby sitter, we take children with us to R-rated movies. Worse yet, we use the TV as a pacifier of sorts.

### What is the message?

"I see parents all the time who give their children mixed messages — worrying about what their children watch, then using the TV as a baby sitter," Axelrod says.

A survey in the New York-New Jersey area in January found that parents bought their children TV sets for their bedrooms because they tired of fighting over what shows the family would watch.

"When parents do things like that, they abdicate any responsibility for what their children see," says David Walsh, executive director of the National Institute on Media and the Family.

"Parents need to know what their children are watching and, in the best cases, watch with them, explaining the context of any upsetting or controversial scenes and dialogue."

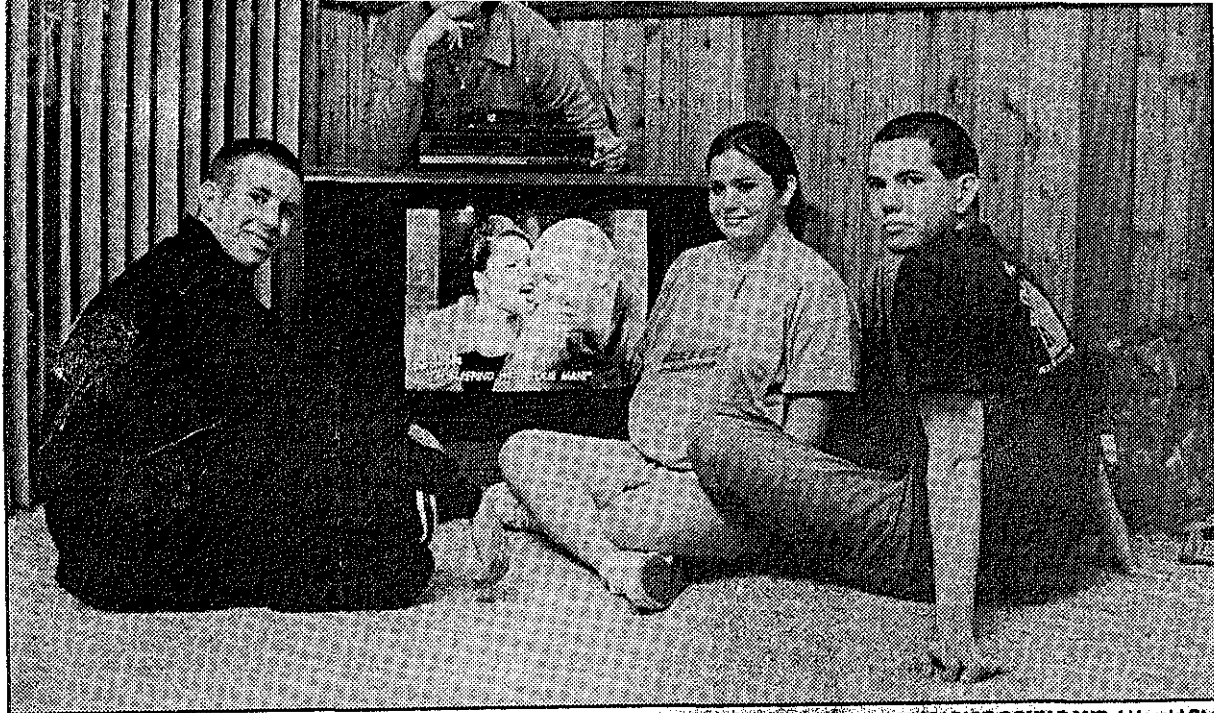
One of the contexts that Axelrod thinks is missing from a lot of programming — and that parents need to supplement — is the element of right and wrong, and

some notion that violence is not the answer to all disputes.

"When the good guys use the same level of violence to beat the bad guys, what's the message for children? They learn that violence is a proper response to any conflict," Axelrod says.

For example, in a recent episode of the CBS police drama *Brooklyn South*, two officers met in an alley after work and had a brutal fistfight to resolve a personal conflict.

Parents need to talk to children and teach them critical thinking, to reason out what they see as it applies to the real world. While watching *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, a prime-time show popular with children, explain that it's a fantasy, that there are hurtful consequences to such actions in real life.



MARICE COHN BAND / Herald Staff

**NO MORE POLICING:** Alice Gilbert and her kids, from left, Matt, Krista and Nicolas, watch one of their favorites, Jerry Springer's talk show. The West Kendall mother says she no longer censors their viewing

### Reality is less violent

Overall, children need to know that the world is not as violent as it seems on TV, the movies or computer games. What they see are mostly fictional depictions exaggerated to an extreme.

"There is no doubt that the world can be a dangerous place," says Ellerbee, a former newspaper journalist and network reporter. "We tell our children to not talk to strangers with good reason.

"But is it a world where they should be afraid of being shot at random, or being kidnapped and tortured? Those things happen, but by what they see on TV and in the movies, kids today have an unrealistic fear it will happen to them."

Finding the time for all this may be problematic in busy, two-income families, but researchers say it can be accomplished. And technology can help.

The family videocassette recorder can be a useful tool if parents tape shows they think are appropriate for their children and then schedule specific times when the family can watch together.

"There are a lot of good shows on TV, and a lot of good movies available at the video store," Ellerbee says. "Parents can make sure their children see more appropriate programs with just a little research."

But parents should also not expect to totally purge violent entertainment from their children's lives. Setting that goal dooms the effort to failure.

When Alice Gilbert's three children were younger, she was a card-carrying member of the media police. She patrolled their viewing and their playing, and censored those games and shows she deemed inappropriate. As the kids got older, however, she learned about a different type of control.

### Policing called difficult

"You can't be with them 24 hours a day," the West Kendall mother says. "Once they're old enough to go over to a friend's house, they're old enough to do things you don't know about."

Like other parents, Gilbert faces the onerous task of determining how much and what kind of media exposure her children have. She must monitor a host of outlets she may know little about, everything from chat rooms to movies to television and computer games. And she must do all this knowing that her house rules will probably be different from another parent's.

That's why Gilbert does not censor anything anymore — not movies, not video games, not explicit lyrics on her kids' CDs. But she does talk to the children and explains to them what media offerings she finds offensive, and why.

"I don't want to make it seem like forbidden fruit," she says.

This tactic has worked. She says her kids — now 19, 17 and 15 — watch fewer violent movies, play fewer computer games and don't listen to as many explicit CDs as their friends. And when they do, she makes it a point to discuss whatever subjects might come up.

"I've been able to discuss things with them that otherwise would have been awkward to bring up," Gilbert says.

Gilbert's methods are not unusual.

Stuart Needel, a Plantation father of an 11-year-old boy, considers himself pretty liberal about what he allows Zachary to watch and play. He offers the child few obstacles — but a lot of guidance. For example, Zachary loves *Mortal Kombat*, a video game often criticized for glorifying violence.

"We let him play, but we make sure we talk about it," Needel says. "I try to put it in context for him. My concern is more that when you see too much gratuitous violence, you think, 'Oh, well, that's just how it is.'"



**'STAKES ARE VERY HIGH':** Linda Ellerbee, cable TV host.

*'We've got to stop focusing on the hope that all of these violent influences will just go away, and take control.'*

**LAURYN AXELROD,**  
author of *'TV-Proof Your Kids'*

### The role of Hollywood

Some longtime media researchers such as George Gerbner, a Temple University professor who has studied the impact of violence on children for three decades, say that in all this talk about what parents should do, Hollywood gets off too easy.

"To shift the responsibility to the parents is wrong," Gerbner says. "It's like saying that if the air is polluted, let the parents get gas masks for their children."

Gerbner still strongly believes that the entire structure of entertainment — particularly TV — needs to change and that parents should continue to press Congress for legislation to force the opportunity for less-violent programming.

Bok, Axelrod and other advocates would welcome such change, but they take a more pragmatic view that says more immediate action can come at the family level.

"Parents need to educate themselves about what they can do individually, what they can do as members of the community," says Bok, who admits that many parents will still throw in the towel.

"The sad thing in many ways is that the people who will respond to this will be those who are already doing the right thing," Bok says.

"But if we manage to get the kind of debate we need, to get parents to look at themselves, that will help.

"People need to feel less helpless."

*Herald staff writer Ana Veciana-Suarez, Tyler Bridges of The Herald's Tallahassee Bureau and the Associated Press contributed to this report.*

# MIAMI HERALD

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## Violent films rated 'R' find young audience

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The intense, graphic violence found in some movies can exceed anything found in TV series or video games. But those films often carry a Motion Picture Association of America rating of "R" — no one under 17 admitted without parent or guardian.

Fair warning for parents — or so it would seem.

"It's a touchy issue," says an assistant manager at a Pembroke Pines theater, who would comment only if his name weren't used. "The 'R' rating says no one under 17 should see it without a parent or guardian. We see kids ages 10 or younger there with their parents, but who are we to say anything?"

There are other avenues for children to see films that weren't made for them — including videos. Chains like Blockbuster have strict policies about not allowing children to check out R-rated films. But once the video goes out the door, all bets are off.

Pay TV channels like Home Box Office and Showtime show films uncut. And even when a film eventually makes it to broadcast TV, where the most egregious material is edited out, it can still contain many violent scenes.

"The movies that are on TV are the worst offenders in putting violent scenes before children," Temple University professor George Gerbner says.



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# Prime time still hotbed of violence

■ *TV: Three years and 6,000 hours of programming later, a study reveals network and cable shows are still as violent as ever — and then some.*

2034 Temple Univ

By DAVID ZURAWIK  
SUN TELEVISION CRITIC

Despite assurances from the television industry in recent years that it has been diligently cutting down on violent content, one of the largest studies in the history of the medium finds that violence is in fact on the rise in prime time.

The National Television Violence Study, which involved viewing more than 6,000 hours of programming during the last three years at four major research universities, found that programs containing violent content rose by 14 percent on network television and 10 percent on basic cable between 1994 and 1997.

The percentage of prime-time programs containing violence now stands at 67 percent for the networks and 64 percent for basic cable, or roughly two out of every three programs. The highest level of violence is found on premium cable channels, where it is 92 percent.

(Broadcast networks are ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, UPN and WB. Basic cable includes such channels as USA and TNT. Premium cable includes HBO, Showtime and Cinemax. Prime-time runs from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. on weekdays and 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. on Sundays in the east.)

"For those who think the TV violence problem is solved, it is not," said Daniel Linz, one of the study's senior researchers, from the University of California, Santa Barbara. "This increase is especially problematic since prime time attracts the largest number of viewers."

In addition to UCSB, [See Violence, 7E]

# Violence hasn't fallen off in prime time, study says

[Violence, from Page 1E]

the University of Wisconsin, the University of North Carolina and the University of Texas participated in the three-year study, which was financed by the National Cable Television Association and overseen by an advisory council. The council, chaired by Donald Roberts, of Stanford University, includes representatives from such organizations as the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the PTA.

According to the study, several key aspects must be present for a program to be considered violent: the involvement of animate beings, a clear intent to harm and harm that is physical in nature, as opposed to psychological or emotional.

Lois Jean White, president of the national PTA, reacted to the study by saying that she was concerned about the rising tide of violence in prime time, "because studies have shown that certain kinds of television violence can have negative effects on a child's overall well-being."

In a statement issued yesterday, the National Cable Television Association said it "shares concern about portrayal of violence and its effects on children."

But Dennis Wharton, a spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters, said the findings contradict a network-funded study by UCLA researchers "which found that violence on broadcast television has declined steadily over the last three years."

The UCLA study, released in January, said networks had tempered the amount and nature of violence on their shows, except for the new "shockumentary" type shows featuring grisly content.

And Marty Franks, senior vice president of CBS Corp., strongly disputed the new study. He said his network's prime time lineup — with "Touched by an Angel," "Cosby" and "The Nanny" — features shows with little violence.

"This study persists in using the same flawed methodology ... of simply counting acts of violence without taking dramatic context into account," Franks said.

But the researchers said they did consider the context in which violence occurs. Not all violence on TV is bad, they said. Depictions that show the negative effects of violence are good and socially responsible.

However, one of the more troubling findings from the study was in how violence is depicted.

Nearly three-fourths of violent scenes contain no remorse, criticism or penalty for violence, with "bad" characters going unpunished in 40 percent of all programs.

Worse, the study found that violence is often glamorized and sanitized. About 40 percent of the violent incidents on television are initiated by "good" characters who are likely to be perceived as attractive role models.

"These patterns teach children that violence is desirable, necessary and painless," said Dale Kunkel, a researcher from UCSB.

This is what George Gerbner, the Temple University professor who pioneered research on TV violence, calls "happy violence."

Other findings from the study: ■ Violent incidents that qualify as high risk for children under age 7 are found most often in cartoons.

"Younger children have difficulty distinguishing televised fantasy from reality and are therefore at increased risk of imitating cartoon violence," said Barbara J. Wilson of UCSB.

This conclusion challenges the networks' claim that it is somehow ridiculous to consider cartoon violence as real violence, a tactic they used to try to minimize Gerbner's research.

■ The overall level of violence in non-fictional "reality" programming remained stable across the span of the three-year study.

This finding flies in the face of the conventional wisdom that says tabloid news shows and talk shows have been dramatically upping the ante on violent content.

■ The report lists five kinds of portrayals of violence that pose the highest risk for children: a perpetrator who is attractive; violence that seems justified; violence that goes unpunished; minimal consequences to the victim; and violence that seems realistic to the viewer.

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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# What Children See and Do: Studies of Violence on TV

■ New research shows level of violent programming holds steady, but networks call work 'flawed.'

By Alexandra Marks

Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

The simplicity of the experiment at the Minneapolis day-care center and the starkness of the results stunned the parents.

When a class of two- to five-year-olds watched public television's big-hearted purple dinosaur, "Barney," they sang along, marched along, held one another's hands, and laughed together.

The next day, the same class watched the aggressive teenage avengers, "Power Rangers." Within minutes, they were karate-chopping and high-kicking the air — and one another.

"Even though the goal of these programs isn't to teach, our kids are learning because they're always learning," says David Walsh of the National Institute on Media and the Family, who conducted the experiment with a local television station last fall.

Concern about the effect of TV violence on children has grown almost every year since the flickering screens entered America's homes. While Congress has pounded its fists and parents have complained, the overall level of violence remains the same, according to the National Television Violence Study released yesterday in Washington.

The three-year study underwritten by the cable industry also found that prime-time violence, on both broadcast and cable networks, has increased since 1994. And the much-ballyhooed rating system implemented by the networks initially failed to identify violent programs. It also concluded that the way violence is portrayed in most instances — glamorized, sanitized, and without negative consequences — poses a serious risk to children.

"These patterns teach children that violence is desirable, necessary, and painless," says Dale Kunkel of the University of California at Santa Barbara, where the study was done.

The networks, weary of the annual attacks, strongly defend the strides they've made in adding the rating system and high-quality children's shows. "[This study] frustrates me, because I don't think it paints a very accurate or useful picture," says Martin Franks, a senior vice president of CBS.

Mr. Franks says a similar study underwritten by the broadcast networks found an overall decrease in the level of televised violence. He also attacks the methodology of the cable study as "horribly flawed," contending that it primarily counts incidences of violence without noting timing or context. "It doesn't distinguish between 'Schindler's List' and 'Die Hard,'" he says.

But the study's authors disagree. They say their counters clearly distinguish between harmful and educational violence. They found that less than 5 percent of all programs had an antiviolent theme.

"These point out the problems with violence, show alternatives to it, and make people aware of the negative consequences," says Barbara Wilson,

NEW YORK



FOX CHILDREN'S NETWORK

IN THE LINE OF FIRE: Many critics of TV violence have targeted the show 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' as a prime offender. A new study says glamorized or sanitized violence poses a bigger risk to children.

another of the study's authors.

Professor Wilson applauds the efforts of some individuals in Hollywood to create positive programs. But she says many others have to follow suit if their efforts are to register a change in the annual study.

The authors also praise the networks for adding content information to their age-based rating system after parents complained. But NBC is criticized for refusing to join the others.

Some media experts, like George Gerbner of Temple University in Philadelphia, are tougher on the new ratings. "It's like instead of cleaning up the polluted air, they said, 'We'll give you a gas mask,'" says Professor Gerbner.

But other media analysts are taking a wait-and-see attitude about the new system.

"It's a start, but there's a long way to go," says Ranny Levy of the Coalition for Quality Children's Media. The coalition already rates children's videos and CD Roms to give parents an independent guide to quality programming. The National Institute on

Media and the Family has also decided to add an independent voice to the debate.

"We're having parents rate the programs," says Dr. Walsh. "Within a week or so, we'll report on whether our parents agree with the networks."

For now, the study's authors say, parents should become aware of the types of violence that pose risks to children and monitor what their kids watch. "In the long term, if the creative community is going to use violence, it should consider showing the consequences, some remorse, and criticism of violence," says Wilson.

## RATINGS RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

■ These groups provide independent ratings of television programs.

### KidScore™

National Institute on Media  
and the Family  
Riverside Professional Building  
606 24th Avenue South, Suite 606  
Minneapolis, MN 55454

### KIDS FIRST!™

112 W. San Francisco St.  
Santa Fe, NM 87501  
[www.COCM.org](http://www.COCM.org)

# Killers may have used rap song as a blueprint for torture, murder

By DAN SHEEHAN  
The Express-Times

The revelation that Richezza Williams' killers may have used a rap song as a blueprint in her torture and murder feeds into an old debate about the effects of media violence.

"Method Man" by Wu-Tang Clan describes tortures similar to those inflicted on Williams — among them, burning a victim with a wire hanger heated on a stove.

"Put a hanger on a f---' stove and let that s— sit there for like a half-hour," the lyrics say. "Take it off and stick it in ..."

But it would be a mistake to blame the obscenity-laden song itself in Williams' murder, one media expert says.

"There must be some predisposition (in killers) that must be triggered by a rap song or a story but is not created by it," said George Gerbner, a Temple University professor who conducted groundbreaking research into the influence of television and other media on behavior.

"They use (the song) as a standard to decide what they want to do — they can decide to imitate it or carry it to an extreme, which is a form of one-upmanship."

State Rep. T.J. Rooney, D-Northampton, who has pushed the Legislature to prohibit sales of explicit records to minors, said gangster rap may not directly trigger violence, but it contributes to a dangerous climate.

"When you glorify hate, when you glorify violence and you're targeting an audience that's susceptible or malleable, then it takes a toll in one way, shape or form," he said.

"It occurs every day, but it oftentimes manifests itself in far

Please see RAP /A-2

## RAP

Continued from A-1

less striking examples, (such as) if a kid comes into school and refers to an African-American by the 'n' word," or if a kid calls another kid (obscenities)."

Easton Police Lt. Steven J. Parkansky said violent song lyrics — whether in rap or other genres — "at some point have to have an effect on society.

"Do I believe that song was the catalyst for this murder? No," Parkansky said. "I do believe it may have had some influence in some of the things that occurred to her."

EXAMINER

INDEPENDENCE, MO  
FRIDAY 11,064  
MAY 29 1998



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# Are video games tied to violence?

203LT  
By The Associated Press

ATLANTA — At the nation's largest trade show for video games, industry officials insist they don't sell gore to kids and that their games are all in fun.

For critics, that message was hard to hear above a deafening din of computer gunfire and bomb blasts, where banks of new shoot-'em-up software fought noisily for attention.

The Electronic Entertainment Expo here comes a week after the latest in a string of deadly shootings at schools, renewing concerns that frequent exposure to TV brutality has numbed teenagers to gore — and even helped to push some troubled ones over the edge.

"I call it the military training of

the mind and body," said George Gerbner, a telecommunications professor who studies media violence at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Children in many ways haven't learned the spurious distinction between reality and storytelling."

While the industry has expanded its array of genres — there are videos from Barbie dolls to fishing — it was clear from displays at the expo that games encouraging users to wound and kill are alive and well.

One new video game unveiled here featured a boy in a white karate outfit whose goal is to kick and beat various opponents. "The killer in me is just beginning," reads one biography.

The video-game industry points out that there is no evi-

dence the high-profile school shootings in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Mississippi were tied to playing video games or watching TV.

"I think everybody ... has to be concerned with what's happening with these school shootings," said Howard Lincoln, chairman of Nintendo of America Inc., maker of the popular Nintendo 64 console. But, he added, "I don't think there's any connection with video games and violence."

Several industry officials at the three-day expo said a ratings system for games launched four years ago has successfully prodded sellers to voluntarily restrict teen-agers from buying violent videos.

But ratings aren't foolproof, others acknowledged.

USA TODAY (EUROPE)

ZURICH, SW

FRIDAY 61,066

MAY 29 1998



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# TV content ratings get parents' backing

By Gary Levin  
USA TODAY

2034T  
Parents may be warming up to TV's content-ratings system.

A new study from the Kaiser Family Foundation shows 54% of parents use the system, and 45% say they've stopped their child from watching a show because of its rating.

Under the system introduced in January 1997, the net-

works assign age- and content-based ratings to most programs to warn parents about sexual themes, violence or adult language.

The ratings are designed to be used with the upcoming "V-chip" (for violence), which will allow parents to block shows carrying certain labels.

Nearly two-thirds of parents (65%) say they'd use a V-chip if they had one. But 69% say

they're unlikely to buy a new TV set or an add-on device containing a V-chip in the next two years. And a separate survey of kids reveals that 35% would try to watch blocked shows, confirming the so-called "forbidden fruit" theory.

Many respondents remain unfamiliar with the alphabet soup of labels, such as "D" (suggestive dialogue) and "FV" (fantasy violence); one in five

haven't heard of the system.

Kaiser found more support for the ratings system than did a recent survey conducted by the Associated Press, which found 51% of parents ignored the labels.

"Making choices about their children's TV viewing is the right of every parent," said Vice President Al Gore at a briefing Wednesday.

"We must explore every option that might help prevent violence by children and that includes ... helping parents to limit their own children's exposure to television violence."

Kaiser, an independent research group, surveyed 1,358 parents and 446 children by phone in April; margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage

points for parents, 5 percentage points for kids.

Some critics say evidence of growing support for the ratings system may be overstated. Many parents "say what they think they ought to say" when questioned about responsibility for their kids' viewing habits, says George Gerbner, a Temple University communications professor.

For now, "the research is relatively meaningless," says Action for Children's Television founder Peggy Charren. "It isn't as though parents have no way of knowing what's on television. Without the chip in the set, the ratings are no more meaningful for parents than picking up information in the newspaper." /

MIAMI, FL  
SATURDAY 5, 1994  
MAY 30 1998



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203LT

Associated Press

**\$50 GIZMO:** Tiger Electronics employee demonstrates the company's new pocket video game, Pocket Pro, Friday.

## Don't blame us for kids' violence, game makers say

By **DAVID E. KALISH**  
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Above the deafening din of pretend gunfire and bomb explosions at a trade show here, the video-game industry had a message for people who worry about the impact of violent play on kids:

Our games are all in fun, we don't sell gore to children, and our ratings system makes sure of it.

But some critics said that message was hard to hear this week at the nation's largest trade show for video games, where banks of new shoot-'em-up software — some with youthful appeal — fought noisily for attention.

The recent string of deadly school shootings has renewed a perennial concern that frequent media brutality is numbing teenagers to gore, potentially helping to push some troubled ones over the edge.

"I call it the military training of the mind and body," said George Gerbner, a telecommunications professor who studies media violence at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Children in many ways haven't learned the spurious distinction between reality and story-telling."

There's no evidence the shootings this year in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Mississippi were tied to playing video games or watching TV.

And several officials at the Electronic Entertainment Expo said a ratings system the industry started four years ago has prodded sellers to voluntarily restrict teens from buying violent videos. A study released last November by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., found many parents use ratings on game packages to guide their purchases.

The industry recently expanded beyond boy-targeted games to create a wide range of videos, from dressing Barbie dolls to fishing.

"I think everybody . . . has to be concerned with what's happening with these school shootings," said Howard Lincoln, chairman of Nintendo of America Inc., maker of the popular Nintendo 64 console.

But, he added, "I don't think there's any connection with video games and violence."

"Our ratings are just like the motion picture industry," said Kazuo Hirai, chief operating officer of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., which makes PlayStation, the largest-selling console.

But ratings aren't foolproof, others acknowledged.

"Unfortunately, not all parents are that discerning about what their children might buy," said Robert Lindsey, head of sales and marketing for the U.S. unit of Japan's Capcom, a seller of fighting games to Sony and Nintendo.

Because many video games still urge users to shoot or fight realistic-looking characters, some critics say they can desensitize kids already immune to violent acts on television and in movies.

# Many parents say 'duh' to TV ratings

by **Richard Huff**

~~New York Daily News~~

While more than half the parents polled in a new survey said they're using the 18-month-old TV content-rating designations when making viewing choices for their kids, many also conceded they can't explain what the ratings mean.

Specifically, 54 percent of the parents said they use the TV ratings to guide their children's viewing, and 45 percent said they have stopped at least one of their kids from watching a show because of its rating, according to the study released yesterday by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

The survey also found, though, that only 54 percent of the respondents know what at least six of the 11 ratings symbols mean, while 46 percent know five or fewer.

The ratings range from TV-MA, which designates suitability for viewers 17 and older (Comedy Central's "South Park" is the only regular series to carry the MA label) to TV-Y, the label for such all-ages kid shows as ABC's "101 Dalmatians."

Last October, ABC, CBS, Fox and most major cable networks added V, S and L designations to their age-based content ratings to warn parents of strong violence, sexual content or language. NBC refuses to modify its ratings, though it does provide on-air warnings.

"The good news for the ratings system is that many parents are using the ratings and find them helpful, but they do not always understand the system and there are changes they'd like to see made," said Drew Altman, president of the foundation, a research group concerned with the impact of entertainment.

The survey conflicts with a March poll conducted by the Associated Press that indicated that parents were overwhelmingly ignoring the ratings.

"The groundswell in terms of public pressure still hasn't hap-

pened," said a network source. "Corporatewise and at our stations, people haven't been asking about the ratings."

In the new survey, one out of five parents claimed never to have heard of the ratings system. Twenty-seven percent said they had heard of the system, though they "never" or "hardly ever" use it. The most common reason for not using the system was that parents would rather decide themselves what their kids should see.

"We work very hard to provide parents with as much information as possible," said an ABC spokeswoman. "We're glad to see many parents are using the information we give them."

In a companion survey of kids, a third of the 10- to 17-year-olds polled, said that their parents have stopped them at least once from watching something because of the rating. Also, more than a third said they had not watched a show based on the rating. In that group, 40 percent said they did so because their parents would not approve, while 26 percent said they tuned elsewhere because the rating indicated the show was for a younger audience.

According to the survey, 49 percent of the parents knew that children's shows are rated; 51 percent failed to name even one of the ratings for kid shows, and 17 percent could name only one.

The survey found that 65 percent of the parents would use a V-chip, an electronic device to block programming in their home, if they had it. However, most parents said they are either "not too likely" (24 percent) or "not likely at all" (45 percent) to get a TV or set-top box equipped with a V-chip in the next two years.

Vice President Al Gore on Wednesday urged parents to use the TV ratings and the coming V-chip technology to try to reduce violence by youngsters. ■



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# Game makers say they're not responsible for violence

By David E. Kalish

Associated Press

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ATLANTA — Above the deafening din of pretend gunfire and bomb explosions at a trade show here two weeks ago, the video-game industry had a message for people who worry about the impact of violent play on kids:

Our games are all in fun, we don't sell gore to children, and our ratings system makes sure of it.

But some critics said that message was hard to hear last weekend at the nation's largest trade show for video games, where banks of new shoot-'em-up software — some with youthful appeal — fought noisily for attention.

The recent string of deadly

school shootings has renewed a perennial concern that frequent media brutality is numbing teenagers to gore, potentially helping to push some troubled ones over the edge.

"I call it the military training of the mind and body," said George Gerbner, a telecommunications professor who studies media violence at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Children in many ways haven't learned the spurious distinction between reality and storytelling."

There's no evidence the shootings this year in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Mississippi were tied to playing video games or watching TV.

And several officials at the three-day Electronic Entertainment Expo said a ratings system the industry started

four years ago has prodded sellers to voluntarily restrict teens from buying violent videos. A study released last November by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., found many parents use ratings on sides of game packages to guide their purchases.

"I think everybody ... has to be concerned with what's happening with these school shootings," said Howard Lincoln, chairman of Redmond-based Nintendo of America Inc., maker of the popular Nintendo 64 console.

"I don't think there's any connection with video games and violence," he added.

While the industry has expanded its array of genres, it was clear from displays at the show that games encouraging users to wound and kill are alive and well.



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# 'Dr. Quinn' falls victim to TV's lust for a younger audience

By DON AUCOIN  
THE BOSTON GLOBE

203LT  
Every Saturday night over the just-ended television season, nearly 12 million viewers tuned in to watch "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman," almost twice as many as paddled through the soapy currents of "Dawson's Creek" each week.

But "Dawson's Creek" is the toast of the television industry, such a "hit" for the nascent WB network that rival programmers are scrambling to come up with copycat shows.

Meanwhile, "Dr. Quinn" has just been dumped by CBS like a superannuated sawbones, even though the show often finished first in the ratings in its time slot, and even though Jane Seymour had become one of the network's signature stars.

This tale of two series sheds a sickly light on the baffling world of

TV demographics, a pseudo-science in which Manhattan-based media buyers in their 20s largely determine what you watch and how long you get to watch it.

"What's happened to 'Dr. Quinn' is a perfect example of why people say that TV is out of touch with the mainstream, with Middle America," said TV historian Steven Stark. "Shows that ordinary Americans liked, are gone, simply because Madison Avenue doesn't like them."

The cold truth about TV land is that some viewers are more equal than others. If you're age 18 to 49 and live in or near a city, like many "Dawson's Creek" fans, the networks will cater to you because advertisers will pay premium prices to the networks in order to reach you.

However, if you're over 49, or if you have the temerity to live in a rural area — like many "Dr. Quinn" fans —

you will largely be ignored (the "Save Dr. Quinn" campaign that fans have launched is doomed to failure, CBS sources say).

"If you're not huge in New York, L.A., Chicago, you're finished, you're done," said TV industry consultant Paul Krumins.

In canceling "Dr. Quinn," CBS is dumping one of the few prime-time shows considered safe for family viewing at a time when Congress and advocacy groups are stepping up the pressure on the networks to clean up their act.

More broadly, the networks' collective quest for demographically desirable viewers — which once kept high-quality shows such as "Cheers" and "Hill Street Blues" on the air through early ratings struggles — now appears to override considerations of quality. Ad agencies, not programmers, are more firmly in the driver's seat than ever.

"It's not the guy at CBS who canceled the show," said Krumins. "It's the ad agencies that push the older, comfortable shows off the air."

A CBS executive said the decision to drop "Dr. Quinn" was "not made lightly," especially since the show is partly owned by CBS.

"But one of the cruel realities of our business is that advertisers place a premium on reaching viewers who are younger," said the executive, who requested anonymity.

In canceling "Dr. Quinn" and tailoring many of next season's shows for younger viewers, CBS appears to be bending to the iron law of the marketplace.

"The basic television transaction is the purchase of audience time to watch the commercials," says George Gerbner, a professor of communications at Temple University. "Unfortunately, the quality of the program — or even the popularity of the program — is not the primary consideration."

The primary consideration for TV executives and the advertisers who call the TV tune is: Will a show appeal to the 18-to-49, urban, college-educated demographic?

That cohort is considered hard to reach because they are "light" TV viewers, unlike the over-50 crowd. "The feeling in television, and the research proves this out, is that adults 50 and over, you get those audiences for free," said Krumins. "The 18-to-49 audience is more elusive."

The reason for the influence of younger viewers is as simple as economics. First, movie advertising plays an increasingly large role on TV, and moviegoers tend to be younger. The same applies for other big TV advertisers such as soft drinks and fast foods. Second, advertisers crave younger viewers because, while they may not be as affluent as older viewers, their purchasing habits are not firmly established yet.

Consequently, shows with the "right" demographics can command prices from advertisers up to four times higher than shows with the "wrong" demographics.

Young-skewing shows are considered winners by the networks, even if their ratings might seem unimpressive. "Dawson's Creek," for instance, finished at No. 132 last season in the Nielsen ratings ("Dr. Quinn" finished at No. 74). Another hot WB show, "Buffy the Vampire Slayer," finished at No. 142.

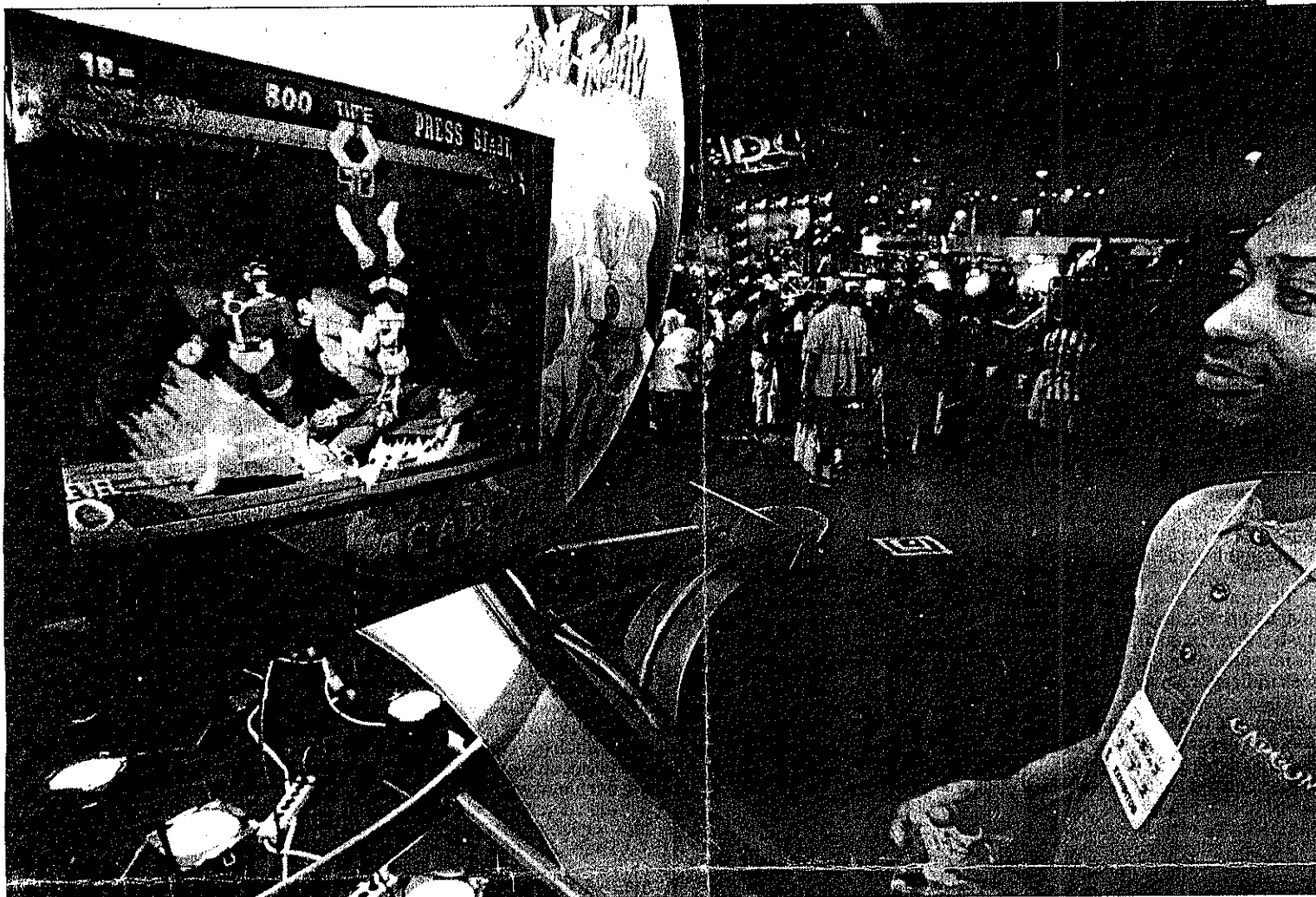
By contrast, rival networks dismiss the success of such CBS shows as "Touched by an Angel" (No. 6) and "Diagnosis Murder" (No. 25) because they have the "wrong" demographics. And advertisers apparently agree.



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# Video games not pulling punches



Capcom's Victor Johnson demonstrates a video game on a Sony PlayStation console at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Atlanta.

## But makers defend sales with use of rating system

By David E. Kalish  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ATLANTA — Above the din of pretend gunfire and bomb blasts at a trade show here, the video-game industry had a message for people who worry about the impact of violent play on kids:

Our games are all in fun, we don't sell gore to children, and our ratings system makes sure of it.

But some critics said that message was hard to hear last week at the nation's largest trade show for video games, where banks of new shoot-'em-up software — some with youthful appeal — fought noisily for attention.

The recent string of deadly school shootings has renewed a perennial concern that frequent media brutality is numbing teenagers to gore, potentially helping to push some troubled ones over the edge.

"I call it the military training of

the mind and body," said George Gerbner, a telecommunications professor who studies media violence at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Children in many ways haven't learned the spurious distinction between reality and storytelling."

There's no evidence the shootings this year in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Mississippi were tied to playing video games or watching TV.

And several officials at the three-day Electronic Entertainment Expo said a ratings system the industry established four years ago has prodded sellers to voluntarily restrict teens from buying violent videos. A study released last November by Sen. Joseph I. Lieberman, Connecticut Democrat, found many parents use ratings on the sides of game packages to guide their purchases.

The industry recently expanded beyond boy-targeted games to cre-

### SOFTWARE STRINGS

Here are the computer-game ratings:

Rating	Meaning
EC: Early Childhood	For ages 3 and up.
K-A: Kids to Adults	For ages 6 and up. May contain mild violence, comic mischief or crude language.
T: Teen	For ages 13 and up. May contain violence, strong language or sexually suggestive themes.
M: Mature	For ages 17 and up. Contains harsh violence and language. May include sexual themes.
AO: Adults Only	Should not be sold or rented to minors. Has graphic depiction of sex and/or violence.

The Washington Times

ate a wide range of videos, from dressing Barbie dolls to fishing.

"I think everybody... has to be concerned with what's happening with these school shootings," said Howard Lincoln, chairman of Nintendo of America Inc., maker of the popular Nintendo 64 console.

But, he added, "I don't think there's any connection with video games and violence."

"Our ratings are just like the motion picture industry," said Kazuo Hirai, chief operating officer of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., which makes PlayStation, the largest-selling

console.

But ratings aren't foolproof, others acknowledged.

"Unfortunately, not all parents are that discerning about what their children might buy," said Robert Lindsey, head of sales and marketing for the U.S. unit of Japan's Capcom, a seller of fighting games to Sony and Nintendo.

Because many video games still urge users to shoot or fight realistic-looking characters, some critics say they can desensitize kids already immune to violent

see GAMES, page B9

# GAMES

*From page B7*

acts on television and in movies. Games increasingly grow more realistic because of technology making imagery seem three-dimensional and computer-generated characters seem more human.

While the industry has expanded its array of genres, it was clear from displays at the show that games encouraging users to wound and kill are alive and well.

Capcom, for example, displayed several new fighting games. One was its latest "Street Fighter," in which a boy in a white karate outfit

tries to kick and beat various opponents. "The killer in me is just beginning," reads the text introducing one of its characters.

Mr. Lindsey said teen-agers are an important audience for Capcom fighting games. "I refer to them as my early adapters — if I get them on board, I know I'll get everyone else."

Sony's Mr. Hirai, in comments to thousands of attendees Thursday, said the industry needs to do a better job getting out its message to lawmakers.

"We in the industry need to obtain more visibility and have people on Capitol Hill understand what this business is about," he said.



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## Stories TV Doesn't Tell

E203LT

EDITORIAL

We're at a point in history, says George Gerbner, a professor at Temple University, when most of our culture's stories are told not by parents, schools, churches or community members with something to tell—but by global media conglomerates with something to sell. A whole lot of selling's going on. But what stories are not being told by U.S. television—or not told fully?

Ask Todd Putnam, who edited *National Boycott News* in the early nineties. NBC's *Today* decided to do a segment on boycotts and sent a producer to ask Putnam, "What's the biggest boycott going on right now?" After Putnam said that the premier U.S. boycott was the one targeting General Electric—owner of NBC—

on its production of nuclear weapons, the producer responded: "We can't do that one. Well, we could do that one, but we won't." Weeks later, she called Putnam, looking for a boycott that was "small," "local" and "sexy." Still later, a more senior producer remarked that he'd lose his job at NBC if G.E. was mentioned. Ultimately, *Today* did run a boycott segment without mentioning G.E.

You don't have to be a nuclear scientist to know that some stories are better left untold in corporate-dominated television. Indeed, what's striking about the boycott-story fiasco and others like it is that TV producers were either daring or clueless enough to venture into off-limits territory in the first place. It's more common simply to avoid whole areas, as do journalists at NBC when it comes to the nuclear and environmental problems caused by G.E. As do journalists at ABC when it comes to Disney's sweatshops. Nor is PBS beyond the reach of corporate influence. Throughout 1995 the *NewsHour* all but ignored the price-fixing scandal involving Archer Daniels Midland, the agri-giant that underwrites the show to the tune of \$6 million a year.

It's well known that TV sponsors dislike controversy. What's not well known is the intimate prior review that some programs grant sponsors. At NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, advertisers review scripts, watch rehearsals and work closely with network censors in getting skits changed or dropped. Even more than controversy, sponsors detest criticism. In 1992 G.M. threatened to pull its ads from *Saturday Night Live* until a comedy sketch about mass layoffs dropped the company's name. G.M. threatened another ad pullout after seeing rehearsals of an *SNL* bit deriding the company for its use of live animals in crash tests. The bit was dropped.

In rare cases, advertisers themselves get censored. When it comes to political (noncampaign) ads, TV executives have arbitrary power over which will air. In 1995 CNN brazenly rejected an ad telling viewers that consumer advocates opposed a merger-friendly telecommunications "reform" bill because it would cost consumers "billions of dollars." After "reform" was enacted, Time Warner's merger with Turner/CNN was approved.

Politically minded comics have found that, even in jest, many ideas are off-limits on TV. On the Letterman show soon after it moved to CBS, network censors surgically removed Bill Hicks's stand-up routine because it had touched "too many hot spots." Hicks's targets included "pro-life" activists (who were encouraged to blockade cemeteries), male homophobes (who, he quipped, love to see women together in porn) and religion (would Christ, on his return, really want to see all those crosses?).

Singing truth to power is a long musical tradition—one that has often conflicted with the codes of television. Rage Against the Machine, the multi-platinum rap-metal group, has encountered no meddling from its record company but was unceremoniously muzzled in 1996 on *Saturday Night Live*. Band members were escorted out of the NBC building before they could perform their second song after hanging American flags upside down on their amps prior to the first song (stagehands quickly removed them) and after dissing that night's host, Steve Forbes. This past December, anarcho-rockers Chumbawamba outfoxed the censors when, performing a song on Letterman, they chanted "Free Mumia Abu-Jamal"—a rare mention of the death-row

*(Continued From Page 7)*

inmate on national TV. Fearing a "big edit" from CBS censors, Letterman producers asked the band to do a retake. The group refused, and the song aired in full.

While U.S. television serves up a regular diet of sizzle and gruel, there's a whole range of options not on the menu. You can turn off what's tasteless, but as children's TV advocate Peggy Charren observes, "You can't turn on what's not there."

JEFF COHEN

*Jeff Cohen is the director of the media watch group FAIR and co-author of Wizards of Media Oz (Common Courage).*

*(Continued on Page 38)*



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*Video-Game Makers To Parents:  
Don't Blame Us For  
M: 203LT Kids' Violence*

BY DAVID E. KALISH

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
BUSINESS WRITER  
ATLANTA

FRONT PAGE

Above the deafening din of pretend gunfire and bomb explosions, at a trade show here, the video-game industry had a message for people who worry about the impact of violent play on kids:

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"I call it the military training of the mind and body," said George Gerbner, a telecommunications professor who studies media violence at Temple University in Philadelphia. "Children in

*Continued On Page 3*

# Don't Blame Us

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many ways haven't learned the spurious distinction between reality and story-telling."

There's no evidence the shootings this year in Oregon, Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Mississippi were tied to playing video games or watching TV.

And several officials at the three-day Electronic Entertainment Expo said a ratings system the industry started four years ago has prodded sellers to voluntarily restrict teens from buying violent videos. A study released last November by Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., found many parents use ratings on sides of game packages to guide their purchases.

The industry recently expanded beyond boy-targeted games to create a wide range of videos, from dressing Barbie dolls to fishing.

"I think everybody ... has to be concerned with what's happening with these school shootings," said Howard Lincoln, chairman of Nintendo of America Inc., maker of the popular Nintendo 64 console.

But, he added, "I don't think there's any connection with video games and violence."

"Our ratings are just like the motion picture industry," said Kazuo Hirai, chief operating officer of Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc., which makes PlayStation, the largest-selling console.

But ratings aren't foolproof, others acknowledged.

"Unfortunately, not all parents are that discerning about what their children might buy," said Robert Lindsey, head of sales and marketing for the U.S. unit of Japan's Capcom, a seller of fighting games to Sony and Nintendo.

Because many video games still urge users to shoot or fight realistic-looking characters, some critics say they can desensitize kids already immune to violent acts on television and in movies. Games grow increasingly

more realistic due to technology making imagery seem three-dimensional and computer-generated characters seem more human.

While the industry has expanded its array of genres, it was clear from displays at the show that games encouraging users to wound and kill are alive and well.

Capcom, for example, displayed several new fighting games. One was its latest Street Fighter, in which a boy in a white Karate outfit tries to kick and beat various opponents. "The killer in me is just beginning," read the text introducing one of its characters.

Lindsey said teen-agers are an important audience for Capcom fighting games. "I refer them as my early adapters — if I get them on board, I know I'll get everyone else."

Sony's Hirai, in comments to thousands of attendees May 28, said the industry needs to do a better job getting out its message to lawmakers.

"We in the industry need to obtain more visibility and have people on Capitol Hill understand what this business is about," he said.