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New television-rating system is extremely flawed
by George Gerbner
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The Federal Communications Commission last week put its stamp of approval on a new television-rating system that is extremely flawed.

This system has been in effect since Jan. 1, 1997. Signs like TV-K (for kids) and TV-M (for mature audiences) flicker on the upper left corner of your screen at the start of every show.

The television-rating system has four major problems.

First, it doesn't work. I recently conducted a study that shows these ratings do little to protect children from violence- or alcohol-saturated programming.

The study found that programs rated TV-G (suitable for all ages) during last fall season's prime-time schedule contained only one-third fewer violent scenes than programs rated TV-14 (unsuitable for children under 14), the highest age category for children.

Even the TV-G programs contained an average of two and a half scenes per hour of alcohol being consumed, with virtually no discussion of the adverse effects of alcohol consumption.

Second, the rating system confuses the choices made in movie-going with the very different decisions involved in television viewing. Television comes into the home an average of seven hours a day. To monitor your child's viewing you have to be a full-time television watchdog. Opening credits (when the ratings flash on) are not when people decide which programs to view.

Third, the rating system is inconsistent. This is because producers rate their own programs. So, while the "Tonight Show with Jay Leno" has a TV-14 rating, the "Late Show With David Letterman" gets a TV-PG (parental guidance suggested).

Fourth, to have ratings designed by the industry and then programmed into the V-Chip -- a device proposed to be installed in television sets to block out objectionable programming -- is like letting the fox guard the chicken coop.

Before they go to school, most of our children are integrated into a television view of the world. Parents, schools, communities or even countries may not share this perspective, since it belongs to a handful of global conglomerates with something to sell.

This phenomenon has transformed our culture. Our Cultural Indicators (CI) research project, based in Philadelphia, 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. More than 20 scenes of violence per hour fill Saturday morning cartoon programs.

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.

Ratings cannot alleviate the human, social and political fallout of the "mean world syndrome." But can they at least keep viewers from flocking to violent programs? No, according to the results of our study.

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.

So what shall we do as concerned parents and citizens?

Media-watch groups, children's and parents' advocates, and other

public-interest organizations should make their voices heard on the real issues -- issues of diversity in media ownership, employment and representation. We need to speak out on marketing-driven media monopolies, the homogenization of programming and the global reach of media corporations.

Citizens own the airwaves. We should demand that they be healthy, free and fair, not just "rated." The rating system is a diversion from the real issues.

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