

The Ratings Rant, V-Chip Gyp, and TV Violence Shuffle: What are the Real Issues?

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

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

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

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

All organizations present urged him to design a system that provides reasons for the ratings such as sex, violence, foul language, etc., so that parents can make informed decisions. But Valenti made it clear that, like it or not, his age-classification movie-style rating is the system we get. The next thing we saw was the picture of Jack Valenti in the White House, where President Bill Clinton praised Valenti for developing the ratings a year before it will be programmed into the now legally mandated V-Chip, an electronic device that is supposed to block unwanted programs.

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

First, it ignores what public opinion polls

and public-interest groups have demanded: information about the reasons for the ratings rather than only age classifications.

Second, it confuses the choices made in movie-going with the very different decisions of television viewing. Television is watched more by the clock than by the program. To monitor your child's viewing you have to be a full-time television watchdog. Opening credits (when the ratings flash on) are not the decisive choice points in television viewing.

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

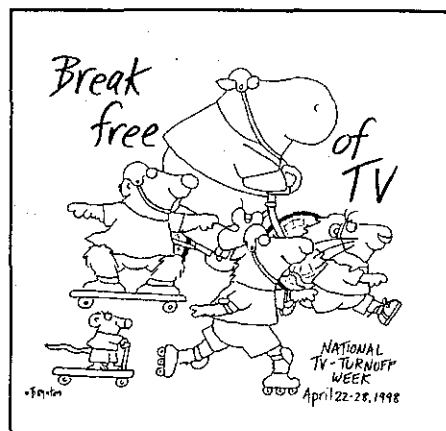
Fourth, using ratings designed by the industry and programmed into the V-Chip is like letting the fox (no pun intended) guard the chicken coop.

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

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

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

We have also found that those who watch more television in every group express a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and insecurity than do light viewers in the same groups. We call this the "mean world syndrome." Viewing violent televi-



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sion cultivates fears and dependencies that make some groups more vulnerable than others to exploitation and victimization. Ultimately, therefore, marketing mayhem contributes to domination and repression.

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

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

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

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

Mindless TV violence, then, is not an expression of artistic freedom or of any

measure of reality. On the contrary, it is the product of a de facto censorship: a global marketing formula imposed on program creators and foisted on the children of the world.

Media watch groups, children's and

parents' advocates should make their voices heard on the real issues. They are issues of gender equity and general diversity in media ownership, employment, and representations. They are issues of marketing-driven media monopolization, homogeni-

zation and globalization.

Citizens own the airwaves. We should demand that they be healthy, free, and fair—and not just “rated.” ☪

On Video Violence, Parents and Programmers are Missing the Real Dangers, and a Real Opportunity

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It's the debate that has been around since the dawn of cartoons. Does violence in children's entertainment lead to more violence in the real world? While this debate simmered in the background of parents' and peace groups' concerns for years, the advent of the video game brought the subject to a new level.

Once video violence actually became interactive, it became a source of far more immediate concern. Groups like the Lion & Lamb Project and the National Institute on Media and the Family point to a 1995 study from the American Psychological Association that concluded that “children's exposure to violence in the mass media, particularly at young ages, can have harmful lifelong consequences.” The 1995 study emerged from dozens of smaller studies conducted throughout the nation. This concern has become far more acute with the advent of high-resolution games like “Mortal Kombat” and “Duke Nukem” where the violence has become tremendously life-like and bloody.

On the other side, we have the manufacturers who argue that they have made plenty of what they call “nonviolent” video games/puzzle games like the many variations of “Tetris,” sports games, and racing games, that have no violence in them at all, or games like Nintendo's “Donkey Kong Country” or Sony Playstation's “Crash Vandicoot” where the hero is cuddly and cute rather than some muscular brute. They have voluntarily adopted the Electronic Software Ratings Board ratings system.

But in all this back and forth, what neither side realizes is that despite the agreement on the “violent” and “nonviolent” categories by both industry and par-

ents/peace groups, in reality there are no “nonviolent” video games. This is because both sides are misusing the word “nonviolence.” As people of peace know, in its proper use “nonviolence” is a proactive choice of an alternative other than violence when confronted by a conflict situation. This is a *major* difference from simply being “not violent.” For example, Soleau Software prides itself on making what it calls nonviolent games. While their games are excellent brain-teasers, even their most complex game, “Axiom Adventures,” is just a well-crafted puzzle-solving game that has no conflict, no danger, no choices.

All those studies point out another interesting thing. Kids like the violent video games more. So where are the games that actually use the violence as a draw in order to teach alternatives? Where are the games that put heroes in dangerous, action-packed situations, but reward progress by teamwork, making allies, and finding ways other than killing to save the day?

They do not exist.

There are two factors behind why they don't. First, while there are some who doubt that violent entertainment leads directly to violent behavior, there is little argument that these violent video games make violence, and often high-tech violence, more appealing. This leads to a subtle and insidious problem—a link with the military industrial complex.

The differences between military training and the most popular games are almost nil at this point. A recent issue of the foremost newspaper on military matters, *Defense News*, shows a picture of soldiers glued to their computer screens. What are they doing? Why, they are using a method known as “distance training” to combat-train interactively by computer. What are they using? A version of ultra-popular video game “Doom,” of course.

Furthermore, while parents and peace groups tend to focus in on the ultra-graphic games like “Doom,” or “Resident Evil”

(which boasts in its ads that players can “splatter entrails all over Racoon City, inflict grotesque wound effects on the undead,”) they forget that it is not the shooter games that are one of the fastest growing software genres on the market. What is? According to *Defense News*, it's military simulators for realistic fighter jet and tank combat. In fact, the National Research Council released a report called “Modeling and Simulation: Linking Entertainment and Defense” that suggested both the game and film industries increase their collaboration with the Defense Department. “Collaboration could improve the competition advantage of entertainment companies and the ability of DoD to meet its national security objectives more efficiently than if the two communities continued to operate independently.”

That is, if children and soldiers are viewing and experiencing the same things, familiarity and affection for things military will allow the military to pre-indoctrinate future soldiers, and allow the military industrial complex to make all its future constituents familiar and comfortable with its weapons. This affinity numbs all players to the facts about weapons in the real world—they are most often used to repress innocents, kill and maim the helpless, and keep tyrants in power throughout the globe. It also numbs all to the other significant fact—the United States has sold and is selling more weapons to dictators and human rights abusers than any other nation in the world. So there is a vested interest out there in seeing violent video games continue, without a truly nonviolent alternative.

But aside from this Orwellian rationale, there is a more fundamental problem: both sides of this argument have been comfortable drawing lines in the sand and practicing business as usual. The parents/peace groups have been so caught up in the horrors of violent video games, they have forgotten that the only way to learn