

Should we rethink the rating system for television and film?

THERE ARE ONGOING concerns about too much sex, violence and profanity—and too much censorship—in television and film. Those who believe the rating system should change suggest a variety of options, such as considering appeals by citizens who disagree with ratings decisions. Those who think the current system works say it already takes into account a wide range of parental opinions and is built to evolve over time as media and society's standards change.

What do you think?



Find out more about this topic on the Web:

- www.tvguidelines.org
- www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate (search "Sex, Violence and R Ratings")
- <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org> (search "Media violence")
- <http://moviehistory.us/index.html>

YES

from members:

Anose Altidor
Miami, FL



They should add new policies that are more strict. [There is] too much bad stuff in general on all channels.

Eddie Marsalis
New Orleans, LA



The world has changed all over, due to the Internet. So change time is here.

Diane Lemke
Montague, CA



The rating system should evolve as quickly as our society changes.

NO

from members:

Scott Jones
Ashland, OR



Allowing appeals would add too much debate to a system where it isn't necessary.

Marty Austin
Knoxville, TN



I think it's appropriate. Parental controls can individualize restrictions.

John Hiigel
Sioux Falls, SD



The system works as long as the reason for a rating is specified.

SHUTTERSTOCK

from an expert in the field:



Tim Winter is the president of the Parents Television Council (www.parentstv.org), a nonpartisan education organization advocating responsible entertainment.

A RATING SYSTEM must be accurate, consistent, transparent and publicly accountable. The current system is none of those.

New evidence shows that both TV and movie ratings are inaccurate and inconsistently applied, rendering some of the worst content imaginable as “acceptable” for children.

Parents Television Council research found that some of the most violent TV-14-rated shows (content unsuitable for children under 14) on broadcast TV have levels and types of violence similar to TV-MA-rated (content designed to be viewed by adults that may be unsuitable for children under 17) cable TV shows. Content such as child molestation, rape, mutilation, dismemberment, graphic killings, violent abductions, physical torture, cannibalism, burning flesh and suicide all showed up as types of violence in the study, yet broadcast TV programs containing these types of violence were rated as appropriate for 14-year-old children.

Movies aren't much better. The Annenberg Public Policy Center and Ohio State University found that PG-13-rated films (parents strongly cautioned that some content may be inappropriate for children under 13) contain as much violence as

R-rated films (restricted, so children under 17 require an accompanying parent or adult guardian). And another Annenberg Public Policy Center study also found that there was more sex and violence in movies rated PG-13 than those with an R rating.

People often don't realize that each TV network determines the ratings for its own shows. The industry is financially rewarded to rate content inaccurately for younger audiences, as most sponsors won't buy advertisements on TV-MA programs. And PG-13 movies are routinely more profitable than R-rated films.

It's time for wholesale reform of the entire ratings system, and those whom the ratings are intended to serve—parents and families—must be given a seat at the table. Criteria must be more objective and more transparent. And both the Motion Picture Association of America and the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board must implement a public process to consider appeals by citizens who disagree with rating decisions.

Until this rating system reform occurs, the entertainment industry is deceiving families by labeling adult-themed TV programs and movies as appropriate for children, giving lie to their repeated assertions that they are committed to giving parents the information they need to make informed viewing decisions for their families. [E]

from an expert in the field:



Joan Graves is senior vice president and chairwoman of the Classification and Rating Administration (www.filmratings.com) at the Motion Picture Association of America (www.mpa.org).

THE CURRENT voluntary film rating system, created in 1968, replaced the earlier moral censorship guidelines known as the Hays Code with a revolutionary new system focused on parents. The system was born out of the simple notion that the movie industry wouldn't approve or disapprove what audiences should see, but instead would focus on educating parents so they could make their own informed moviegoing decisions for their families. Consequently, the ratings board of the Motion Picture Association of America does not exist to regulate the content of films, but exists to provide parents the tools they need to help them determine what their children watch.

The ratings board, composed entirely of parents, is charged with rating a film the way they feel a majority of American parents would rate a film. This is no easy task; the United States is a large, diverse country where opinions and social standards vary from region to region, from coast to heartland.

The ratings board reviews a film exactly as a parent would see it in a theater and then assigns it a rating—G, PG, PG-13, R or NC-17—accompanied by something called a descriptor box.

The descriptor box accompanies the rating in all materials promoting the film and gives parents details about why the film received the rating it did—for example, language, crude humor, violence or sexual situations, to name just a few of the many options.

Of course, moviemaking today is dramatically different than it was even 20 years ago. Violence, sexuality and suspense can all be depicted on-screen in ways that weren't even conceivable a few decades ago. That's why the system is built to evolve over time, because its purpose is to reflect the standards of American parents, not set them. (The evolution of social standards goes both ways, by the way. Drug content is treated much more stringently now than it was in the 1970s, when parents said they felt less concerned about its depiction.)

In order to do our job, we members of the ratings board are constantly engaged in dialogue with parents to get feedback from them on whether they feel the ratings are conveying the information they need. What we overwhelmingly hear from parents is that they feel they are getting accurate information about film content. That doesn't mean they love the content of every film they see; it simply means they feel we are providing them with the information they need to choose the movies they want their kids to see. [E]

FEBRUARY DEBATE RESULTS: Is chivalry outdated?

6% YES
94% NO

Percentage reflects votes received by February 10, 2014. Results may reflect Debate being picked up by blogs.



See Dialogue pages for more debate responses

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