

What Kids Can See
When It's Rated
TV-PG



**FOR MEDIA INQUIRIES
PLEASE CONTACT**

Liz Krieger
Or
Katie Glenn
CRC Public Relations

(703) 683-5004



www.ParentsTV.org



Because our children are watching

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Introduction

This is the Parents Television Council's (PTC) sixth report examining the television content ratings system.

In Section 551 of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress gave the television industry the first opportunity to establish voluntary content ratings. After that law was passed, the television industry established a system for rating programming that contains sexual, violent, or other material parents may deem inappropriate and committed to voluntarily broadcast signals containing these ratings. The TV ratings include guidelines for age-appropriateness (TV-Y, TV-Y7, TV-G, TV-PG, TV-14, and TV-MA) and content descriptors to indicate the presence of specific types of content ("S" for sexual content, "V" for violence, "L" for coarse language, and "D" for suggestive dialogue).

Since the ratings were introduced, five studies conducted by the PTC, among others, have documented persistent problems with the application of the TV ratings and the V-chip technology that depends on them.

This study looks at the issue from a slightly different perspective. In this analysis, PTC examined television program content that aired during primetime hours on the broadcast television networks carrying the TV-PG rating. The question we wanted to ask is this: If a diligent parent employs the V-chip to ensure only TV-PG rated content can be consumed by their child, what type of content will that child be able to consume?

Since virtually all content aired during primetime on the broadcast networks carry either the TV-PG or TV-14 age-based rating, TV-PG is the rating most likely to be encountered by children watching broadcast television, even when the V-Chip and cable box parental controls are deployed to block higher age-based rated programs.

Some the findings of our research include:

- More than 10.8 incidents of explicit adult content per hour. In other words, a child watching TV-PG programs would have been exposed to explicit adult content every five and a half minutes.

- 217 instances of violence in the study period, 11.5% rose to the level of mutilation, dismemberment, decapitation, violent drugging, animal abuse, animal violence, blood-shedding, electrocution, graphic depictions, and graphic descriptions.
- NBC and ABC had particularly high levels of explicit sexual content: 71 and 96 instances, respectively. At the same time, Fox had 15 instances while CBS had only 1.

In recent years, the broadcast television networks have battled the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) legal authority to fine broadcasters who air indecent material at certain times of the day when children are likely to be in the audience. Years of constitutional challenges by the networks culminated earlier this year at the United States Supreme Court in its seminal decision in *Fox v FCC*. The key legal argument made by the networks in that case was that V-Chip technology combined with the voluntary TV Ratings System constituted a "least restrictive means" than FCC oversight to prevent children from accessing television content that is clearly inappropriate for them or even harmful.

As with our previous research on the TV Content Ratings, the findings of this study suggest quite the opposite to be true: The V-Chip cannot be relied upon to consistently block explicit programs because parents cannot rely on the ratings to correctly identify problematic content.

Historically when the Entertainment Industry faced Congressional scrutiny for producing and distributing entertainment products filled with graphic sex, foul language, and violence, the Industry responded with remedies intended to stall or dissuade Congressional intervention. For example, concerns about sex and profanity in the movies in the mid '60s prompted the late Jack Valenti, as head of the Motion Picture Association of America, to craft an age-based ratings system as the solution, thus appeasing lawmakers without forcing the movie industry to materially alter their product.

Concerns about graphic TV content in the mid '90s led to a series of Congressional hearings and threats of legislation. The result was a similar age-based content ratings system, which was subsequently bolstered to include content descriptors. January 2013 will mark the fifteen-year anniversary of the initial proposal by the television industry of the existing system for rating television programming to the FCC.

Based on the findings of this report as well as numerous others, the television content rating system is in urgent need of substantial reform. In addition to concerns about accuracy, this report raises serious questions about cross-network consistency. We call upon the television industry, the FCC, and Congress to immediately begin review of the order that implemented the current TV Ratings System. And we call for the system to increase its transparency and accountability to the public.

Our children demand no less.

Background and Significance

Numerous studies report the networks' poor performance in accurately reflecting levels of explicit content using the existing television rating system (1, 2, 3, 4). Although some studies have focused exclusively on violent content, their findings along with parent reviews have caused many to question the efficiency of the rating system as a screening mechanism for parents. Past studies concluded that parents who rely on television ratings to select age-appropriate programming may be exposing their children to significantly higher levels of adult-themed content than they realize.

In an effort to provide a more comprehensive assessment of the current Television Ratings System, the PTC has conducted an analysis of TV-PG rated broadcast television content. This study examined violent content as well as explicit language, dialogue, and sexual content during the first two weeks of November 2011 for all primetime entertainment programming on the four major broadcast networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox). The goal was to create a profile quantifying the type and amount of explicit sex, language, and violence being consumed by children watching TV-PG programming.

Ultimately, the viability of the rating system rests with the question of whether the system is providing useful information to parents. This study raises serious questions regarding the ability of broadcasters and producers to accurately and consistently apply guidelines in a manner that meets the objectives for parents and their children.

A Description of the Rating System

The current ratings structure is a system of parental guidelines implemented by television broadcasters and networks, cable networks and providers, and television program producers. This system was intended to be used in conjunction with the V-Chip. Pursuant to the FCC Commission's rules, the inclusion of V-Chip technology was required on all television models 13 inches or larger manufactured after January 1, 2000. The ratings include guidelines for age appropriateness (TV-Y, TV-7, TV-G, TV-PG, TV-14, and TV-MA) and content descriptors to indicate the presence of specific types of content ("S" for sexual content, "V" for violence, "L" for coarse language, and "D" for suggestive dialogue).

The rating system is comprised of six categories. Two designations, TV-Y and TV-Y7, apply only to children's programs, most of which air weekday afternoons, on Saturday mornings, or on youth-oriented cable networks. However, most primetime programming is rated as TV-PG (parental guidance suggested) or TV-14 (parents strongly cautioned). This study exclusively examines TV-PG shows.

TV-PG (Parental Guidance Suggested -- This program contains material that parents may find unsuitable for younger children.) Many parents may want to watch it with their younger children. The theme itself may call for parental guidance and/or the program contains one or more of the following: moderate violence (V), some sexual situations (S), infrequent coarse language (L), or some suggestive dialogue (D).

Study Parameters and Methodology

The PTC examined all primetime entertainment programming on the four major broadcast networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox) during the first two weeks of the November 2011 sweeps period, for a total of 59 hours of programming. Broadcasts of news and sports programs were excluded from this analysis.

The entire dataset was captured within three major categories of variables: 1) Sex; 2) Language; and 3) Violence. Specific variables were assigned within each major category to further describe the content. Language was separated into numerous categories: Curses and intensives (“Hell” and “Damn” and the like), offensive epithets, scatological language, sexually suggestive language, and censored language. (See Table 1 for an explanation of the language classifications). The variable “sex” was divided into four categories to include: nudity, sexual acts, sexual innuendo, and anatomical references.

Each of the categories was divided into specific variables that further describe the content (e.g. group sex, masturbation, prostitution, etc.). Violence was categorized based on whether it was depicted, implied, graphically described, or medical in nature. These categories were further divided into subcategories that describe the type of violence (e.g. cannibalism, mutilation, dismemberment, etc.).

Major Findings

QUESTION #1: Did the TV-PG rating accurately and consistently alert parents to programs that contained content more suitable for older children or adults?

Finding #1.1:

In only a two-week period (59 hours) of analyzed TV-PG rated shows there were a total of 637 instances of explicit language, sex, and violent content that aired during primetime. This is equivalent to a child being exposed to more than 10.8 incidents of explicit adult content per hour. In other words, a child watching TV-PG programs would have been exposed to explicit adult content every five -and-a-half minutes.

Finding #1.2:

The data show that a child watching TV-PG programming within a two-week period would have witnessed 181 instances of adult sexual content, 239 instances of offensive language, and 217 instances of violence.

QUESTION #2: Did the TV-PG rated shows include descriptors (D, L, S, V) warning parents of the explicit adult content?

Finding #2.1:

Based on study findings, not only were children exposed to explicit adult content every five-and-a-half minutes while watching TV-PG programs, almost half of the instances (44%) did not include a “D,” “L,” “S,” or “V” descriptor alerting parents the content was present.

Finding #2.2:

Ninety-two percent of the adult sexual content aired on TV-PG shows did not include an “S” descriptor.

Finding #2.3:

Thirty-six percent of the TV-PG shows containing offensive language aired without an “L” descriptor. The data further revealed 24% of the language aired without a warning to parents included the harshest forms of profanity (bleeped “f-words” and “s-words”). See pages 10-11 for content samples.

Chart 1

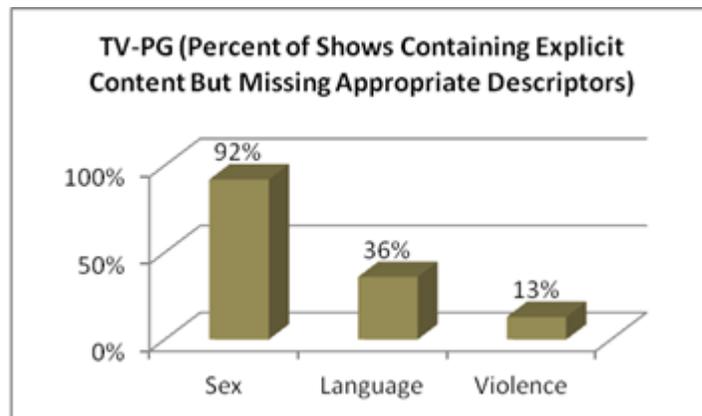


Table 1: Description of Explicit Language Categories

Explicit Language Categories	N	%	Descriptions
Curses or Intensives	93	38.9%	Hell, Damn
Offensive Epithets	25	10.5%	Douche/Douche bag, Bastard, Bitch/Son of a Bitch, Jackass, Euphemism for “Bitch”, Tool
Scatological Language	20	8.3%	Piss, Suck
Sexually suggestive or Indecent Language	76	31.8%	Ass, Penis, Screw, Balls, Euphemism for “Fuck”, Euphemism for “Penis”, Euphemism for “Vagina”, Booty/Butt, Boob, Tits, Horny, Nut, Skank, Breasts, Tramp
Censored language	25	10.5%	Muted “Fuck”, Muted “Motherfucker”, Muted “Shit”, Muted “Bullshit”, Muted unknown

QUESTION #3: What type of content would my child have seen and/or heard while watching TV-PG rated programs?

Finding #3.1:

The 637 instances of explicit adult content aired during TV-PG shows included the following: partial nudity, implied nudity, obscured nudity, implied sexual intercourse, sexual dialogue, curses/intensives (“Damn,” “Hell”), offensive epithets (“Bitch,” “Bastard,” “Jackass,” etc.) scatological language (“Piss,” “suck”), sexually suggestive/indecent language (“Screw,” “Ass,” euphemisms for “Fuck,” etc.), censored language (muted/bleeped “Fuck,” “Motherfucker,” or “Shit”), obscene gestures and various forms of violence including dismemberment, beatings, weapon related violence (stabbing/shooting), etc.

Finding #3.2:

As seen in Table 2, 67% of the explicit sexual content identified during the study period included: direct references to sexual body parts (e.g. vagina, penis, etc.), verbal statements that included the word “sex,” descriptions and/or depictions of sexual activity, and/or some form of nudity (obscured/blurred, partial or implied).

Table 2: Description of Explicit Sex Categories

Explicit Sex Categories	N	%	Description
Sexual Innuendo	60	33.2%	An indirect sexual remark or gesture.
Anatomical Reference	44	24.3%	Any direct reference to sexual body parts (breasts, penis, vagina, and/or buttock).
Sexual Reference	40	22.1%	Any verbal statement that included the word “sex.”
Sexual Acts	29	16.0%	Any description or depiction of sexual activity. The following sexual acts were identified in the study: Masturbation, group sex, implied sex/intercourse, sadomasochism, pornography, prostitution, stripping, and sexual gestures.
Nudity	8	4.4%	Any depiction of a nude body or part of a body intended to infer nudity. The following types of nudity were identified in the study: Implied nudity, obscured/blurred nudity, and partial nudity.

Finding #3.3:

Out of 217 instances of violence on TV-PG programming in a two-week period, 11.5% rose to the level of mutilation, dismemberment, decapitation, violent drugging, animal abuse, animal violence, blood-shedding, electrocution, graphic depictions, and graphic descriptions. In other words, more than one out of ten violent scenes contained one or more of these elements.

Samples of TV-PG Show Content

“Dancing with the Stars” – ABC - 10/31/11

Karina: “When you build a house, you build the [bleeped ‘fucking’] foundation first!”

Maks: “Don't [bleeped ‘fucking’] speak.”

Cheryl: “Oh my god, you scared the [bleeped ‘shit’] out of me.”

Up All Night – NBC - 11/2/11

Reagan: “Why don't we call it a vagina?”

Dean: “The thing about death is, I have no [bleeped ‘fucking’] idea. It scares the hell outta me. I try not to think about it.”

The Office – NBC - 11/3/11

Kevin explains where paper comes from.

Kevin: “Uh, the man tree puts its penis...”

“Survivor: South Pacific” - CBS – 11/9/11

Woman: “You throw the whole [muted ‘fucking’] team under the bus.”

Man: “He's a [muted ‘fucking’] piece of [muted ‘shit’].”

“Community” – NBC – 10/27/11

Pierce unzips his own pants and a thud is heard. Troy looks down, and Pierce's penis punches Troy out.

“Dancing with the Stars” – ABC - 11/1/11

Cheryl encourages her partner, Rob, to step up his performance level.

Cheryl: “Step your ____ (bleeped shit) up!”

An unseen man's voice is heard complimenting Cheryl and Rob after their performance.

Man: “That was ____ (bleeped fucking) unbelievable! You guys killed it!”

“Cops” – Fox - 11/5/11

Suspect: “I had just left. I had gotten all my ____ (bleeped shit) together and this was the first place I could pull into to use the phone.”

“Dancing with the Stars” – ABC - 11/7/11

Karina's getting frustrated with J.R. who's not being serious during rehearsal.

Karina: “I'm over this ____ [bleeped bullshit].”

“Community” – NBC - 10/27/11

Pierce tells his scary story. Pierce is in his robe, about to drink a brandy. Annie, Shirley, and Britta are in night gowns waiting for him.

Shirley: “Come back to bed, Magnum.”

Pierce: “In a moment, girls. I'm just enjoying a post-coital expensive brandy.”

“Unforgettable” – CBS – 11/8/11

A group of police go into an apartment and find the body of a dead young woman. She has blood on her head and a pool of blood under her.

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