

Protecting Children or Protecting Hollywood?

A Twenty-Year Examination of the Effectiveness of the TV Content Ratings System

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Because our Children are Watching™...

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The TV content ratings system is failing America's children. Twenty years after its creation and implementation under the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the system intends to accurately inform parents about the content of television programming, and aid them in restricting viewing of graphic violence, explicit sex, profanity and other adult content. But it is not achieving that purpose.

In this, the Parents Television Council's (PTC) seventh study of the TV content ratings system since the system's implementation in 1997, the PTC found that the TV content ratings system is inadequate for the purpose of protecting children from graphic sex, violence, and profanity on television for the following reasons:

- 1. Regularly-scheduled series rated G (appropriate for all audiences) have been eliminated from prime time.**
The number of prime-time TV-G rated programs has decreased from 27 hours in a two-week period in 1997 to 0 hours in a two-week period in 2014. In 2015 and 2016, there were no regularly-scheduled prime-time series rated TV-G.
- 2. There are fewer programs on prime-time broadcast television rated TV-PG.**
From 1997 to 2014, there was a 38% decrease in the number of hours networks aired TV-PG programming during prime time, thus significantly reducing viewing options for families.
- 3. There are fewer differences between the content of programs rated TV-PG and those rated TV-14.**
- 4. Graphic content on television is increasing in both amount and intensity.**
Between 2011 and 2014, all violence per hour of programming on prime-time broadcast TV increased 6%; weapon-related violence (involving guns, bladed weapons, and blunt force) increased 17%; and nudity increased 93%.
- 5. Every hour of content on broadcast television is rated as appropriate for a 14-year-old child, or even younger ages. Despite containing explicit content, no continuing program on broadcast television is rated TV-MA, appropriate for mature audiences only.**

A vast body of scientific, psychological, and medical research demonstrates that exposure to graphic violence and explicit sex is harmful to children. Those at the television networks claim that they have provided families with tools, such as the V-Chip, descriptor indicators, and TV ratings, which allow parents to protect their children by blocking harmful or unwanted programming. But parents, mental health professionals, national surveys, and scientific research concur that these tools are not effective in protecting children.

The TV content ratings system is administered by the very businesses it is supposed to be regulating: TV networks. The same companies create media content, rate the content, and run the board which oversees the ratings process – a conflict of interest which would never be tolerated in any other regulatory body.

Systemic reform of the voluntary, self-regulating TV content ratings system is needed. Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, public health advocates, and most of all, parents, must insist upon a television content ratings system that is accurate, consistent, transparent, and accountable to the public – and which meets the needs of those it was intended to serve.

INTRODUCTION

For most of the 20th century, the entertainment industry acted responsibly in keeping entertainment appropriate for all audiences, in the awareness that television was “a guest in the home.” From 1934, when the Federal Communications Commission first set up statutes regulating the airwaves, to the 1970s, when the Supreme Court reaffirmed them, and up to the present day, it has been the law that the airwaves are public property belonging to all Americans. Further, private corporations are permitted to use them to make a profit, free of charge, only so long as they do so “in the public interest.” The Court confirmed that the broadcast airwaves are “uniquely pervasive,” and that the government and the American people have a “compelling national interest” in keeping graphic violence, explicit sex, and other harmful content off the public airwaves in a “time, place, and manner” when children are likely to be in the audience.

Science Affirms Potential Dangers

Science concurs that there is reason for concern about media content. Medical, social, and psychological sciences affirm that children’s exposure to media sex and violence is potentially harmful.

Violent Content

Over 40 years of scientific research has shown that exposure to violence in the media is a significant risk factor for children. The U.S. Surgeon General issued studies to this effect in 1972 and again in 2001. In 2000, the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, American Psychological Association, American Medical Association, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association issued a joint statement declaring that “based on over 30 years of research, viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children.” As recently as August of 2015, the American Psychological Association released a policy statement concluding that violent media increases aggression in those who use it.



Sexual Content

Sexual content is of equal concern. Since 1987, there has been a growing body of research on the impact of sexualized media images. Numerous researchers have reported strong correlations between viewing sex on TV and subsequent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Dr. Rebecca Collins, Senior Behavioral Scientist at RAND Corporation, found that watching sex on TV predicts and may hasten adolescent sexual initiation.³ Collins is

only one of many researchers examining the link between depictions of sexual content in mass media, teens' attitudes toward sex, and sexual behavior (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009⁴; Brown J Halpern, 2005⁵; Brown, L'Engle, & Pardun, 2006⁶; Kunkel, Eyal, Donnerstein, Farrar, Bielly, & Rideout, 2007⁷; Strouse & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1987⁸). And in 2010, an American Psychological Association taskforce concluded that the sexualization of girls in the media is a "serious societal problem."

Conflict of Interest by Vocal Opposition

The scientific consensus is that exposure to graphic sex and violence in the media places children at risk of harm. Sadly, despite the proven science demonstrating the link between media content and harm to children, a vocal opposition to this scientific evidence has developed, with the loudest voices of protest coming from those who produce and profit from explicit media. When confronted with the concerns of parents and even the evidence of science, the entertainment industry and its minions dismiss legitimate concerns as "moral panic," or claim that their products have no influence over viewers.

False Solutions by the Entertainment Industry

Until very recently, it was understood and accepted by the entertainment industry, the government, and the public that it is the industry's responsibility to ensure that television programming is distributed and marketed in such a way as to minimize children's exposure to adult content. In recognition of parental concerns about the health and safety of children, during its passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress urged the entertainment industry to make provision for the protection of children from harmful media content. However, the industry's answer to America's growing concern with increasing sex, profanity, and violence on television was not to reduce such content. Rather, the entertainment industry's representatives chose to create a TV content ratings system (similar to the familiar movie ratings system), which they claimed would assist parents in protecting children from harmful media content.

Need to Fix a Failed System

The entertainment industry, the government, and even many public advocacy groups praised the new system, in the hope that it would serve to protect children from harmful media content. Unfortunately, as currently conceived and implemented, the television content ratings system is not adequate to protect children. This study will show that the current TV ratings system is in serious and urgent need of reform, and will propose several key conditions which must be met for such reform to be effective.

ABOUT THE TV RATINGS SYSTEM

In order to understand why the current system is flawed and in need of reform, a brief overview of the TV content ratings system is necessary.

Under Federal Communications Commission Report and Order 98-35, issued in the wake of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the television content ratings system was put in place. This system comprised three components:

1. The installation of a “V-chip” in all newly-manufactured television sets. This chip would read the content rating assigned to a program, and would allow parents to protect their children by blocking harmful or unwanted programming;
2. The creation of a content ratings system. These ratings would allow the V-chip to function, by assigning a rating (similar to the familiar ratings given movies) to each episode of every television program, barring news and sports; and
3. The establishment of a TV Oversight Monitoring Board (TVOMB). The TVOMB was charged with managing the content rating process, and ensuring that the ratings assigned to programs were accurate and consistent.

(The current iteration of the TV Oversight Monitoring Board is named the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board. Throughout this report, both names and the designation “TVOMB” are used interchangeably.)



Current Television Rating Guide

Rating	Target Audience <i>(From tvguidelines.org)</i>
TV Y	All Children: This program is designed to be appropriate for all children. Whether animated or live action, the themes and elements in this program are specifically designed for a very young audience, including children from ages 2-6. This program is not expected to frighten younger children.
TV Y7	Directed to Older Children: This program is designed for children age 7 and above. It may be more appropriate for children who have acquired the developmental skills needed to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements in this program may include mild fantasy or comedic violence, or may frighten children under the age of 7. Therefore, parents may wish to consider the suitability of this program for their very young children.
TV Y7 FV	Directed to Older Children: Fantasy Violence: For those programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in the TV-Y7 category, such programs will be designated TV-Y7-FV.
TV G	General Audience: Most parents would find this program appropriate for all ages. Although this rating does not signify a program designed specifically for children, most parents may let younger children watch this program unattended. It contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.
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).
TV 14	Parents Strongly Cautioned: This program contains some material that parents would find unsuitable for children under 14 years of age. Parents are strongly urged to exercise greater care in monitoring this program and are cautioned against letting children under the age of 14 watch unattended. This program contains one or more of the following: intense violence (V), intense sexual situations (S), strong coarse language (L), or intensely suggestive dialogue (D).
TV MA	Mature Audience Only: This program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program contains one or more of the following: graphic violence (V), explicit sexual activity (S), or crude indecent language (L).

METHODOLOGY

The Parents Television Council is uniquely qualified to speak on the topic of TV content ratings. The organization has produced the largest volume of data relative to the issue, and has published the largest number of research studies examining the TV ratings system. The present study represents the PTC's seventh report, and provides a systematic review of past and present findings.

For this study, the PTC analyzed its own body of past research on the topic of the TV ratings system. The first such study was conducted at the inception of the TV content ratings system in 1997; the most recent, in December, 2013.¹⁰⁻¹⁷ Previous PTC research analyzed in this report includes: *A TV Ratings Report Card: F for Failure* (February, 1997); *The Family Hour: No Place for Your Kids* (May, 1997); *Bigger Isn't Better: The Expanded TV Ratings System* (February, 1998); *Profanity on TV* (October, 2008); *Habitat for Profanity* (November, 2010); *A Comparison of Explicit Content in TV-MA vs. TV-14 Programming* (May, 2011); *What Kids Can See When It's Rated TV-PG* (September, 2012); and *Media Violence: An Examination of Violence, Graphic Violence, and Gun Violence in the Media* (December, 2013).

In addition, the PTC examined all prime-time entertainment programming on the four major broadcast networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox) during the first two weeks of the November 2014 sweeps period. Content examples from current shows were also examined. Broadcasts of news, sports, specials, and reruns were excluded from these analyses.

This study asks one question: **"Is the TV content ratings system serving the purpose for which it was created?"** To answer it, this study presents a comprehensive review that examines the effectiveness of the ratings system, based upon its ability to provide parents with the tools they need to make decisions regarding programming for their family. In order to achieve comparisons between the data sets across years, common measures were identified in each study. For example, some studies measured month-long time periods, while others looked at two-week time periods. In these cases, per-week averages were determined to allow for comparisons. Methodological consideration was also given to the number of networks examined in each study.

MAJOR FINDINGS

This study found that the TV content ratings system is inadequate for the purpose of protecting children from graphic sex, violence, and profanity on television for the following reasons:

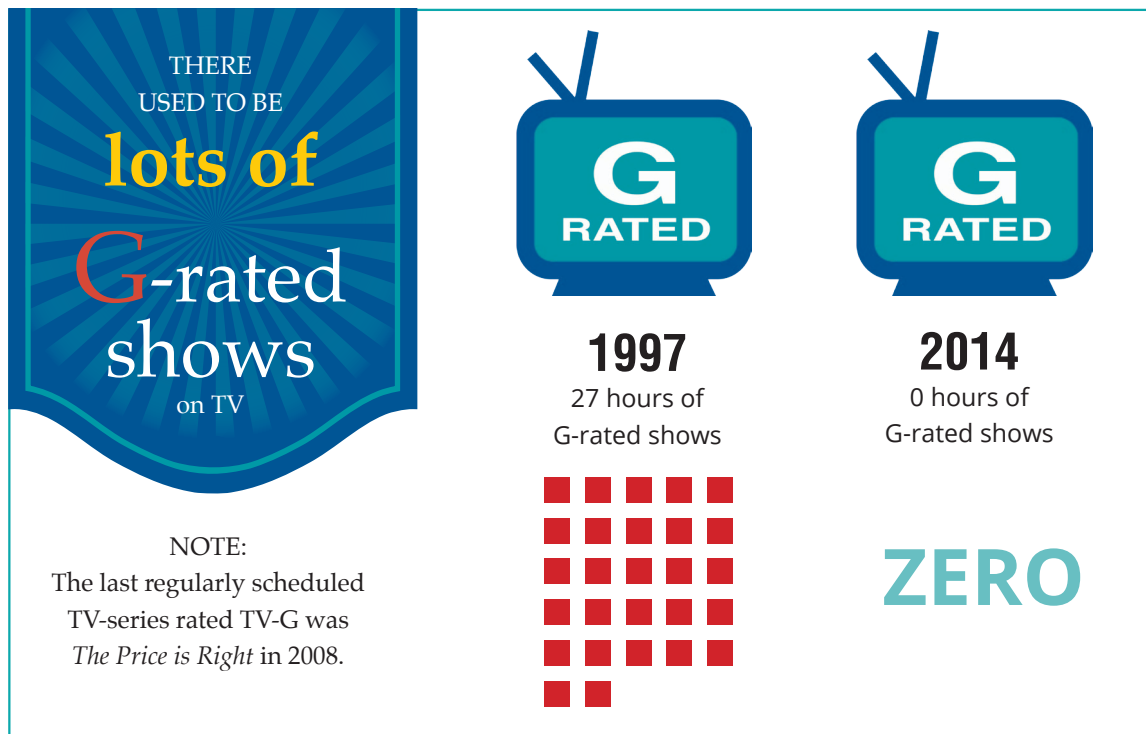
1. Regularly-scheduled series rated TV-G (appropriate for all audiences) have been eliminated from prime time. In all practicality, family shows rated for all audiences do not exist;
2. There are fewer programs on prime-time broadcast television rated TV-PG;
3. There are fewer differences between the content of programs rated TV-PG and those rated TV-14;
4. Graphic content on television is increasing in both amount and intensity; yet
5. All content on broadcast television is rated as appropriate for a 14-year-old child.



FINDING #1

TV-G rated series eliminated from prime-time programming

- As reflected in the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board's own ratings definitions, TV-G rated programming was intended to fulfill the role of designating programs intended for all ages and all viewers. Most programming using the publicly-owned airwaves and intended for a general audience should be rated TV-G. Yet, the broadcast networks have chosen not to create nor maintain prime-time programming appropriate for all ages.
- The number of prime-time TV-G rated programs has decreased from 27 hours in a two-week period in 1997 to 0 hours in a two-week period in 2014.^{10, 18}
- In 2015 and 2016, there were no regularly scheduled prime-time series rated TV-G.¹⁸
- The last regularly scheduled TV-G rated series that aired during prime time was in 2008. The show was the prime-time version of *The Price Is Right*.
- In the absence of regularly scheduled TV-G rated programming on broadcast television, families are left with TV-PG programming as their only alternative.

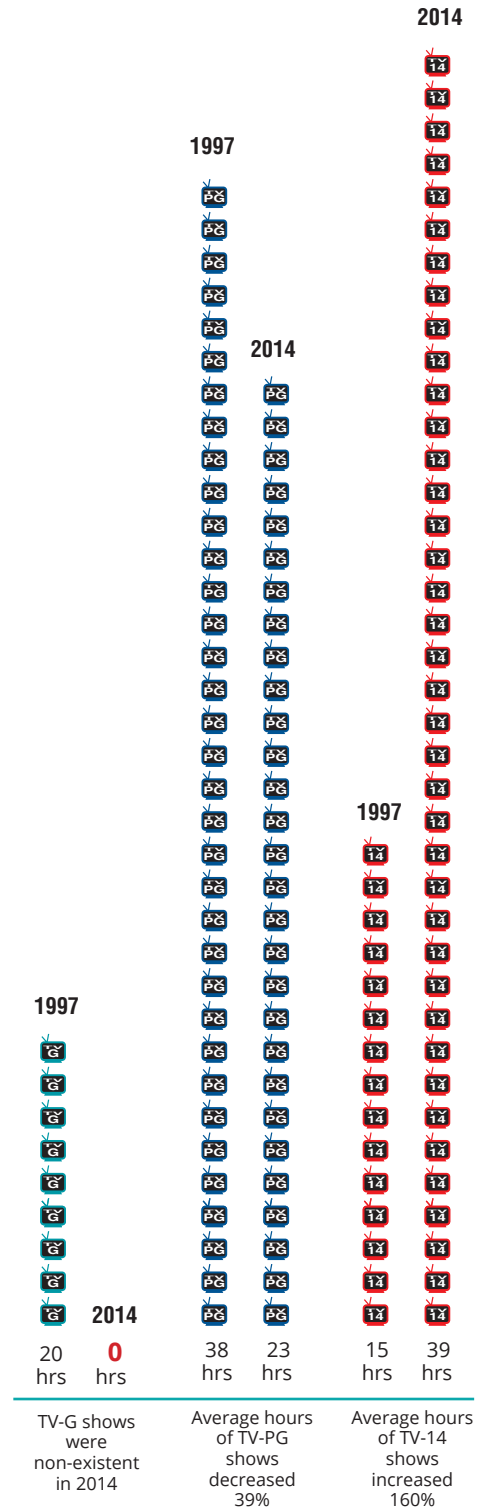


FINDING #2

Fewer programs on prime-time are rated TV-PG

- Today, there are significantly fewer TV-PG options for families on prime-time broadcast TV than there were previously.
- From 1997 to 2014, there was a 38% decrease in the number of hours networks aired TV-PG programming during prime time, thus significantly reducing viewing options for families.^{10, 18}
- In the first two weeks of 2011, there were 60 hours of TV-PG programming on prime-time broadcast TV. In the first two weeks of 2014, there were 45 hours.¹⁸
- In a 2007 PTC study, out of 608 individual programs on prime-time broadcast TV, 308 were rated TV-14 and 294 were rated TV-PG. Only five were rated TV-G. None were rated TV-MA.

Average hours
per week of
TV-G, TV-PG and
TV-14



FINDING #3

TV-PG vs. TV-14: Fewer differences in prime-time

- The amount and intensity of adult content on TV-PG shows is increasing, yet the TV-PG rating does not reflect these changes. Consequently, children are exposed to more adult content, even when parents choose TV-PG rated programs.



Karen has a flashback to the group sex she had the night before. Wearing only a bra, she lies sandwiched between a man and a woman, who kisses Karen's neck. Next, Karen is shown on her back as the woman lies on top of her, kissing her neck while the man kisses the other woman's shoulder. The man caresses Karen's buttocks, then lies atop her, kissing and caressing her breasts.

(*Mistresses*, ABC, July 9, 2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG DS)



Jess and Benn kiss passionately. The scene transitions to the bedroom. The couple moves underneath the sheets and breathe heavily, presumably having sex.

(*Secrets and Lies*, ABC, April 26, 2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DSV)



FINDING #4

Graphic content is increasing in amount and intensity

- The amount of both nudity and violence (particularly weapon-related violence, involving guns, bladed weapons, and blunt force)^{16, 18} increased per hour of programming on prime-time broadcast TV between 2011 and 2014.
- Between 2011 and 2014, all violence increased 6%; weapon-related violence increased 17%.^{16, 18}
- Violence has greatly increased in explicitness and intensity.

2010 Example

Jack chases Dana down the street. Dana grabs an innocent bystander and uses her as a human shield to fire at Jack. She misses, hitting a cab driver instead. Jack and Dana trade gunfire. Dana runs out of bullets and Jack catches up to her. Jack shoots Dana twice at point-blank range.

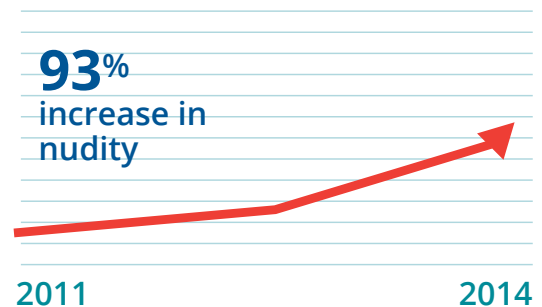
(24, Fox, May 3, 2010, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

2015 Example

Luis' enemy interrupts a poker game of Luis' friends, demanding information on where to find Luis. When one player refuses to divulge Luis' whereabouts, the stalker chops off his hand with a meat cleaver. Later, Ryan and his team discover the gruesome crime scene where the poker players have been massacred. The walls are covered in blood and a severed hand rests on the table; dead bodies are strewn across the floor.

(*The Following*, Fox, April 6, 2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

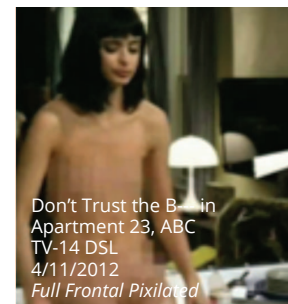
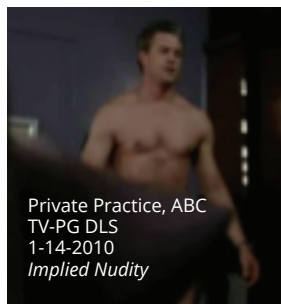
- Nudity increased 93% per hour of programming on prime-time broadcast TV between 2011 and 2014.¹⁸



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- Nudity also increased in intensity. For example, implied nudity in 2010 was less explicit than in 2012 and 2013. From 1997 to 2011, scenes depicting nudity in 1997 typically showed someone implied to be nude, but whose sexual body parts were covered by a conveniently located object (see **Image #1 below**). In contrast, the scenes airing after 2011 were more likely to depict full-frontal nudity, with only the sexual body parts lightly pixelated (see **Images #2 and #3 below**).¹⁸



- Sexual dialogue has also become more explicit in recent years.

2009 Example

At a church service, members of the congregation confess their sins by shouting them out loud.

Dad: "I hate kids. I just love sex."

Randy: "I touched a boob on the statue outside."

Jackie: "I slept with Earl."

(*My Name Is Earl*, NBC, April 23, 2009, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DVL)

2015 Example

Chanel: "Last night I had an amazing threesome with Roger and Dodger, and I realized that I'd rather focus my attention this semester on getting spit-roasted by hot golf frat twins than help you figure out who's murdering a bunch of dumb gashes...I got Eiffel Towered by hot morons who are brothers."

Chad: "Chanel, you're hot. Your boobs are symmetrical and you shave your box in a hot way."

(*Scream Queens*, Fox, September 29, 2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

- Since 2011, there has also been a trend toward combining explicit sexual content and graphic violence in the same scene.

2015 Example

Married couple Kenny and Natalie hire a prostitute to join them in a threesome. Kenny throws the call girl onto the bed and kisses her roughly, as Natalie stands at the foot of the bed, watching. The call girl steps behind Natalie and unzips her dress, stripping Natalie down to her bra and panties. She leads Natalie to the bed, and produces a scarf. The call

girl orders Kenny to tie Natalie's arms to the head of the bed, and he does so. Natalie watches as Kenny and the call girl kiss right above her. The call girl suddenly produces a knife and stabs Kenny in the throat. Then, as Natalie cowers in terror, the call girl stabs her in the abdomen. A close-up shows Natalie's bra-clad breasts as blood fountains out of her stomach.

Later, investigating the murders, Ryan and the FBI team inspect the crime scene, where the couple's corpses have been propped up in a tableau. Quick camera cuts show Natalie's blood-smeared, underwear-clad corpse, with close-ups of her breasts and bloody stomach, and Kenny's torso, covered in blood, with his entire body shackled to the wall, strung up by his arms and throat.

(The Following, Fox, March 2, 2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

2015 Example

A woman performs oral sex on Kent while seated in his car. Kent takes out a knife and stabs the woman in the back repeatedly. Blood sprays all over the interior of the car.

(Wicked City, ABC, October 27, 2015, 10:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

TIMELINE: Adult Content Significantly Increases

The timeline below reveals the progression in the amount of adult content airing on broadcast TV.

1997 The TV Ratings System was implemented

1998	2005	2007	2012
221.5% increase in sexual references airing during the Family Hour on broadcast TV compared to the previous year when the ratings system was implemented.	Fall of 2005 averaged 4.41 instances of violence per hour during prime time — an increase of 75% since the 1998 television season.	Nearly 11,000 expletives aired during prime time on broadcast TV in 2007 which is nearly twice as many as in 1998.	Use of the bleeped f-word in the Family Hour (8:00 pm – 9:00 pm) increased from 10 instances in 2005 to 111 instances in 2010 – an increase of 1,010%.
2012	2013	2014	2015
One instance of full-frontal nudity occurred during the 2010–2011 study period. By the same time the following year, 64 instances of full-frontal nudity had aired.	Only a 6% difference in the amount of violence on cable's vs. broadcast's most violent shows; yet every show on broadcast TV is rated as appropriate for a 14-year-old.	On the most violent shows on broadcast TV, a bladed weapon or gun appeared on screen every three minutes.	93% increase in nudity per hour on prime-time broadcast TV from 2011 to 2014.

FINDING #5

The networks RATE every hour as suitable for a 14-year-old child

- From 1997 to the present, the commercial broadcast television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, CW) have never rated any of their regularly-scheduled series' programming content TV-MA (mature audiences only). According to the networks and the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board, every example of sexual or violent content, on broadcast TV, no matter how extreme, is suitable for a 14-year-old child. A few examples of content from programs rated TV-14 include:

2013 Example

A woman commits suicide by plunging an ice pick into her own eye as an act of servitude to a serial killer. In a waiting room at the police headquarters, a young woman takes off her shoes and dress. She stands topless in black panties, and pulls out a knife. She says: "Lord help my poor soul" repeatedly and then jams the knife into her own eye and collapses. Blood gushes out as her body convulses.

(The Following, Fox, January 21, 2013, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

2014 Example

Following a brutal attack, the blood-drenched body of a young woman, wearing only her underwear, is strung up from the ceiling of her home. Ryan discovers the body. The woman's leg has been deliberately severed. The dismembered leg rests on the floor above her bleeding stump, which has been tied off with a tourniquet. Ryan initially thinks she's dead, but she lifts her head and draws a breath.

(Gang Related, Fox, June 12, 2014, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

2015 Example

Chad unzips his pants as he stands over an elderly woman's grave.

Chad: "When I find a gravestone I like, I get turned on and I rub one out to it."

Hester: "I get it. I also find the thought of dead bodies extremely arousing...And here you are saddled with an uptight girlfriend who freaked out, for no other reason than you just wanted to fantasize about having sex with her lifeless corpse."

Chad: "Oh, my God, I got a total chub. I need to do it right now. On Dorothy. You and me."

(Scream Queens, Fox, October 6, 2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

THE TV CONTENT RATINGS SYSTEM: TWENTY YEARS OF FAILURE



The above major results demonstrate only a few of the ways in which the television content ratings system has failed to achieve the purposes for which it was intended: alerting parents to potentially harmful television content, and enabling them to block such content from reaching their children.

Not only is the ratings system inadequate for protecting children today; compelling evidence demonstrates that the TV content ratings system has been inadequate and poorly implemented since its inception.

1997

FCC Report and Order 98-35, which established the TV content ratings system, states that the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board is required

to explore attitudes about the way in which [the content ratings] are applied to programming, conduct focus groups and commission quantitative studies to determine whether the TV Parental Guidelines are providing useful information to parents, and consider any needed changes to them.

Later, the FCC Report and Order reiterates:

*To be useful, the rating system must be applied in a consistent and accurate manner. Independent research and evaluation is important to determine whether the rating system is working and providing parents with the information needed to make viewing choices for their children... The research and evaluation of the rating system, once the system has been in use, will allow for adjustments and improvements to the system. **We view this commitment as an important element in the proposal.** (Emphasis added)*

Despite the Report and Order's requirement that the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board take action to determine whether the TV Parental Guidelines are meeting their purpose, little such action has been forthcoming. It has largely been left to other public advocacy bodies and foundations to "explore attitudes, conduct focus groups, and commission quantitative studies to determine whether the TV Parental Guidelines are providing useful information to parents." The results of such studies have not been encouraging. Numerous challenges, failures, and inaccuracies were publicly noted in 1997 at the very outset of the content ratings system; and little improvement has been seen in the decades since.

2000

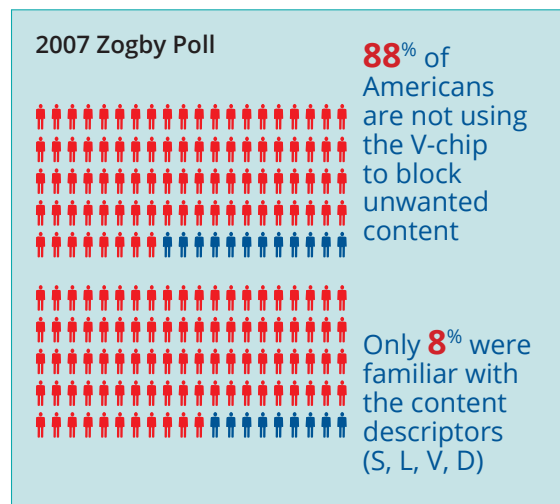
Three years after the implementation of the TV Parental Guidelines, during which the networks were given time to improve the system, promote it to families, and increase awareness regarding TV content ratings, a study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that only half of parents were even aware of the television content ratings. Only 39% reported using the ratings to guide their children's viewing. More than a third had never heard of the V-Chip.¹⁹

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2005

A 2005 study by the Pew Foundation found that 66% of respondents stated that TV show content was worse than it had been five years prior. The increased prevalence of sex and violence on television were the two most frequently mentioned reasons for this response.

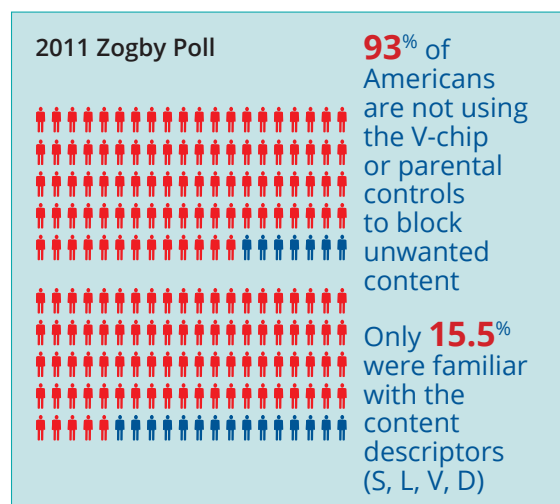


2007

A 2007 Zogby poll, conducted after the entertainment industry spent **more than \$500 million**²⁰ on its “TV Boss” advertising campaign (which told parents *they* were responsible for their children’s exposure to the industry’s programming) revealed that the networks failed to effectively educate parents on how to use the resources established to protect children and families from unwanted media content.

The same poll revealed that eight years after the implementation of the TV content ratings system, 88% of Americans were still not using the V-chip to block unwanted content. Only 8% of Americans who participated in the Zogby poll were able to correctly

identify the content descriptors, even when provided with the correct answer as part of a multiple-choice question.



2011

A 2011 Zogby poll, which asked the same questions as the 2007 poll, found that an even higher percentage of Americans (93%) were not using the V-Chip to block unwanted content. The percentage of Americans identifying content descriptors when provided with the correct answer as part of a multiple-choice question increased, but was still a miniscule 15.5%.

2013

In January 2013, Vice President Joe Biden met with entertainment industry executives to discuss the issue of media violence and the role it plays in tragic, real-life violence such as the school shooting of Newtown, Connecticut. Industry representatives were only willing to offer a reissuance of the previously failed TV Boss campaign.

THE PTC'S STUDIES OF THE CONTENT RATINGS

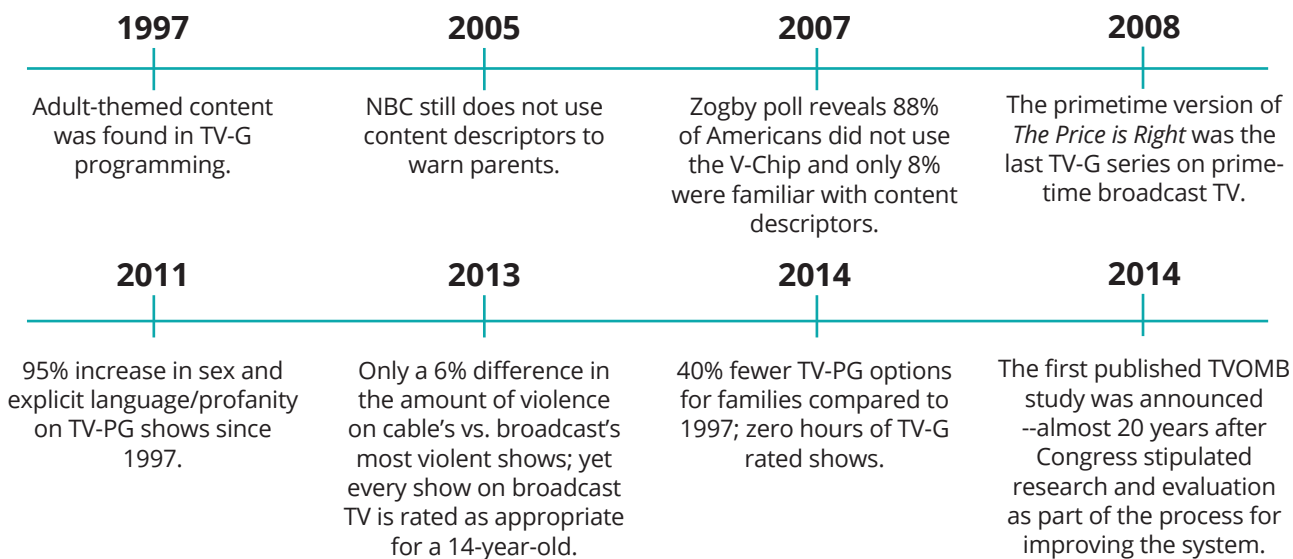
The PTC's own studies have consistently corroborated these findings. Since the inception of the TV ratings system, PTC studies have exposed significant inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

1997

In 1997, two weeks after the implementation of the rating system, the PTC examined the system's effectiveness. That study found that TV-PG rated shows (which at that time comprised three-fifths of all prime-time broadcast programming) contained significant amounts of sexual content and explicit language, and that even TV-G rated shows contained sexual references and other forms of offensive content.¹⁰ Obscenities appeared almost as often in TV-PG shows as in those rated TV-14; 189 incidences of offensive language were identified within only a two-week period. Further examination revealed that while slightly more TV-14 than TV-PG shows contained sexual references, TV-PG shows included more sexual references per hour than did TV-14 programs.

TIMELINE: Implementation of the TV Content Ratings System

1997 The TV Ratings System was implemented



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Several months later, a second PTC study focused specifically on the Family Hour (8:00 p.m. Eastern/Pacific, 7:00 p.m. Central/Mountain). Results showed that of the programs aired in this time slot, one-third contained offensive language; sixty contained references to sexual intercourse; and almost 31% of the programs referred to sex. Of the 86 family-hour shows rated TV-PG, meaning they were considered appropriate for everyone except young children, 36% contained sexual references, and 49% included obscenities.¹¹

1998

In 1998, one year after the inception of the TV ratings system, a third PTC study found a significant spike in the amount of adult content airing during the Family Hour. Study results revealed a 221.5% increase in sexual references from the previous year.¹²

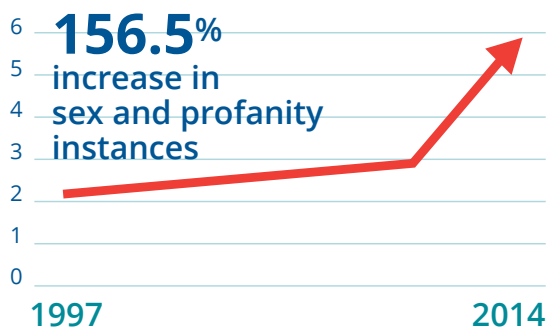
2007

Ten years after the passage of the Telecommunications Act, the professional and scientific communities, as well as the American public, continued to express concern that children were regularly being exposed to harmful material. This nation-wide heightened concern resulted in the passage of the Child Safe Viewing Act of 2007.

As directed by the Child Safe Viewing Act, the FCC conducted an in-depth assessment of technologies available to parents to protect children from harmful media. The issue of greatest concern consistently repeated in public comments was the need for parents to be better informed regarding the tools available to them. Even a decade after parental resources were established through the Telecommunications Act, the broadcast television networks and the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board had yet to effectively communicate or educate parents in a manner that would allow them to effectively access and utilize these resources.

2014

After almost 20 years of research, practice, and feedback from the scientific community, public health professionals, and the American public, no improvements to the TV content ratings system are evident. In fact, as documented above, the system today is permitting ever-more dangerous material to be viewed by children, through increasingly graphic and explicit depictions of sex and violence, and through an ever-more lax interpretation of the TV-PG and TV-14 ratings.



A 2014 PTC study revealed that since the inception of the TV ratings system, sex and profanity in TV-PG shows has grown from 2.3 instances per hour in 1997 to 5.9 instances per hour in TV-PG programming during 2014 – an increase of 156.5% per hour of programming.¹⁸

Despite the importance which Congress and the FCC gave to the ongoing process of review, public comment, and reform of the ratings system, in almost twenty years of existence, the TVOMB has done little to invite or enable public comment to determine whether the ratings system is providing useful information to parents. It has held few focus groups outside its own membership. No independent scientific study or evaluation of the ratings system has been announced or discussed for many years; and few parents have been asked for their attitudes about the way the ratings are applied to programming.

The TVOMB has offered few suggestions for greater accountability, accuracy, or consistency in the ratings; nor has the body addressed its Congressionally-mandated legal responsibility to make corrections and adjustments to the current ratings system.

The entertainment industry's unwillingness to seriously examine itself makes it difficult to understand how the current self-regulated system can adequately address the needs of families.



THE PROBLEM WITH THE RATINGS SYSTEM

In the almost two decades since the implementation of the TV content ratings system, the V-chip, and the TVOMB, it is clear that the entire system has become deeply flawed. This is so for several reasons.

1. The Entertainment Industry Disavows Accountability for What it Produces

The existence of the content ratings system and the V-chip has allowed those in the entertainment industry to evade their responsibility for the programming they create. Where once the industry accepted its role as a partner in the greater society, and acted responsibly to help safeguard children from harmful content, today the industry sees itself as completely autonomous, responsible to nobody and contemptuous of laws intended to ensure even minimal standards of decency.

For decades, the entertainment industry has battled any attempt to include violence in the definition of indecency – even though the FCC’s Order and Report prominently and repeatedly mentioned violence as one of the concerns driving the establishment of the ratings system to begin with. Further, it has repeatedly fought in court to overturn any and all forms of regulation related to explicit content. In a joint legal filing in June of 2013, the major broadcast networks demanded that the FCC “cease attempting broadcast indecency limits once and for all.”

Instead, the industry points to the ratings system to absolve itself of the need to abide by any decency regulations. As a result, the industry now claims it is solely the responsibility of parents to keep all harmful content away from their children, pointing to the existence of the V-chip and the content ratings system to evade the industry’s own responsibility for the very content the industry itself creates.

2. Financial Conflict of Interest In The Ratings System

The content ratings system as currently constituted is deeply flawed. This is so because the power to assign program content ratings rests with the same networks where the content originates.

This represents a tremendous conflict of interest. It is to a network’s financial advantage to misrate its programming. The lower a show’s age-appropriateness rating is, the more people (including children) will watch the program; and the more people watch the program, the more the network can charge advertisers for running commercials during it. Thus, by misrating a program’s content, a network can increase the size of its audience, and the amount of money the program makes for the network.

Furthermore, most corporate advertisers have a media policy of not sponsoring television programming rated “TV-MA.” Therefore, even if an accurate assessment of program content means a show would merit a rating of “TV-MA,” the network assigning the rating is highly motivated not to rate the program accurately, as in doing so the network would immediately reduce sponsor interest, and hence the advertising revenue available from the program. Whether accidentally or intentionally, an informal

policy has evolved whereby broadcast networks never rate any of their programming “mature only” (TV-MA), no matter how graphic, explicit, or inappropriate its content may be for children. As a result, extreme, graphic content is rated appropriate for 14-year-olds; and other programs with adult content are even rated PG. This demonstrates just how inherent, and how fatal, the conflict of interest is within the existing system.

3. The Tools the Entertainment Industry Created Are Flawed

An incorrect content rating renders the V-chip worthless. Even if a parent programs their television’s V-chip to block programs rated appropriate for “mature viewers only,” (TV-MA), with increasingly explicit material airing on TV-14 and even TV-PG shows, the V-chip would still fail to screen out inappropriate content, because the program itself is misrated.

A network can also get around the system by not rating a program at all (Not Rated), as is the case with news, sporting events, commercials, and the networks’ own promos for their own programs. By doing so, the V-Chip or other parental blocking device will not work, and any content “Not Rated” can be easily viewed by any child.

4. The Entertainment Industry Oversees The Ratings System

The TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board has enabled and sheltered this flawed ratings system, rather than following its Congressional mandate to monitor the system and reform it where necessary.

Supposedly, the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board represents the interests of parents, and ensures the networks rate their shows appropriately, in a manner which helps parents protect their children. But most parents don’t even know the TVOMB exists. They don’t know that the TVOMB is

Do you know the TVOMB?	
Have parents heard of the TVOMB?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do parents know how to contact the TVOMB?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do parents know that the TVOMB is responsible for overseeing TV content ratings?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do parents know how the TVOMB determine ratings?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Can parents attend TVOMB meetings?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do parents know who represents families on the TVOMB?	YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Do children often see content that is misrated?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>

in charge of the ratings system, or how to contact its members. The public has never been told the names of those who sit on the TVOMB; how they are chosen or elected; when, where, or how often the TVOMB meets; how the networks or the TVOMB determine what content ratings TV programs ought to have; or how they respond to complaints from parents and other citizens. The TVOMB is not accountable to anyone outside its own membership, nor is it transparent to the parents it supposedly exists to serve.

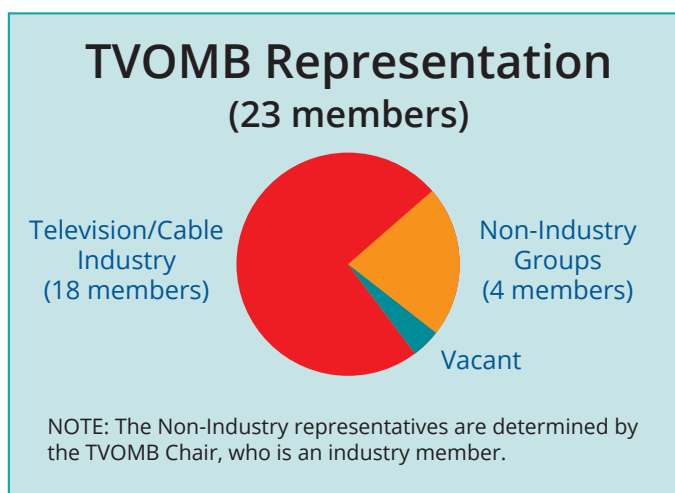
Members of Congress and the Federal Communications Commission are not regularly invited or permitted to attend TVOMB meetings; nor are members of the press; nor are members of the public.

PROTECTING CHILDREN OR PROTECTING HOLLYWOOD?

A TWENTY-YEAR EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE TV CONTENT RATINGS SYTEM

The TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board is an entirely closed and autonomous group, made up of representatives of the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, the Motion Picture Association of America, and various broadcast and cable networks and other media corporations.

The TVOMB is composed of a chairman and 23 members, including six members each from the broadcast television industry, the cable industry, and the program production community. There are only five non-industry seats on a board of 23, despite the board's express purpose being to serve the needs of parents; and as of this writing, not all five of the non-industry seats are filled. The membership of the five non-industry seats on the TVOMB is determined by the TVOMB's chairman (an industry member).



In other words, the body charged with monitoring the ratings system is made up of those it is supposed to be monitoring. Under the current system, the same people who create TV content then rate the content they've created, and also run the board that supervises the rating process.

This arrangement would never be tolerated in any other industry. Would oil companies be allowed to control the Environmental Protection Agency? Would pharmaceutical corporations be permitted to oversee the Food and Drug Administration? Would Wall Street be allowed to determine policy for the Securities and Exchange Commission? Would Big Tobacco be empowered to choose the U.S. Surgeon General?

In short, the entertainment industry and TVOMB's attitude has become, "As long as we rate it, we can show it" – no matter how graphic, explicit, or extreme it is. The entertainment industry refuses to abide by broadcast decency laws; and its hand-picked Board, rather than holding the industry accountable, ignores its responsibility for overseeing the content ratings system, and allows its members to do as they please.

Over the years, the entertainment industry has fought to keep the power to decide what is shown in every living room; and the TVOMB, which allegedly oversees the ratings process, has consistently chosen to shield the status quo, rather than actively pursue improvements or reform, as the FCC's Report and Order required. Instead, the responsibility for protecting children has fallen entirely on

THE SOLUTION

The present study serves as further evidence of the need for systemic reform of the voluntary, self-regulating TV content ratings system. Recognizing that the current system is not meeting its intended objectives, Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, public health advocates, and most of all, parents, must insist upon a television content ratings system that meets the needs of those it was intended to serve.

Although there are numerous strategies and processes that could be implemented to accomplish this goal, any effort towards reform must insist that, going forward, the TV content ratings system be:

- **Accurate**
- **Consistent**
- **Transparent**
- **Accountable to the public**



MEASURES FOR REFORM OF THE TV CONTENT RATING SYSTEM

Accuracy	<p>A program's content rating should fully and correctly assess all of the content present in that episode, with the goal of enabling parents to protect their children. This means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networks should clearly state the criteria by which they assign ratings. • Ratings should reflect content from a parent's perspective, not a TV network's perspective. • Clear and meaningful distinction between programs rated TV-PG and TV-14. • Use of the TV-MA rating where appropriate.
Consistency	<p>Ratings for similar television program content should be consistent within each network, consistent across all networks, and consistent across all distribution platforms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standards for what constitute TV-G, PG, 14, and MA programming should remain relatively constant. Networks should resist the tendency towards "ratings creep." • Changes in ratings standards should be independently approved by the non-industry members of TVOMB. • If changes in ratings standards are made, the public must be informed of the change, and [for example] told why a rating of TV-PG no longer describes the same content it did previously. • Content descriptors (D,V,S, and L) should be used to inform, not serve as intensifiers of the underlying age rating. • All network content should carry an accurate and consistent content rating regardless of distribution platform. For example: Content that is streamed by the networks over the internet should be rated according to the same standards as content that airs on broadcast or cable television.
Transparency	<p>Every step in the TV content ratings process should be clearly explained and openly available to the public.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On a regular basis, the TV networks should inform the public about the existence of, and the role played by, the TVOMB. • The TVOMB should provide accurate and current postings of the names of its members, noting how they were chosen, why they were chosen, what their term is, and how they can be contacted. • The TVOMB should state whether there are any conflicts of interest that might interfere with its members accurately rating program content. • The TVOMB should make publicly available basic information about its proceedings, such as dates and locations of its meetings, minutes of business transacted, and rulings handed down in cases of disputed ratings of individual programs. • The TVOMB should open its meetings to the FCC Commissioners and to members of Congress, as well as to their staffers; and meetings should be open to members of the press and the public. • Meetings should be streamed live over the internet, and archived video recordings should be available for prior meetings.
Accountability	<p>The American people should be the ultimate arbiter as to whether the content ratings system and the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board are achieving their stated purpose.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Congress and/or the FCC should hold periodic hearings to ensure that the entire content ratings system is serving its intended purpose. • There should be a greater number of public advocacy organizations with expertise in media issues represented on the TVOMB. • The composition of the TVOMB should reflect a wider cross-section of the American public than a tiny clique of entertainment industry insiders; and the public should have some say in the nomination and election of members. • Reflecting their licensing requirements to operate "in the public interest," both individual television stations and the networks with whom they affiliate should solicit public opinion on content ratings standards in open, public meetings to ascertain the "contemporary community standards" of the community in which they are located. • As mandated by the FCC Report and Order that established the content ratings system, the TVOMB should routinely "conduct focus groups and commission independent quantitative studies to determine whether the TV Parental Guidelines are providing useful information to parents, and consider any needed changes to them."

CONCLUSION

The gross inconsistencies reported in this study clearly demonstrate that the TV content ratings system is failing parents and the American public. If the entertainment industry is going to honor its commitment to families, the TV content ratings system must be accurate and consistent, and the ratings process ought to be transparent and accountable to the public, especially to the parents for whom the system was created.

Though this study has concentrated on broadcast networks, there are equally grave implications for cable and satellite TV, as they share the same content ratings system as broadcast TV. And with ever-more individuals and families “cutting the cord,” and the increasing migration to online viewing services like Netflix, Hulu, and the like, an accurate, accessible, and trustworthy content ratings system is of vital importance.

The PTC supports the idea of a TV ratings review board completely independent of the entertainment industry, which would objectively provide television content ratings that are meaningful for parents. But whatever the precise mechanism of reform, one fact is clear: there must be consequences when networks irresponsibly place explicit, adult-themed content in front of children. Currently, it is *children* who are most impacted by the volume and degree of profanity, explicit sex, and graphic violence on our public airwaves.

Parents deserve a content ratings system which meets their expectations and needs. Twenty years after its creation, the TV content ratings system still fails to do so. Those in the entertainment industry have been entrusted with tremendous power by the American people. It’s time they started proving themselves worthy of that trust.



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Christopher Gildemeister, Ph.D., is the Parents Television Council's Head of Research Operations. Beginning as an entertainment analyst with the PTC in 2005, he was responsible for documenting the content on the UPN and ABC broadcast, and later the FX, MTV, VH1, Comedy Central, and Spike cable networks. Promoted to PTC Senior Writer/Editor in 2008, he created the PTC Watchdog blog; wrote the Culture Watch, TV Trends, Best, Worst, Cable Worst, and Misrated TV Show of the Week columns; the PTC's Annual Reports; the monthly PTC Insider newsletter; and the weekly email newsletter, the Weekly Wrap, as well as administering the PTC Seal of Approval program, awarding family-friendly media content. He has written three major research studies for the PTC: *Faith in a Box: Religion on Entertainment Television, 2005-2006*; *Habitat for Profanity: Broadcast TV's Sharp Increase in Foul Language, 2005-2010*; and *Protecting Children or Protecting Hollywood? A Twenty-Year Examination of the Effectiveness of the TV Content Ratings System* (2015). Dr. Gildemeister received his Ph.D. in 2013 from The Catholic University of America.

ABOUT THE PARENTS TELEVISION COUNCIL



The Parents Television Council® (www.parentstv.org) is a non-partisan education organization advocating responsible entertainment. It was founded in 1995 to ensure that children are not constantly assaulted by sex, violence and profanity on television and in other media. This national grassroots organization has more than 1.4 million members, and works with television producers, broadcasters, networks and sponsors in an effort to stem the flow of harmful and negative messages targeted to children.

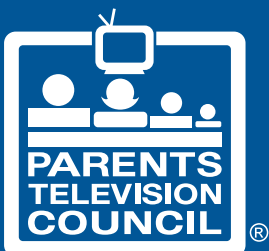
The PTC™ also works with elected and appointed government officials to enforce broadcast decency standards. Most importantly, the PTC produces critical research and publications documenting the dramatic increase in sex, violence and profanity in entertainment. This information is provided free of charge so parents can make informed viewing choices for their own families. Visit the *PTC Blog* at <http://www.parentstv.org/blog/>. Follow the PTC on Twitter: www.twitter.com/theptc, Facebook at: www.facebook.com/ptcusa and Pintrist at: www.pinterest.com/theptc

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