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This commentary was published by the San Francisco Examiner on April 7, 1997.

THE TELEVISION RATING SYSTEM: TV EXECUTIVES JUST DON'T GET IT

The Federal Communication Commission's public comment period on the so-called television rating system has just closed. Now the Commission must decide whether the new rating system, designed and promoted by the television industry, should be implemented or rejected. It should be scrapped. It is the product of an industry that remains in denial. The television industry insists on six ratings, with each show's producer deciding which applies. Actually, almost all shows will be operating either below or above the "recommended for 14 year old" line. Two or three actual categories, purporting to represent the industry's view of what a "14 year old" should hear, is industry paternalism at its worst.

They just don't get the problem.

This industry is addicted to sex and violence. Before he or she reaches seventh grade, an American elementary school-aged child will see 100,000 violent acts on television, and witness 8,000 murders. As recent surveys have affirmed, in very few cases do we see the real consequences -- physical pain, irreparable loss of a unique person, the anguish of the victim's mother and father. None of this is visible. Instead, television has turned into a series of "mini-morality" plays, a kind of comic book world where heroes and villains are exaggerated to allow the competitive contest we so enjoy. Dispatching a dehumanized villain is what it means "to be a man;" pity the foolish male who believes child support, fatherhood, steadiness, being an anchor for your children is a real man's aspiration.

Children Now's recent survey of sex on television tells us more. Surveying the 8-9 P.M. time spot most watched by children, the sexual references and subject matter have risen four fold in twenty years -- while 700,000 teen girls have unplanned pregnancies and 20,000 are infected with the AIDS virus. The major preoccupation of most characters is sex. The goal of the male is to "score," the goal of the female is to allure. Sex is funny. Sex is fun. Products make you attractive, buy them. She's cute, he's a hunk. Every other sentence is a reference to sexual intercourse -- either anticipated, teased about, denied, sought, or relished. And when your 16 year old announces that she is pregnant, she hears an anguished and shocked: "What, you're pregnant?"

Again, there are few references to consequences, to the real world. When the writers of Friends include a segment where the girls will not have sex without condoms, the show's writer acts as if it has just put on a PBS special. Never mind that the preoccupation of all characters at all times is who is sleeping with whom and who saw who naked and isn't it all fun? Yes, violence is sometimes justified; yes, sex should be fun. But the sum total drum beat our children are getting is disturbing. And each show does not see the overall drum beat, only its particular tune. The beat is now a din, driven partly by the Hollywood facility for risk aversion -- the sheep-like witless imitation of a prior Nielsen success.

Certainly local news is no respite; they have now joined the circus. Although seeking to exempt themselves from having to be rated, these shows feature as primal subject matter: (1) anything having to do with a celebrity; (2) cute animal stories; (3) heroic rescues; (4) petty ironies; (5) violence; and (6) sex -- usually a kind of sniggering adolescent happy talk "well I won't touch that, ha ha ha ha ha" approach. The clincher has been local news' recent trend to feature as news stories the salacious story lines of their own prime time shows, or the lives of their actors -- as if that is somehow news. None of these shows should be exempt from ratings.

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The answer is not censorship. Only government would do a worse job than Hollywood at filtering anything. But a marketplace works best with accurate information. The consumers here are the parents; they raise these children.

When Jack Valenti argues with a straight face that the simple ratings provided by those profiting from the shows is required because anything else is "too complicated," he insults all of us. Three variables are of widespread concern: sex, violence, and language. Some parents care more about some than others -- for legitimate reasons. And parents are able to judge when a child is ready for more information. What an insult that a TV producer with a profit stake can not only rate a show, but tell us it is advisable for a 14 year old. What hubris.

We want these shows rated from 1 to 5 along each of these three measures. That gives us enough information to make a choice about the barrage coming into the future values structure of our charges. The "V-chip" would allow its precise use: We can draw the violence line at 3, language at 4 and sex at 2 if we wish. Shows not passing muster do not air at home. That is not too complicated for us, Jack. It is interesting that Mr. Valenti thinks we can understand subtle commercial messages, intricate spy plots, and sophisticated sexual innuendos, but we cannot count to 5.

We can count to 5, Jack. And one other thing. We know how to vote, too.

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April 10, 1997