

CAP 4800, Capstone

Think twice about your child's program rating, a further examination into the  
U.S. television rating systems.

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## **Introduction**

This capstone project will examine, analyze and develop a better understanding of the television ratings system in the U.S. and how it affects children. It will look into what the rating system approves for children. Most of the rating systems in the U.S. are typically rated by entertainment companies themselves. This paper will further explore the ratings and if they are easy to understand and how they compare with parents views on what they think is appropriate for their child to watch. It will take a deeper look into the rating system and see what the television networks thoughts are on how they are protecting children with ratings. The paper will fully analyze how the rating system could protect every child since not every child is the same.

The big picture issue that inspired this topic is that violence is presented in all sources of media and it has huge effects on children and what kind of adult they turn into. TV ratings and all other forms of media ratings is a large issue. Who is making the decisions on what the ratings are and what's appropriate for children to watch? Who is doing the research on what is appropriate for children to watch and is it a person who is unbiased? How can we empower the right people with the right interests in mind to keep all children safe from programs. The rating system of television programs does not give caretakers enough information to make decisions on what their child should and shouldn't watch. As stated in one article "80 percent of parents wanted a more descriptive system that labels the type and degree of violence, sex, and adult language rather than the television industry's age-related ratings." (Kunkel, Farinola, Cope, Donnerstein, Zwarun, Kaiser, 1998) Parents want to know exactly what their children is going to be exposed to so, that they can make the right choice to as if they want them to watch it or not. It

is also the parents right to know what terminology a program is going to use and if it has an underlying message that is appropriate for their child. Violence and other behaviors can be overlooked when a company is rating their program, this can lead a child to view subliminal violence that their parent would not want them exposed to. This viewing of violence can affect the child's behaviors. Regulating violence in children programs is meaningful because it is important to teach children to have empathy and sympathy at a young age. When we allow them to watch programs that have violence in it (possibly because of false ratings) it can take away what we are trying to teach them. Viewing violence on any screen can desensitize children toward violence and can cause them to use it on others. Children watching violence in programs has been recognized by the government as being harmful, which is why programs are required to have a rating system making parents or caregivers aware of the amount of violence present in it. This is a great thing to have but it still doesn't ensure that children can't watch violent programs. Media and programs can have a beneficial impact on children, such as helping them learn new things and encouraging interaction. Video games also have a number of benefits such as improved motor skills, enhanced critical thinking capabilities, problem solving techniques, improved hand eye coordination and so on but just because these products have positive effects doesn't mean they lack negative ones. Usage of media and screens needs to be limited and censored. The education on violence in the media and its negative effects needs to be effectively addressed. In this paper it's going to take a deeper look into the 1996 Communication and a further look into the V-Chip and the specific television ratings. It will also take a deeper look into why the 1996 Communications Act is ineffective and should be updated, as well as which children are at a higher risk due to factors such as socioeconomic status and race.

What will be analyzed in this paper is the ineffective rating systems in the U.S. and its lack of ability to protect all children based on race and income. I want to know more information about how television series and movies get rated and what the guidelines are for each category a program is rated. I will conduct this analysis by using a textual analysis, this will consist of finding and reading many peer reviewed articles and also watch documentaries.

This paper will contribute to the existing literature in the field because it will address what goes into rating a television show or movie, this will allow people to hopefully have a better understanding of what their children are watching. People mainly rely on the television programming network to have the show rated but they never fully understand what that rating allows the content in the show to be. It will also allow people to see the inequality of the television ratings system and how it does not protect all children.

### **Literature Review**

Media violence is described as illustrating physical force to deliberately cause physical harm to another life form, as stated in the article ‘the context of violence for children of color’. Sanders-Phillips talks about how media shapes children and can influence their behavior and social development. Viewing explicit content that is not age appropriate can be very harmful and also scary for children. As talked about in the article there has been cases where children have shown symptoms of PTSD from the after effects of a violent program they watched. This can be presented in nightmares and/or not wanting to be alone because of anxiety that was obtained by a program viewed. It also discussed after watching violent films children are more likely to participate in risk taking behavior. Children of low income households viewing of television is more frequent and higher than children who have a stable income. This is likely because parents

of lower income families may not have the money to send their children to outside of school activities and therefore their children will have more unscheduled time and likely will watch TV. Low income areas have more criminal activity which means children who live in these areas stay indoors more instead of playing at the playground or outside running around with nearby children. This puts children of low income areas at risk, research has also shown that children that have been exposed to television violence have an increased risk of committing a crime.

The journal 'empowers parents to choose quality children's television' written by Mark Nadel, states the problems parents face with the television rating system and the V-Chip and its functionality. The writer states the argument that parents should have the same accessibility of what their children watch as their actual food diet. They state the introduction of the V-Chip was part of a solution but the accessibility of parents truly understanding how to use the V-Chip to effectively block content. They also need to be able to understand in an easier manner which programs are unsuitable for their children. Nadel states that a survey conducted in May of 1999 found that parents felt uneasy trying to understand the rating system. Parents also felt the use of the V-Chip was too complicated. The technology created to help parents block programming from their children is inaccessible. The writer states that you can go to the FCC website and they have information on how to use your V-Chip. The V-Chip should ideally be a simple technology that is easy to use and helps the needs of parent. The V-Chip should not be difficult or take a lot of researching and understanding to use because this reinforces the belief that the V-Chip is not made for every family and child. Parents are busy and have limited time. Any tool should be a simple design that is easy to use and most importantly doesn't take a lot of time.

In the academic article, “Parents’ Use of the V-Chip and Perceptions of Television Ratings: The Role of Family Characteristics and the Home Media Environment” ( Vaala, Bleakley, Castonguay, and Jordan, 2017) states how to this current day after the Telecommunication act was passed in 1996, parents still dont not have full control over what their children watch. When taking a poll of how many parents knew about the television rating system, 81% of parents knew about the rating systems but of these 81% many believed it wasn't as useful as it could be. It talks about how television producers are creating the ratings which leaves some people wondering if these television ratings are accurate. Every television that had been bought after July of 1999 should have a V-Chip equipped. V-Chips are only activated if the person who owns the TVselects to do so. In order for the selection of turning the V-Chip on you have to read instructions and fully understand the television ratings. Without the understanding of the television ratings the V-Chip is useless to a person. How do you know what to block for your children if you don't know what each rating means. There are a few ratings and each has its own definition on what it allows to be in its content. When blocking certain ratings such as TV-PG 13, you can choose to block every PG 13 program that has violence by adding TV-PG 13-V. When you block a certain program rating that means all the programs above PG13 are also going to be blocked. If parents want to watch an adult program that contains mature content they can't because the TV automatically blocks content. This is unpractical for a family that has multiple children of different ages who need different censors.

In the article “Ready for prime” written by Marc Silver and Thom Geier it analyzes the television rating system. It states that creating a labeling system helps flag inappropriate content for viewers. In 1997 the system was approved and passed by congress. It was said to be applied

to every program except for sports and news. The system also included a “V-chip” that allows parents to block content on a computer from their children. This was seen as giving parents the option to remove or hide violent inappropriate programs. But there was controversy about this, why was it allowed for such programs to even be allowed to air on television if it was deemed as too inappropriate. “V Chips” were also being created for television, they want people to have more information on what they are watching and to have the option to choose. The article states that even the ratings saying for example PG-13 does not tell them enough information. A rating system was tested in Canada that shared age and content guidelines these responded really well to citizens. Parents had more control over what their child was able to see and not see. It was said that parents want to be able to decide what they see as appropriate for their children and not an outsider deciding if it's appropriate or not. Not all children over 13 should watch the same shows. Some children are more sensitive to certain content so a PG-13 rating wouldn't give parents enough information to assess whether it's appropriate for their child.

To understand television ratings and v-chips let's talk about what they are and what they do. According to [tvguidelines.org](http://tvguidelines.org) it informs parents on the television ratings and their meanings for example, TV-Y means the program is meant for all children ages 2-6 and is not meant to scare children but contains action. TV-Y7 is meant for children seven and older. It contains violence such as fantasy violence and comedic, so they want children who watch it to be able to understand make-believe violence and reality violence. They believe children under seven years of age cannot handle these violent reenactments. TV-Y7-FV means that the program has a more heightened fantasy violence than the programs in TV-Y7. TV-G is defined as programs that “most parents” would allow children from all age groups to view. This rating does not have a

specific age or group of children it is intended for. It shows little if any violence, little to no sexual dialogue and situations. It also states that parents could let children watch unattended. TV-PG is defined as a program that parents can find inappropriate for younger children. It states that parents and children may watch it together and that it's intended for parental guidance. This rating allows television programs to have some suggestive dialogue, sexual situations, coarse language, and violence. TV-14 is labeled as parents should be extremely cautioned and only for children 14 and older. This rating allows programs to have heightened cases of violence, sexual situations, coarse language, and suggestive dialogue. It also states that children under the age of 14 should not watch unattended, does not say should not watch. TV-MA is labeled as only mature viewers only, which is adults 18 and over. This rating allows the program to have explicit sexual activity, violence, and language. Programs that contain letters D, L, S, V, and FV can be added to programs these letter ratings stand for D- suggestive dialogue, L- inappropriate language, S- sexual situations, V- violence present, and FV- is a fantasy violence that is present in children television.

“SPSSI Research Summary on Media Violence “ written by Craig A. Anderson, Brad J. Bushman, Edward Donnerstein , Tom A. Hummer, and Wayne Warburton. This academic article stated and presented the harmful effects media violence has on children. They state the average child watches thirty hours of programming. This can be very detrimental for children if their programming is not rated or if their parents do not have control over their viewing preferences. It talks about how violence in programming can shape a child's personality and can cause aggressiveness within that child. So, having the parent know as much information about a program is crucial so they can choose whether or not to allow their child to watch a program.



The outcome of violence in programs has on behavior is expressed in verbal aggression, relational aggression, proactive aggression, reactive aggression, and physical aggression.

(Anderson, 2015)

The academic journal “Preaching to the Choir: Profiling TV Advisory Ratings Users” written by Robert Abelman talks about the history of programing, when it came about and the types of ratings that came out and what they mean. It also talks about how the TV rating system was not enough for parents, they wanted more. The Telecommunications Act required every television sold in the US had to come with the ability to block certain content, in order for this to happen it had to be encoded. Jack Valenti an executive from the Motion Picture association of America who was head of the ratings created a system on screen that was four categories. TVM meant mature audience only, TV-14 which meant may not be suitable for children under 14, TV-PG means parental supervision suggested a, TV- G meant it was acceptable for children who were seven and older, TV- Y meant it was acceptable for all ages. Parents wanted more than these ratings, they wanted more information about the programs their children should watch and wanted to be able to make an informed decision on which programs their kids should watch and which ones they should avoid. decide what they can and can not watch.

In the academic journal do you see what I see? Parent and child reports of parental monitoring of media, written by Douglas Gentile, Amy Nathanson, Eric Rasmussen, Rachel Reimer, and David Walsh dives deeper into how media is heavily apart of children's lives at a young age and how the consumption of television is only being more prevalent and appart of children's everyday lives. It states that children spend much of their day in front a screen. It states that children from 8-10 years of age use five hours of screen time. Most of this time is watching

television shows. Children's screen time continues to increase as screens become a large part of society and culture. They also talk about how around the age of 8-10 is a crucial time period where children start to develop their own sense of self. They learn how to decision make and how to express their developing self. Children of middle ages are also beginning to develop a sense of social groups and who they want to socialize with and what groups they want to be apart of. Because media can be very influencing and can make actions seem appealing such as cursing and violence it can cause children to adopt these features and actions

In the academic journal "Not in Front of the Children." written by Beatrice Newbery, talks about how when the U.S. moved to use the V-chip to help control violence and explicit content, Europeans followed to help sensor their television programs. They talk about how V chips are not practical and are basically useless because of the TV rating system they need to agree on implementing. They also state that implementing the V chip would signify that the guidelines and codes that are in place are inferior and not good enough, which they believe their system is set up well.

Textual analysis is a qualitative methodology that helps researchers better understand a given subject. Textual analysis is a qualitative methodology this means it will help better understand symbols, language, and pictures to help me acquire the most information. Having a deeper understanding of messages and their social structures. Current rating systems are ineffective because all children are not the same and various studies have shown there are many determining factors too such as income and race. This current rating system does not protect all children equally if these issues are not considered. This topic was further explored by reading

and comparing many different academic journals and pieces of writing. This is using a textual analysis is relevant to this topic, it heavily relies on text, studies, and data collection.

Before there was television and a broad spectrum of electronics there wasn't a need for thoughts or worry about the need to protect children from viewing violence and other inappropriate content. Of course people still had to protect their children from being exposed to violence usually outside of their homes but now with TV's and computers everywhere there is such a large amount of access to potential exposure and parents have to protect their children from watching and being exposed to violence within every home and even with the ineffective system some children are protected more by it than others. The impression that the rating system works for every child needs to be addressed, research suggests that other factors play a role when considering how children respond to televised violence and those differences with fall along race, income, and gender.

### **Analysis**

The 1996 FCC Telecommunications Act helped regulation of violence to a small extent under Title V: Obscenity and Violence and Subtitle B: Violence. Under title v obscenity and violence section it states that when requested cable operators must block programming that the customer wants to be blocked. It also states that cable companies must block sexually explicit adult programming so that people who do not want it do not see it, as well as not screening it during the day since that is the time children are up and can view it. This also allows cable companies to choose not to screen something to the public based on nudity, obscenity, or indecency present. In the FCC's Telecommunications Communications act of 1996 also had a section called subtitle B: violence. Under this section it states that the FCC has the right within a

year if the video programming distributor hadn't created a rating system for programs that have violence, sexual situations, or indecency that a person, specifically parents should be advised about before turning on a program. It states that these program distributors should have a team of people designated to create ratings for programs and giving parents the option of blocking inappropriate content. If program distributors cannot comply with these guidelines then they will require the implication of a system that will enable people to block all programs with a similar rating they wish to block. This will only be enacted in picture screens that are thirteen inches or larger. It also states that program distributors as well as broadcasting create technology reserve to motivate electronic manufacturers to develop something that will allow parents more easily to block programming that is rated inappropriate for children. It is also stated to create something that will be accessible for low income families. Although the FCC did bring rating systems for programs and are trying to give parents the ability to block programs, the current ratings system is inadequate. There are many outliers when it come to program ratings. The current rating system does not serve all the needs of all children as shown in my research. The current rating system is meant to be a guideline for all children even though children without taking into consideration their different homelives, exposures, fears etc. So how can it really protect all children? It's impossible to so it does not.

### **Weaknesses**

The problem with The FCCs Telecommunications Communications Act of 1996, even though it was a great start to figuring out a solution is that it gave the programming distributors all the power to rate these programs. They will of course try to minimally apply these guidelines given to them but it will not be what is completely the best for children and their sense of well

being. They will likely rate the shows to include as broad of an audience as they can in order to gain more viewers as that is their ultimate goal. The FCC's Telecommunications Communication Act also stated that it wanted low income families to have access to this new technology that would allow them to block programming. This is a great thought but what if it is not accessible to them, then what? Children all over should be protected from violence and inappropriate content in programming. We cannot pick and choose which children will be exposed to inappropriate content. For example a television show that is very popular among young children called SpongeBob Squarepants is rated as TV-Y. TV-Y means that it is suitable for children of all ages, research has shown that many parents do not agree with this television ratings. The show has a lot humor and situations that can go over children's heads, but can be understood as inappropriate content to adults. SpongeBob uses terms that parents do not want their children to say, it also contains scenes where characters are in their undergarments. Characters are either insulted or insult others especially since patrick and spongebob are meant to be naive characters. Even the names of people and places are named after inappropriate things. This is presented in sandy a characters name "Sandy cheeks" and the place they all live "bikini bottom". These are two small examples but there is many more within the shows content. Let's compare spongeBob square parents to dora the explorer. Do these shows sound similar to you or even on the same platform as one another? Dora the explorer is rated TV-Y which means it is suitable for all ages. Dora the explorer is very educational. It teaches children how to say words in spanish, teaches children how to problem solve for example when she goes through obstacles shes asks the audience to choose the strategie. Dora also promotes counting and verbal communication from the children watching. During the episode dora is constantly asking for advice on how to

overcome her obstacle and at the end of every episode she asks the audience what their favorite part of the adventure was. When thinking about these two shows it really highlights how different they are from one another and makes you question how they are both rated the same. Being able to recognize people in low income areas need to have access to this screening is great but actually making sure they receive the information is more important. Even recognizing that people in low income areas need this shows the variety of different children and how unequal their protection is. The development of children is very complicated and it is crucial for parental involvement this can sometimes have negative effects on children depending on how their parent is and what the child's temperament is like. Parents often face a lot of difficulty when parenting. It's very demanding when a child's temperament is challenging and the parent has too much going on to give the child what he or she needs, and instead will do what's easiest for example use the television to entertain or distract the child. Children whose parents use television as a form of entertainment or child care because they have other things to do, do not have time to fully communicate with their child and consistently hold conversations with them.

(Sanders-Phillips, 2003) This contributes to the antisocial behavior that watching long amounts of television can lead to for children. This can happen very easily in low income households especially in single parent households because the one parent doesn't have support and has to care for and provide for the family. This puts these children at a higher risk of viewing inappropriate content and violence because the parent may be preoccupied with the responsibility of providing for the family financially. If there is no one there with the child to view the ratings who will stop the child from watching a program that is inappropriate for them. Violence is also correlated in lack of self control, many children deal with this issue when they first enter school

and in new social settings. But lack of self control can be heightened and can cause issues for the child in many ways. It makes performing tasks harder and following instructions in school very difficult and this can also make their parent or parents lives harder. This is why we need to care for and put more effort into rating and controlling content that isn't suitable for young viewers. Race plays a large part in the inequalities of the television rating system. For example for the longest time ever the media has promoted violence in an uplifting way and has connected it to racial stereotypes. These racial messages are connected to violence within shows, research and statistics show that children of color who are among low income families could be really negatively impacted by this. (Carlsson paige, 2003) Controlling what children see is very important when they are developing their own personalities. Especially around middle school age, programs can cause a false sense of what young girls should be dressing like, acting like or what young boys should be that either gender cannot live up to. Studies have shown that adult monitoring programing is related to education level, in the study they found that children from higher level of education households need permission before they watch television. People who have a higher level of education most times have a higher income level which means there is less financial pressure and worry for the parents. (Douglas et al., 2012) If parents do not have time to actively protect their children from programing then the government should regulate programing to protect these children from being predisposed to violence and other inappropriate content that have long term negative effects. From young ages children are cognitively figuring out the world and they learn from imitating what they see around them. Children are learning new things everyday and television can teach them so much they are not ready for and can make them act out on others. The current rating system allows for the same programs to be rated differently

depending on the channel you are watching. They also allow the rating of a show to be changed by episode. This is very misleading for parents and children. For instance if there's a show a parent believes is age appropriate they will allow the child to watch that show unknowing that the next episode may be rated different and could contain inappropriate content. This seems very flawed. As shown in the earlier literature review the television rating system is not detailed and inaccurate. Children programming allows for fantasy violence to be present and every rating after that a higher level of violence is present and is allowed for children to watch with the presence of a parent. Programs are rated by producers or networks these are not people who specialize in child development and know what's developmentally best for children and their cognition. The V-Chip that was mandatory to be implemented in every television set after The 1996 FCC Telecommunications Communications Act is very unpractical. If parents choose to block a program ratings they do not want their children to watch it also means that they cannot watch anything over that television rating because it will be blocked. So if there is a show a parent doesn't want their child to watch this means they have to block every show and program that contains that television shows rating or higher. This makes it so that most parents will not block the program because they want to use the television for their recreational use as well. This increases the likelihood that children can view content that is unsuitable to watch. Parents can choose to supervise every interaction their child has with the television but this is highly difficult for many. This affects children of low income families heavily, research shows that parents use the television as a form of babysitting and replacement of afterschool activity. Many families cannot afford after school programs or babysitting and there neighborhood or school district do not have funding to allow them to have after school programs. (Sanders-phillips, 2003)



There are some solutions and remedies to this problem such as educating parents on limiting their child's use of screen time could greatly help. Shown in one study were the restricted amount of television correlated with a better outcome in school, and show less stereotypical gender roles. Restricting violence in studies have also shown to result in an less aggressive manner than other children. Being able to effectively reach every parent and properly inform them about the outcome television can have on their children is crucial. Monitoring media is a solution but often low income households don't have as much time to review a program with their child. Studies show that single parent household discuss television in a positive manner to their children. (Sanders-phillips, 2003) It also draws conclusions that families with higher annual income and education are more active and communicative then families with a lower socioeconomic status. A more promising solution to the current inadequate rating system is to completely restructure the rating system and to have professional child psychologists and cognitive psychologist work on it. There's a strong correlation of watching violence and aggression, violence overall has negative effects for everyone. Watching a large portion of television in one's life can create antisocial behavior which then can turn into aggression. Aggression can be formed from young and follows children into their adult lives this can lead into higher chances of committing violent crimes. (Wilson, 2008) Choosing programs with children and creating a child friendly account to streaming programs can be beneficial, the less commercials the better because typically commercials show violent or sexual content in trailers for shows or movies.

## **Conclusion**

Furthermore the current television rating system is ineffective due to many factors. One main factor is that all children are not the same, there are many determining factors such as socioeconomic status that put some children more at risk than others. Exposure to TV is becoming more accessible daily, this means we have a responsibility to children and parents to create a flawed system and protect them from inappropriate content. This current system does not protect all children equally. The requirements of the V-Chip and television rating system was created in 1996, this is over twenty-three years ago and seems a bit outdated. Research has shown that television can shape children's personality and characteristics so why would we allow for this to negatively affect the lives children can lead? As a society we need to come together and figure out the best possible plan with professionals who specialize in child development to protect children from inappropriate programming on television. This has the power to negatively shape children into who they become in the future, we want to have healthy citizens who lead positive lives. Children's brains are constantly developing and it's such a fragile stage to become exposed to content that they are not ready for. We owe it everyone in our society to improve the wellbeing of children and protect them from the negative aspects of what television and technology can do.

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