The Rating Systems for Media Products

Douglas A. Gentile

Parents have raised many concerns about the potential impact of the media on their children. Most of these concerns have pertained to media content that contains violence, sexuality, offensive language, and graphic horror. Today, 95 percent of American parents believe that exposure to media violence contributes to increased aggression in children, and 95 percent believe that sexual content contributes to children becoming involved in sexual situations before they are ready (Rideout, 2004). Parents also believe that it is important to protect their children from exposure to explicitly graphic, violent, or sexual content (Nathanson et al., 2002). Yet it is increasingly difficult to do so in a media world that is filled with multiple technologies in the home, 24-hour television networks, media in children's bedrooms, and websites that are unrestricted and often quite explicit.

In an effort to help parents navigate these terrains, media industries have developed a number of rating systems to label the content of different products. The movie rating system has been in existence for over 30 years. Other systems have developed more recently, in response to newer technologies or to controversies over explicit content that children are exposed to. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of these different rating schemes. The chapter will begin with a brief description of the stated goals for the various rating systems. The next section will describe the different systems that exist, comparing and contrasting the historical factors that lead to their creation as well as their resulting structures. The third section will discuss seven major limitations of the rating systems as they currently exist: inconsistency in the assignment of ratings, ratings creep, lack of content-based information, incongruence with scientific research on harm, lack of agreement with parent ratings, lack of publicity and clarity of the ratings, and the forbidden fruit problem. The final section will offer some suggestions for improving the ratings of media products in the United States.

The Goals of Rating Systems

There are several different rating systems – one for each major medium with which children spend time (i.e., television, movies, videogames, music, Internet). Although each of these media has different characteristics, the rating systems all share the same goals: (1) to provide information to parents and caregivers that will allow them to make informed decisions about which media products are appropriate for their children, which in turn will (2) help parents reduce children's exposure to content that may be inappropriate. For example, the stated goal of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system is to "offer to parents some advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see" (MPAA, 2000). The other industries make similar statements, such as the videogame industry's stated goal "to help consumers make informed decisions about which games might be appropriate for their children and family" (ESRB, n.d.a).

In 1996 (prior to the creation of the television rating system), Children Now, a non-profit organization, surveyed 18 of the country's top children's media experts to define what would make an ideal rating system. Almost every expert reported independently that the major goal of a rating system should be to provide as much relevant and correct information as possible, and that it should be in a format that is as simple and understandable as possible. The experts stated clearly that the goals of a rating system should not be to censor material or to dictate taste, but instead to provide information that is descriptive, objective, meaningful, reliable, and valid. Surveys also show that parents and child development experts feel that it is important to know about several areas of media content, such as violent content, sexual content, offensive language, and fear-producing themes/scenes (e.g., Children Now, 1996; Gentile, 1996). Although parents and experts agree on what is desirable, the rating systems are quite variable in how well they provide the desired information.

History and Description of Current Rating Systems

The media rating systems described here have differences among them, but there is one striking similarity. Each of them was created only after political pressure was placed on the industries, including threats of government regulation and restrictions (Cantor, 2003a). As will be illustrated, the rating systems vary considerably in the types of information provided and in the extent to which they emphasize age restrictions and/or content descriptions.

Movies

The film industry was the first to adopt a rating system. The system was created in 1968 by the MPAA, which is the trade association funded by the major

movie studios. The ratings were prompted by public and governmental concern when filmmakers began adding more adult material into movies following the revision of the "Hays Code," which had censored film content since the 1930s. The shift from internal censorship to external information is reflected in comments made by Jack Valenti, architect of the film ratings: "The movie industry would no longer 'approve or disapprove' the content of a film, but we would now see our primary task as giving advance cautionary warnings to parents so that parents could make the decision about the movie-going of their young children" (Valenti, 2005).

Initially, there were four ratings: G for general audiences, M for mature audiences, R for restricted under 16, requiring a parent or guardian, and X for no admission under 17. The system has undergone many changes over the years. Because of parent confusion, the M rating was changed to GP (for General audiences, Parental guidance suggested), and later changed to PG. In 1984, two movies were released with a PG rating that upset children and parents because of their scary images: *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins*. These movies caused concerns that the PG rating was too uninformative, given that it combined all children from toddlers up to age 17 into one group (Breznican, 2004). In response, the PG rating was split into two ratings: PG and PG-13. In 1990, the X category was changed to NC-17, meaning no children 17 or under admitted, and brief explanations of why films received an R rating began to be provided. As shown in Figure 23.1, there are currently five ratings that a movie can receive. Each of the ratings attempts to gauge approximately the "proper" age a viewer should be in order to watch a particular film.

Movie distributors and producers submit their movies to the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), which is the ratings board created by the MPAA. Although submission is nominally voluntary, it is in essence mandatory because the National Association of Theater Owners, which comprises over 29,000 theater screens in the US (NATO, 2006), will not show movies that have no rating. The CARA rating board is composed of 8 to 13 individuals who are parents and do not have ties to the movie industry (MPAA, 2006). The ratings are determined by a majority vote, and raters are required to give feedback on ways to reduce a rating if the directors, producers, and distributors so desire (e.g., if they wish the movie to have a PG-13 rating when it initially received an R rating). Most raters are considered junior raters, who serve for up to five years (Waxman, 2001). A minority are senior raters who have unlimited terms and special responsibilities, such as leading discussions about ratings with movie directors. The raters are required to sign a secrecy contract, stating that they will not disclose any information about how the ratings are given.

Music

The music industry was the next to adopt a rating system in 1985, again due to government pressure. Congressional hearings were prompted by the Parents
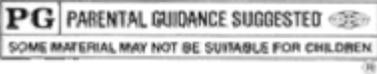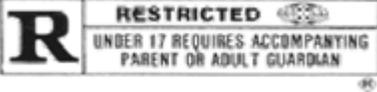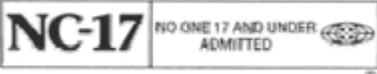
Movie rating	
Rating	Explanation
G GENERAL AUDIENCES — All Ages Admitted	General audiences. All ages admitted.
PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED — SOME MATERIAL MAY NOT BE SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN	Parental guidance suggested. Some material may not be suitable for children.
PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED — Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13	Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.
R RESTRICTED — UNDER 17 REQUIRES ACCOMPANYING PARENT OR ADULT GUARDIAN	Restricted. Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.
NC-17 NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED	No one under 17 admitted.
Videogame ratings	
EARLY CHILDHOOD — eC — CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content may be suitable for ages 3 and older. Contains no material that parents would find inappropriate.
EVERYONE — E — CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content may be suitable for persons ages 6 and older. Titles in this category may contain minimal violence, some comic mischief, and/or mild language.
EVERYONE 10+ — E 10+ — CONTENT RATED BY ESRB	Content may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence, mild language, and/or minimal suggestive themes.

Figure 23.1   The Major US Rating Systems and their Meanings

TEEN **T** CONTENT RATED BY **ESRB**	Content may be suitable for persons ages 13 and older. May contain violent content, mild or strong language, and/or suggestive themes.
MATURE **M** CONTENT RATED BY **ESRB**	Content may be suitable for persons ages 17 and older. Titles in this category may contain mature sexual themes, more intense violence, and/or strong language.
ADULTS ONLY **AO** CONTENT RATED BY **ESRB**	Content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of sex and/or violence. Adult Only products are not intended for persons under the age of 18.
Television ratings	
TV Y	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	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 violence 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	For those programs where fantasy violence may be more intense or more combative than other programs in this category.
TV G	General audiences.

Figure 23.1   (*Cont'd*)

TV PG	Parental guidance suggested.
TV 14	Parents strongly cautioned.
TV MA	Mature audience only.
V, FV	Includes violence or fantasy violence.
S	Includes sexual situations.
L	Includes coarse language.
D	Includes sexually suggestive dialogue.
Music rating	
PARENTAL ADVISORY EXPLICIT CONTENT	The recording may contain strong language or depictions of violence, sex, or substance abuse. Parental discretion is advised.

Figure 23.1   (*Cont'd*)

Music Resource Center (US Senate, 1985), a group created by Tipper Gore, wife of then Senator Al Gore (later Vice President) and three other Washington wives, who became upset over the blatant sexual and violent lyrics of popular songs, such as Prince's song "Darling Nikki." Although no legislation was ever proposed, there was an implied threat that government regulation could occur if the industry did not respond appropriately. For example, Senator Hollings stated in his opening remarks, "I will be looking from the Senator's standpoint, not just to bring pressures to try to see if there is some constitutional provision to tax, but [for] an approach that can be used by the Congress to limit this [offensive music]" (US Senate, 1985, p. 3). The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) agreed to provide a warning label on music releases that contained explicit lyrics, including violent and sexual lyrics. As shown in Figure 23.1, the warning label provides no information regarding the ages for which a given music release is appropriate, nor does it provide any information about the type(s) of explicit content that the album contains. The label simply states: "Parental Advisory Explicit Content." The decision to use or not to use the label is determined solely by each record company and musical artist, and the RIAA states that the number of sound recordings carrying the label is less than one half of one percent of available recordings (RIAA, 2006). This rating has

not undergone any particular changes since 1985, other than to standardize the size of the label in 1990.

Videogames and the Internet

In response to congressional hearings led by US Senators Lieberman and Kohl, two competing rating systems were developed for videogames and software in 1994. Both systems were sponsored by the software and videogame industries. One was developed by the Software Publishers Association (SPA) and the other by the Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA, now renamed the Entertainment Software Association). The SPA created the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC, now renamed the Internet Content Rating Association) to design a rating system that focused mostly on providing content information. Games were rated using a questionnaire with standardized definitions, providing separate information on the level or quantity of nudity/sex, violence, and offensive language in each game (levels 1 through 4 for each type of content, depicted by increasing amounts on a thermometer). This descriptive approach was designed in part by expert media researchers such as Dorothy Singer and Don Roberts. Game developers rated their games on each dimension, using the standardized definitions (a full list of current definitions is available at http://www.icra.org/vocabulary).

At the same time, the IDSA created the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) to design a system that classified games into age-based categories similar to movie ratings. There were four original categories: K-A (Kid through Adult), T (Teen; ages 13 and older), M (Mature; ages 17 and older), and AO (Adults Only; ages 18 and older). The K-A category was soon split into two categories, EC (Early Childhood; ages 3 and older) and E (Everyone; ages 6 and older). In 2005, a sixth category was introduced – E10+ (Everyone 10 and older). These labels were required on the fronts of game packaging (see Figure 23.1). Content descriptors were added to the backs of the videogame boxes as well. The content descriptors provided some information about the amount of violent, sexual, and other potentially objectionable content in the games, though they were less detailed than the four levels in the RSAC system.

The ESRB rating system soon became the dominant videogame and software rating system, in part because the RSAC labels were criticized for being difficult to decipher on game packaging and for not including age suitability information (http://www.chipriv.com/privacy-policies/recreational-software-advisory-council.html). The ESRB process for rating software and videogames begins by game developers submitting representative game footage to the ESRB. Although getting a rating is voluntary, again most major retail outlets will only sell games that have ratings, so most game developers submit their games to get ratings. Three paid ESRB raters view the material in private and recommend a rating for the game. The raters are not supposed to have any ties to the videogame or computer industries, and their names are kept confidential (ESRB, n.d.a).

Internet

In 1995, the RSAC videogame rating system was modified to become a rating system for Internet websites (called the RSACi system). This system was incorporated into several Internet browsers, such as Internet Explorer and Netscape, as well as into parental blocking software. In 1999, the RSACi was turned into a new corporation, the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA). The ICRA provides a questionnaire to participating web content providers, in which they note the presence or absence of several types of content, including nudity, sexual content, violence, potentially offensive language, and other potentially harmful behaviors (e.g., drug use, gambling). The burden is on each web designer to choose to rate their own material and add the ratings tags to their webpages. Users (e.g., parents) would need to enable software to look for the ratings tags and filter based on their personal choices. However, this is not the only Internet rating system in existence. There are competing rating systems provided by SafeSurf, the Emmis Austin Radio Broadcasting Company, and the Platform for Internet Content Selection (supported by Microsoft); and the ESRB is rumored to be creating an Internet rating system called ESRBi.

Television

Although television networks had occasionally provided the message that "viewer discretion" was advised for particular shows, it is the most recent medium to "voluntarily" adopt a rating system. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 mandated that all televisions with screens 13 inches or larger include a "V-Chip" starting January 1, 2000. The V-Chip is a computer chip in a television that can filter out content in accordance with parents' wishes. For the V-Chip to work, programs needed to be rated so that parents could block particular content, such as violence (the "V" in V-Chip). Hence, by legislating the V-Chip, Congress had effectively required that a rating system be created for the V-Chip to be able to read. The Telecommunications Act offered the broadcasting industry the first opportunity to create voluntary ratings, and if none had been created within a year, the Federal Communications Commission was to appoint a committee to create one (FCC, 2003; Kunkel et al., 1998).

Jack Valenti, former president of the MPAA, led the development effort, in collaboration with the National Association of Broadcasters and the National Cable Television Association. The system originally created was an age-based approach, similar to the movie rating system. It contained six ratings, two for children's programs (TV-Y and TV-Y7) and four for non-children's programs (TV-G, TV-PG, TV-14, TV-MA). Soon after the system was released, parents, researchers, and child advocacy organizations voiced strong criticism of it, in part because it contained no information about the content of programming (Kunkel, 2003). In response to the criticisms, the ratings were amended to include five content descriptors as a complement to the six age-based categories (Figure 23.1). The

five content descriptors are V (violence), FV (fantasy violence), L (offensive language), S (sexual situations), and D (suggestive dialogue). However, not all combinations of age and content ratings are used in the system. For example, none of the main five content ratings is applied to programs rated TV-G, for general audiences. In addition, none of these five descriptors is applied to children's programs, or those rated TV-Y or TV-Y7. Instead, the only content label that is sometimes applied to children's programming is FV (fantasy violence), and then it is only used in conjunction with the TV-Y7 rating. The ratings are displayed on-screen for the first 15 seconds of a program on a broadcast network (FCC, 2003), and some networks also display them at other times. Until 2005, the network NBC had refused to provide the content descriptors.

Each network rates its own programming, which means that two networks can give the same program or movie a different rating. Although this is a rare occurrence, it does happen from time to time, and it is made more likely as shows go into syndication. A network provides a "prerating" for each show before it is delivered to local affiliate stations. The prerating could be changed by local broadcasters if they disagreed with it, but in practice most broadcasters do not review the programs and simply accept the preratings to save time and costs (Kunkel et al., 1998).

To summarize, five different systems exist to inform consumers about media content. Even those that are somewhat similar have distinct differences. For example, a movie that may not be appropriate for a preteen would be rated PG-13 whereas a television program with similar qualities would be rated TV-14 and a videogame would be rated T. In addition to having different symbols, the systems vary in how much information they provide. The videogame ratings are arguably the most informative because they not only contain age recommendations and content information, but the content is sometimes also rated in terms of intensity. At the other end of the continuum, music recordings are not labeled for appropriate age or the nature of the content – they simply get a warning for "explicit content." In the middle are television ratings and movie ratings, which provide age guidelines and some content information, although not for every rating.

Limitations of the Rating Systems

Although several of the rating systems have undergone changes over the years in response to scientific and parent concerns, they still have limitations. In this section, seven weaknesses that pertain to most of the ratings collectively are discussed.

Consistency

Many critics have lamented an apparent lack of consistency within and among the rating systems, questioning the diverse range of content that can fit within

a single rating category. For example, after the film *Billy Elliot* received an R rating for multiple uses of a swear word, one critic wrote, "it seems reasonable to wonder why a film like *Billy Elliot* – which doesn't feature any sex, extreme violence, or mature themes – should get the same rating as . . . *8MM* (full of some of the most disturbing imagery this side of hell)" (Tharps, 2000, p. 24). Furthermore, it is confusing to many parents how movies such as *Shrek* and *Star Wars Episode 2* both received a PG rating. *Shrek* includes depictions of alcohol use and some more mature humor. But *Star Wars Episode 2* has massive counts of characters killed, including many beheadings. These do not appear to be the same kind of PG. One former rater broke the MPAA secrecy restrictions to comment that raters are given no clear standards for how the ratings should be determined, such as what distinguishes a PG-13 movie from an R (Waxman, 2001). The confusion appears widespread:

> "I don't understand the system, and I'm a filmmaker," says producer Hawk Koch (*Wayne's World, Primal Fear*). "I want to follow the rules, but I can't figure out what they are, and no one is able to explain them. I see action films with blood and gore rated PG-13. And I have this sweet little comedy, and I'm trying to get the same rating" [but finding it difficult not to get an R]. (Fleming, 2000, p. 36)

Similarly, for music, the same parental advisory label is used for albums that include a small number of potentially objectionable content as for those that include hundreds. There are no uniform standards to be used to determine which albums should carry the label (Funk et al., 1999). For example, the self-titled *American HI FI* CD contains four swear words and some sexual references, whereas *The Marshall Mathers LP* CD by Eminem contains hundreds of swear words and many violent, sexual, and drug references. Both contain the same label with no other distinctive information for consumers.

For videogames, there is empirical research documenting inconsistency in the ratings. In one content analysis of 55 E-rated ("Everyone") games, the researchers found that about two thirds (64 percent) included violence, yet nearly half of these (44 percent) did not receive a violence content descriptor in their ESRB ratings (Thompson & Haninger, 2001). In a separate random sample of 81 T-rated ("Teen") games, again almost half (48 percent) included violent, sexual, and drug-use content that was not listed in their ratings (Haninger & Thompson, 2004). Finally, in a random sample of 36 M-rated ("Mature") games, a majority (81 percent) included violent, sexual, profane, or drug/alcohol/tobacco-related content that was not listed in the ESRB rating information (Thompson, Tepichin, & Haninger, 2006).

Likewise, for television, the content descriptors are not applied consistently to programming. In one large-scale content analysis of 2,757 television programs, 79 percent of shows that contained violence did not include the V (violence) descriptor rating, 91 percent of shows with offensive language did not

include the L rating (offensive language), and 92 percent of shows with sexual content did not receive the S rating (sexual scenes; Kunkel et al., 1998). Among children's shows containing violence, 81 percent did not include the FV rating (fantasy violence). These inconsistencies may be due to the fact that there are no industry-wide standards for how shows should be rated, or how the content descriptors should be defined (Kunkel et al., 1998).

Related to this issue of inconsistency, the ratings often treat violence and sex differently as well. In one study, Leone (2002) content analyzed 210 sequences that were removed from NC-17 films in order to secure an R-rating. He found that significantly more sexual sequences were removed from these films than violent sequences were. In a subsequent study, Leone (2004) analyzed the rating descriptions of 52 R-rated and NC-17 rated films. He found that violence was mentioned in 81 percent of the R-rated movie descriptions but in only 31 percent of the supposedly more explicit NC-17 descriptions. In contrast, sexuality was mentioned in 58 percent of the R-rated descriptions and 96 percent of the NC-17 descriptions. Based on these two studies, Leone argued that the MPAA ratings employ a double standard and that violence is treated more liberally than is sex in assigning labels to films.

This double standard appears to be typical across rating systems. Table 23.1 displays an analysis of 12,668 videogame ratings I conducted in November 2006. Violent and sexual content do not appear to be treated similarly. For example, very few (only 23) games have ever received the strictest rating, AO (Adults only), and of these, 87 percent have sexual content whereas only 22 percent have violent content. This pattern is reversed for all the other rating categories (except games with an EC rating, which had no violent or sexual content). For example, 89 percent of M-rated (Mature) games have violent content, but only 19 percent have sexual content. This pattern still holds if we limit the analysis to only the strongest descriptors ("Intense Violence" and "Strong Sexual Content") rather than including any type of violent/sexual content. AO-rated games are much more likely to have strong sexual content (87 percent) but few have intense violence

Table 23.1 Percentages of Videogames with Violent and Sexual Content by Rating

Rating	*AO*	*M*	*T*	*E10+*	*E*
Total number of games	*23*	*1034*	*3059*	*296*	*8011*
Have any violent content	22% (5)	89% (919)	91% (2781)	91% (269)	31% (2521)
Have "intense violence"	4% (1)	18% (183)	0%	0%	0%
Have any sexual content	87% (20)	19% (196)	18% (559)	17% (50)	1% (46)
Have "strong sexual content"	87% (20)	7% (76)	0%	0%	0%

Note: AO (Adults only); M (Mature); T (Teens ages 13 and older); E10+ (Everyone 10 and older); E (Everyone).

(4 percent), whereas M-rated games are more likely to have intense violence (18 percent) than strong sexual content (7 percent). If we examine the next strongest descriptors ("Violence" and "Sexual Themes"), this pattern is also found in T-rated games, which are more likely to have "violence" (91 percent) than "sexual themes" (18 percent).

Ratings creep

A second problem is that the meaning of ratings seems to change across time. Indeed, there is increasing evidence that ratings are undergoing what has been called "ratings creep." That is, over time, more "adult" or explicit content filters down into less restrictive ratings. In a study of G-rated animated films released between 1937 and 1999, for example, Yokota and Thompson (2000) found that there was a statistically significant increase in the duration of violence across time, even after controlling for film length. In other words, more violence was permitted in G-rated films in the later years. In a more recent study, Thompson and Yokota (2004) assessed nearly 2,000 movies released between 1992 and 2003. They found that the amount of objectionable content had increased significantly over time. In particular, a movie rated PG-13 in 2003 included approximately as much violence, nudity, and offensive language as did an R-rated movie of 10 years before. Acknowledging this time shift in the meaning of the ratings, Fox film executive Tom Sherak stated, "It used to be you could use the F-word once and still get a PG-13. Then it was twice. Now it can be three times, as long as the usage is not sexual. Frontal nudity used to be an X or an NC-17. Now it can be an R. It's always changing" (Fleming, 2000, p. 36).

Although technically not ratings creep, Walsh and his colleagues (2005) found that M-rated games in 2004 contained 46 percent more violence, 800 percent more sexual content, and 3,000 percent more profanity than did M-rated games from the late 1990s. These results should be viewed with some caution because they are based on a small sample, but the findings suggest that ratings creep may be due in part to an overall increase over time in violent and sexual content in media products. It appears that the creators of media entertainment are including more "edgy" adult content in games, music, television programs, and movies. If so, our culture may be becoming acclimatized to increasing amounts of explicit material in the media, and even raters may experience desensitization in their judgments of what constitutes material that parents need to know about.

Parents may be most likely to notice ratings creep in the categories just below the most restrictive rating (i.e., PG-13 for movies, TV-14 shows, and T games), as previously restricted content trickles down. In an analysis comparing movie, television, and videogame ratings with parent-validated ratings, this is exactly the pattern that was observed (Walsh & Gentile, 2001). That is, parents were most likely to disagree with ratings in the PG-13, TV-14, and T categories.

One could argue that the ratings *should* change to reflect changing norms. "I have tried to make sure that [we] keep up with the American ethic," [MPAA president] Valenti says. "We cannot be sterner than television. More than 125 million people a day watch TV. Only three to five million people a day go to the movies. TV sets the tone, and TV, of course, has changed. So we have changed" (Fleming, 2000, p. 38). Researchers have noted that the existing media ratings are generally based more on what is considered offensive than on what is likely to be harmful to children (Kunkel et al., 2001; Wilson, Linz, & Randall, 1990). However, if parents' main goal is to protect their children from harm, then what is culturally unacceptable or offensive is not likely to be very relevant to their decision-making. In other words, the ratings should not change over time if they are truly designed to help shield children from potentially harmful content, unless of course, new evidence is discovered about the types of messages that are detrimental to youth.

Lack of content-based information

When asked what they would like in a rating system, parents overwhelmingly state that they would prefer ratings to be content-based rather than age-based (Bushman & Cantor, 2003; Cantor, 1998a; Cantor, Stutman, & Duran, 1996; Gentile, 1996). Over three quarters of parents say that it is "very important" to have information about the amount of violence, offensive language, and sexual content present in media (Gentile, 1996). Yet at least one of the systems, that for music, provides no information about content at all. And other systems, such as those for television and movies, provide content information only for certain rating categories. For example, the movie system offers no content information for G-rated films, although all of the G-rated films studied by Yokota and Thompson (2000) included at least one act of violence, with the average duration of violence totaling 9.5 minutes. Similarly, the television rating system provides no content descriptors for the TV-Y or TV-G ratings, and only one possible content descriptor for the TV-Y7 rating (i.e., FV). The videogame ratings appear to be the most useful for parents, in that content information accompanies all ratings (although studies have shown that relevant content information is often not documented; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Haninger, 2001; Thompson, Tepichin, & Haninger, 2006).

Even when content is signaled, the information may not be as helpful as it could be. Most of the content descriptors are vague, at best. For example, the movie ratings provide content information on their website (www.mpaa.org), but the phrases used (such as "pervasive language," "intense action," "creature violence," and "thematic material") are not particularly clarifying and are not likely to be of much help to parents. The videogame system gives better indication about the *amount* and the *graphicness* of explicit material. For example, the violence and blood descriptor options are:

Violence content descriptors	*Blood content descriptors*
Mild cartoon violence	Mild animated blood
Mild fantasy violence	Animated blood
Mild violence	Mild blood
Cartoon violence	Blood
Fantasy violence	Blood and gore
Violence	
Intense violence	
Sexual violence	

Although this approach is clearly better than providing no content information or even vague information, it is unclear how useful it is for parents. For example, can parents really distinguish between what is meant by "animated blood" compared to "blood?" All videogame blood is animated. Cantor (2006) has suggested that the descriptors should be much more explicit and illustrative, such as "first-person shooter," "blood-spurting," "exposed brain matter," "sever heads with sword," "shoot and kill police officers," and "sex with prostitute," rather than broad euphemistic terms like "intense violence." Furthermore, some of the current descriptors may actually suggest to parents that the violence will have no effect, such as calling the violence "mild" or "cartoon" or "fantasy." In one study of 161 elementary school children and 354 college students (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007), participants were randomly assigned to play either a violent or a non-violent E-rated game (college students could also play a T-rated game). In this context, violence was defined as demonstrating intentional harm to victims who would be motivated to avoid that harm, and it was not an indication of how graphic the depictions were. After playing, the participants had an opportunity to punish another person with very loud noise blasts. Those who had played one of the violent games punished their opponents with significantly more high noise blasts than did those who played the non-violent videogames. The violent E-rated games had an equally large effect on short-term aggression as the more graphic violent T-rated games. In other words, practicing being aggressive mattered more in terms of harmful outcomes than did how graphic or cartoonish the violence was. Therefore, descriptors that downplay the violence, such as calling it "mild," "fantasy," or "cartoon," actually may be a disservice to parents who are concerned about the effects it may have. To date, however, no research has been published to see how parents interpret the ESRB or MPAA content descriptors.

Other content information is completely absent. None of the rating systems currently labels media for frightening or horrific content, although research indicates that media images can cause both short-term and long-term fear reactions in children (see Cantor, 1998b, 2003b, for reviews). Moreover, parents, especially parents of younger children, are concerned about shielding their offspring from images that can cause nightmares and even phobias (Cantor, 2003b).

It would also be useful if the ratings distinguished between the *amount* of violence and the *explicitness* of the violence, and a similar distinction could be

made for the sexual content of media. Furthermore, only some of the rating systems (ESRB and MPAA) provide information about tobacco, alcohol, and drug use. None provides much information on other behaviors that, if copied by children, would be either illegal or dangerous, although the ESRB ratings provide information on gambling. Only the ESRB and television systems include any information on what products may have educational value (while technically not part of the television rating system, television has another symbol "E/I" for shows that have educational or informational content).

It should be noted that across movie, television, and videogame ratings, there is a correlation between the industry ratings and independent content ratings (Walsh & Gentile, 2001). When a media product receives a more restrictive rating, it also tends to receive higher scores for violence, sex, and profanity by independent judges. However, there are also inconsistencies, and they do not appear to be random. When there are disagreements between industry ratings and content analyses or independent rating systems, the disagreements appear to be due to the industry ratings not including sufficient information about the content (Walsh & Gentile, 2001).

Thompson and Yokota (2004) compared the MPAA ratings of 1,269 movies with two independent content-based rating systems, both of which were designed to provide detailed information to parents. The two content-based systems (Screen-It! and Kids-in-Mind) correlated very highly with each other ($r = .83$). However, there was considerably less agreement when comparing these two content-based systems with the MPAA age-based ratings or with the MPAA's content descriptors. Funk and colleagues (1999) found that consumer agreement with the videogame ratings is dependent on the content of the games. There was high agreement with the ratings when the games had an obviously high level of violence or were clearly non-violent, but there was considerable disagreement when the games included cartoon violence or fantasy violence.

The discrepancies between the industry age-based ratings and independent content-based ratings have two important implications. First, the one type of rating that parents can rely on is the most restrictive rating (e.g., R, M, TV-MA, or Parent Advisory labels) – if the industry itself says the product is not for children, parents almost always agree. Second, if the product receives a less restrictive rating, parents will often be surprised to find content that they did not expect.

Incongruence with scientific research about harm

If parents want to protect their children, they need a system of information that signals the degree of risk that a media product poses to youth. The parallel, here, is food labeling. We know a great deal about the risk of ingesting foods with high fat or cholesterol, for example. Food labels provide consumers with accurate descriptions of the amount of these potentially harmful ingredients, regardless of what type of food product it is. Yet media ratings frequently do not correspond to what

is known scientifically about the types of messages that can harm children. In fact, one original movie ratings member claimed that "much of the classification was actually done with an eye to what disturbs *adults*" rather than what is likely to be risky or disturbing for children (Farber, 1972).

Kunkel and his colleagues content analyzed 1,332 television shows, focusing on dimensions that pose the greatest likelihood of risk for children and adolescents (Kunkel et al., 2001). Take violent content as an example. Not all portrayals of violence increase the risk of children copying the violence. Violence that is punished or that portrays the consequences to victims can actually reduce the likelihood that children will imitate such materials, whereas violence that is rewarded increases that risk (for review, see Wilson, Linz, & Randall, 1990). Kunkel and his colleagues (2001) found that the ratings had little relationship to whether the programs included high-risk content. Over two thirds (69 percent) of children's shows with high-risk violent content were assigned the rating TV-Y, indicating they were appropriate for even the youngest children, and thus did not include the FV content descriptor when they should have. Among all general audience shows (those not specifically designed for children) that included high-risk violent content, two thirds (65 percent) did not include the V label, and 40 percent of shows with high-risk violent content were given a TV-PG rating. Among shows including high-risk sexual content, most (80 percent) did not include the S content descriptor, and 29 percent of shows with high-risk sexual content were given a TV-PG rating.

Lack of agreement with parent ratings

Do parents rate media in the same way that the industries do? Only one study has clearly addressed this issue. The National Institute on Media and the Family created a combination age-based and content-based rating system designed to be applicable to all media. The system (called KidScore) was designed to use panels of parent raters, who were trained to make scientifically reliable judgments on several dimensions. The parent ratings are reduced to a stoplight-style rating, green-yellow-red. The KidScore ratings were independently assessed by a randomly selected national sample of 600 untrained parents; parents were sent videotapes of television programs and videogame footage and they showed high agreement with the KidScore ratings (Walsh & Gentile, 2001). The KidScore ratings were then compared with the industry ratings for 276 movies, 253 television shows, and 166 videogames. The industry ratings should match up with the KidScore ratings – that is, if a show/film/game is rated as acceptable for children (e.g., given a TV-G, G, or E rating), then ideally it should also receive a "green light" from parent raters. Furthermore, if a show/film/game is rated as not for children (e.g., TV-MA, R, or M rating), then ideally it should not receive a green light from parent raters. This pattern was observed only partially. In general, parents always agreed when a product had an R, M, or TV-MA rating by the industries, but there was far less agreement with the other ratings.

For movies, the trained parent raters considered only half (50 percent) of G-rated movies to be clearly appropriate (that is, given a green light) for children between the ages of 3 and 7. Only 63 percent of PG-rated movies were considered completely appropriate for children aged 8 to 12, and only 60 percent of PG-13-rated movies were clearly appropriate for teenagers.

For videogames, parents considered two thirds (67 percent) of E-rated games to be clearly appropriate for children aged 3 to 7, and 87 percent to be clearly appropriate for children aged 8 to 12. There was much lower agreement for T-rated (Teen) games, with less than half (43 percent) considered completely appropriate for children aged 13 to 17. As before, parents agreed with the most restrictive rating (M) 100 percent of the time.

Television had the lowest agreement of the three media assessed in this study. The most valid ratings were the extremes, TV-Y and TV-MA, with 76 percent of shows with a TV-Y rating considered to be clearly appropriate for children aged 3 to 7, and 100 percent of shows with a TV-MA rating considered inappropriate for children. Only 40 percent of shows rated TV-G were judged to be clearly appropriate for children aged 3 to 7. Over half (57 percent) of shows rated TV-Y7 and fewer than one out of four (23 percent) shows with a TV-PG rating were rated as appropriate for children aged 8 to 12. Only 15 percent of TV-14-rated shows were given green lights for teens aged 13 to 17. In other nationally representative studies of parents, only *two percent* of parents who had used the TV ratings thought that they always reflected the content of the shows accurately (Rideout, 2004), and half stated that they have disagreed with a rating given a show (Kunkel et al., 1998). This lack of agreement may explain why only about half or fewer of parents believe that the ratings are "very useful" in making decisions about media for their children (45 percent for movies, 48 percent for music, 53 percent for videogames, and 38 percent for television; Rideout, 2004).

Lack of publicity and clarity of ratings

Because parents are the intended users of ratings, the ratings should be clearly understandable and easy for parents to use, and should provide information that parents find useful. Almost all parents (90 percent) agree that ratings are a good idea (Kunkel et al., 1998), but they are not as widely used as one might expect. Over three quarters (78 percent) of parents say they use the movie ratings to guide their family's movie choices (Rideout, 2004). However, only about half of parents say they have *ever* used the music advisories (54 percent), the video-game ratings (52 percent), or the television ratings (50 percent). Among parents who own televisions with V-Chips, over half are unaware of that feature (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001), and few parents actively use it (see Kunkel, 2003, for a review). In a recent review of television policy, the Federal Communications Commission (2007, p. 14) concluded that the "evidence clearly points to one conclusion: the V-Chip is of limited effectiveness in protecting children from violent television content."

Why do so few parents find the ratings useful, given that they reportedly want ratings? One reason may be that parents find the current rating systems to be confusing. For example, Rideout (2004) conducted a phone survey with a nationally representative sample of 1,001 parents of 2- to 17-year-olds regarding their understanding and use of the television ratings. Only 43 percent of parents reported that they understand all of the television rating symbols, and when required to actually name what the various symbols mean, correct responding was even lower for many ratings. For example, only 24 percent of parents of 2- to 6-year-olds could name *any* of the ratings that would be relevant for children that age, with about one in ten (12 percent) knowing that FV stands for "fantasy violence," whereas almost as many (8 percent) thought it stood for "family viewing." At least half of parents could define the age-based ratings (TV-PG, TV-14, and TV-MA) and the V descriptor. However, parents were less successful with the other descriptors, with D (sexual dialogue) being the least understood at 4 percent.

We know much less about parents' understanding of other rating systems. In a national survey of 145 parents, fewer than half (47 percent) reported understanding all of the videogame rating symbols (Walsh et al., 2005). Not only do parents find the symbols within a particular system to be confusing, it is likely that they also are confused about the different systems, although this has yet to be studied carefully. To add to parents' difficulty, the ratings are not always available or well publicized. The television ratings, for example, are generally only presented on screen for the first 15 seconds of a show.

Forbidden fruit problem

Another problem with creating useful ratings is that certain types of labels can actually attract children to content that is not appropriate for them. This effect is known as the "forbidden fruit effect." Research suggests that this type of attraction is most likely to occur with ratings that communicate age restrictions (e.g., Bickham & Wright, 2001; Bushman, 1998; Cantor, 1998a, 2003b). In one experimental study of television ratings, 8- to 13-year-olds were given information about what all the television rating symbols meant, and then given an opportunity to choose a videotape to watch while the experimenter was out of the room. There were three videotape conditions – (1) only age-based ratings on the spines, (2) only content-based ratings, or (3) both age and content ratings. Children were most interested in viewing shows that were rated as highly restrictive (i.e., TV-MA) if they were solely provided with the age-based rating (Bickham & Wright, 2001). This effect was dampened when content descriptors were included with age-based ratings, and was eliminated altogether when only content-based ratings were provided.

In another set of experiments examining the movie ratings (reviewed in Cantor, 1998a), 297 children between 5 and 14 were given information on the MPAA ratings and asked to vote for movies they would like to watch. The MPAA ratings had a significant effect on children over 9 and on boys. Specifically, these groups were more interested in a video when it was given a rating of PG-13 or

R, instead of a G or PG rating. Not a single older boy (10–14) in the sample selected the movie when it was rated G, but at least half wanted to see it when the movie was rated PG-13 or R. If instead of a rating, the video was tagged with the statement, "parental discretion advised," this too made older boys more interested in seeing it, whereas the statement "viewer discretion advised" had no effect on any group, and actually caused some children, specifically younger girls (5–9), to be less interested in the program, a "tainted fruit effect."

An experiment the following year with 374 children between 5 and 15 replicated these results (Cantor, 1998a). Again, MPAA ratings of PG-13 and R increased children's desire to see the movie, and a rating of G decreased this desire. Adding the phrase "contains some violent content" did not increase a child's desire to view a program. This study also included tests of three content-based systems (i.e., the violence rating system that was used by HBO, the RSAC ratings for videogames, and the rating system used in Canada to work with the V-Chip). In contrast to the MPAA ratings, none of these content-based rating systems increased children's desire to see the programs.

A meta-analysis of 70 independent study samples including 5,519 participants demonstrated that age-based ratings consistently increase adolescents' interest in viewing rated material (Bushman & Cantor, 2003). However, there were some moderating effects of sex and age. In general, the forbidden fruit effect was stronger for males than females, and there was a curvilinear relation with age. More restrictive ratings tended to deter media interest for younger children up to about age 8, and then began to increase interest from age 11 until at least age 22. In addition, the meta-analysis revealed a small forbidden fruit effect when violence (but not sex) was labeled.

The music parental warning label is neither clearly age-based nor clearly content-based, but has an element of each. It is directed to parents, but the warning is for "explicit content." In one study, 11- to 15-year-olds listened to song excerpts while looking at a CD cover that either displayed or did not display the warning label (Christenson, 1992). Then they were asked to judge how much they liked the band and how much they would like to own the album. Although the results were not entirely straightforward, they tended to favor the tainted fruit hypothesis in that children liked the unlabelled music better. This pattern is similar to the results with television programs labeled "viewer discretion advised" (Cantor, 1998a), although this study focused on liking *after* listening, rather than selectively choosing to listen, so its applicability to the forbidden fruit issue is unclear.

One psychological theory that helps to explain the forbidden fruit results is called *reactance theory* (e.g., Brehm, 1966). In brief, whenever people perceive that there is an unfair restriction on their freedoms, they tend to react negatively, which motivates them to act against the restriction. In accord with this theory, if a rating suggests that the individual's freedom to engage in a behavior is restricted, the individual is likely to act according to the forbidden fruit hypothesis. In contrast, if the information provided by a rating decreases the attractiveness of the media product by describing what may be upsetting or offensive, the individual is more likely to act according to the tainted fruit hypothesis.

What Happens When Ratings Are Used?

Despite the many documented shortcomings of the existing systems, there is some research to demonstrate that the use of ratings may provide a benefit. For example, in a study of 607 eighth and ninth graders, adolescents who played a high amount of violent videogames were more likely to get into arguments with teachers (antisocial behavior) and to get into physical fights (aggressive behavior; Gentile et al., 2004). Yet, if parents checked the videogame ratings and put limits on the amount of time the adolescents played, this appeared to act as a protective factor, resulting in less antisocial and aggressive behavior. In fact, parental use of the videogame ratings reduced the risk of physical fights even after controlling for respondent sex, hostility, weekly amount of videogame play, and videogame violence exposure. These results have recently been replicated and extended with other samples of children and adolescents (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007). It is unclear whether this effect is due to use of the ratings, to parental monitoring and mediation more broadly, or to the effects of more highly involved parents. Yet from a practical side, it may not matter. Even if the core issue is being an involved parent, one cannot simply tell parents to "be more involved." Educating parents about media content and giving them informational tools such as ratings will presumably assist them in being more proactive and involved in their children's media experiences. Nevertheless, many parents appear unmotivated to use ratings. One psychological finding that helps to explain this is called the *third-person effect* (e.g., Hoffner et al., 2001; McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999). In brief, people tend to believe that others are more influenced by the media than they themselves are. This pattern holds true even when parents consider their own children. In one nationally representative sample, parents were asked whether their children are affected by the media more, less, or about the same as other children are. Only 4 percent say their children are influenced more than other children, whereas 40 percent say their children are affected less (Gentile, 1996). It is likely that the third-person effect limits the effectiveness of rating systems, although more research needs to be conducted to determine the extent to which parents do not use media ratings because of the third-person effect.

Conclusion

Based on the current research, the media ratings could be improved in at least seven domains: (1) Improving the consistency with which they are applied; (2) maintaining consistent definitions and standards across time to guard against ratings creep; (3) increasing and improving the industries' use of content information in ratings; (4) modifying ratings to focus on content features that have been empirically demonstrated to increase the risk of harm to youth; (5) modifying

the ratings to provide information in a manner less likely to increase children's interest in seeing age-inappropriate material (i.e., the forbidden fruit problem); (6) increasing the clarity of the ratings; and (7) providing increased education about the rating systems and why it is important that parents use them.

The use of multiple rating systems for different media products is sometimes confusing to parents. One possibility for resolving this situation is to create a single universal rating system. Many industry spokespeople have claimed that a universal rating system is not possible, and that because the various media are different, the ratings must also be different (Baldwin, 2001; Lowenstein, 2001; Rosen, 2001; Valenti, 2001). However, two independent universal rating systems (KidScore and Screen-It!) have been used since 1996 to rate movies, television shows, and videogames, so it can be done. Furthermore, although music, movies, television, videogames, and the Internet have real differences, the concerns that parents have about them are similar. In fact, the various rating systems are already based on essentially the same things – amount of violence, sex, and offensive language. When asked whether they would support the creation of one standard rating system that could be used by all media, 84 percent of parents say they would (Walsh, 2001). If a universal rating system were to be created, two key concerns surface: who would design the system, and who would judge the content? Although these questions are beyond the scope of this chapter, some suggestions may be useful.

There are several categories of people who could appropriately be called "experts" on ratings. At a minimum, these include (1) the current media rating professionals from the television, film, videogame, music, and Internet industries, (2) academic researchers who have studied rating systems and their effects, (3) pediatric and public health professionals, (4) child development researchers, (5) child advocacy organizations, (6) organizations that have developed and utilized universal rating systems, (7) researchers who have conducted content analyses and research on the effects of media, and (8) parents. Since the creation of most of the rating systems, a great deal more is known now about how to rate media products, what types of ratings are most useful and effective, how to define the types of content that are most important to rate, and what the effects of different ratings may be. Therefore, it seems possible to build on the expertise of each of these eight stakeholder groups to create the next generation of rating systems.

Since their inception, the ratings have been conducted on a voluntary basis by the media industries themselves. If one universal rating system were created, it is not necessary that this should change. Each industry could continue to rate its own products, but would use one common system and vocabulary. However, there are economic pressures within each industry to keep products accessible to the widest audience (Goldstein, 2003). Furthermore, producers continue to push the envelope on the types of "edgy" material that is included in media products, partly as a response to the wider competition for the public's eyeballs, ears, and wallets, and partly as a response to the fact that the public becomes desensitized over time. Such issues suggest that a ratings oversight committee that is independent of

all media organizations could be useful. Such a committee could regularly conduct research on the ratings, helping to improve and maintain their consistency across media and across time. It might also be involved in training and educating industries' raters. Ultimately, parents want ratings that are clear, consistent, accurate, and useful. The current media ratings have been useful for many parents, but the research reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that improvements could be made (see Gentile, Humphrey, & Walsh, 2005, for additional suggestions). Furthermore, as digital technologies continue to converge, the lines between the different media types will continue to blur. This blending of television/film/ DVD/ videogame/Internet technology will likely make the use of multiple rating systems more unwieldy and confusing for parents, exacerbating any difficulties with the ratings as they currently exist.

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