

## Parents Have Many Tools to Combat Objectionable Media Content

by Adam Thierer\*

*“Our government should not be in the business of choosing which programs are appropriate for our nation’s children. By showing the public how to use available blocking mechanisms, we ensure those in the best position to make viewing decisions—parents—are able to do so.”*

— Senator Ted Stevens, chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee.<sup>1</sup>

A heated debate continues to take place in Washington over the regulation of indecent or violent media content. Numerous hearings have been held and multiple bills introduced during the current session of Congress alone. These proposals deal with broadcast television and radio content, cable and satellite programming, video games, and the Internet.<sup>2</sup> Many of the policymakers and family groups supporting these efforts argue that parents are essentially powerless to stop the flow of objectionable media content in their homes. Therefore, in the name of protecting children, they argue that government regulation is required.

---

\* Adam Thierer is a Senior Fellow at the Progress & Freedom Foundation in Washington, D.C. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of The Progress & Freedom Foundation, its officers or Board Members.

<sup>1</sup> Ted Stevens, “Guest Columnist: State of Decency in DC,” *CableFax*, Vol. 17, No. 69, April 10, 2006, <http://www.broadband-pbimedia.com/cfaxmag/>

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of some of these measures, see Adam Thierer, “Thinking Seriously About Cable and Satellite Censorship: An Informal Analysis of S. 616, The Rockefeller-Hutchison Bill,” Progress & Freedom Foundation *Progress on Point* no. 12.5, April 2005, <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/pops/pop12.6cablecensorship.pdf>; Adam Thierer, “Moral and Philosophical Aspects of the Debate over A La Carte Regulation,” Progress & Freedom Foundation *Progress Snapshot* 1.23, December 2005, <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/ps/ps1.23alacarte.pdf>; Adam Thierer, “Kid-Friendly” Tiering Mandates: More Government Nannyism for Cable TV,” Progress & Freedom Foundation *Progress Snapshot* 1.2, May 2005, <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/ps/ps1.2familyfriendlytiering.pdf>; Adam Thierer, “A ‘Voluntary’ Charade: The ‘Family-Friendly Tier’ Case Study,” Progress & Freedom Foundation *Blog*, December 13, 2005, [http://blog.pff.org/archives/2005/12/a\\_voluntary\\_cha.html#more](http://blog.pff.org/archives/2005/12/a_voluntary_cha.html#more); Adam Thierer, “Fact and Fiction in the Debate over Video Game Regulation,” Progress & Freedom Foundation *Progress Snapshot* 13.7, March 2006, <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/pops/pop13.7videogames.pdf>

Perhaps the most troubling thing about calls for media regulation to protect children—especially when those calls are coming from conservative lawmakers or groups that otherwise stress individual responsibility over government intervention—is that it ignores the fact that parents have many better and more constructive alternatives to government regulation at their disposal. This paper documents the many tools or techniques that parents can use to restrict or curtail objectionable content in their homes before they call upon government to do this job for them. (The Appendix also includes a tip sheet for parents searching for ways to combat objectionable media content in the home or keep kids safe online.)

### **Informal Household Media Rules**

To begin, there are formal and informal household “media rules.” A 2003 Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that “Almost all parents say they have some type of rules about their children’s use of media.”<sup>3</sup> For example, parents can place limits on the overall number of hours that children can “consume” various types of media content. Alternatively, parents can demand that other tasks or responsibilities be accomplished before media consumption is permitted. For example, many of us are familiar with this common household media rule: “You have to finish your homework before you get to watch any TV.”

Parents can also impose restrictions on what times of the day that children can consume media: “No TV or video games after 8:00.” Parents can also limit viewing (and websurfing) to a single TV (or computer) in a room where a parent can always have an eye on the screen, or be listening in. The same can be done for video games. At a minimum, parents can start by at least getting televisions, computers and game consoles out of kids’ bedrooms where they cannot monitor what is going on. According to another Kaiser survey, 68 percent of 8-18 year-olds have televisions in their bedrooms and 31 percent have computers.<sup>4</sup> Parents who allow their kids to lock themselves in their rooms with media technologies have surrendered their first line of defense for protecting children from objectionable content.

### **Tapping New Technologies**

Parents can also tap the many new screening and filtering technologies to limit their children’s access to content before asking government officials to intervene. In striking down the Communications Decency Act’s effort to regulate underage access to adult-oriented websites, the Supreme Court declared in *Reno v. ACLU* that a law that places a “burden on adult speech is unacceptable if less restrictive alternatives would be at least as effective in achieving” the same goal.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*, Kaiser Family Foundation, Fall 2003, p. 9, available at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia102803pkg.cfm>

<sup>4</sup> *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds*, Kaiser Family Foundation, March 2005, p. 10, <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia030905pkg.cfm>

<sup>5</sup> *Reno v. ACLU*, 521 US 844 (1997).

Many such “less restrictive alternatives” are available to parents today to help them shield their children’s eyes and ears from content they might find objectionable. In addition to the “V-Chip” capabilities integrated into all televisions today, which give parents the ability to screen content by ratings, cable and satellite set-top boxes offer locking functions for individual channels so that kids can’t watch without a password. Parental controls are usually just one button-click away on cable and satellite remote controls. Every digital set-top box includes parental screening capabilities with password protection. Parents can also request that cable companies block specific channels entirely.<sup>6</sup>

VCR, DVD players, personal video recorders (PVRs), and home computers also give parents the ability to accumulate libraries of preferred content for their children. If certain parents believed that their children should only be raised on reruns of “The Lone Ranger” and “Leave it to Beaver,” then these new media technologies can make it happen. To use a personal example: My wife and I have developed a strategy of designating a specific television in our house for most of our children’s media consumption and then using a PVR to amass a large library of programming we believe is educational, enriching and appropriate for them. Dozens of programs can be cataloged and archived in this fashion and then supplemented with DVDs and computer software. Needless to say, such content tailoring was not an option for families in the past.

Even mobile content and communications can be filtered or controlled using innovative new technologies. Firefly Mobile, for example, is already marketing a tiny, voice-only phone for kids with just 5 buttons on it.<sup>7</sup> Two of the buttons have small icons symbolizing mom and dad, allowing the child to call them directly via pre-programmed numbers. It comes in a number of colors and contains a variety of accessories geared toward kids. Another such phone called the TicTalk is being marketed by wireless company Enfora and the educational toy maker LeapFrog Enterprises.<sup>8</sup> The Walt Disney Co. and Sprint Corp. also recently announced a new wireless phone service tailored to youngsters.<sup>9</sup> The “Disney Mobile” cell phone will let parents set talking and spending limits and also limit text messaging and photographs. The Disney phone also includes global satellite positioning technology that allows parents to locate their children and monitor their whereabouts at all times.<sup>10</sup> All three systems give parents a great deal of control over what their kids can access on their cell phones.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the content controls cable television provider make available to their subscribers, see the National Cable and Telecommunications Association’s “Control Your TV” Website: <http://controlyourtv.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.fireflymobile.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Kim-Mai Cutler, “A Phone of Their Own,” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2005, p. D1.

<sup>9</sup> Fern Shen, “Only a Few Can Hear You Now: Limited-Use Phones Geared to Kids,” *The Washington Post*, July 18, 2005, p. C14.

<sup>10</sup> See Merissa Marr, “Ring the Parents: Disney Is Set to Unveil Cellphones for Kids,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2006, p. B3.

<sup>11</sup> Yuki Noguchi, “Connecting with Kids, Wirelessly,” *The Washington Post*, July 7, 2005, p. A1.

## A Constructive Role for “Family” Groups

Parents can also pressure media providers and programmers directly through public campaigns, or indirectly through advertisers.<sup>12</sup> Groups like the Parents Television Council, Morality in Media, Common Sense Media, and the National Institute on Media and the Family can play a constructive role in influencing content decisions through the pressure they can collectively bring to bear on media providers in the marketplace.

Morality in Media’s website, for example, outlines several strategies parents can use to influence advertisers, programming executives and cable operators before resorting to censorship.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the National Institute on Media and the Family’s “MediaWise” website offers occasional columns and newsletters for parents that include information they can use to make more informed judgments about the content their children consume.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the Institute’s website offers a free “KidsScore” system that rates thousands of movies, TV shows, video games. All content is alphabetized and easy to search.<sup>15</sup> And Common Sense Media’s comprehensive website allows both parents and children to rate a diverse assortment of media content and then sort it all by age group to find what is appropriate for their families.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, in March 2006, TiVo announced a partnership with the Parents Television Council, the Parents Choice Foundation and Common Sense Media to jointly develop “TiVo KidZone.” Using ratings and information created by those groups, KidZone will allow parents to filter and record only the content that parents deem appropriate for their children.<sup>17</sup> All these methods are preferable to the type of pressure that some self-described family advocates bring to bear in the *political* marketplace when they encourage policymakers to censor media content.<sup>18</sup>

## Industry-Led Educational Efforts

Meanwhile, industry-led groups and other organizations have developed new parental empowerment tools, websites, and educational efforts to help families learn more about media content, parental controls, and ratings systems. For example:

---

<sup>12</sup> “There is every reason to believe that the marketplace, speaking through advertisers, critics, and self-selection by viewers, provides an adequate substitute for Commission involvement in protecting children and adults from television’s “captive” quality.” Mark S. Fowler and Daniel L. Brenner, “A Marketplace Approach to Broadcast Regulation,” *Texas Law Review*, vol. 60, no. 2, February 1982, p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> Morality in Media, “What to Do to Fight Bad TV,” available at <http://www.moralityinmedia.org/>

<sup>14</sup> National Institute on Media and the Family website, available at <http://www.mediafamily.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.mediafamily.org/kidscore/index.shtml>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.common sense media.org>

<sup>17</sup> Saul Hansell, “TiVo to Offer Tighter Rein on Children’s Viewing,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/02/technology/02tivo.html?\\_r=1&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/02/technology/02tivo.html?_r=1&oref=slogin)

<sup>18</sup> See generally Adam Thierer, “Examining the FCC’s Complaint-Driven Broadcast Indecency Enforcement Process,” Progress & Freedom Foundation *Progress on Point* no. 12.22, November 2005, <http://www.pff.org/issues-pubs/pops/pop12.22indecencyenforcement.pdf>

- **Television / Broadcasting:** “TV Watch,” a coalition of 27 prominent individuals and organizations representing more than 4 million Americans, sponsors initiatives such as the “1-2-3 Safe TV” tool kit for parents.<sup>19</sup> The group circulates materials that provide parents easy-to-understand primers on how to safeguard their children against objectionable content on television.<sup>20</sup> The effort was spearheaded by media operators such as Viacom, News Corp. and NBC-Universal but also includes groups as diverse as the American Conservative Union, the Black Filmmakers Foundation, Center for Creative Voices in Media, The Creative Coalition, the Minority Media & Telecommunications Council (MMTC) and the US Chamber of Commerce.<sup>21</sup>
- **Cross-Media:** Much like the Common Sense Media website mentioned above,<sup>22</sup> the “Pause-Parent-Play” coalition offers a wonderful compendium of websites and services that parents can use to learn more about the media their children might want to see, hear or play.<sup>23</sup> The effort is sponsored by an amazingly diverse coalition of companies and associations, including: WalMart, the Girl Scouts, YMCA, Microsoft, Comcast, Time Warner, News Corp., the Electronic Software Association, Viacom, NBC-Universal, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). The coalition’s website features numerous links answering questions about how TV ratings and screening tools work (like the V-Chip and cable / satellite set-top boxes).<sup>24</sup> These TV screening and filtering tools seem to be the source of some confusion for some parents, but the links provided on the Pause-Parent-Play website help parents better understand how to use these technologies. There’s also a “Get the Facts” section on the site that offers detailed explanations of how many of the current ratings systems work.<sup>25</sup>
- **Movies:** The motion picture industry has the longest-running ratings system in America. Established by the MPAA and theater operators in 1968, the MPAA’s familiar ratings system includes: G – General Audiences (All ages admitted); PG – Parental Guidance (Some material may not be suitable for children); PG-13 – Parents Strongly Cautioned (Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13); R – Restricted (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian); and NC-17 (No one 17 and under admitted). These ratings are also accompanied by additional content descriptors explaining what viewers can expect to see in the movie. These ratings and content descriptors appear at the beginning of all movies—whether seen at a cinema or on DVD. The MPAA also requires that the

---

<sup>19</sup> [www.televisionwatch.org](http://www.televisionwatch.org)

<sup>20</sup> *Safe TV. Easy as 1-2-3 The TV Watch Guide to the TV Ratings and Parental Controls*, TV Watch, <http://www.televisionwatch.org/atf/cf/%7BC38CC853-7DD3-4E60-8787-646324AB1C9F%7D/safe%20tv.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> By way of full disclosure, I am an individual member of TV Watch.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.commonensemedia.org>

<sup>23</sup> <http://pauseparentplay.org/>

<sup>24</sup> <http://pauseparentplay.org/see/index.php#tv>

<sup>25</sup> <http://pauseparentplay.org/facts/>

ratings appear on all promotional advertising (posters, TV ads, etc.) Finally, the MPAA's website also features a search engine that allows the public to search any movie it has rated since 1968 to find its rating and a description of what sort of content they can expect to see in the motion picture.<sup>26</sup>

- **Cable:** The National Cable and Telecommunications Association (NCTA), the cable industry's trade association, sponsors a \$250 million public service campaign called "Cable Puts You in Control."<sup>27</sup> As part of the effort, the industry airs numerous educational ads and distributes materials to subscribers. These materials are also made available to consumers via in-store displays at retailers such as Best Buy and Circuit City. The effort also includes an education website ([www.controlyourtv.org](http://www.controlyourtv.org))<sup>28</sup> that offers a variety of educational links and videos showing parents how to block access to certain channels or programs that they might find objectionable.
- **Television / Cross-Media:** At a January 19, 2006 Senate Commerce Committee hearing, Jack Valenti, the former CEO of the MPAA, announced that all media companies "who make and dispatch visual programming" were launching a joint 18-month marketing campaign "to inform and persuade the American people that they have the power" to control the content that appears on their television screens.<sup>29</sup>

This unprecedented \$250-\$300 million campaign includes participation from the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA); the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB); the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA); the National Cable & Telecommunications Association (NCTA); Viacom; Time Warner; television broadcast networks ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC Universal; and satellite TV providers DirecTV and EchoStar's Dish Network. The Ad Council and various advertising agencies will assist the effort to help craft "simple messages" that would then be broadcast and cablecast by all these media providers over at least an 18-month period.<sup>30</sup>

- **Music:** Since the mid-1980s, the recording industry has administered a voluntary parental advisory labeling program to give parents fair warning that a particular album might contain explicit lyrics about sex, violence or drug use. According to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), individual record companies, working with their artists, decide which of their

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.mpa.org/FilmRatings.asp>

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.ncta.com/pdf\\_files/Fact-Sheet-on-Cables-Pledge\\_PDF\\_4-27-05.pdf](http://www.ncta.com/pdf_files/Fact-Sheet-on-Cables-Pledge_PDF_4-27-05.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.controlyourtv.org/>

<sup>29</sup> Tony Sanders, "Visual Media, Ad Council To Link For Decency Campaign," *Billboard Radio Monitor*, January 19, 2006, [http://billboardradiomonitor.com/radiomonitor/news/business/leg\\_reg/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1001881791](http://billboardradiomonitor.com/radiomonitor/news/business/leg_reg/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1001881791)

<sup>30</sup> "Industries Unite in Unprecedented Effort to Educate Parents That They Have to Tools to Control TV Programming in Their Home," National Association of Broadcasters *Press Release*, January 19, 2006, [http://www.nab.org/newsroom/PressRel/Releases/indecency\\_coalition.doc](http://www.nab.org/newsroom/PressRel/Releases/indecency_coalition.doc)

releases get labeled.<sup>31</sup> If they determine that a warning is appropriate, the industry's widely recognized black-and-white "Parental Advisory – Explicit Content" label is affixed prominently to the outside of the permanent packaging. (Artists can also release a "clean" version of the same album with the potentially objectionable content removed). The industry also works with in-store and online retailers and encourages them to prominently display the warnings regardless of how they choose to sell the albums. Many retailers refuse to sell labeled products to those younger than 18. Other retailers, such as WalMart, refuse to carry such albums at all.

- **Wireless:** In November 2005, the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association (CTIA), the wireless industry's trade association, unveiled new "Wireless Content Guidelines" that industry members would follow "to proactively provide tools and controls to manage wireless content offered by the carriers or available via Internet-enabled wireless devices."<sup>32</sup> Under the guidelines, wireless carriers pledged not to offer any adult-oriented content until they have created controls to allow parents to restrict access. The guidelines propose the creation of a Content Classification Standard, which will divide mobile content into two categories: "Generally Accessible Carrier Content" and "Restricted Carrier Content." Ratings will then be developed using familiar categories and criteria employed by existing movie, television, music and games rating systems and then tools will be developed that will "ensure carrier-offered content either excludes or requires parent or guardian permission to access any material inappropriate for subscribers under 18."<sup>33</sup> Under the second phase of the plan, wireless carriers will implement Internet Content Access Control technologies to let consumers block access to the Internet entirely or block access to specific websites that they might find inappropriate.<sup>34</sup>
- **Internet:** No single business sector oversees the Internet or online media, but many companies and private organizations have already established voluntary filtering and ratings schemes for online content. The Internet Content Rating Association, for example, is helping to develop improved Internet filtering systems through comprehensive website labeling and "metadata" tagging.<sup>35</sup> Metadata tagging involves the embedding of machine-readable content descriptors within websites that can automatically be screened by other devices regardless of how that content is accessed. Parents can download the "ICRAplus" filter from ICRA's website and customize it to their specific needs / tastes. ICRA's major partners include AOL Europe, Microsoft, AT&T, Verizon, CompTIA, and BT Openworld.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.riaa.com/issues/parents/advisory.asp>

<sup>32</sup> "Wireless Carriers Announce 'Wireless Content Guidelines,'" CTIA Press Release, November 8, 2005, [http://www.ctia.org/news\\_media/press/body.cfm?record\\_id=1565](http://www.ctia.org/news_media/press/body.cfm?record_id=1565)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> The complete guidelines can be found at [http://files.ctia.org/pdf/CTIA\\_Board\\_Approved\\_Guidelines.pdf](http://files.ctia.org/pdf/CTIA_Board_Approved_Guidelines.pdf) and the classification criteria for "Restricted Carrier Content" can be found at <http://files.ctia.org/pdf/ClassificationCriteria.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.icra.org/>

Many other helpful Net-filtering / safety technologies and services are highlighted on “GetNetWise.org,” a public service website sponsored by a wide array of Internet and computer companies as well as a host of public interest organizations and parental / child activists.<sup>36</sup> The GetNetWise website offers a comprehensive “Online Safety Guide” and lengthy inventory of “Tools for Families” that can be custom-tailored to the needs and values of individual families.<sup>37</sup> Major corporate supporters include Dell, Microsoft, Verizon, Amazon.com, Yahoo, AOL, AT&T, Comcast, Earthlink, Visa, Wells Fargo, and the RIAA. Key public interest organizations include the Center for Democracy and Technology, the American Library Association, The Children’s Partnership, People for the American Way Foundation, National Consumers League, Net Family News,<sup>38</sup> ProtectKids.com,<sup>39</sup> SafeKids.com,<sup>40</sup> and Wired Patrol.<sup>41</sup> Those last four websites offer parents and kids outstanding advice for how to stay safe online. Other useful sites include: SafeTeens.com,<sup>42</sup> Family Tech Talk,<sup>43</sup> BlogSafety.com.<sup>44</sup> Finally, almost all major web “portals” and search sites offer customizable parental controls / filters.

- **Video Games:** Although it is the newest of all industry content ratings / labeling schemes, the video game industry’s system is in many ways the most sophisticated, descriptive, and effective ratings system ever devised by any major media sector in America. Established by the video game industry in 1994, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) is a self-regulatory ratings / labeling body. The ESRB ratings scheme is remarkably comprehensive. In addition to its seven major ratings designations (“EC”- Early Childhood; “E”- Everyone; “E10+”- Everyone 10+ years of age; “T”- Teen; “M”- Mature; “AO”- Adults Only; “RP”- Rating Pending), the ESRB also uses over 30 different content “descriptors” to give consumers highly detailed information about games. Thus, by simply glancing at the back of each game container, parents can quickly gauge the appropriateness of the title for their children. If parents want to do additional research in advance of a purchase, the ESRB’s website ([www.esrb.org](http://www.esrb.org)) allows parents to type in the name of any game and retrieve its rating and various content descriptors. According to the ESRB, it rates over 1,000 games per year. Virtually every title produced by major game developers for retail sale today carries an ESRB rating and content descriptors. Generally speaking, the only games that do not carry ESRB ratings today are those developed by web amateurs that are traded or downloaded via the Internet.

---

<sup>36</sup> <http://kids.getnetwise.org/>

<sup>37</sup> See <http://kids.getnetwise.org/safetyguide/> and <http://kids.getnetwise.org/tools/>

<sup>38</sup> <http://netfamilynews.org/index.shtml>

<sup>39</sup> <http://protectkids.com/>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.safekids.com/>

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.wiredsafety.org/>

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.safeteens.com/>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.familytechtalk.com/>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.blogsafety.com/>



Importantly, the ESRB also operates an Advertising Review Council (ARC) that promotes and monitors advertising and marketing practices in the gaming industry. The ARC monitors compliance with ESRB guidelines and places restrictions on how game developers may market ESRB-rated games through its “Principles for Responsible Advertising.”

To ensure that its system is enforced properly, the ESRB provides a variety of materials to retailers as part of its “Ok to Play?” educational campaign. The materials include an ESRB employee training manual and quiz about the ratings system. The ESRB also provides stores with posters about the industry’s ratings system that can be displayed in the store. According to the ESRB, the “Ok to Play?” signage is displayed at 17 top national retailers who account for approximately 90 percent of all game sales. Prominent retailers involved in the effort include WalMart, Best Buy, Target, Toys R Us, and EB Games among others. These retailers, which are responsible for a significant portion of all video game sales, have enormous reputational incentives to abide by the ESRB ratings system. Importantly, the in-store signage used by these and other game retailers is also reproduced as consumer advertising in various magazines, newspapers, websites, and so on.

Finally, parents also have another line of defense once video games are brought into their homes. Major game console developers (Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo) are all including sophisticated parental controls in their new gaming systems.<sup>45</sup> These console controls allow parents to enter the ESRB rating level that they believe is acceptable for their children. Once they do so, no game rated above that level can be played on the console. (All ESRB-rated games contain embedded “flags,” or a string of code in the software, that allow the consoles to automatically recognize the game’s rating). Thus, a parent could set the rating threshold on their child’s video game console to “T” for “Teen” and then no games rated Mature (M) or Adults Only (AO) could be played on the console unless the parent first entered a password. New handheld gaming systems, such as Sony’s PlayStation Portable, also contain similar parental controls.

## Conclusion

The combination of these various ratings systems, the V-Chip, set-top box parental controls (including gaming consoles), new Internet and mobile media filtering / screening technologies, and other technological tools like personal video recorders, mean that parents now have multiple layers of technological protection at their disposal. And the industry-led educational efforts highlighted above prove that, contrary to what some critics claim, media operators *are* taking steps to help parents make content determinations and better control child access to unwanted media. Critics can always

---

<sup>45</sup> Tim Surette, “PS3 to Include Parental Controls,” *Gamespot News*, November 28, 2005, <http://www.gamespot.com/news/6140451.html>

argue that media and communications companies should “do more” to address the concerns parents have, but it’s important to realize that they are already doing quite a bit. Whether or not parents are taking advantage of those tools and options is another matter entirely.

Thus, markets are bringing parents empowering tools to sort and filter content they might find objectionable. This is being done much more quickly, much more closely tailored to the parents’ own desires, and without concerns about censorship such as is associated with traditional government regulatory efforts.

In the extreme, if parents want to take radical steps to limit children’s potential access to objectionable programming, they can get rid of their TV sets and other media devices altogether or severely restrict their availability in the home. While impractical for most, some families do reject televisions, for example, and still find plenty of other ways to gain access to important information and entertainment.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most sensibly, parents can always sit down with their children, “consume” controversial and provocative media programming with them, and talk to them about what they are seeing or hearing. For those parents willing to accept the reality that children *will* be confronted with many troubling or sensitive topics from peers at school or from other sources outside their control, this option makes a great deal of sense. Most parents already do this, of course. A recent survey of media usage by children under 6 years of age found that 69 percent of parents were in the room when children were watching TV.<sup>47</sup> At the end of the day, there is simply no substitute for talking to children in an open, loving and understanding fashion about the realities of this world, including the more distasteful bits.

---

<sup>46</sup> See, for example Rich Karlgaard, “Net—One, TV—Zero,” *Forbes.com*, November 29, 2004, <http://www.forbes.com/columnists/business/forbes/2004/1129/041.html>

<sup>47</sup> *Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers*, Kaiser Family Foundation, Fall 2003, p. 11, available at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia102803pkg.cfm>

## **APPENDIX**

### ***Handy Tips for Parents Seeking to Control Access to Objectionable Media Content and Keep Kids Safe Online***

Nobody ever said being a parent was easy. But by imposing some basic household rules and tapping the many technologies at our disposal, parents can effectively make decisions about what their children can see, hear or play in their homes:

- ✓ Get those televisions, game consoles and computers out of the kids' bedrooms! Parents who allow their kids to lock themselves in their rooms with media technologies have surrendered their first line of defense.
- ✓ To the maximum extent possible, situate major media devices (TV, gaming consoles, personal computer) in an area of the house where the screens can be pointed outward so mom or dad can keep an eye on them.
- ✓ More specifically, assign a single television to the kids on which they can watch shows or play games. If possible, consider using a personal video recorder, VCR, or DVD recorder to compile a library of programming that you find wholesome, education or appropriate for your children.
- ✓ Alternatively, establish household rules governing when and where children can watch TV, play video games, or surf the Internet.
- ✓ Program the V-Chip in TV sets or, better yet, use cable or satellite set-top box technologies to ensure children cannot gain access to objectionable programming when parents are not present. Use password protection tools whenever possible. See these sites for information and assistance:
  - TV V-Chip: [www.fcc.gov/vchip](http://www.fcc.gov/vchip)
  - Cable TV (set-top box tools): [www.controlyourtv.org](http://www.controlyourtv.org)
  - DirecTV: [www.directv.com/DTVAPP/learn/LocksLimits.jsp](http://www.directv.com/DTVAPP/learn/LocksLimits.jsp)
  - Dish Network: [www.dishnetwork.com/content/programming/parental\\_control](http://www.dishnetwork.com/content/programming/parental_control)
- ✓ Establish household rules limiting the aggregate amount of time (on a daily or weekly basis) that children can spend watching television, playing video games, or surfing the Internet.
- ✓ Provide carrot-and-stick incentives for kids to use media properly. (i.e., only allow media consumption after homework is complete or chores have been finished. Or, only allow a new video game to be purchased if the child has maintained good grades. Etc.)
- ✓ Familiarize yourself with major media ratings systems for television, movies (MPAA) and video games (ESRB). The following websites explain the ratings and some even allow parents to search for program ratings and content descriptors by movie or game title:
  - Movies: [www.mpa.org/FilmRatings.asp](http://www.mpa.org/FilmRatings.asp)
  - Games: [www.esrb.org](http://www.esrb.org)
  - TV shows: [www.tvguidelines.org/ratings.asp](http://www.tvguidelines.org/ratings.asp)
  - Others: [www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org)
- ✓ Teach children to closely guard their personal information (passwords, Social Security number, phone numbers, personal photos, etc.) and never give it to strangers online.
- ✓ Install filtering technologies and use other parental controls on any computers that children may use. (Popular filtering programs include: NetNanny, PureSight PC, CyberPatrol, Pornblocker,

CyberPatrol, SafeSurf and SurfPass). Again, first demand that children use computers in areas where you can keep an eye on their online activities. Also, establish rules for the use of instant messaging (IM) services and monitor the sites that children visit on computers by examining the search history of the web browser. Also, install kid-friendly search engines to ensure that your kids can only access age-appropriate content. See these excellent sites for more details and assistance in finding the right tools for your family:

- [www.getnetwise.org](http://www.getnetwise.org)
  - [www.netfamilynews.org](http://www.netfamilynews.org)
  - [www.protectkids.com](http://www.protectkids.com)
  - [www.safekids.com](http://www.safekids.com)
  - [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)
  - [www.safeteens.com](http://www.safeteens.com)
  - [www.familytechtalk.com](http://www.familytechtalk.com)
- ✓ When the child is deemed old enough to have his or her own cell phone or other mobile devices, use the parental controls embedded in those technologies to restrict access to objectionable content.
  - ✓ Teach children basic etiquette rules as they start to use more interactive media and technologies, such as cell phones, IM and blogs.
  - ✓ Sit down and talk to you kids about controversial and provocative media programming. Teach them the difference between fantasy and reality. Explain to them what is right or wrong from your perspective. And do it all in an open, understanding and loving fashion.
  - ✓ Finally, remember that you were a kid once too! Teach your kids what you've learned and help them learn how to be smart media viewers / consumers. With a little guidance and common sense, they'll become savvy and discriminating media consumers just like you.