

Parents Television Council Asks FCC to Review V-Chip Ratings Agreement Based on Survey of Parents' Use of V-Chip Technology

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In late June, the Parents Television Council (PTC), filed with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) three new studies examining parents' views on the efficacy of the current V-chip ratings system and asked that the agency launch a review of the system with an eye towards reform. The V-chip ratings system is governed by a voluntary industry agreement, which the Commission approved in March 1998.

The results of the three national surveys, each of which surveyed more than 700 parents, were published in the July issue of the American Academy of Pediatrics' journal, *Pediatrics*.^[1] Together, these surveys provide several insights into how and whether parents are using V-chip technology to prevent children from viewing content they deem inappropriate. In its press release calling for FCC action, the PTC highlights two of the researchers' findings: (1) that the content ratings do not themselves provide parents with all of the information they need to make appropriate decisions for their children, and (2) that few parents believe the assigned ratings are "always accurate."

In its call to action, however, the PTC did not focus on the finding that the researchers identified as "surprising" and that may provide context to PTC's observation that relatively few parents believe that the ratings are "always accurate." Specifically, the researchers found that while "parents tend to agree on the types and descriptors of content about which they would like to know," they do not agree as to the appropriate ages to view such content.

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The ratings systems for all media are, in essence, age-based; the researchers found that this may cause a tendency "to overestimate the degree to which people agree with them or hold similar beliefs." Because most parents do not agree on the appropriate ages at which children can view certain types of content, the researchers contend that the ratings are based on a "false consensus" about appropriate ages. As a result, the researchers note that while age-based ratings systems are easier for parents to implement, the lack of consensus about appropriate ages "may be part of the reason that so few parents use the existing ratings regularly."

While the authors of the *Pediatrics* article tend to favor content-based, rather than age-based, ratings systems, they acknowledge that even accurate and descriptive content labels will not always provide parents with meaningful information about the age at which they should allow their children to view certain types of content. Moreover, the researchers imply that the effects on children of certain types of content is the subject of ongoing academic research.

While it is unclear whether the FCC will respond to the PTC's call to action, the recent *Pediatrics* article will likely provide yet another data set for industry participants, public interest advocates and policymakers to consider in the ongoing debate over content regulation.

Endnote

[1] Douglas A. Gentile, *et al.*, Parents' Evaluation of Media Ratings a Decade After the Television Ratings Were Introduced, 128 *Pediatrics* 36 (2011), available at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/128/1/36.abstract>.