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Decoding the Television Rating System

Designed to help viewers determine which shows are suitable for them and their children, the television industry has initiated a voluntary rating system.

The guidelines for rating TV programs were developed by a special committee, headed by Jack Valenti, C.E.O. of the Motion Pictures Association of America. Modeled after the Motion Pictures Association of America rating system, the guidelines also incorporate input from over 1,200 parents nationwide. In addition, Valenti will chair a monitoring oversight board to bring overall uniformity and consistency to the system.

Using the guidelines, networks began rating their programming. They had to decide whether to rate individual episodes of a program or assign an overall rating. News and sports were excluded; however, entertainment magazine shows like "Entertainment Tonight" and "Showbiz," as well as some news magazine shows like "Hard Copy," have been rated. Ratings for other news magazine programs such as "20/20" and "60 Minutes" are being left to the discretion of local affiliates.

The voluntary actions were motivated by Congress who urged the television industry to police itself or risk possible government regulation. It's now up to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to accept these voluntary guidelines or take steps to develop its own system.

What the rating codes mean...

TV-Y (All children): Programming is suitable for children of all ages.

TV-Y7 (Children seven and above): Recommended for children older than age seven who can distinguish between fantasy and reality.

TV-G (General audience): Contains little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations.

TV-PG (Parental guidance suggested): May contain infrequent coarse language, limited violence and some suggestive sexual dialogue and situations.

TV-14 (Parents strongly cautioned): May contain sophisticated themes, sexual content, strong language and more intense violence. Parents may find programming unsuitable for children under age 14.

TV-MA (Mature audience): May contain mature themes, profanity, graphic violence or explicit sexual content. Show is specifically designed for adults.

Critics argued that it was too difficult to determine suitability when ratings were not content specific, and after several months of battle, additional, enlarged codes will be included with the current ratings, with the exception of NBC, which continues to hold out. These codes are:

- V** (Violence)
- S** (Sexual situations)
- L** (Language)
- D** (Dialogue)



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