

Protecting Children from Sex and Violence in the Media: Assessment of Broadcast Regulations

Globally, governments are well aware of the political and social importance of the media and are developing policies aimed at regulating and controlling the media. In democratic societies, broadcast regulations generally focus on ensuring that broadcasters serve the public interest, needs and convenience. Also, over the past 25 years regulations have particularly focused on concerns related to children. In particular, there has been a universal concern over the growing amount of sex and violence in broadcast programming.

Throughout the world, a growing number of nations are moving away from direct authoritarian control of media. Instead, they are moving toward combining government influence with free-market forces. For most governments the maintenance of some control includes ensuring the culture is not eroded by the sex and violence-filled products imported from countries like the United States, Great Britain, Mexico and others. Broadcasters believe attracting large audiences depends upon the purchase of quality programming from the increasingly lucrative international software market, even though the programs are filled with violence and sex.

What are regulators doing to combat the growing problems associated with sex and violence in the media?

Media Regulations in Europe and the United States

Media regulators in European nations in the 1980s moved away from direct government operation of the media. Prior to that time, broadcasters emphasised public service, but the media was national in character, politicised, and non-commercial (McQuail, De Mateo, & Tapper, 1992). Once the control of the media became more a responsibility of broadcasters, government significantly reduced regulations regarding the structure and financing of broadcasting. Today in Europe there is more open competition between public broadcasters and commercial stations, with advertising now allowed in public broadcast stations. In addition, new commercial stations are increasing (Hirsch & Peterson, 1992). The importation of foreign television programs has also increased. Broadcast station managers say programs from abroad are generally cheaper to use than producing

their own programs. However, free-market competition means a lot of violent and sexually explicit content in programs as a way to attract large audiences.

Over the past ten years, a continuing increase in the use of foreign software has led European countries to introduce stronger regulations on media content. Many governments have introduced rules on what can be included in programming, and limits on the amount and frequency of advertising. This is because advertising since the 1980s has increased to the extent that some countries now require news, public affairs, religious, and children's programs to run for 30 minutes before a commercial break. In France, Great Britain and Sweden government regulations prevent broadcast stations from programming violent material during children's programs. Broadcasters are subject to stiff fines for violation. Outside of Europe, countries like Canada and Australia have similar regulations.

In the United States there has been much concern over the growing amount of sex and violence in broadcast programming and its availability to young viewers, particularly children under 13 years of age. Much of the concern is based on the numerous research studies widely reported in both popular and scholarly publications. Clark (1993) documented over 3000 studies on violence in the media. Listed among the more recent areas of research, were rock 'n roll lyrics, music videos, and explicit violence depicted in broadcasting. One example given by Strasburger (1995) reports Arnold Schwarzenegger murdered 250 people in his short movie career.

In addition to the academic research on children, public opinion polls continuously show Americans believe there is a correlation between violence in the mass media and violence in society. Yet, the government deregulated children's television in the 1980s and relaxed or eliminated many of the existing broadcast rules. The Federal Communications Commission, the regulator for telecommunications in the United States, rationalised that industry self-regulation was preferred to rigid government standards. Among the broadcast areas deregulated was control over the amount of advertising on children's television. Unfortunately, with the deregulation of children's advertising, some toy manufacturers began producing cartoons that appeared on television as program-length commercials for their toys. The first of these was the 'He Man' cartoon that promoted action figures and accessories by the same name. Over time, program-length commercials were selling children everything from 'GI Joe' to 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles'. Their popularity soared, although many of the programs were very violent and war-related (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997). According to Lazar (1994), between 1983 and 1986 sales on war toys increased by 600 percent.

By the end of the 1980s, American public opinion polls showed fairly widespread popular support for government regulations in the content of broadcast media.

Congress responded by passing The 1990 Children's Television Act. This law has three primary provisions:

- It requires broadcasters to limit programs containing nudity, sex and inappropriate language to times of the day when young children are less likely to be watching television (i.e. between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.).
- The law limits advertising during children's programs to 12 minutes per hour on weekdays and 10.5 minutes per hour on the weekend.
- The law requires broadcasters to include educational television programs in their Saturday morning line-up. Saturday mornings is considered prime time for children's programming in the US. The law, however, neglected to interpret the meaning of educational programs. As a result, over the years broadcasters have defined all types of programs as educational, from cartoons like 'The Flintstones', and the 'Jetsons', to comedies (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997).

In 1996 the United States Congress took stronger steps in regulating broadcasting, and passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The law requires all television set manufacturers in the United States to install a computer chip, giving parents control over the type programs their children can watch. This electronic device identifies programs coded as containing violence or other materials rated as inappropriate for children. The computer chip is called the violence chip, or 'v-chip'. It allows parents to activate the chip, preventing their children from watching programs considered inappropriate. The coding system used with the v-chip was designed by the broadcasting and cable television industries. It is similar to the rating system used for many years by the American movie industry, but contains more age restrictions.

Industry Self-Regulations

In South Africa, broadcasters also offer an electronic parental guidance system designed to help parents control the movies their children can view on television. As in the United States, the M-Net channel movies are coded by age. The codes are in accordance with international restrictions applied to the film industry. They are:

- Suitable for family viewing;
- Films with no age restriction, but have adult theme and parental guidance is advised (PG);
- Films unsuitable for persons under 13 years of age;
- Films unsuitable for persons under 16 years of age;
- Films unsuitable for persons under 18 years of age; and
- Films restricted to persons under 18.

The restrictions in each category are based on the amount of violence, sex, nudity, language and other inappropriate material in the film.

These self-regulatory efforts by the broadcast and movie industries are extremely important to the welfare of young children. It is important to note, however, that regulators have had significant impact on the development and direction of the broadcast industry. An area of continuing concern, however, is the small amount of broadcast programs available for children under the age of 13.

The American Psychological Association estimates in the United States an average American child will see 8000 murders on television before finishing elementary school (Clark, 1993). In fact, parents often use the television set as a babysitter for their children. According to the 1992 *Statistical Abstracts of the United States*, American television sets are turned on an average of seven hours each day. During these seven hours, children are a large part of the viewing audience. Yet, most programs are not targeted to children under 13 years of age. The challenge for broadcasters is to provide much more programming suitable for family viewing and programs specifically targeted to children.

In South Africa there seems to be movement in the direction of increasing programs targeted to children. For example, M-Net recently launched on its web site a section for kids (K-TV). It allows parents to customise the viewing schedule for both themselves and their children. On the other hand, a content analysis of 169 movies available for September 1998 in the *MultiChannel Programming Guide*, *TV Magazine* produced the following findings:

Number of movies described	169
Movies rated Family Viewing	3
Movies rated PG	71
Movies rated PG 13	38
Movies rated PG 16	37
Movies rated PG 18	19
Movies rated R18	1
Movies with nudity	20
Movies with sex	44
Movies with inappropriate language	82

In the same publication was The Hallmark Entertainment Network that offered a medley of 13 movies. Of the 13, two were listed for Family Viewing.

The conclusion drawn from the analysis of the M-New and Hallmark Entertainment Network movies was that there are few movies available for children under 13 years of age. In fact, children are not a priority in terms of the amount of programs available outside of the hours set aside for children's programming.

Recommendation

Producing television programs are expensive, and many broadcasters cannot afford to produce programs for specialised audiences, such as children. Therefore, they must import programs from other countries, such as the United States and Great Britain, where children's programming also is not a priority. The solution to increasing the number of appropriate programs for young children may be co-productions between broadcasters from two or more countries that are willing to combine financial and other resources. By co-producing programs for children, these broadcasters could divide capital expenses and profits from assured distribution of programming throughout the countries involved. This may be a way for both regulators and broadcasters in countries like South Africa to serve the interest, needs and convenience of children.

Conclusion

With the growing use of newer technology, such as communication satellites and the Internet, it is extremely important for regulators to consider the potential for new forms of children's entertainment. At the same time, however, regulators must accept the challenge to find ways of preventing children from accessing adult material. Currently, the US Congress is debating a bill that would control children's access to adult material on the Internet. If the law passes, it will require commercial web sites to use software that prevent children from gaining access to materials regarded as 'harmful to minors'. The law will also require organisations that receive public funds for accessing the Internet to install blocking software. This bill has already passed the Senate, but must also be passed by the House of Representatives and signed by the President before it becomes law. Presently, civil liberties organisations are protesting the bill. These organisations argue it will be hard for regulators to identify the type material that is harmful to children. However, with the vast amount of research that exists on the impact of media on children, it should not be difficult to identify materials that are harmful to children. It is generally agreed, programming must further the intellectual, emotional and social development of children.

As broadcast policy is being developed in South Africa, regulators must give greater emphasis to improving and expanding children's broadcast programming. Most importantly, consideration should be given to limitations on broadcast programs imported from outside of Africa, particularly programs that contain ideas, language, images and practices that are alien to the culture. This is not meant to suggest the need for content regulations, but quality control by the broadcast

media in what is selected and presented in diverse entertainment, information and educational programs. To serve the public interest regulators must require broadcasters to implement ways of protecting children from sex and violence in the media.

Marion Hayes Hull, Ph.D.
Howard University
Washington, D.C.
mhull@fac.howard.edu

References

- CLARK, C.S. 1993. TV Violence. *CQ Researcher*, 3(12):267-284.
- CROTEAU, D. & HOYNES, W. 1997. Media/Society Industries, Images, and Audiences. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forest Press.
- HIRSCH, M. & PETERSEN, V.G. 1992. Regulation of Media at the European Level. In Siune, K. and Truetzschler, W. eds. Dynamics of Media Politics: Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe. London: Sage.
- HOLT, D. 1996. The Origin of 'Public Interest' In Broadcasting. *Educational Broadcasting Review*, 1:15.
- KUTASH, I.L. et al. 1978. Violence: Perspectives on Murder and Aggression. San Francisco: Joseph - Bass.
- LAZAR, B.A. 1994. Under the Influence: An Analysis of Children's Television Regulation. *Social Work*, 39(1):67-74.
- McQUAIL, D., DE MATEO, R. & TRAPPER, H. 1992. A Framework for Analysis of Media Change in Europe in the 1990s. In Siune, K. and Truetzschler, W. eds. Dynamics of Media Politics: Broadcast and Electronic Media in Western Europe. London: Sage.
- SMITH, F.L., MEESKE, M. & WRIGHT, J.W. II 1995. Electronic Media and Government, N.Y.: White Plains.
- STRAUSBERGER, V. 1995. Adolescents and the Media: Medical and Psychological Impact.
- TV MAGAZINE. September MultiChoice Programme Guide '98, 'Movies A-Z'.
- US CENSUS BUREAU. 1992. Statistical Abstract of the United States. Washington, D.C.: USGPO.
- US CONGRESS. Telecommunications Act of 1996, 104th Congress, 2nd Session, Section 551 (January 3, 1996).

Reproduced by Sabiriyah under license from Penerbit Fajar Bina Sastera