

Avoiding unsavoury

THE rapid growth of television channels following the launch of cable, satellite and digital transmission systems has created a fresh challenge for viewers. How, given a much expanded programme menu, are they to find the programmes they most want to watch and avoid the ones they don't. For parents, there is also a growing concern that their children can more readily gain access to violent and sexual material that is unsuitable for them.

In a political climate that emphasises consumer empowerment over centralised control and censorship, one solution to this problem is to provide viewers with better information about programmes in advance. In particular, such information should enable parents to judge whether a programme will be suitable for their children.

But to work effectively, it is essential that any television content classification and description systems reflect an understanding of audience psychology. On this matter, so far, there is some doubt.

British broadcasters have used restrictive scheduling practices for many years. The idea of the 'family viewing policy' and 9pm watershed was designed to achieve a balance between protecting children's interests and catering to the needs of the adult audience.

Before 9pm on the mainstream terrestrial channels in Britain, no programmes may be broadcast that are unsuitable for children (under 16 years). After 9pm, this rule is gradually relaxed. Most British parents seem to be aware of this regulation (ITC, 1999).

More specific programme labelling systems can also be used. Ratings have been used for many years to classify cinema films and, more recently, videos. Broadcasters have also adopted cinema



BARRIE GUNTER argues that TV ratings systems may be based on an incomplete understanding of audience psychology.

ratings systems (or derivatives from them) to classify televised films. Such ratings systems tend to use age-based classifications; these place legal restrictions on the ages of viewers for whom films are deemed appropriate.

In Britain, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) has adopted three age specifications: '12', '15' and '18'. In the US, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has two age divides at 13 and 17. Both here and in the US there are also advisory classifications for films (called 'advisories'). Usually, they indicate that parental guidance (PG) is required.

In Britain, the '15' and '18' restrictions are used on premium movie channels available through satellite and cable transmission. Films suitable for viewers aged 15 and over are broadcast only after 8pm, and those suitable only for viewers aged 18 plus after 10pm.

In the US, new legislation was introduced in 1996 encouraging the television industry to create a voluntary code for rating programmes or else to have one imposed by the industry regulator (Federal Communications Commission).

This proposed ratings system was also to be linked with the so-called 'V-chip' (viewer chip) technology installed in TV sets. Under US law all new TV sets are to be installed with this technology from 2000. V-chips enable viewers to block out reception of programmes rated as unsuitable for children.

After some debate, a system based on

the MPAA ratings for films was adopted by American broadcasters (see Table 1). Further lobbying by parents' groups resulted in specific content labels also being included for fantasy violence (FV), violence (V), sexual situations (S), coarse

TABLE 1 US television programme classifications

TV-Y	Suitable for all audiences, specifically designed for children
TV-Y7	Directed to children over the age of seven
TV-G	Suitable for all audiences
TV-PG	Contains material some parents may find unsuitable for younger children
TV-14	Contains some material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14
TV-MA	Specifically designed for a mature audience, may be unsuitable for children under 17

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language (L), and suggestive dialogue (D) (Salvoza, 1997). The 'fantasy violence' rating applies principally to children's programmes, and most especially to cartoons, while the standard 'V' rating is used with programmes aimed at the general audience.

Are current programme ratings systems adequate?

Programme ratings systems make certain assumptions about the psychology of the television audience. Age-based categories, for example, assume that pre-teenage and

teenage viewers will have distinct types of reactions to violent or sexual content. Providing content labels to signify the presence of violent or sexual material further assumes that such attributes are key elements in viewers' decision-making processes.

But are these assumptions accurate? According to some scholars, programme warning systems lack sufficient social scientific validation (Wilson *et al.*, 1990). These ratings represent an incomplete understanding of child development; they also fail to represent sufficiently the content

attributes known to mediate viewers' responses to what they watch (Kunkel, 1997).

Research on media violence has, for example, established that undesirable audience reactions and the potential for emotional upset are enhanced by violent portrayals in more realistic settings, when the violence is depicted as justified or rewarded, when viewers strongly identify with the characters on screen and when the pain and suffering of victims is graphically shown.

Furthermore, there is growing evidence that ratings may invoke audience reactions the opposite of those intended, especially where children are concerned (Bushman & Stack, 1996).

The MPAA system in the US has been challenged for treating all pre-teenage children as a homogeneous group when, in fact, they can be psychologically diverse (Wilson *et al.*, 1990).

Children under eight years old are more perceptually dependent than older children (Bruner, 1966). This means that their attention may be more closely tied to surface features of programmes than is true for older children. Older children are more conceptually driven and will therefore consider more complex story elements (Melkman *et al.*, 1981).

Such age differences can be illustrated in children's reactions to horror content. Very young children are frightened by monsters they can see on the screen, while older pre-teenage children are frightened by hidden evils in disguise or lurking unseen off-camera (Sparks & Cantor, 1986; Wilson & Cantor, 1985).

Thus, while the under-eights are scared by *The Incredible Hulk*, they do not show fright reactions as readily as the nines to twelves to a film such as *Poltergeist*. In *Poltergeist*, much of the 'horror' is covert and depends on a more sophisticated reading of story events.

In age-based ratings systems, programmes are classified primarily according to the amount of violence or sex they contain. But relatively little attention is given to the nature of portrayals or the context in which they appear (Kunkel, 1997).

For example, a film classified with an 'R' rating under the MPAA system (see

Table 2) is characterised by having ‘rough’ and ‘persistent’ violence, nudity and lovemaking (but no explicit sex), and at least two expletives involving sexual swear words. An X-rated film (no longer in use as a classification) will have an ‘accumulation of sexually connected language, or explicit sex, or of excessive and sadistic violence’ (Valenti, 1987).

In fairness to the British system, the BBFC classification policy attempts to embrace some contextual features — such as whether the violence is relevant to the plot — though its ratings nevertheless place emphasis on the presence and amount of certain categories of content (BBFC, 1998). These categories include nudity, sex and violence (see later). One of the BBFC’s primary concerns is to ensure that children and young people are protected from material likely to harm them.

But the emphasis on amount of violence or sex has been criticised for failing to recognise that violent or sexual portrayals of even brief duration can have profound effects on the audience (Kunkel, 1997; Wilson *et al.*, 1990). Audience reactions are always strongest when violence or sex involves well established characters in realistic settings, or in programmes where such portrayals are rare. Thus, even a brief kiss between two male gay characters in *EastEnders* caused considerable outcry. What’s more, as mentioned above, various other factors affect audience reactions to screen violence — such as how graphic it is.

Wilson *et al.* (1990) made two recommendations. The first was to create a new ratings age-break at age eight, in recognition of the varying cognitive abilities of pre-teenage children. The second was to introduce content distinctions between horror, violence, sex and sexual violence, in light of what research had revealed about young viewers’ psychological reactions to these distinct types of content. Ratings of H, V, S and SV could then be combined with age-based ratings.

The recommendations of Wilson *et al.* have not been explicitly taken up. But in Britain, the BBFC’s classification guidelines already make separate references to bad language, nudity, sex, violence and horror (but not to sexual violence). Film ratings take into account the presence, amount and, to some extent, nature of each of these five elements (BBFC, 1998).

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The important question here, though, is how are these advance warnings used by audiences?

Are programme ratings systems used?

Ultimately, the effectiveness of programme ratings systems can only be demonstrated by examining the way they are used. There are several key questions we can ask about this. First, do programme ratings make any difference to viewers’ programme selections? Second, do they help parents to control their children’s viewing? Third, how do children react to them? In the end, do programme ratings systems deliver what

is expected of them? If not, what can be done to improve them?

One of the main purposes of advance warnings is to help parents decide programmes’ suitability for their children. Research among American parents has indicated that programme ratings and advisories do lead parents to discourage their children from watching content labelled as age-inappropriate. When discussing programmes with their children, warnings about violence and sex result in parents making more disparaging remarks about such programmes.

Furthermore, a rating indicating the age-appropriateness of a programme

TABLE 2 MPAA movie rating system

G	General audiences	All ages admitted
PG	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
R	Restricted	Under 17s need an accompanying parent or guardian
NC-17		No one under 17 admitted

appeared to have more force than a mere verbal warning about violence (Krcmar & Cantor, 1997).

But what happens when parents are not around? How do young viewers respond to programme ratings and advisories? The answer seems to depend on the gender and age of the child.

In one study, programmes were significantly more likely to be selected from a TV guide by 10- to 14-year-old boys when labelled 'parental discretion advised'. Girls' choices were unaffected by this label. In contrast, a label such as 'viewer discretion required' had no effect on boys' programme choices, but discouraged young girls under nine (Cantor *et al.*, 1996).

From these findings, girls seem more likely than boys to conform to recommendations of authority sources concerning what is appropriate viewing fare for their age group.

Further research investigated the effect of MPAA ratings on children's interest in watching movies. Children aged five to 16

years had to select one movie to watch from a choice of three in a TV guide. The movies were fictitious, with descriptions made up by the researchers. Two of the movies were rated 'PG', while, in varying conditions, the third was rated G, PG, PG-13, or R (the ratings are explained in Table 2). Again, choices were dependent on the age and sex of the child.

When the target movie was rated as appropriate for all viewers (G), it was less likely to be selected. But when it was rated more restrictively, say as PG-13, alongside two PG-rated movies, it was more likely to be selected, especially by boys who were just too young legally to view.

An even more restrictive 'R' rating also enhanced a movie's appeal, but only among boys. Girls, it seems, felt that they ought not to be curious about such movies just yet (Cantor *et al.*, 1996, 1998).

Further research with teenagers has found that age-restrictive ratings can enhance interest in programmes. This effect is usually most clearly manifest among boys. When a programme is labelled as

appropriate only for an older age group, boys find it more appealing than when the same programme is labelled as suitable for their own or a younger age group (Sneegas & Plank, 1998; Chen, 1999).

Researchers working in this field acknowledge that the effectiveness of programme ratings is linked to the gender of young viewers. While more research is needed to explain why these gender differences occur, it is clear from the evidence so far that boys are more sensitive than girls to restrictive programme ratings. This is especially the case when age-based ratings are supplemented by content-based advisories alerting viewers to the violent or sexual nature of programmes. These are attributes to which boys, in particular, are strongly attracted (Chen, 1999).

Which type of rating is best?

Two main psychological theories have been put forward to explain the way programme ratings may work. These have been called the forbidden fruit effect and the tainted fruit effect.

The forbidden fruit idea derives from psychological reactance theory. This says that threatening to restrict or take away an individual's freedom to act will motivate the person to restore that freedom by actively seeking to engage in the proscribed activity (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Wicklund, 1974).

So by labelling programmes with age limitations rather than purely descriptive information about content, the TV industry may actually be creating a 'boomerang' or 'backlash' effect by turning certain programmes into 'forbidden fruit' (Cantor *et al.*, 1996; Kunkel, 1997). The ratings attract children to what is restricted simply because it is restricted.

Such a restriction may be regarded as a threat to one's personal freedom. This is especially so when some other party is encouraged to take control, as parents are in the case of advisories such as 'parental discretion advised' (Roberts, 1998).

An alternative 'tainted fruit' explanation derives from information processing theory. This theory rests on the assumption that the main purpose of the programme label is to provide descriptive and detailed information about the content. Consumers can then use that information to direct their behaviour. (An analogy here would be with putting nutritional labels on food products.)

TV programme ratings use descriptive advisories to specify the programme content that warrants a certain aged-based rating. For example, that a programme

contains mild or graphic violence. A descriptive advisory simply gives information that is similar to an index or table of contents.

Designations for content such as sex and violence might attract some children and adolescents and repel others (Roberts, 1998). Ratings and advisories could be interpreted, for example, as warnings of potentially disturbing content.

Thus, a 'tainted fruit effect' occurs where the presence of an advisory label acts as a warning to adolescents that they may confront material likely to make them feel uncomfortable or that is simply not likely to interest them.

Bushman and Stack (1996) conducted a series of studies with college undergraduates to investigate both the forbidden and tainted fruit theories. Experimental participants chose programmes from a printed TV guide on behalf of themselves, other male or female peers, or male or female children, using age-related and content-descriptive programme ratings.

In the first experiment, respondents read descriptions of violent and non-violent films. Afterwards, they estimated how

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much they wanted to view each film and how much they thought the other types of viewer might want to.

Films had one of six label conditions attached to them: no label; standard network TV label advising parental discretion because of violent content; age- or non-age-restrictive labels authorised by the Surgeon General; and age- or non-age-restrictive labels with no authority source. Pre-tests showed that greater authority and

pressure to comply were attached to warnings attributed to the Surgeon General.

Warning labels increased personal attraction to films with violence, but did not increase perceptions that others would be more motivated to watch these films as well. Ratings and advisories did not affect selection of non-violent films. These results thus supported the forbidden fruit theory, but not the tainted fruit theory.

However, it would be premature to

reject the latter theory entirely on this evidence alone. Econometric analysis of TV audiences and advertising revenue data in the US has indicated that programmes with advance warnings about violence in TV guides attracted smaller numbers of several demographic categories of viewer and were avoided by certain categories of advertiser (Hamilton, 1998).

In a second experiment, which largely repeated the first, individual differences in reactance disposition were examined in relation to reactions to films with and without warning labels. Individuals, pre-classified as high in reactance using the Therapeutic Reactance Scale (Dowd *et al.*, 1991), were expected to exhibit the strongest reactions to having their freedom of choice curtailed. Warning labels for films should have been seen as more restrictive by high reactance viewers.

The results supported this hypothesis. Individuals with least tolerance for having their freedom of choice reduced were especially likely to select films with restrictive warning labels.

A third experiment examined the impact of purely informative labels versus restrictive warning labels. Four label conditions were created that varied in amount of violence ('some violence' or 'extreme violence'), and whether there was a warning ('viewer discretion required') or not (descriptive information only). A no-label control condition was also used.

Violence warning labels were expected to produce reactance and hence more

attraction to films than were information-only labels.

Results showed that participants expressed a greater desire to watch violent films when they had 'viewer discretion' warning labels than when they had descriptive information-only labels. Information labels on their own did not increase participants' interest in watching violent films (Bushman & Stack, 1996).

These findings indicate that improved information about a programme's content may produce the more desired response from both adults and children than do labels that operate ostensibly to exclude certain sections of the audience from watching.

The future

The rapidly changing electronic entertainment environment has created a greater need for advance information about media content to help viewers, especially parents, make decisions about what to watch. Content ratings and verbal warnings are being deployed by broadcasters, video producers and internet content suppliers to help media consumers. So far, however, research has shown that content ratings systems may be based on an incomplete understanding of audience psychology.

One American writer has cynically concluded that US broadcasters have deliberately opted for an age-based system of classifying programmes because it leaves viewers uncertain about what to expect. More explicit labelling of programmes as 'graphically violent', for

instance, might encourage more viewers to switch off, thus driving away advertising dollars (Kunkel, 1997).

Switching off is not the only kind of audience reaction that might be expected, however. The impact of programme ratings and advisories on viewers' choices, especially younger viewers, can depend on whether content classifications have a forbidden fruit or tainted fruit effect.

So far, though, work on the effects of programme ratings has been completed on a fairly limited range of media content. The choices provided to participants in experiments have not generally represented the range of material between which viewers have to choose in regular television guides.

The focus has also been on labels, when what is needed is better content descriptive information that reflects more broadly what programmes are about.

Careful and systematic psychological research is needed into the way media content is described and classified. This is to ensure that advance programme labelling and other information is helpful to responsible media consumers and, importantly, has the desired outcome of protecting children.

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