[US] Television networks agree to rate television programming

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On 29 February 1996, top U.S. television network executives met with President Bill Clinton at the White House for two hours and afterwards announced that they had agreed to implement a voluntary ratings system that would give parents greater control of programming watched by their children. The clear impetus to the agreement was the passage three weeks earlier of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 ("1996 Act"see: IRIS 1996-3: 7-10).

One provision of the 1996 Act requires all new television sets manufactured or sold in the U.S. after 1998 to be equipped with a new technology referred to as the "V-chip". The purpose of the V-chip will be to give parents the ability to block the display of television programming that they consider too violent, sexually explicit, or otherwise indecent for their children. The V-chip operates by blocking all programs with a common rating that the television device with a V-chip has been programed to block. Of course, programming must first be rated and then encoded for the V-chip to become effective.

Section 551(b) of the 1996 Act grants the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") the power to require programme distributors - usually a television network or independent station - to transmit a rating so that parents can block undesired programming. The FCC is further authorized to establish an advisory committee, to issue guidelines for rating of video programming that contains sexual, violent, or otherwise indecent material. In addition to industry representatives, the advisory committee would also consist of parents and public interest groups. As it became clear that the 1996 Act and its V-chip provision would become law, the various factions of the television industry banded together in order to establish their own rating system. The industry calculated that developing their own rating system would dissuade government involvement. The industry enlisted the aid of Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Association of America, who had developed the ratings system for movies in 1968. In its public statement, the television industry announced that its ratings system would be in place in January 1997. Since the V-chip will not be available until at least a year later, ratings initially will be published in newspapers and magazines so parents can use the ratings to guide their children's viewing habits.

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Developing television ratings will prove much more challenging than those of the film industry. There are only some 700 films, or 1,200 hours of films, to rate every year. In contrast, there are over 600,000 hours of television programming on average cable systems. Since each distributor will rate its own programming, there is a concern that programs with similar content will carry different ratings. While the an industry ratings review process is included in the proposal, policing the ratings may become difficult due to sheer volume.

Several questions remain unanswered. Will the television ratings be similar to those used by the movie industry, or will there be more gradations? Will a television series receive a blanket rating, or will each episode be rated individually? Will sports events and newscasts be rated? Conventional wisdom would dictate that neither is likely to be rated.

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