



FEDERAL GOVERNMENT CALLS FOR REGULATION OF TV VIOLENCE

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The Federal Communications Commission has called on Congress to draft tougher regulations on violent television programming. The FCC's long-awaited report issued last week drew on three years of studies linking excessive exposure to violent TV to aggressive behavior in children.

Unlike previous attempts to crack down on TV violence that targeted only broadcasters like NBC, ABC and PBS, the new report calls on lawmakers to include cable and satellite TV. The report also suggested that Congress come up with a workable definition for "excessively violent programming that is harmful to children."

Currently, television networks voluntarily decide whether or not to rate their programming using 1997 federal standards that outline appropriate audiences -- TV-MA for mature audiences, TV-14 for programs that should only be viewed by those 14 or older. These ratings usually appear at the beginning of programs and after some commercial breaks. If parents choose, they can use these ratings to block certain shows with their television's built-in V-chip.

The FCC concluded these measures have been largely ineffective at limiting children's exposure to violent programming. Few parents are using the V-chip technology and, in some cases, the rating system has helped kids hone in on racy content.

The FCC's recommendations

The FCC, which drafted the report at the request of a bi-partisan group of legislators in 2004, suggested a number of ways to reduce kids' exposure to media violence but stopped short of defining exactly what it felt constituted "excessively violent."

Broadcasters, the report noted, could make a commitment to airing violence-free programming during peak watching hours.

Another method of reducing kids' exposure to violent programming, the FCC report stated, would be to allow cable and satellite subscribers to choose exactly which stations they want coming into their house. This "a la carte" method of subscribing would let concerned parents decide whether they think a particular channel or channels are too graphic for their children.

Currently, cable and satellite providers "bundle" channels, making it difficult for parents to sign up for stations that provide educational or family programming without also getting stations that air violent content.

Supporters and detractors

Even though Congress has not taken any steps to implement FCC's recommendations, the report has already stirred debate.

The Parents Television Council, a nonpartisan organization that works to reduce the amount to sex, violence and profanity on television, supported the FCC's push for "a la carte" programming.

"We support the notion that the volume and degree of violence on broadcast television should be reduced, especially during the times of day when children comprise a significant portion of the viewing audience," the PTC's president, Tim Winter, said. "And we applaud the commission's endorsement for parents, not the cable industry, to determine which networks we subscribe to and pay for."

Cable and satellite broadcasters, however, say the FCC's recommendations would increase fees and limit the variety of programming they could provide.

Brian Dietz, a spokesman for the National Cable Telecommunications Association, an industry trade group, told the Washington Post that "simple-sounding solutions, such as a la carte regulation of cable TV packages, are misguided and would endanger cable's high-quality family friendly programming, leaving parents and children with fewer viewing options."

What is too violent?

The American Civil Liberties Union, which advocates for freedom of speech, has expressed concern based on the FCC's enforcement of "indecent" claims -- such as Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction" during the 2004 Super Bowl, saying efforts to define "excessive violence" would likely be too broad and limit free speech.

Defining in law what is "excessively violent" and harmful to children is both tricky and controversial. Drawing the line between violence in a movie such as "Schindler's List," which has been re-broadcast on TV, and a torture scene from the popular series "24" would be a challenge.

Beyond the legal questions, the rapid developments in technology also pose problems for regulators. With more video online and viewing options such as TiVo, on-demand, and video on the Web, people are increasingly watching TV shows both where and when they want. Given these trends, enforcing violence-free programming during certain hours of the day would not cover all viewers.

Still, studies showing that violent content on TV has been on the rise in recent years have persuaded lawmakers to try.

Democratic Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, a member of the Commerce Committee, the panel that oversees the FCC, is expected to introduce a bill within the next few weeks.

"Violent television content is reaching epidemic proportions," he said in a statement. "We've waited a long time for this report, and the FCC is finally weighing in on one of the most critical communications issues of our time -- how can we protect our children from being exposed to excessively violent programming?"

-- *Compiled by Noah Buhayar for NewsHour Extra*

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