

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER DEBORAH TAYLOR TATE**

*Re: In the Matter of Violent Television Programming and Its Impact on Children,
MB Docket No. 04-261*

Members of Congress requested the FCC launch an inquiry regarding negative effects of violent programming, the constitutional limitations on restricting violent programming when children are likely to be viewing, and the constitutionality and public interest basis for adopting a definition of “excessively violent programming that is harmful to children.” While I recognize the difficulty in drafting narrowly tailored and constitutionally sustainable definitions in this matter, after reviewing the studies and meeting with researchers and those who have been involved in this debate for decades, I am convinced that something must be done to help parents minimize the pernicious effects of violent programming on their children. Congress faces difficult issues everyday and constantly walks a tight constitutional line, but, as Albert Einstein once said, “In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”

Like many of the parents, experts and health professionals we heard from, I am deeply concerned about the negative effects violent programming appears to have on our children. Many of us, as parents, have witnessed our children acting out a fighting scene from an episode of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, been shocked by our children’s callousness towards violence, or been awakened by a frightened child climbing into bed after having a nightmare because of something they saw on television. While the Report we submit to Congress today recognizes that there is some research refuting the causal relationship between violent programming and aggressive behavior, the vast majority of studies indicate that violent programming does have a negative impact – ranging from increased desensitization to violence to sleep abnormalities to heightened fears of becoming a victim – on children. I’m sure the 81 percent of parents who believe that violence on television contributes to violent behavior in children will agree with many of our findings.

The debate regarding the impact of violent programming is not a new one. In fact, it made its official debut in 1952 with the first Congressional hearing on the matter. The discussions, the political rhetoric, the hearings, and indeed the promises made by the industry during those hearings have been remade, rehashed, reinvented, and recycled in the following 55 years. While I support self-regulation first, these discussions have been going on for far too long. It is time that more effective steps are taken to protect our children.

Following the passage of the 1996 Communications Act, countless parents and advocacy groups, the FCC, and indeed Congress strongly encouraged the industry to adopt a “ratings system.” Today, we have an age-based system with general content descriptors warning of violence, language, sexual situations, and suggestive dialogue.

While this was a positive, *voluntary* industry step, it has proven to be insufficient to protect our children. Individual networks rate each of their programs, leading to inconsistencies across channels, and even across shows. Age-based ratings may reasonably reflect the content of the shows, but content descriptors frequently are not used or would be considered inaccurate by an impartial observer. For example, a program may very well have violent content, but if the network does not believe it constitutes “moderate” violence, a “V” label is not applied. The industry also frequently labels intense violence in children’s programs as “FV,” for comedic violence or fantasy violence, regardless of whether it is fantasy or realistic, merely because it appears in children’s programming. Yet, research shows that children aged 7 and younger often perceive fantasy or comedic violence as reality.

The industry should implement ratings reliably, more completely, consistently, and accurately. A properly implemented ratings system would be a very useful tool for parents when used together with the V-Chip. Unfortunately, notwithstanding government and industry educational efforts, more than half of Americans do not know their television is equipped with a V-Chip and two-thirds have never used it. Thus, effectively educating parents about the V-Chip is an additional necessary step. Further, our report notes that the industry could voluntarily commit itself to reducing the amount of excessive violence viewed by our children. A good first step would be to readopt a family hour during which there is no violent content, period.

Over the past few years, sources from outside the industry have introduced new tools and technology designed to help parents make smart choices about what kind of violent content is age-appropriate and available to children. For example:

- Parents Television Council provides on its web site a rating of a significant number of network programs based on PTC employees’ log of every instance of violence, language, sexual situation, and suggestive dialogue.
- Common Sense Media has rated more than 6,000 media titles from a kids and family perspective – including violent content ratings. These reviews are distributed not just through Common Sense’s website, but also through major Internet and cable partners such as Comcast, Time Warner Cable, and Road Runner High Speed.
- TV Guardian technology actually detects and filters profanity and other offensive phrases chosen by the parent – including “hate words” and racial slurs – while you watch movies or television shows.

While independent information can facilitate parental control, in today’s 24/7 media environment, parents need more help. Our Report concludes that the available tools and technological “fixes” are not sufficient to protect our children from violent programming. There is no doubt that parents are the ones who know their children best, and are the first line of defense in keeping their kids from viewing violent content they aren’t ready to see. But both the industry and the government have an important role to

play: in educating the public about the problem as well as potential solutions; in encouraging the development of more and better tools; in brokering partnerships so that parents have better access to accurate information; and in listening to both experts and parents across this country. I pledge my assistance in these efforts.

I will close with this thought: we, parents, must take responsibility for the media that is viewed *inside* our homes, but also must be active in changing the media landscape *outside* our homes. I encourage all parents to let your local TV station know when something you find inappropriate is aired, and be sure to notify your representatives in Congress. If enough parents speak out, perhaps we will not only improve the tools that are available to parents to help minimize their children's exposure to violent content, but we will actually see an increase in the amount of family-friendly, uplifting and nonviolent programming being produced.