

Parental Filters

Congress enacted and President Clinton signed into law a requirement that TV manufacturers will have to equip their TV sets with a chip that would enable parents to screen out violent programs (the so-called “v-chip”). This approach is flawed both in principle and in practice.

In principle, even many liberal reformers agree that when the government identifies a social need that is not met by the private sector, it should encourage or require that the need be attended to, but not specify the techniques or technologies to be employed. The private sector should be left free to select the most efficient methods for meeting the social need. For instance, environmentalists previously demanded that smokestacks be equipped with scrubbers. Now, they tend to insist that the same factories reduce damaging emissions in whatever ways they deem fit. The same principle should apply to the TV “pollution” of gratuitous violence and smut. The White House and/or Congress should spell out what is needed, but should not specify which technology is to be applied. If this approach is followed, the v-chip is likely to be avoided because it is inferior to other technologies.

To enable parents to control what their children watch on TV, parents need a screening device that can discriminate among programs according to content, and that is low in cost, difficult to disable, and easy to operate. (Otherwise, the parents will find themselves calling on their youngsters to “make this thing work.”) Even those who do not mind government controls would rather find a mechanism that does not entail censorship. Parents should be able to screen out programs in line with their values rather than be forced to rely on a board set up by the industry or the government. (The new telecommunications law grants the broadcasting and cable industry one year to establish a rating system; if they do not, a five-member commission appointed by the president would take over the task.) By most of these considerations, the v-chip compares poorly to other blocking technologies that are now available or entering the market. Such technologies are already on the market for the Internet and cable TV. Prototypes are being issued for broadcast TV.

If the president's approach is followed, the v-chip will require parents to acquire a new TV that contains the new chip, or to install it in their old TV. (Manufacturers of new TV sets are already required to include a chip that can be encrypted for various purposes, including closed-captioning, and now, possibly, screening out objectionable programming.) Parents will be dependent on a board that will rate programs by criteria that are not their own. Most importantly, the v-chip requires the continuing cooperation of the broadcasting industry, which will have to include in all broadcasts a signal carrying the ratings required to activate the v-chip. All parents can do is to set the chip to screen out programs that have a v, n (for nudity), or some other such notation.

Compare the v-chip to a technology that I shall refer to as "parental filters," because I would rather not endorse a specific commercial product, and because several kinds of parental filters are being introduced into the market. (Details about these technologies can be found in a report on media rating by Mediascope in Studio City, California.) Parental filters work like a device widely relied upon by those unable to program their VCRs; it enables them to pre-select programs to be recorded by punching in five-digit numbers listed next to their favorite programs in many daily newspapers and TV guides. This device, sometimes referred to as "VCR Plus," entails no hard labor: once a user punches in a number, the device instructs the VCR to record the same show for as many weeks as desired. The parental filters rely on the same principle, but the other way around. Parents can punch in the same numbers, and the TV (if properly adapted) will *not* exhibit the undesired program. (Not surprisingly, this technology is sometimes referred to as "VCR Minus".) Blocking devices for cable TV and for the Internet are already being marketed.

Parental filters cannot be gridlocked in Washington; no congressional acts are required. There is no need or even room for a ratings board with a de facto monopoly on determining which programs are without redeeming merit versus those that are virtuous. Nor do the filters have to await the cooperation of the broadcasters. Parents are free to buy the device, if they are so inclined, and choose among TV shows according to their values, by using the numbers already published in television listings. Above all, parents will be able to screen out programs even if they are not violent or vile, but simply

deemed by them as unsuitable for their children. (In my household, we would block most programs broadcasted in the hours set aside for homework, reading, family dinners, and outdoor activities.) Guidelines are expected to be provided by a variety of bodies, ranging from churches and synagogues to associations of private schools. Those who have techno-phobia should realize that using this device is as easy as “dialing” a phone. The cost is sure to decline as parental filters move from prototype into mass production. Currently, though, the v-chip is much less costly.

In short, parental filters—unlike the v-chip—entail little government involvement, require no cooperation from broadcasters, and they are responsive to the parents’ ideas rather than to a single and limited set of ratings provided by a government-sponsored board. Above all, they are better at enabling parents to control their TV sets and thus discharge this part of their educational responsibility.

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Toasting a Toaster

“Japanese weddings can be daunting affairs. Bosses and co-workers must be invited to an absurdly expensive party, they must be seated according to their rank, and they are required to give speeches that often barely mention the wedding couple while extolling the virtues of whatever brand of car or toaster or paint the groom’s company produces.”

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