Prosocial Effects of Media

Though the term *prosocial* is often bandied about by the media industry, federal regulators, academics, and advocates, there is not necessarily a shared definition within or between groups. Most writers suggest that prosocial media content is somehow socially helpful (such as that which promotes altruism, friendliness, acceptance of diversity, and cooperation). Others would include content that is more personally helpful (calming fears, engaging in safer sex practices, eating healthfully). In this chapter, we use the definition provided in one of the first comprehensive reports of the positive effects of the media written in the 1970s, titled “Television and Behavior.” The author defines *prosocial* as that which is “socially desirable and which in some way benefits other persons or society at large” (quoted in Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 354).

Any definition of *prosocial* involves some level of value judgment. Some might argue that a program that emphasizes “looking out for #1” prepares a child better for a competitive world than one that instills values of “cooperation.” Despite this caveat, we examine studies that have explored the benefits of prosocial media in its traditional sense. Most of the landmark studies were conducted in the 1970s, in response to increased federal funding to investigate the positive role of television in children’s lives (this, on the heels of the Surgeon General’s report outlining the negative role of television—particularly the deleterious consequences of TV violence) (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). The studies reviewed in this chapter are mainly focused on television content, though by extension, many of the findings would hold true for DVD and videotape viewing of the programs. Less clear is the impact of other electronic media—including computer and video games, Internet social Web sites (including networking sites), music, or magazines.

Many studies have found that children’s emotional and social skills are linked to their early academic standing (e.g., Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Children who have difficulty paying attention in class, getting along with their peers, and controlling their own negative emotions of anger and distress do less well in school (Arnold et al., 1999; McLelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000). What’s more, longitudinal studies
suggest that this link may be causal: “For many children, academic achievement in their first few years of schooling appears to be built on a firm foundation of children’s emotional and social skills” (Raver, 2002, p. 3). Specifically, research on early schooling suggests that the relationships that children build with peers and teachers are (a) based on children’s ability to regulate emotions in prosocial versus antisocial ways, and (b) a “source of provisions” that either help or hurt children’s chances of doing well, academically, in school (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999, p. 1375).

Developmental psychologists believe that children have a set of “emotional competencies” that determine how they think about and handle their own and others’ emotions (Saarni, 1990). For example, a child’s ability to recognize and label different emotions gives him or her powerful social tools. Children’s emotional styles are thought to be influenced not only by their temperament but also by their environments. Certainly, parents’ uses of warmth, control, and harshness in the home matter (see Chapter 12). Media may matter too. As we shall see in a moment, media have been shown to be effective at developing skills such as altruism and cooperation in young viewers.

Prosocial Media for Children

In the early days of television, the limited offerings of the networks featured many “family-friendly” prosocial programs such as Lassie, Captain Kangaroo, and The Waltons. Through the 1970s and early 1980s, content analyses revealed that children’s favorite programs often featured portrayals of empathy, altruism, and an exploration of feelings (Palmer, 1988). Networks soon discovered, however, that more money could be made on so-called program-length commercials—cartoons that were mainly vehicles for selling toys such as action figures (Kunkel, 1988). As a consequence, prosocial television declined through the 1980s and mid-1990s (Calvert & Kotler, 2003). The Children’s Television Act of 1990 aimed to reverse that trend, but it really wasn’t until the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) processing guideline went into effect—explicitly stating a minimum requirement of 3 hours per week of educational television—that the landscape of children’s television began to include more prosocial television. Today, more than three quarters of the commercial broadcasters’ educational offerings are “prosocial” shows (Jordan, 2004).

How Do Prosocial Media Affect Youth?

Researchers who study children’s prosocial learning from media typically work under the assumption that characters who behave kindly, cooperatively, responsibly, and altruistically are providing models that children can learn from and subsequently imitate. Much of this research is grounded in Bandura’s social cognitive theory, which originally explored how televised aggression might be imitated under
certain conditions (see Chapter 5), but has also looked at prosocial behavior that might result from media exposure. Generally speaking, the mechanism goes like this: Children observe a character behave in a positive manner. That behavior is more likely to be imitated if the character (a) is realistic, (b) is similar to the child (for example, in age or gender), (c) receives positive reinforcement, and (d) carries out an action that is imitable by the child (Thomas, 2005).

Prosocial content may also be providing children with skills for dealing with their emotions and managing their moods. As noted at the beginning of the chapter, children are born with temperament but look to their environments to learn emotional competencies—for example, ways to feel better about themselves or get through a bad day. *Sesame Street* has, in its three decades on the air, taught children about emotional coping in its curricular goals. It has addressed the scariness of hurricanes, the jealousy that arrives with a new sibling, and even the uncertainty that came after the 2001 terrorist attacks. However, we know very little about the efficacy of these storylines. Similarly, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* produced many episodes for children on topics that scared them or made them uncomfortable. (Indeed, there is a large body of research on children’s management of their fright reactions to media. See, for example, Cantor, 2001.)

A third potential mechanism underlying the relationship between media content and prosocial behavior may be that prosocial content offers children “scripts” for dealing with unfamiliar situations. According to schema or script theory, a schema is an organized structure of knowledge about a topic or event that is stored in memory and helps a person assimilate new information (Mandler, 1984). Schema theory suggests that people possess schemas for emotions, which include information about facial expressions, the cause of feelings, and the appropriate ways of expressing feelings. Children use schemas to help them interpret what they encounter in the media. In turn, media content can contribute to a child’s schemas. Cultivation theory, described in Chapter 5, has found that, over time, heavy TV viewers tend to adopt beliefs about the world that are consistent with television’s portrayal of the world. In other words, children who watch a lot of TV featuring crime or hospitals may come to see the world as a mean and scary place (Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1986).

The Research Evidence

*Empathy*

Social learning theory, emotional competency theory, and schema theory might all be used to understand children’s development of empathy, or the ability of children to understand and relate to another’s feelings by taking his or her perspective. Many would argue that the ability of humans to empathize with others is both hardwired and learned. Developmental psychologists who follow the Piagetian tradition would argue that it is not until children are 6 or 7 years old that they are “sociocentric” enough to understand that not everyone sees the world
or events as they do. In one famous experiment, children were put in front of a constructed three-dimensional mountain with different objects placed on it. Piaget asked the child to choose from four pictures which view the experimenter would see (the experimenter was standing on the opposite side of the mountain). Younger children selected the picture of the view that they themselves saw (Thomas, 2005). From this experiment and others, Piaget argued that children have difficulty understanding others’ perspectives, including understanding how they might feel. By the time children reach school age, they become more tuned into the feelings and needs of others.

Research suggests that child audiences can recognize the feelings of media characters, though it appears that younger children are less likely to experience the character’s feelings (that is, empathize with them) than older children. In one study, 3- to 5-year-olds and 9- to 11-year-olds watched a scary movie clip. For one clip, a threatening “stimulus” was shown. For the other, a character’s fear in response to the threatening stimulus was shown. Older children were more frightened and physiologically aroused than the younger children, though all children recognized the character as frightened (Wilson & Cantor, 1985).

Calvert and Kotler (2003) examined a more recent crop of prosocial programs for elementary school-age youth airing on commercial broadcast, cable, and public television. Their two-pronged study involved second to sixth graders in both a naturalistic reporting methodology (in which children logged onto a Web site and reported on what they were watching and what they learned) as well as an experimental methodology (in which children were shown programs in the classroom and asked about them afterwards). Their research suggests that school-age children learn from prosocial programs even more so than from traditional, school-related educational shows. Moreover, much of what the children seemed to be learning is how to identify the emotions of characters and apply what they learn to their own lives. As this sixth-grade girl in the experimental condition wrote about the program *Anatole*, “This program was about a little mouse who tried her hardest in singing but just couldn’t do it. The mouse gave up and ripped her opera notes up because of her frustration. When her dad (Papa) met an Opera singer named Renee, he knew that if his daughter heard her singing, she would have kept her confidence. And she did. She learned that just because you are not good at something doesn’t mean you have to give up. And that is the lesson that I will keep in mind when I get frustrated with something I am not good at” (quoted in Calvert & Kotler, 2003, p. 316).

Altruism/Helping

One of the first studies of the impact of prosocial television came with the program *Lassie*, which ran from 1954 to 1974 on commercial broadcast TV. The show featured an extraordinary collie, who was devoted to his family and, in particular, the boy owner (Jeff). Because of his devotion and intelligence, Lassie often helped them out of dangerous situations. In the Sprafkin, Liebert, and Poulos (1975) experiment, first-grade children saw one of three TV shows. In one condition, they saw a prosocial episode of *Lassie* in which Jeff rescues a puppy. In the second, they viewed a “neutral” episode of Jeff trying to avoid taking violin lessons.
In the third, the children watched a “competitive” episode of the *Brady Bunch*. After viewing the television program, children were told to play a game to win points and prizes. They were also told that if they needed assistance, they could press a “help” button, though that would mean they would need to stop playing the game and presumably be less likely to win a prize. Children could hear dogs barking with increasing intensity and distress through the experimental period (the barking was, of course, prerecorded). Children who saw the prosocial episode of *Lassie* condition were nearly twice as likely to seek help as children in the neutral condition. Children in the competitive condition were the least likely to seek help.

**Social Interaction**

In a 1979 study of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, Friedrich-Cofer, Huston-Stein, Kipnis, Susman, and Clewett explored the effects of daily exposure to different kinds of television over a 2-month period on preschool children’s social interactions with one another. All of the children were enrolled in Head Start programs. In one classroom, children watched *Mister Rogers*, and teachers were trained and relevant play material was provided. In a second classroom, children watched *Mister Rogers*, but teachers had no training. Relevant play material was provided. In the third, children viewed *Mister Rogers*, but there was neither teacher training nor program-related play material. In the final condition, children watched “neutral” films, with irrelevant play material in the classroom. Researchers observed children’s natural social behaviors in the classroom and on the playground before...
and after the 2 months’ worth of viewing. They found that positive interactions with peers increased the most in the condition where children had exposure to prosocial programming, teachers were trained, and relevant play material was provided. Prosocial television alone, however, led to few differences in children’s behavior, at least in this early study.

A second program that has been extensively studied is *Barney & Friends*. This program, which features a big purple dinosaur and emphasizes kindness and good manners, has been found to have a positive effect on children from diverse regions in the United States. Similar to the *Mister Rogers* study described above, day care centers were assigned to either a viewing or a viewing plus lessons condition or a no-viewing control group. Even without the accompanying lessons, children who viewed *Barney* were rated as more civil and having better manners.

**Acceptance of Others/Acceptance of Diversity**

A major goal of the program *Sesame Street* has been to highlight the diversity of American life and to model racial harmony. Program characters are African Americans, Latino Americans, White Americans, American Indians, and Asian Americans. Even its Muppets are different colors! In 1989, in response to increasing racial unrest, the producers and researchers at Sesame Workshop (the nonprofit production company that makes the program) designed a curriculum to encourage friendship among people of different races and cultures. Preschool viewers were encouraged to perceive people who look different from themselves as possible friends and to bring a child who has been rejected because of physical and/or cultural differences into the group. Truglio, Lovelace, Segui, and Schneider (2001) write that initially, there was some doubt as to whether race relations was truly an issue for preschoolers. However, a review of the literature, along with meetings with experts, revealed that preschoolers were aware of racial differences. Their formative research suggested that ethnic minority children felt less good about themselves and that White children were more likely to segregate African American children in an imaginary neighborhood they were asked to create. However, most of the children were open to the idea of being friends with children of different races.

One very interesting study analyzed two segments for *Sesame Street* that were created to address racial harmony and interaction. In one, “Visiting Ieshia,” a White girl visits an African American girl in her home. The other, “Play Date,” shows a similar family visit with an African American boy in his home and his White friend. Researchers at Sesame Workshop found that children liked the segments and identified with and remembered them. Most of the children who viewed the episodes stated that the visiting White child felt positive about being at Ieshia’s home (70%) and Jamal’s home (58%). However, less than one half of the children who viewed “Play Date” felt that the African American mother in the film (48%) and the White mother of the visiting boy (39%) felt happy about the visit. Why? Preschoolers perceived their own mothers as not feeling positively about other-race friendships, even after viewing friendly and inviting images of parents in “Play Date.” From these findings, the researchers recommended that in future segments, mothers and
fathers needed to have a more prominent role in expressing support about the child character’s friendships with children of different races before, during, and after these visits. They also suggested that the segments show the parents of the different-race children interacting and expressing the positive value of making good friends (Truglio et al., 2001).

The Limitations of Research on Prosocial Content for Children

It is unfortunate that so few studies have investigated the potential benefits of prosocial programming for children, particularly when there are so many programs now being offered by commercial broadcasters to satisfy the 3-hour rule. As Mares and Woodard (2001) point out, there are still many unanswered questions about how best to design prosocial content for children. First, does children’s exposure to specific prosocial models (such as donating money) translate into more “general kindness” or “goodness”? They argue that such a link has been found in exposure to antisocial models (with, of course, the opposite effect) and that despite the fact that the research could be carried out fairly easily, it never has. The popular series American Idol, for example, televised a double episode called “Idol Gives Back” in which the judges spotlighted the ravages of poverty, including the desperate plight of AIDS-afflicted mothers and children in Africa. By modeling charitable behavior (one of the episode’s hosts, Ellen DeGeneres, donated $100,000 and the program’s host, Ryan Seacrest, went to Africa and cared for dying women and children), they raised a total of $60 million. Children watching the program asked their parents to give and pledged their own allowances. But is this generosity fleeting, or have children’s beliefs and behaviors been affected in the longer term?
There is also a question about what kind of prosocial portrayal is most effective for different ages. For example, Mares and Woodard (2001) argue that “the combination of aggression and a prosocial theme is particularly pernicious. That is, showing violence and mayhem in the cause of social justice or followed by a rapid conclusion in which the villains are punished for their aggression may be more deleterious to children’s prosocial interactions than showing violence unadulterated by any prosocial theme” (p. 195). One study by Krcmar and Valkenberg (1999) found that 6- to 12-year-olds could easily reason that “unjustified violence” is wrong in an abstract, hypothetical situation. However, those children who were heavy viewers of the fantasy violence program *Power Rangers* were more likely to judge “justified” aggression in the hypothetical scenarios as morally correct, while those who seldom watched the program did not. One might argue that children who see the world in this way (that is, that justified violence is morally right) are drawn to superhero-type shows such as *Power Rangers*. Krcmar and Curtis (2003) conducted an experiment in which 5- to 14-year-olds were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: One watched an action cartoon that featured characters arguing and eventually engaging in violence, another watched a similar clip involving an argument but the characters walked away instead of fighting, and a control group did not watch television. Afterward, the subjects listened to and judged four hypothetical stories involving violence. Children who had watched the violent program were subsequently more likely than those in the control group to judge the violence as morally acceptable. They also exhibited less sophisticated moral reasoning in their responses (for example, they relied on punishment as rationale—“don’t hit or you’ll get in trouble”).

Not only is much of children’s superhero programming portrayed with conflicting pro- and antisocial messages, so too is the adult programming that is popular with young audiences. The Fox program *24* has been roundly criticized for having its hero, Jack Bauer, use torture against his enemies (including his bad-guy brother) to save the world from disaster (Moritz, 2007). Similarly, if one aim is to have children imitate constructive, prosocial behavior, what is the best way to promote that? Should the reward be intrinsic or extrinsic? Should children be shown how to carry this behavior over into their own lives? The program *Captain Planet* highlighted the ecological problems facing the world—problems that were solved by superheroes called “planeteers.” At the end of the program, however, children were shown exactly what they could do in their own homes and communities to be a “planeteer” too. Behaviors included recycling newspapers, making birdhouses, and picking up litter.

One of the few studies to examine the impact of production values on the take-away value of a prosocial program tracked elementary school children’s reaction to a popular family sitcom, *Full House*, in which a young character was trying to cope with anxiety about earthquakes or taking a fall while trying to learn how to ride a bicycle. In addition, half of the children were exposed to a humorous subplot that was interspersed with the main plot (the other half saw no subplot). The study revealed that while the subplot reduced the younger children’s (5- to 7-year-olds) comprehension of the emotional event in the storyline, it had no impact on older children’s comprehension. Thus, it is clear that research needs to account for the
developmental differences of audiences when examining the potential benefits of prosocial content. As described earlier, Georgetown researchers Calvert and Kotler (2003) argued that at least for school-age children, prosocial program content is even more “educational” than academic-oriented shows that feature science, literature, or math. As Jordan (2003) points out, however, it is difficult to know whether the children remember the lessons better because they have been ingrained in them since they were toddlers (share, be nice, etc.) or whether it is because the narrative structure is more entertaining and engaging.

**Prosocial Media for Adolescents**

The great majority of research on prosocial effects of media has involved children, especially very young children (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008). Only a handful of studies and experiments have specifically examined the possibility of prosocial effects of media on adolescents (Mares & Woodard, 2001, 2005). A recent meta-analysis of 35 prosocial studies found that the impact of prosocial content seems to peak at age 7 and fall off rapidly after that (Mares & Woodard, 2005), so that teenagers may be relatively “immune” to such influences or simply too egocentric to be affected. One of the earliest and classic experiments involved assigning 60 young people, ages 9, 13, and 16, to view one of two versions of *The Mod Squad*. In the violent version, a police captain who is framed for bribery gets even with the villain. In the prosocial version, everything is worked out through negotiation. The subjects were then placed in front of a “help/hurt” machine in a mock experimental situation. Those who had viewed the prosocial version spent more time pressing the help button and less time pressing the hurt button (Collins & Getz, 1976).

In an intriguing use of prosocial TV, Elias (1983) used a 5-week series of 10 prosocial videos about dealing with teasing, bullying, and peer pressure to help treat a group of 109 boys, ages 7 to 15 years, who had serious emotional disturbances. Compared with control subjects, the boys were rated as less isolated and less troubled, and this effect lasted as long as 2 months after the videos were seen. Media popular with teens can also be used to teach them about important subjects. For example, Singer and Singer (1994) developed and tested an effective adolescent health education mini-curriculum using five episodes of *Degrassi Junior High* with teens and preteens in Grades 5 to 8.

Content analyses have also found that prosocial content is relatively rare. An analysis of the top 20 shows for children and teens ages 2 to 17 found that only two contained themes of altruism, antiviolence, or friendliness in the episodes analyzed (Mares & Woodard, 2005). An older analysis of the most popular shows among fourth, sixth, and eighth graders found that there were as many antisocial acts as prosocial acts depicted (Greenberg, Atkin, Edison, & Korzeny, 1980). However, the most recent analysis of 2,227 programs on 18 different channels found that 73% of the programs featured altruistic acts, with a rate of 2.92 incidents per hour (Smith et al., 2006).

Both video games and the Internet have been used recently and creatively to try to reach teens and young adults (Baranowski, Buday, Thompson, & Baranowski, 2008).
Recently, a 16-week online intervention succeeded in producing weight loss and a reduction in binge eating for a small group of adolescents (Jones et al., 2008). A new video game titled Re-Mission (HopeLab, Palo Alto, CA) has been developed for cancer patients and features a “nanobot” named Roxxi, an attractive brunette who travels through the body blasting away at cancer cells. In a study of 375 cancer patients, ages 13 to 29 years, at 34 different medical centers, those who played the game were more compliant with chemotherapy and antibiotic treatments (Beale, Kato, Marin-Bowling, Guthrie, & Cole, 2007). Dance Dance Revolution is a popular video game that encourages exercise at home and can double energy expenditure (Lanningham-Foster et al., 2006). However, a 6-month follow-up of 30 children who used it at least 150 minutes a week found no reduction in body mass index (Madsen, Yen, Wlasiuk, Newman, & Lustig, 2007). Another new video game, Body Mechanics, tries to teach children to avoid becoming obese by allying themselves with a team of superheroes to battle villains such as Col Estorol and Betes II (Ellis, 2007). TV has also been used successfully to distract children having blood drawn (Bellieni et al., 2006). Finally, a computer-delivered HIV/AIDS program resulted in increased condom use in a recent randomized trial with 157 college students (Kiene & Barta, 2006).

National and International Prosocial Efforts

Evidence is increasing that well-conceived health campaigns involving mass media can have a demonstrable impact (Noar, 2006). One of the earliest prosocial experiments was conducted in Mexico by Miguel Sabido. His telenovela, Acompañame (Accompany Me), featured a young woman with two children who decided that she didn’t want any more pregnancies and therefore needed contraception. The show was immensely popular, and sales of contraceptives increased 23% in the first year the show aired, compared with 7% the year before the show began (Brink, 2006). Subsequently, the use of soap operas to convey public health messages spread to India, China, and Africa, where radio characters would discuss the problems of dealing with the risk of AIDS (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). In Zambia, a media campaign to reduce the risk of HIV resulted in a doubling of condom use among those teenagers who viewed at least three TV ads from the campaign (Underwood, Hachonda, Serlemitsos, & Bharath-Kumar, 2006). In 2006, the African Broadcast Media Partnership Against HIV/AIDS began a 3- to 5-year campaign involving a series of public service announcements (PSAs) on radio and TV in 25 African countries (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). The goal of the “An HIV-Free Generation...It Begins With You” campaign is to educate people in Africa about what they can do to stop the spread of HIV. And in China, students have been successfully taught sex education via the Internet (Lou, Zhao, Gao, & Shah, 2006).

In the United States, the Kaiser Family Foundation began partnering with MTV in 1997 and has produced a total of 62 different PSAs and 19 full-length shows that deal with HIV/AIDS (Rideout, 2003). In 2003, Kaiser joined with Viacom to get HIV/AIDS storylines incorporated into shows such as Becker, Touched by an Angel,
and *Queer as Folk* (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). A RAND study of 506 regular viewers of the hit sitcom *Friends* found that more than one fourth could recall seeing one particular episode in which Rachel became pregnant despite the use of condoms. Of those, 40% watched the episode with an adult, and 10% talked with an adult about condom use as a direct result of the show (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003). Similarly, a Kaiser survey of more than five hundred 15-to 17-year-olds found that one third had a conversation with a parent about a sexual matter because of something they saw on television (Figure 4.3). In the same survey, 60% of teens said that they learned how to say no to sex by seeing something on TV, and nearly half said that TV helped them talk to a partner about safe sex (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002). Two Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) surveys in the past 7 years have found that half of regular viewers of daytime soap operas in the United States say that they have learned important health information, and one fourth of prime-time viewers say that TV is one of their top three sources of health information (Brink, 2006). And an innovative campaign in North Carolina used TV and radio PSAs and billboards to encourage parents to talk to their teenagers about sex. “Talk to your kids about sex. Everyone else is,” was the primary message, and a subsequent survey of 1,132 parents found that the campaign had indeed been effective (DuRant, Wolfson, LaFrance, 2003).

**Have you ever had a conversation with one of your parents about a sexual issue because of something you saw on TV?**

![Bar chart](https://example.com/chart.png)

**Figure 4.3**

SOURCE: Kaiser Family Foundation (2002). This information was reprinted with permission from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a nonprofit, private operating foundation focusing on the major health care issues facing the nation and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.
Both the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Advocates for Youth have run similar campaigns (see Figure 4.4). In San Francisco, the Department of Public Health has become the first in the country to begin sending safer sex text messages to young people who request them (Allday, 2006).

Ratings

One of the most important noncontroversial possibilities for improving the quality of children's media experiences would be to create a uniform rating system for all media. This would end the current confusion of the “alphabet soup” of different ratings for different media and would yield a system that is far more “user-friendly” and content based (Gentile, Humphrey, & Walsh, 2005; Greenberg & Rampoldi-Hnilo, 2001). Every available study shows that parents and public health organizations are overwhelmingly in favor of a content-based ratings system, not an age-based one (Cantor, 1998a, 1998b; Gentile et al., 2005; Greenberg
& Rampoldi-Hnilo, 2001; Hogan, 2001). Yet, to date, every media industry has resisted such a change.

The first ratings system, of movies, was created in 1968 as a joint venture between the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the National Association of Theatre Owners (see Figure 4.5). Interestingly, it quickly followed two Supreme Court decisions that upheld the power of states to regulate children’s access to media otherwise protected by the First Amendment (Ginsberg v. New York, 1968; Interstate Circuit v. Dallas, 1968). Although the system is voluntary, most films are rated. Ninety percent of parents are aware of the ratings system, and more than half approve of it (Federman, 1996). However, a significant percentage of parents disagree with the ratings for particular movies (Walsh & Gentile, 2001), and a recent survey of more than 1,000 parents found that only 53% find the ratings “very” useful (see Figures 4.6 and 4.7) (Rideout, 2007). The current movie ratings are as follows (see also Figure 4.8) (Federman, 1996; FTC, 2000):

**Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)**

- **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 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

- **NC-17** No Children Under 17 Admitted

*Figure 4.5 MPAA Movie Ratings*  
Figure 4.6  Percentage of Parents Who Say They Have Ever Used Movie Ratings, Video Game Ratings, and Music Advisories


Figure 4.7  Percentage of Parents Who Have Used Each Rating or Advisory System and Found Them “Very” Useful

G: General audiences—all ages admitted.

- Signifies that the film contains nothing that most parents will consider offensive, even for their youngest children. No nudity, sex scenes, or scenes depicting drug use.


PG: Parental guidance suggested—some material may not be suitable for children.

- May contain some material that parents might not like their young children exposed to, but explicit sex scenes or scenes of drug use are absent. However, nudity may be briefly seen, and horror and violence may be present at “moderate levels.”

- Recent examples: The Chronicles of Narnia, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Nanny McPhee, Dreamer: Inspired by a True Story, Alvin and the Chipmunks.

PG-13: Parents strongly cautioned—some material may be inappropriate for children under 13.

- “Rough or persistent violence” is absent, as is sexually oriented nudity. There may be some scenes of drug use but one use (only) of a common sexually derived expletive.


R: Restricted, under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian.

- May contain some adult material. May contain “hard” language, “tough violence,” sex or nudity, or drug use. Consequently, parents are urged to learn more about the film before taking their children to see it.


NC-17: No one under 17 admitted.

- May contain material that the ratings board feels is “patently adult,” and therefore children 17 and younger should not be viewing it. May contain explicit sex scenes, considerable sexually oriented language, and/or scenes of excessive violence.

- Recent examples: Where the Truth Lies; This Film Is Not Yet Rated; Lust, Caution. (Older examples: Showgirls, Kids)
There are several problems with the MPAA system. Initially, the ratings were evaluative only, not descriptive (see Table 4.1). Parents would be given only the “PG” or “PG-13” symbol without being told exactly what content was problematic (Harris, 2007).

For certain parents, offensive language could be more of an issue than scenes with brief nudity, for example. Recently, however, and with very little public fanfare, the MPAA added descriptive information below the symbols (e.g., the 2007 film *Hostel: Part II* is rated R for “sadistic scenes of torture and bloody violence, terror, nudity, sexual content, language, and some drug content”). But the descriptions do not always accompany the rating, nor is the print always large enough to be deciphered by the average parent with average eyesight.

Sometimes, decisions by the ratings board defy explanation. The movie *Billy Elliot* was a fine film for children and teenagers, except for repeated use of the “f” word. Despite the fact that the word was spoken in a northern English accent so thick that it was barely decipherable, the film received an R rating, putting it out of reach of many teens who would have enjoyed seeing it. *Hannibal*, a gory sequel to *Silence of the Lambs*, was rated R, not NC-17. As critic Roger Ebert noted in his review, “If it proves nothing else, it proves that if a man cutting off his face and feeding it to the dogs doesn’t get the NC-17 rating for violence, nothing ever will” (Ebert, 2001, p. 4). Similarly, *Hostel: Part II* shows grisly scenes of blood and torture, “which means it’s perfectly okay to take a 5-year-old to see it if you can’t get a sitter” (Harris, 2007, p. 76). The board is also notoriously susceptible to negotiation with the industry (Dick, 2006). Thus, the movie *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* received an R rating only after it was rated five times as NC-17. “God’s the biggest bitch of them all” qualified the film for an R rating, whereas “God f—ing me up the a——” would have merited an NC-17 (Hochman, 1999). Even the makers of the film were surprised that their film escaped with just an R rating (Hochman, 1999).

Many observers have felt that the MPAA rates more harshly for sex than for violence, which is the exact reverse of what European countries do (see Figure 4.9) (Federman, 1996). Any depiction of sexual activity is likely to earn a picture an R

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contains some violence</td>
<td>Parental discretion advised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nudity/sex level 3</td>
<td>Teen: ages 13+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence: blood and gore</td>
<td>R: restricted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language: mild expletives</td>
<td>Adults only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contains extreme violence</td>
<td>Mature: ages 17+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BN: brief nudity</td>
<td>PG: parental guidance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

rating, whereas a PG-13 movie can contain an appreciable amount of violence. Films that were extremely violent, such as *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction*, received R ratings, whereas *Showgirls*, which had graphic sexuality and some nudity but only brief violence, received an NC-17 rating (Federman, 1996). Even former members of the MPAA ratings board have serious problems with how this is decided (Waxman, 2001a).

Other problems with the MPAA system are that, through the years, the industry has tolerated significant drug and violent content in G- and PG-rated movies, despite its own guidelines (see Figure 4.10) (Associated Press, 2005). Of all the animated feature films produced in the United States between 1937 and 1999, 100% contained violence, and the portrayal of intentional violence increased during this 60-year period (Yokota & Thompson, 2000). Two studies of G-rated children’s films released between 1937 and 1997 have found that nearly half displayed at least one scene of tobacco or alcohol use (Goldstein, Sobel, & Newman, 1999; Thompson & Yokota, 2001).

**Figure 4.9**

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**Figure 4.10**

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Another significant problem is what has been labeled “ratings creep.” Between 1992 and 2003, for example, the PG rating seemed to be turning into a G rating, the PG-13 rating into a PG rating, and the R rating into a PG-13 rating for many films (Thompson & Yokota, 2004). In particular, the amount of violence (PG and PG-13 films), sex (PG, PG-13, and R films), and profanity (PG-13 and R films) seems to be ratcheted up in the past decade. As always, the MPAA rates more severely for sex or nudity than it does for violence, despite what the research says.

Several studies have noticed that the age-based ratings simply encourage children, especially boys, to seek “older” fare (see Figure 4.11) (Cantor, 1998b). When ratings are based on age rather than content, the “forbidden fruit theory” seems to become operational (Bushman & Stack, 1996).

There is also the problem of “enforcing” the ratings system. Half of movie theater operators surveyed confessed that they admit teens younger than 17 to R-rated movies without an accompanying parent or guardian (FTC, 2000). Even if theater owners were more conscientious, today’s multiplex theaters allow children and teens to pay for a PG movie and switch to an R movie with minimal chances of being caught. There is some evidence that this trend may be changing, however. A 2001 study by an industry research firm found that films may lose as much as 40% of their potential opening-weekend earnings if they are rated R (Waxman, 2001b). Researchers who polled 1,500 people per week found that increasingly teens were being turned away at R-rated movies (Waxman, 2001b). In addition, of the top 20 films in 2002, 13 were rated PG-13 and none were R rated (Weinraub, 2003).

The television industry has lagged far behind the motion picture industry in developing a ratings system. Nearly 30 years after the MPAA system was introduced, the networks began rating their shows but only after considerable pressure from parents, advocacy groups, and the federal government (Broder, 1997; Hogan,

Figure 4.11  Effect of MPAA Ratings on Older Children’s Interest in a Movie

In fact, it took congressional legislation to accomplish it. In 1996, the Telecommunications Act mandated that new television sets be manufactured with a V-chip and that television programs be rated so that the chip could be programmed accordingly (see Figure 4.12). Like the MPAA ratings, the TV ratings system also has many flaws (see Figure 4.13). News and sports programs are not rated. Initial age-based ratings had to be supplemented with content descriptors (see Table 4.2). Many public health groups suggested that the system should have been modeled after the premium cable channels’ practice of indicating the level of sex, violence, and coarse language in each program (Cantor, 1998b; Mediascope, 2000).

However, even after descriptors were added, studies show that the system is still not working properly. For several years, NBC refused to use the content descriptors in its ratings. The current categories are not specific enough regarding content, and the contextual impact of violent or sexual references is completely ignored. For example, certain content becomes lost to the highest rating: A TV-MA program with an “S” for sexual content may contain violence at a TV-14 level but is not given a “V” for violent content. In addition, parents may be tempted to place inappropriate faith in the rating “FV” for fantasy violence, even though research shows that this represents some of the most potentially detrimental programming for young children (Cantor, 1998a; Federman, 1998). In fact, in a recent study of more than 1,000 parents, only 11% knew what “FV” stands for, and 9% actually thought it meant “Family Viewing” (Rideout, 2007). Finally, the ratings are completely voluntary, and two studies reveal that producers are not always conscientious about rating their own programs (Greenberg, Rampoldi-Hnilo, & Mastro, 2000; Kunkel et al., 1998). Nearly 80% of shows with violence and more than 90% of shows with sex do not receive the V or S content descriptors (Kunkel et al., 1998) (see Figure 4.14). For example, an episode of Walker, Texas Ranger featured the stabbing of two guards on a bus, an assault on a church by escaped convicts threatening to rape a nun, and a fight scene in which one escapee is shot and another is beaten unconscious. It did not receive a V descriptor. In addition, 80% of children’s programs with violence do not receive the FV descriptor (see Figure 4.15) (Kunkel et al., 1998).

To add to all of this confusion for parents, the gaming industry began by using two different systems, one for video games and the other for computer games. The former won out, but it bears little resemblance to the movie and TV ratings systems (Gentile et al., 2005): a new EC rating (ages 3 and older), E (everyone), a new E 10+ rating (everyone 10 and older), T (teen), M (mature), and AO (adults only) (see Figure 4.16). A recent study of the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings found that more than half of all games are rated as containing violence, including more than 90% of games rated as appropriate for children.
Figure 4.13

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Table 4.2  Current TV Ratings System

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Restrictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV-Y</td>
<td>(appropriate for all children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Y7</td>
<td>(directed to older children)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FV</td>
<td>(fantasy violence—intense violence in children's programming)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV-G</td>
<td>(general audience)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV-PG</td>
<td>(parental guidance suggested)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>(moderate violence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>(some sexual situations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>(infrequent coarse language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>(some suggestive dialogue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV-14</td>
<td>(parents strongly cautioned)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>(intense violence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>(intense sexual situations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>(strong coarse language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>(intensely suggestive dialogue)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV-MA</td>
<td>(mature audiences only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>(graphic violence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>(explicit sexual activity)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prosocial Effects of Media

Figure 4.14  Percentage of Shows With Sex, Violence, or Adult Language That Did Not Receive a Content Descriptor


Figure 4.15  Percentage of Children’s Shows Containing Violence


Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)

Figure 4.16  Original Video Game Ratings

SOURCE: ©2006 Entertainment Software Association. All rights reserved. The ESRB rating icons are registered trademarks of the Entertainment Software Association.

NOTE: Now “E” (for “Everyone”) and “E10+” categories have been added.
10 years and older (Gentile, 2008). Finally, the music industry uses a single rating system, “Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics.” It, too, is voluntary and does not distinguish among lyrics that are explicitly violent, sexual, or profane (Federman, 1996).

All of these disparate systems rely on the integrity, honesty, and judgment of the producers of the program, except for the MPAA system, which has an independent board, composed of parents, that confers the rating. However, even then, the independence of the board is sometimes questionable, and the lack of expert membership is often apparent (Federman, 1996; Waxman, 2001a, 2001b). These separate and noncompatible systems have been developed with very little input from the public, the medical community, or the academic community (Gentile et al., 2005).

One recent “test” of the ratings systems found that parents frequently disagree with the industry about the ratings applied to different media, particularly when violent content is involved. Only half of parents surveyed agreed with the G rating given to popular movies, and more than a third disagreed with PG ratings (see Table 4.3) (Walsh & Gentile, 2001).

The solution here should be readily apparent: a single, uniform, content-based ratings system that could be applied to all media that children and teenagers use (Gentile et al., 2005; Greenberg & Rampoldi-Hnilo, 2001; Hogan, 2001). The current “alphabet soup” of ratings systems is too confusing for parents to learn and apply and is even difficult for researchers to study (Greenberg et al., 2000). In addition, the voluntary nature of the current ratings systems is too easy for producers to exploit. The temptations are ever present to downcode a product to capture a larger audience (or, ironically, upcode it) or to depict increasingly edgy sexual, violent, or drug-taking behavior (Gentile et al., 2005). An external ratings board, with representation from the various industries, along with parents, health professionals, and academics, would put the United States on par with many other Western countries (Federman, 1996). In addition, such a move would inevitably lead to a societal discussion of cultural values: What should we rate most heavily against? How do we define quality and educational? That, in itself, would be useful.

### Table 4.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie’s Angels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Nicky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nutty Professor II: The Klumps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s All That</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wedding Singer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exercises

1. Where do you draw the line between prosocial messages and what George Orwell described as "mind control" in his novel, *1984*? For example, most people agree that, in general, war is bad. Should primetime shows contain messages about the recent war in Iraq, or would that be "crossing the line"? Should children's shows such as *Sesame Street* contain antiwar messages? Messages about terrorism? Where do you draw the line between public health and moralizing?

2. Imagine a version of *Sesame Street* designed and produced by (a) the Chinese government, (b) Al-Jazeera TV, (c) the former Soviet Union, and (d) the state of California. Who would the main characters be? What would some of the main themes be? Try watching *The World According to Sesame Street*, a documentary where co-productions from China, Israel/Palestine, and Russia are shown. Are there differences between these shows and the American version?

3. As regular viewers of *The Simpsons* know, *The Itchy & Scratchy Show* is a parody of violent children's cartoons. Like Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner, Itchy and Scratchy do little more than pummel each other constantly. After Marge writes a letter to the producer of the show, however, the tone becomes much more prosocial—and dull. Kids began turning off their TV sets and heading outdoors. Can prosocial programming be entertaining as well as educational? Or do most prosocial shows come off sounding like they've been directed and produced by a consortium of religious organizations?

4. Should shows and entertainment acts that are antisocial be banned? In 2006, an infamous videophone clip posted on the Internet showed Michael Richards, of Kramer and *Seinfeld* fame, in Los Angeles' Comedy Club repeatedly using the "n" word (Heffernan, 2006). Does he have the right to use whatever language he wants in his act? Richard Pryor repeatedly used the "n" word in his stand-up routines, to very powerful effect. Can only African Americans use the word? Conversely, should the White supremacist teenage twins, Prussian Blue, be censored? They call non-Whites "muds," play a video game called *Ethnic Cleansing*, and sing songs that glorify the Third Reich. A feature story about Prussian Blue in the magazine *Teen People* was recently killed by parent company Time Inc. (Hammond & Dillon, 2005). If you are in favor of censorship—for whatever reason—who decides what should be censored? Should prosocial media explicitly deal with issues of diversity and racism?

5. The MPAA recently announced that it would allow filmmakers to appeal ratings based on what other films had been rated in the past (Halbfinger, 2007). This move came after the success of the movie, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, which is extremely critical of the MPAA. Should the MPAA ratings members be kept secret from the public? Should ratings be a negotiation between the MPAA and the filmmaker? What about the recent MPAA decision to consider scenes of smoking in movies in determining the rating (MPAA, 2007, May 10)? Do you think the MPAA will follow through on its decision? What improvements could be made to the current ratings system?
6. Public health campaigns can be “pro” or “con” on certain issues, such as firearms. Look at the two opposing ads in Figure 4.17. Which ad do you think is more effective? What emotions are the ads trying to elicit? A 2008 study found that TV stations donate an average of 17 seconds an hour to PSAs, usually broadcasting them between midnight and 6 a.m. (Gantz, Schwartz, Angelini, & Rideout, 2008). Is this acceptable? If not, how could stations be encouraged to show more PSAs at popular viewing times?

7. Why do you think parents take young children to see violent movies that are rated PG-13 or R and are clearly inappropriate for them? Is it because they cannot afford a babysitter? Or is it because they think such movies are harmless or will not affect their children? Should movie theaters bar young children from seeing such movies, even if their parents are accompanying them, or is that too Big-Brotherish?

References


