The Ethics of Censorship:
Should Governments Cover Our Children’s Eyes?

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Introduction

American society prides itself on freedom of expression. Yet forces larger than the individual control what we see, hear and ultimately determine as appropriate. Censorship—defined as “the official government suppression of any public expression that a governing authority believes to threaten either its power or the accepted social and moral order”¹—is a tool that currently restricts children (classified as persons under the age of 18) from material deemed ‘obscene’ by government organizations. This analysis will demonstrate that a set of criteria used to establish the level of obscenity in media is beneficial to the wellbeing of the general public. It will also argue that lawful restrictions for exposure based on said criteria and set by any organization other than an individual’s own legal guardian (whether it be a parent or otherwise, and henceforth referred to as a parent) are
unethical and impede on ‘common American nature,’ defined henceforth as living a morally hygienic lifestyle.

In order to argue the ethics of censorship in film, television (cable and network formats), music and the internet, we must agree to a set of defined terms that relate to the status of media viewing in the present era. The following premises are used to support my ethical analysis:

- Governments are capable of and therefore responsible for outlining the concept of objectionable material in film, television, music and online, but not for restricting it.
- Children are individuals by nature and react to experiences as such; therefore, children cannot be restricted from decidedly objectionable content on a group basis (namely by age).
- Parents—and no other source—maintain a deontological duty for subjecting their own children to appropriate media content.
- Without a system of ratings and standards for media content, parents are unable to protect their children from potentially traumatic obscenity.

**Duty of Governments to Outline Obscenity in the Media**

Let’s begin by differentiating the duty of the government is to advise its citizens of objectionable content from its tendency to restrict content to certain segments of the population. The current definition of morality in media maintains that obscenity can be divided into three basic categories: violence, sexuality, and linguistic obscenity. At present, government agencies like the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) are responsible for determining what content is appropriate for
children, and what content should be classified as obscenity and therefore inappropriate for children. These agencies preserve a duty to advise responsible parents against allowing their children to view objectionable material. However, that duty does not extend to determining the age at which an individual is mature enough to legally access such content, because a government is incapable of assessing the individual reactions people have to specific content. Therefore, a barrier between advisory and enforcement should be set in place. It is, after all, a parent’s duty to raise their child, and not the government’s. The government should act as a vehicle for the suggestion of morally acceptable behavior.

This barrier is well-understood in television, as shown by recent advancements through the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The Act states that “all new television sets with a picture screen 13 inches or greater (measured diagonally) sold in the United States be equipped with a device that can block certain television programming”. The “V-Chip” provides television owners the ability to personally restrict certain television content based on outlined ratings: “[S]ex (S), violence (V), language (L), or suggestive dialogue (D),” as well as “a designator for fantasy violence (FV)”. This model can be applied to both cinema and music.

What is acceptable in the mainstream commercial media is debatable. However, there are widely accepted norms dividing content between appropriate (proving suitable for general audiences) and inappropriate (proving suitable for adults, who we will accept as persons over the age of 18). While preventative measures set through government ratings are helpful, parents are still the only authority that can truly restrict the material to which their children are exposed. Take note that there is no method of determining when children are capable of
internalizing obscene content as a group because children are inherently different, and setting an age limit for viewing certain material infringes upon a parent’s right and duty to raise their child in a way that they personally see fit.

**Consequences of Mass Ratings Restrictions for Children**

All children react differently when exposed to profanity, violence and sexuality at different ages. Environmental factors such as geographic location, sibling influence, and parental support all factor in to a child’s reaction to obscenity, and more importantly, the effect that obscenity has on that child’s developmental process. To assume that all children react equally to violence or sex in the media is impractical. A child raised in a closed, rural society may react very differently from an urban-raised child to television programming about violent crimes. A seventeen-year old whose family has been broken by infidelity may not be affected at all by programming reflecting this reality, whereas a seventeen-year old in an opposite situation could be very affected. “When a 5-year-old boy in Ohio set fire to his family's trailer home in 1993, killing his 2-year-old sister, his mother blamed the act on her son's love for MTV's animated teenage vandals”\(^4\). A situation of this kind, referring to the popular 1990s television show *Beavis and Butt-Head*, is an obvious example of how individual behaviors and reactions do not reflect the norm, but are actually anomalous. It’s absurd to suggest that even a fraction of children exposed to questionable material are prone to committing similar acts in daily life. A recent study performed separately by North American and British researchers produced only “weak evidence” that that a child who has been watching screen violence will be directly motivated to commit a
crime.\footnote{Mass ratings restrictions put in place by the MPAA, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and other government agencies restrict children from media content via a common age barrier. Yet these restrictions directly abuse the government’s duty to dictate what should be considered obscene material. Freedom of expression is not a government-granted right, and should supersede any national rule. Why should the US government condone restrictions on what certain individuals can and cannot access in the media? A parent should restrict its child from viewing objectionable, inappropriate material as it is outlined by the MPAA; but the MPAA is unethical in acting as the authority that restricts it.}

The debate over whether violence, sexuality and strong language in the media have any effect on children is more prevalent in modern times than ever before. In fact, in the wake of limitless internet content, these elements are actually crucial to the development of wary and mature adults. And through the development of V-Chip and MPAA ratings, “[producers] will reduce the level of violence” in programming so it can be seen by as many households as possible.\footnote{Clearly, the infringement upon these rights by the government has begun to even convince the producers of media content that—if they contain questionable material—their forms of expression will never even reach a large enough audience to be successful. One would be hard pressed to find a more creative disruption of freedom of expression.}

Duty of Parents to Restrict vs. Government’s Duty to Rate

The duty of governments to outline criteria for obscenity in their respective nations coincides directly with a parent’s duty to intelligently
utilize the criteria when determining the types of material that are appropriate for exposing to their own children. The current movie ratings system inhibits parental decision-making by restricting children from viewing certain content at all, even if a parent is willing to supervise. As suggested before, it is important that governments note the level of obscenity contained in programming; but the parent should make the final decision for their child in regards to potentially abhorrent material. The United States has fostered a specific set of cultural standards for good parenting in recent decades; and an integral part of good parenting is protection from the outside world. More and more, online and TV media has become a child’s most immediate source of influence, and while the government can advise parents to protect their children from obscenity, only the parents themselves are capable of monitoring internet use and TV viewing in the home.

Not only does a parent have a duty to protect their child from harmful outside influences—oftentimes found in the media itself—but they must also avoid the consequences of a child brought up to be unfit for mainstream, decidedly normal life in America. Allowing negative media into the consciousness of a child can be potentially harmful, and studies have shown that when children access violent content early in life, they are more prone to committing violent acts as adults. In US culture, parents are seen as the great guides to their children’s development, and therefore should accept responsibility for that child’s actions.

Consequences of Abolishing the Ratings System

The ratings system currently in place for American film is crucial to the proper development of children. The MPAA has devised a very
important standard for content that should help parents determine what their children can and cannot watch if they want them to become upstanding, respectable adults within the framework of a morally hygienic lifestyle. These standards are necessary for the virtuous progression of modern society. To suggest that censorship should be abolished would quite likely bring about anarchy. How can society progress if its negative elements are not weeded out?

However, when restrictions are placed on ‘R’ and ‘NC-17’ material, an unethical line is crossed because they effectively deny American citizens of a basic right to freedom of expression. No matter how degrading or vile a person’s expression may be, they are still legally allowed to tell anyone their beliefs, be it through film, music or on any manner of soap box. Ratings remove that right from filmmakers by removing the ability to profess their work to anyone and everyone. Osborne states that censorship maintains a few justifiable forms, including national safety, and interference with the fair and orderly administration of justice⁸; neither of these includes suppression of one’s inalienable freedom of expression.

Yet children can be positively affected by the application of government media ratings. When parents utilize these ratings as a method of determining what their children should watch, they are protecting them from potentially harmful content. The morality of the mass media comes into question when children commit egregious acts (like that of the child who burned down his parents’ home after watching Beavis and Butt-Head)⁹ and base their influence on the media itself; but there still exists no method of accurately mapping what children as a group are essentially ready to see or hear at any particular age. So, with that being said, the current ratings system should remain in place, but
only as a tool for parents to judge the moral value of media and determining its appropriateness in a situation involving children.

Conclusion

The United States government’s current stance on censorship in the media is flawed. Prohibition of morally injurious or offensive or otherwise indecent content including violence, sexuality and linguistic profanity in public media, and recently the Internet, has been deemed unconstitutional\(^{10}\), but ratings sources like the MPAA and V-Chips have prohibited children in the physical custody of their parents from viewing certain content in movies and on television. The role of the parent in current society has been removed from its prominence and given a back seat to government regulations. This is unethical because the deontological role of the parent to have a final say on what their children do, see, and experience should always take precedence over a government’s duty to outline harmful material in the media. Therefore, instead of restricting and censoring content, the government should encourage media agencies to sharpen and solidify a set of ratings criteria that better assists parents in determining what content their children should or should not see. While retaining the ability and upholding its duty to inform the public of obscenity, the government of the United States will not infringe upon an individual’s right to object himself to whatever material he deems appropriate, nor will they strip parents of their duty to restrict content to their children.
Works Cited


3. Ibid 2


6. Ibid 2


8. Ibid 1

9. Ibid 4

10. Ibid 2

