

Is the current U.S. movie ratings system effective?

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SUPPORTERS ARGUE

The system performs well in its role as a parental guide and is popular with the public. It is preferable to government censorship and to the Motion Picture Production Code, the previous system, which more strictly banned controversial elements from films.

OPPONENTS ARGUE

The system is too lenient, particularly regarding depictions of violence when compared with depictions of sex. Others say that it lacks a workable "adults only" rating, since the existing NC-17 tends to be shunned by movie theaters.

Standardized ratings have long been assigned to films in the U.S. But while people may be familiar with the ratings themselves, there is often confusion and controversy over why a certain film carries a particular rating. Over the years, the movie rating system overseen by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has provoked criticism on a number of fronts.



Films are displayed on the marquee of a movie theater in Universal City in Los Angeles.

Ric Francis/AP Photo

There are currently five MPAA ratings: G—"general audiences"; PG—"parental guidance suggested"; PG-13—"parents strongly cautioned"; R—"restricted, under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian"; and NC-17—"no one 17 and under admitted." While most movie theater owners abide by the system, it is voluntary and operated by the industry itself. And while the distributors of most U.S. films seek ratings, they have the option of releasing films without them (although theaters are often said to be reluctant to show unrated films).

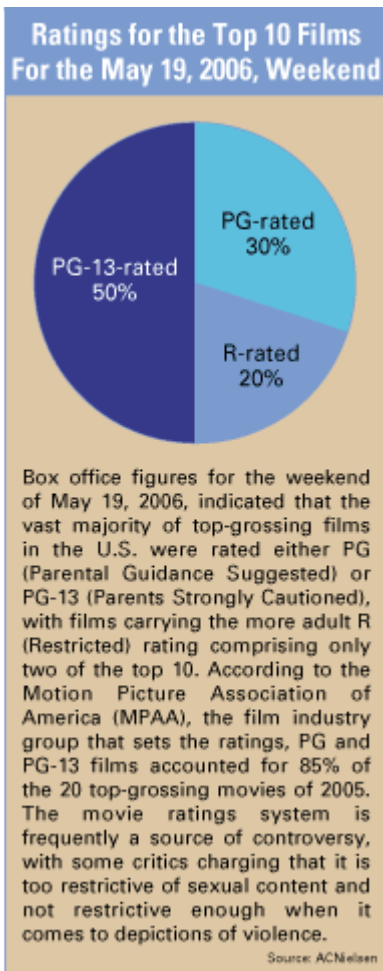
Movie ratings are assigned by the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA), an organization funded by the fees that it charges to distributors to rate their films. The group within CARA that evaluates the films is known as the rating board. It consists of between eight and 13 parents whose identities are kept private and who serve for varying lengths of time. The board's chairman is selected by the president of the MPAA.

The rating board evaluates movies based on a number of factors: theme, violence, language, nudity, sensuality, drug abuse and other elements. After a rating is assigned, the film's distributors can ask for an explanation, and can then resubmit the film with enough changes made to possibly alter the rating. If the distributors are still unsatisfied with the rating, they can take their case to the rating appeals board, which consists of 14 to 18 film industry members and has been said to include some religious leaders as well.

The rating system replaced an older system known as the Motion Picture Production Code, which provided a long list of elements that could not be featured in U.S. films. Distributors whose films violated the Production Code could be fined, and, for much of the code's history, most theaters could also be fined. In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of factors relating to the weakening of the film industry and challenges mounted against the system led to the abandonment of the Production Code.

Since the advent of the rating system in 1968, however, controversy has continued. Critics have charged that the system is not strict enough in certain areas. Others have said that the system stifles expression, and have questioned its legitimacy. A variety of revisions have been suggested: from changing the way that existing ratings are given to revising the NC-17 rating to make those movies more marketable to abandoning ratings altogether. The MPAA, however, has defended the current system as the best possible approach.

Critics say that during the 1990s, film ratings grew more lenient. Another complaint relates to violence in particular, with critics charging that the rating system treats it much less severely than it treats sex. And opponents say that not enough is done about cigarettes in movies, which they say can influence children to begin smoking.



Jeremy Eagle

Other critics say that because many theaters are reluctant to show NC-17 movies, economic necessity often forces filmmakers to edit films so that they do not receive that rating, creating a chilling effect on artistic freedom. They say that the rating system is biased against smaller, independent films. And they charge that the rating process is overly secretive and vague.

Supporters of the rating system, on the other hand, say that it exists to serve parents, and that it succeeds in that role. They add that the system is consistently popular with the public. The movie rating system is preferable to both the old Production Code system and to actual government censorship, they contend.

Supporters also dispute some of the claims made by critics. Violence is not treated more leniently than other elements, they say. And they deny that studio films get better treatment, saying that the rating board may treat a scene in one film differently from a similar scene in another film based on a variety of factors.

Before the Movie Rating System

In the early years of the 20th century, as film was growing in popularity, part of its appeal was derived from its depiction of low comedy and sexual situations. Some observers saw it as a type of "urban vice" that led to immorality. States and cities across the U.S. enacted laws and created panels to censor the content of films.

In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled on a challenge that a film distributor brought against one such law, in Ohio. The court decided the case, *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Commission*, in Ohio's favor, stating that filmmaking was a business, and that films therefore did not qualify for the First Amendment freedom given to other modes of expression.

Reformers and religious leaders continued to object to the content of Hollywood films in the 1920s. During that period, movies often portrayed illegal drinking, parties and other activities associated with the "roaring twenties" (when Prohibition was in effect, and alcohol was banned), and became more accepting of taboo subjects such as adultery. The introduction of sound in movies during that decade, enabling filmmakers to use risqué dialogue, also increased calls for censorship.

Another factor had less to do with film content itself than with the offscreen conduct of Hollywood actors. A number of movie-star scandals made headlines at the time, the most notorious involving the comedian Roscoe (Fatty) Arbuckle, who was charged in 1921 with the rape and murder of a young actress at a party. Although Arbuckle was eventually acquitted of the charges, high-profile cases such as his offended much of the public and led the film industry to take steps to improve its image.

In an attempt to deal with such pressures, in 1922 the film industry formed an association to regulate content, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and hired former postmaster general Will Hays to lead it. Hays oversaw the creation of a set of voluntary guidelines governing the depiction of controversial material, which were seen as a way for the film industry to avoid further government censorship by policing itself. In 1930, the guidelines were formalized as the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code.

The Production Code banned a number of taboo words, along with various types of subject matter deemed offensive at the time. Those included nudity, detailed killing, "lustful embraces," illegal drug use, mockery of religion, and even interracial romance. In addition, the code contained requirements as to how certain subjects were presented. For instance, filmmakers could not depict criminal activity in a way that made criminals seem sympathetic. "No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it," the Production Code stated.

The power that the Hollywood studios held in the early 20th century, such as their ownership of most U.S. movie theaters, gave them the ability to enforce the Production Code. At the same time, however, films that pushed the boundaries of what the code permitted were often box-office hits. In the early 1930s, for example, a number of successful Hollywood films featured sexually active female characters played by actresses such as Jean Harlow, Barbara Stanwyck and Mae West.

Films depicting criminals also became controversial during that time. One of the most notorious was *Scarface* (1932), which was based on the life of the well-known Chicago gangster Al Capone. Concerned that the film glorified criminals, Hays demanded that its producer, Howard Hughes, make a number of changes, including adding an anticrime prologue and a scene in which a group of citizens denounces the media's depiction of organized crime.

Controversies over movie content in the 1930s led to threats of film boycotts by religious groups such as the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency. In response, the industry in 1934 hired a Catholic moralist, Joseph Breen, to oversee enforcement of the Production Code as the head of a new authority, the Production Code Administration. Breen's group had the power to impose fines on studios that released films without code approval, and on studio-owned theaters that showed them. During the following years, films adhered more closely to Production Code standards.



Under the leadership of Jack Valenti, the Motion Picture Association of America in 1968 unveiled a new system of rating movies, which is still in effect today.

Kevin Winter/Getty Images

In the 1950s, however, the system of regulating film content began to face new challenges. One was that the Hollywood studios were found in a 1948 Supreme Court decision, *U. S. v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et al*, to be in violation of antitrust law, and by the late 1950s they had given up the theaters that they owned. Since non-studio-owned theaters were not overseen by the Production Code Administration, they were able to show films that had not been approved under the Production Code.

Another factor was the Supreme Court's 1952 *Joseph Burstyn v. Wilson* decision, which involved an attempt by New York City authorities to prevent the 1948 Italian film *The Miracle* from being shown. Religious groups had argued that the film, in which a woman believes that she is pregnant with the son of God, violated a New York law against sacrilege. The Supreme Court ruled against the city, however. Overruling its earlier *Mutual Film* decision, the court stated that films were protected as free speech, and that they could not be censored for being sacrilegious. "The importance of motion pictures as an organ of public opinion is not lessened by the fact that they are designed to entertain as well as to inform," wrote Justice Tom Clark. *Burstyn* and later rulings helped do away with local film censorship.

At the same time, the movie studios were facing new competition from television. Since television programs were more restricted in what they could show, the studios saw provocative subject matter as a way to keep viewers in theaters. As a result, more and more films began to defy the Production Code.

In 1966, Jack Valenti, former press secretary for President Lyndon Johnson (D, 1963-69), took over as head of the MPAA (formerly the MPPDA). During that year, Valenti dealt with two landmark cases of films violating the Production Code. The first was *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which contained language deemed inappropriate, and the second was *Blow-Up*, which contained nudity. Arguments with the studios over those two films helped convince Valenti to abolish the Production Code and devise a new system.

Development of the Rating System

Valenti met with film industry groups, including the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) and the International Film Importers and Distributors of America (IFIDA), as well as with religious groups, to create the rating system. As he later described it, the ratings were meant to allow filmmakers more freedom, while at the same

time providing a guide for parents. In 1968, the MPAA unveiled the new system, which the MPAA, NATO and IFIDA jointly oversaw.

The original MPAA rating system contained four categories: G, M (for "mature"—all ages admitted but parental guidance suggested), R and X (no one under the age of 17 admitted). The X rating was the only one of the four not trademarked by the system, meaning that filmmakers who did not submit their movies to be rated were free to use it. Although early on, some acclaimed films were rated X, the X rating later became associated exclusively with pornography.

The M rating led to confusion among parents, who thought it was more restrictive than the R rating. As a result, within a few years it was changed, first to GP (for "General audiences, parental guidance suggested") and then to PG.

In 1984, the PG category was changed once again. This time, the reason was the negative reaction of parents to two PG-rated movies, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Gremlins*. Parents complained about a Temple of Doom scene in which a man's heart is ripped out of his chest, and a scene in *Gremlins* in which a monster is cooked inside a microwave oven, arguing that they were inappropriate for viewing by young children. Steven Spielberg, who directed *Temple of Doom* and produced *Gremlins*, suggested to Valenti that the system create a new ratings category for films deemed appropriate for teenagers but not for younger viewers, leading to the PG-13 rating.

Since then, PG-13 movies have tended to perform well at the box office. Spielberg and other industry observers say that PG films are often considered too childish by teens and preteens, and that the PG-13 rating can make a film more appealing to them. Some contend that studios often make a conscious attempt to earn a PG-13 rating by including elements deemed unsuitable for a PG film.

The rating system was altered again in 1990, when the X rating was replaced with NC-17. Valenti and the other administrators wanted to avoid the stigma of pornography that had come to be associated with X-rated films, which many movie theaters refused to show. Unlike the X rating, NC-17 was trademarked, giving the rating system control over who could use it. However, many critics complain that in practice, NC-17 has simply become another X, with theaters refusing to show NC-17-rated films.

Another change made in 1990 was the inclusion of brief explanations for R ratings, which were meant to give parents more information specific to each film. The explanations were eventually added to films rated PG, PG-13 and NC-17 as well.

Despite the changes made, the movie rating system has continued to generate controversy. Some critics have charged that it is too lenient, and has been growing more permissive over time. And they have questioned the movie industry's commitment to the system. In 2000, for instance, the Federal Trade Commission released a report that found evidence that the makers of R-rated movies often market to children well under 17. The report, commissioned in the wake of a 1999 school shooting rampage at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo. (whose perpetrators were said by some to have been influenced by violent entertainment), led to some suggestions for government-mandated regulations, although the idea was not pursued.

Others have denounced the rating system as being too restrictive in some ways. They have questioned the qualifications of the rating-board members and have accused them of inconsistency in their approach, charging that they tend to be more lenient with violence than with sex or controversial themes. Some of those points were made in *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, a documentary directed by Kirby Dick that played at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2006. That film attempted to track down information on the members of the rating board.

Another controversy has developed over the rating of film advertisements. Trailers, posters and other types of marketing are reviewed by an MPAA panel known as the advertising administration. Trailers approved for "all audiences" can be shown with any film, while those for "restricted audiences" can be screened only before films

rated R or NC-17. For posters, the administration forbids certain elements, on the premise that when posters are hung in theater lobbies, anyone can be exposed to them.

The makers of *The Road to Guantanamo*, a documentary about the U.S. prison for terrorism suspects at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that is scheduled for release in June 2006, protested after a poster for the film, featuring a chained man with a hood over his head, was rejected by the advertising administration. While the administration said that the poster was rejected because it depicted torture, the film's distributor, Roadside Attractions, argued that the film's poster was appropriate to its subject matter, and that it examined a serious issue. Ultimately, however, the poster was changed to show only the chained man's hands.

Critics See Problems with System

Some critics of the movie rating system argue that it has become more permissive in recent years. The system, they say, has been undergoing "ratings creep," with rating categories featuring elements that would have previously been confined to more restrictive ratings. For instance, they cite a 2004 study by the Harvard School of Public Health, which examined 1,906 films released between 1992 and 2003 and found that sex, violence and profanity had increased in PG-13 movies, and that sex and profanity had increased in R-rated movies. The study also found an increase in objectionable content in PG-rated films during that time period.

"The findings demonstrate that ratings creep has occurred over the last decade and that today's movies contain significantly more violence, sex and profanity on average than movies of the same rating a decade ago," says Kimberly Thompson, who co-authored the study.

The movie rating system is often inconsistent in how it chooses to rate films, critics add. They point to a study by Luci Jenkins, an epidemiologist at the University of California at Los Angeles, which looked at violence in top-grossing films over the course of a single year in the 1990s. The study found that a PG-13 film could be more violent than the average R-rated film. "The system is not segmenting these categories, at least on the parameter of violence, in any cohesive way," says Theresa Webb, who worked as a researcher on the study.

Critics say that there is a double standard in how the system treats sex and violence. Critics charge that the rating board is much more lenient toward violent movies than toward sexually explicit ones. They argue that it is violence, not sex, that the board should be most concerned about exposing children to, because violent movies send a message that conflicts should be resolved through aggression.

Similarly, some critics charge that the rating system is not hard enough on smoking in movies. They note that the MPAA has indicated that the use of alcohol or illegal drugs can influence a film's rating, and say that cigarette use should be a factor as well. As an indication of the harmful effects of smoking in movies, they point to a 2005 study by James Sargent of Dartmouth Medical School, who interviewed 6,522 children between the ages of 10 and 14. Taking other variables into account, Sargent estimated that 38% of those who had tried smoking had done so because they had seen actors in movies smoking.



Demonstrators in Washington, D.C., in February 2005 call on the Motion Picture Association of America to prohibit the depiction of smoking in movies rated suitable for youth (G, PG and PG-13).
Tim Sloan/AFP/Getty Images

Another complaint is that the rating system censors filmmakers. Opponents say that theaters often refuse to show NC-17 movies, many newspapers will not run advertisements for them, and stores such as Wal-Mart and Blockbuster Video will not carry them on DVD. For that reason, critics argue, serious films that push boundaries become unmarketable. On the other hand, if a film is edited to avoid an NC-17 rating, it becomes a "hard R," exposing children to risqué material, they say. Turning NC-17 films into R-rated ones "has the effect not only of compromising filmmakers' visions but also greatly increasing the likelihood that adult-oriented movies are seen by the very groups for which they are not intended," states the Directors Guild of America.

Critics charge that the rating system tends to favor studio films over independent features. Smaller films may not have the budget to make the reedits necessary to avoid a particular rating, they say. Some even allege that the rating board gives preferential treatment to studio films, for instance by telling studio filmmakers exactly what they must do to get a more acceptable rating.

Opponents also accuse the rating board of excessive secrecy. The board members are an unknown group of people who use vague criteria for judging films, they say. "The rating system operates largely in secret, so it's always sort of a mystery and negotiation as far as what kind of content causes harsher ratings and how those ratings are determined," says Eddie Schmidt, producer of *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*.

Rating System Defended

Supporters of the movie rating system say that it serves a very specific and practical purpose; it allows parents to make informed decisions about what to allow their children to see. "The basic mission of the rating system is a simple one: to offer parents some advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see," Valenti writes on the CARA Web site.

Supporters add that while the system is often criticized for being simplistic, its lack of complexity is part of what makes it valuable, as is illustrated by the fact that much of the public is familiar with its designations. "One of the reasons why the movie rating system has lasted is its simplicity," Valenti says. Supporters add that parents who want more detailed information can find it in movie reviews or on Web sites such as ScreenIt.com. The ratings are meant to give more general information, they say.

The effectiveness of the rating system is demonstrated by its popularity, supporters say. Valenti reports that a 2005 poll conducted by the MPAA found that 79% of parents with children under the age of 13 find movie ratings "very useful" or "fairly useful."

Proponents insist that the rating board does not actually engage in censorship. Rather than trying to block content, the board simply assigns each film a rating based on its content, they say. The decision to edit scenes to obtain a different rating is up to the filmmakers, not the board, they maintain. "We never, contrary to what you may have heard, say, 'Take this out, take that out,'" says CARA chairwoman Joan Graves.

Defenders of the system say that its voluntary nature sets it apart from government censorship, such as the local boards and laws that previously existed in the U.S. And they say that it is also preferable to the Production Code, particularly during the height of studio power in the 1930s and 1940s, when studio-owned theaters barred films that did not meet the code's standards. The current rating system avoids such problems, they assert.

Supporters also dispute some of the claims made by the rating system's critics. They deny that the rating board is lenient toward violence in comparison to sex. According to Valenti, the board has on many occasions given a film an NC-17 rating for violence, but filmmakers in such cases often choose to make the necessary changes to get an R. "Contrary to popular notion, violence is not treated more leniently than any of the other material," Valenti writes.

Supporters also dispute the idea that the rating system gives preference to studio films over independent ones. The rating board takes the context of controversial scenes into account, they say, meaning that it is more likely to offer advice on how to edit a film with an isolated incident of sex or violence than on how to edit one filled with such scenes. That can mean that different films are given different levels of assistance in changing their ratings, they say. "Everybody can get feedback," says MPAA spokeswoman Kori Bernards. "Now, if the film is blatantly one rating or the other, we don't get into providing that because editing and changing the whole content is not our business."

Some supporters also dispute claims that the NC-17 rating is dysfunctional. For instance, NATO president John Fithian says that not as many theaters refuse to show NC-17 movies as is commonly believed. "I think the concept that a lot of theaters won't play NC-17 is almost entirely myth," he says.

New Motion Picture President Faces Controversy

In 2004, Dan Glickman took over as president of the MPAA. As a former Kansas congressman and secretary of agriculture under President Bill Clinton (D, 1993-2001), Glickman had government ties that would seem to benefit him in his role as chief lobbyist for the motion picture industry. Since he has taken control, however, low-level controversy over the movie rating system has continued.

In the face of criticism from sources such as *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, Glickman has defended the system and invited scrutiny of its methods. In addition, he has pledged to listen to criticism from parents and politicians. "One of the things we have to do is maintain a dialogue with members of Congress and the American family community about these issues," he says.

Meanwhile, movies continue to provoke strong reactions in viewers. As long as the depiction of sex, violence, drug use and other controversial themes in films continues to inspire debate, it seems likely that the movie rating system will as well.

Discussion Questions

1) Do you think that the current movie rating system in the U.S. is effective? Why or why not?

- 2) Are harsh language and frank depictions of violence, sexuality and drug use an important part of movies, or do you think that movies are better when those elements are left out, as they tended to be during the period of the Motion Picture Production Code?
- 3) In your opinion, which works better: a movie rating system like the one the U.S. currently uses, which is voluntary and overseen by the film industry, or a mandatory, government-run system?
- 4) Do you think that seeing and hearing things such as violence, drug use and profanity in movies encourages those types of behavior in viewers? Why or why not?
- 5) Design a new movie rating system. Would you designate certain aspects as unsuitable for younger viewers? What aspects?

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Vaughn, Stephen. *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Contact Information

Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of movie ratings or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:

Motion Picture Association of America
1600 Eye Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20006
Telephone: (202) 293-1966
Internet: www.mpa.org

Kids At Risk Project
Harvard School of Public Health
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Internet: www.kidsrisk.harvard.edu

Directors Guild of America
7920 Sunset Boulevard
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Telephone: (310) 289-2000
Internet: www.dga.org

Keywords

For further information about the ongoing debate over movie ratings, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:

Classification and Rating Administration
Motion Picture Production Code
Jack Valenti
Movie rating board
Joseph Breen

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