

To protect children

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

In 1968, when the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the National Association of Theater Owners (NATO) developed the motion picture rating system, they were working with a moviegoing environment that knew nothing about the home video industry, which puts every film potentially in the hands of children. Nor did the system anticipate the development of multiscreen theaters. The single box office window was initially the backbone of enforcement for the rating system; now any unsupervised child can buy a PG ticket and walk down the multiplex hallway to see an R-rated film.

The rating system was created before these cultural developments, and at the end of a decade of revolutionary change in American society. A demand for absolute freedom had swept through the land with little regard for the impact of that freedom on the larger community. The motion picture rating system was devised to accommodate both that desire for freedom in creating and viewing films and the community's need to protect its children from exploitation.

From the outset, civic responsibility was essential to the success of the system. Voluntary curbs on the exploitation of children could not work without the willingness of film industry leaders to curb themselves. But this called for civic responsibility at a time when community idealism was in short supply. Could it work? Church representatives from Protestant and Catholic film offices believed it could.

I attended a 1968 planning session of MPAA and NATO as one of those church representatives. At that meeting, MPAA president Jack Valenti told film industry leaders that the movie industry had to have its own voluntary rating system or else become trapped beneath legal controls imposed by local and state governments. The industry was in a race between its own creative members and a society determined to curb political and creative excesses.

Valenti garnered industry agreement and church support for his new system precisely because it was designed to protect children from adult material. From the beginning, however, the system was built on trust—a risky undertaking in a society

where profit rarely takes a backseat to trust. But it was a risk worth taking.

Now, 32 years after its creation, the film rating system—and the separate systems that followed for music and video games—are under fire from Congress, from the White House and, in this political year, from both presidential candidates. Now led by a generation that grew to adulthood during the 1960s, the film industry is having to defend itself from charges by the Federal Trade Commission, which has issued a scathing indictment of the entertainment industries (one year after President Clinton mandated the study following the murder of teenagers at a Colorado high school).

The FTC has issued its findings regarding marketing strategies for R-rated films (films not recommended for viewers under 17 unless accompanied by a parent). What it found was not reassuring. FTC Chairman Robert Pitofsky told the Senate Commerce Committee that “of 44 movies rated R, 35 of them (80 percent) were marketed to youngsters under 17.” In at least one instance, an R-rated picture was targeted directly to 10- and 11-year-old children.

Such marketing practices remain technically legal. R films are not “illegal” for anyone—even without a parent—as long as the system remains voluntary. But these marketing practices nevertheless reflect an absence of industry responsibility.

It was a total absence of civic responsibility that led the tobacco industry to target children with its toxic products. It took decades before the government was able to break through the wall of denial established by the tobacco companies, which long hid behind the claim that there was “no proof” of any connection between smoking and cancer.

The products of the film industry involve ideas and images, and this will make it difficult to pass laws against media consumption. But film companies responsible for producing violent material and peddling it to children know they should reflect seriously on the question asked by Sissela Bok, whose observations on television violence were cited by Pitofsky in his testimony to the Senate Commerce Committee: “Is it alarmist or merely sensible to ask what happens to the souls of children nurtured, as in no past society, on images of rape, torture, bombings and massacre that are channeled into their homes from infancy?”

First Amendment freedoms are always touted by the industry to ward off government interference. But freedom is never absolute. A tension exists between the right to speak and the right of society to protect its well-being and that of its

children. Pitofsky acknowledged that he would not favor any trade restrictions that would interfere with “First Amendment protections for speech,” but he left open the possibility that unless the entertainment industries demonstrate a desire to clean up their own houses, he would look for ways for the government to do it for them.

The motion picture rating system has relied on the willingness of industry leaders to handle their freedom responsibly. If they cannot fulfill their civic responsibility, they are, by default, asking the government to impose restrictions on their freedom. It is time for the film industry to stop peddling adult films to children and to start finding ways to keep adult fare for adults only. If industry leaders lose their freedom, or any part of it, the fault will be theirs.