

Children and TV: Making a safe and enriching relationship

BY JANET YALE AND
MICHAEL MCCABE

Television has a lot to offer children...it can entertain, educate and inform, introduce them to the world around them and the community in which they live, and help them understand different cultures, people and points of view. While acknowledging the power of television to enrich children's lives, society also recognizes there is programming clearly intended for adults.

The challenge for parents is to help their children have a rich television experience. The challenge for our industries is to offer parents practical tools that make their job as easy as possible. In fact, the issue of violence in the media has been a preoccupation of Canadian broadcasters and cable companies for more than a decade.

Working in co-operation with the CRTC, our industries have been world leaders in development of a comprehensive tool kit to help parents guide children's viewing. They have developed industry codes, a program-classification system, on-screen ratings' icons, public information, and the V-chip, which itself is a Canadian success story.

No bigger than a thumbnail, the V-chip (V for viewer control) packs a provocative punch. It's a simple device that landed Canadian inventor Prof. Tim Collings on the international stage, earning him awards and making V-chip a household word. The V-chip can decode rating information broadcasters insert into TV programs in order to enable individuals to set viewing standards for their homes.

Canada's cable companies were instrumental in the funding, research and development of Prof. Collings' technol-

ogy. They provided significant funding in the early days to support field trials and focus group research, and to conduct beta tests in Canadian homes, where the viability of the V-chip and its impact on TV viewing is most important.

Canadian broadcasters began phasing in V-chip program encoding over a two-month period that ended February 28. This means conventional broadcasters, and pay and specialty services, have embedded in their signals the coding that allows the V-chip to read ratings of individual shows (in the categories where a rating is required) and to then accept or block the program, based on settings established by the consumer.

This is the culmination of an on-going collaborative effort involving the CAB and CCTA, and the industry umbrella organization, the Action Group on Violence on Television (AGVOT), chaired by Al MacKay. Over the past decade, the following initiatives have been put in place:

- development of a comprehensive and user-friendly Canadian program-rating classification system to ensure programs are directed to the appropriate audiences;
- use of on-screen program-rating icons, to let parents know ratings of individual programs;
- ongoing liaison with manufacturers to ensure V-chips in sets sold in Canada are compatible with and able to read encoding for the developed English and French classification systems;
- creation of an Encoding Implementation Committee to coordinate encoding of programming by all Canadian TV services by February 28; and,
- education of the Canadian public, government and industry stakeholders about the V-chip.

Approximately a quarter of million television sets in Canadian homes are equipped with V-chip technology. It is not yet a critical mass, but it's a start. That's a key reason why this month AGVOT, CAB and CCTA will launch the

Janet Yale is
President & CEO of
the Canadian Cable
Television
Association. She can
be reached at
yale@ccta.com.



Michael McCabe is
President and CEO of
the Canadian Association
of Broadcasters. He
may be contacted by
phone at (613) 233-
4035, by fax at (613)
233-6961 or by e-mail
at cab@cab-acr.ca

first-ever bilingual Web site dedicated to the Canadian television program-ratings system and the V-chip: www.chipcanada.ca. The site will provide information on the V-chip and a guide to the ratings system; practical tips on buying a TV set with V-chip technology that will work with the Canadian system; and, links to where parents can find information about media literacy to help children get the most out of television. Through the Web site and other efforts, we'll also continue to encourage TV set manufacturers and retailers to bring the V-chip and the Canadian ratings system to all Canadians.

This marks the first time we have collaborated on a column for *Broadcast Dialogue*. It reflects the strong commitment of the industries we represent to give consumers the tools they need to use television effectively. We're pleased that, together, our member companies have helped make V-chip technology and software a Canadian global success story. It is an innovation that enables TV viewers to control what comes into their homes. And it's about Canada's broadcasters and cable companies working towards a common goal that benefits all Canadians.