

OPENING STATEMENT



**Statement of Senator Joe Lieberman
on Rating the Ratings System
As Prepared for Delivery
July 25, 2001**

Good morning. We are here today to revisit an issue that parents repeatedly raise with just about anyone who will listen – the challenge they face in raising healthy children in today’s 500-channel, multiplexed, videogamed, discmanned universe.

That is a reflection of the quantity of time children spend consuming and using media – an average of 6-1/2 hours a day, according to the Annenberg Public Policy Center. But it is even more a reflection of the quality of the messages about sex and violence kids are being exposed to by the entertainment media – messages which too often reject rather than reflect the basic values parents are trying to instill -- and the growing sense that the totality of these messages is having a harmful influence on the attitudes and behaviors of our children, and therefore on the safety and moral condition of our country.

There are limits to what we in government can do to respond to these concerns – because of our devotion to the First Amendment, and because governments don’t raise children, parents do. At the same time, though, there are some things that we can do – hopefully with the movie, music, video game, and television industries – to empower parents and make the hard job of raising healthy children a little easier.

One way to empower is to inform. Over the years, the major entertainment media have developed rating and labeling systems, largely at the urging of public advocates, to offer parents and consumers information about the content of their products and help parents exercise more informed control over their children’s media diets. And over that time, these ratings, particularly those of the movie industry, have become cultural icons.

But as the content and marketing practices of the entertainment media have become worse, we have been hearing more and more concerns about how these ratings systems work. There have been specific criticisms about their reliability, visibility, and understandability. And there have been general complaints that the ratings do not provide parents with enough information about content – about the levels of sex, violence, and vulgarity in each product -- to make the right choice

for their children. Last year, for example, a Gallup survey found that 74 percent of parents said the movie, music and television ratings were inadequate on that count.

Those concerns culminated in a letter sent to policymakers last month by a distinguished coalition of researchers, medical groups, and child development experts, which recommended a complete overhaul of media ratings. That letter, initiated by the National Institute on Media and the Family, argued that the different ratings are often applied inconsistently, that many parents find the multiplicity of rating icons confusing, and, as a result, that the ratings are not adequately serving their purpose – helping parents or protecting kids. To fix this problem, the signers of the letter called for replacing the existing formats with a new uniform rating system, monitored by an independent oversight committee and grounded in sound research.

I thought this was an important statement with a provocative proposal that deserved more public discussion. I believe that is one critical way in which we in government can help parents, to provide a platform, facilitate a dialogue, and ideally build common ground. That is the aim of our hearing today – to flesh out the concerns raised in the NIMF's letter and explore the merits of their recommendations, to hear the response of industry keepers of these rating systems, and see if there is any agreement on ways to improve the ratings to better inform parents.

I have expressed interest in the idea of uniform ratings before – as have others in Congress, including Senators McCain and Clinton, and in the entertainment industry, notably Disney President Robert Iger – and I remain interested in it. Many parents appear interested as well – a survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation being released today found that 40 percent of parents believe that a uniform rating system would be more useful than the current approach, and only 17 percent think it would be less useful. So today we will hear the arguments in favor of switching to a single system, as well as the industry's objections to it.

I hope the entertainment industry witnesses come with an equally open mind, particularly on the question of providing more and better information. For some time now many of us have voiced dissatisfaction with the recording industry's one size-fits-all parental advisory program, which provides a solitary stickered warning to parents of "explicit content." We have urged the major record companies to expand and clarify their system and tell parents what kinds of explicit content are in the lyrics. Those same criticisms and calls for change were repeated vociferously at a hearing before the House Telecommunications Subcommittee last week, as I understand it, and Ms. Rosen ruled out adding any content descriptions to the recording

industry's labeling system. I hope in our discussion today that Ms. Rosen will reconsider that position.

I also hope that Mr. Valenti will alter the outrageous suggestion he makes in his response to the aforementioned letter from the NIMF that there is serious doubt about whether violence in the media poses a risk of harm to our children.

If we are looking for an industry model, I would point to the video game rating system, which is administered by the independent Electronic Software Ratings Board (ESRB). The ESRB system, which was a response to Congressional hearings, pairs age-based icons with detailed content descriptors in a clear, concise, and informative format. I believe it is the best media rating system in existence.

Ultimately any potential reforms in the ratings will be meaningless if parents don't use them. We need to remind parents of their responsibilities as we renew our call for more and better information in the ratings.

One last word about the First Amendment, which is one thing all of us seem to support. We are not talking about any legislation or government regulation today. But I want to warn the industry again that the best way to invite censorship is to disengage from this discussion and tune out the larger concerns of millions of American parents about media influence on our kids and our country. Indeed, the most striking finding of the Kaiser survey to me was that 48 percent of parents would support government regulations to limit the amount of violent and sexual content in early evening TV shows. That is an outcry that begins to express just how frustrated and angry America's parents are about the state of our culture and its impact on our children.

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