



IS FOR GOLDEN:

THE MPAA FILM RATINGS AT 50



Motion Picture Association of America

NOVEMBER 2018

filmratings.com



mpaa.org

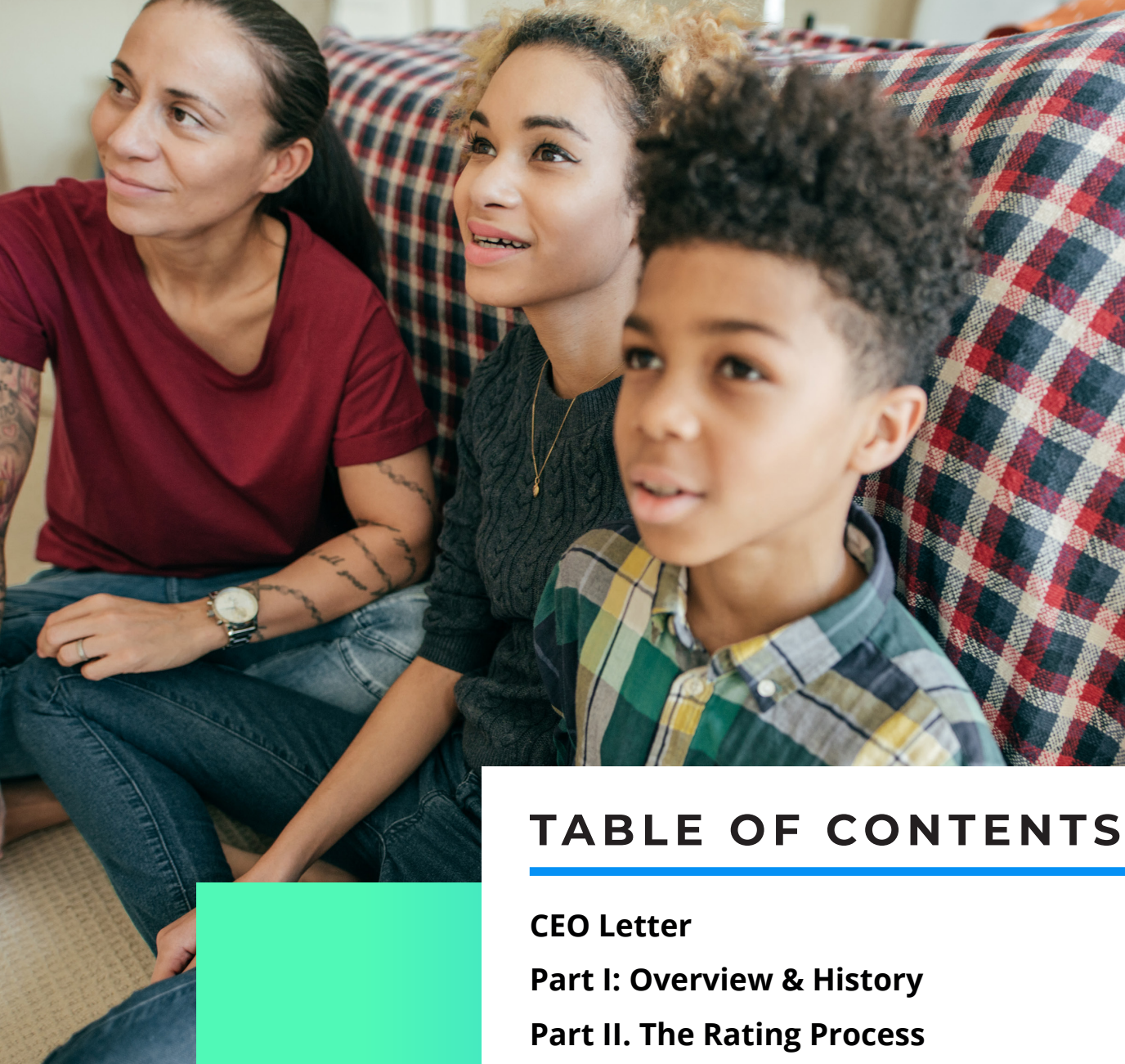


TABLE OF CONTENTS

CEO Letter	3
Part I: Overview & History	5
Part II. The Rating Process	15
Part III. Commentary and Opinions on the Ratings	27
Part IV: Industry Perspective	34
Part V: MPAA Ratings by the Numbers	39
Part VI: Frequently Asked Questions	42
Endnotes	45

CEO LETTER

G. PG. PG-13. R. NC-17.

These simple letters are synonymous with the moviegoing experience.

As the father of two children now in their twenties, it seems like only yesterday that these ratings helped me and my wife decide if a certain movie was appropriate for our kids. In my early career, I spent two decades running youth-focused entertainment companies, at The Jim Henson Company and WildBrain. At both companies, age-appropriate content was our business, so the care that parents apply to their children's viewing habits is very familiar to me.

Now, as Chairman and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America, an important part of my job is to act as a steward of the MPAA film ratings.

That's why it is with great delight and pride that I join everyone here at the MPAA in celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA).

Fifty years is an important milestone in any walk of life, from birthdays to great marriages to successful companies and brands. But given the extraordinary changes in our culture, entertainment, and society over recent decades, this anniversary feels particularly hard-earned and special.

My predecessor Jack Valenti created the MPAA ratings in 1968 amid mounting calls for censorship and the specter of government intervention. It is important to remember the context of that transformative year and decade for American life – the sexual revolution, Vietnam, political assassinations, racial strife – and how the expansion of mass media was seen as a threat by many corners of society.

Jack forged a dynamic program that would provide American parents with a reliable and easy-to-use tool to help them make viewing choices for their children, while also protecting the First Amendment rights of filmmakers and the creative process. He also had the good sense to form a partnership with the exhibitor community, represented by the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), which is on the front lines of American families' reactions to movies and ratings. I am fortunate to have a strong, collaborative relationship with my counterpart at NATO, President and CEO John Fithian.



MPAA CHAIRMAN AND CEO CHARLES H. RIVKIN

Through the decades, the rating system gained credibility and acceptance with audiences—and today it stands as the gold standard of voluntary industry self-regulation. We could point to many factors behind the ratings’ success. But the clearest one of all comes directly from its founding mission: to maintain the trust and confidence of American parents.

Meeting this critical standard required a dynamic system that could evolve along with society. One way we achieved this was by appointing movie raters who are themselves parents, who reflected diverse backgrounds, and who came from different regions of the country. Under the leadership of the CARA Chair, Joan Graves, we have continued to align the ratings with the views of America’s parents by conducting regular surveys and listening to feedback from parents around the country.

It should come as no surprise, in a diverse country like ours, that we have heard voices and views from all sides. We are well aware we have our share of detractors and that ratings are inherently imperfect. Some consider us overly permissive; others insist we are prudes. After rating nearly 30,000 films in 50 years, the overwhelming majority of which are accepted by filmmakers and the public without controversy, I believe we tend to get it right.



We could point to many factors behind the ratings’ success. But the clearest one of all comes directly from its founding mission: to maintain the trust and confidence of American parents.

The internet and other technological advances have also encouraged the ratings to evolve. We have come a long way from the days of sending weekly rating designations by mail to newspapers, where they ran in print. Moviegoers today are more likely to look up rating information on FilmRatings.com, other websites, mobile apps, or electronic ticket kiosks.

But that’s not all. For 3D movies, raters don glasses in order to view a movie just as an audience would. The last-minute nature of CGI production means our rating team sometimes gives a preliminary rating before the most elaborate special effects scenes are completed. In the last year, the advertising team has reviewed more than 68,000 pieces of marketing materials, from trailers and one-sheets to Twitter ads, Snapchat videos, and even gifs.

It’s not inconceivable that one day soon a studio will break the mold and release a feature film in virtual reality. When that happens, our rating team will be ready.

As long as human beings continue to seek out stories in movie theaters, on their living room televisions, or the palm-sized screens of their iPhones, and as long as parents continue to seek reliable information about what content is suitable for their families, we will do our part to support and inform them. After all, parents are among the most important decision makers in society. If we can keep their faith, we know we have positioned ourselves for the best possible future.

Charles H. Rivkin

Chairman and CEO

Motion Picture Association of America

PART 1. OVERVIEW & HISTORY



THE 1934 FILM *IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT* WAS PRODUCED JUST BEFORE THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION CODE WENT INTO FULL FORCE. ACTOR CLAUDETTE COLBERT STANDS ON ONE SIDE OF A BEDROOM DIVIDED BY A SHEET AS CLARK GABLE SITS ON THE OTHER SIDE. (PHOTO BY COLUMBIA PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES)

INTRODUCTION

From its beginning a half century ago, the Motion Picture Association of America's rating system was designed to evolve with the times and incorporate input from all relevant stakeholders, including theater owners, filmmakers, and the religious and political communities. First and foremost, though, it was created to help parents make informed viewing choices for their children. Longtime MPAA head and creator of the ratings Jack Valenti noted in 2004, "One, the First Amendment reigns. Freedom of speech. Freedom of content. The director is free to make any movie he wants to make and not have to cut a millimeter of it. But freedom without responsibility is anarchy. The director will know he can do that, but some of his films may be restricted from viewing by children. Now I thought that was a balancing of the moral compact."¹

This report will pull back the curtain on the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) – the MPAA department in charge of rating movies and reviewing movie advertising – and explain how its review board assigns movie ratings based on evolving parental concerns. It will trace the origins of the MPAA ratings and detail how an antiquated approach that imposed moralizing censorship was replaced with voluntary guidelines that give parents the tools to make informed decisions for their own families. It will highlight key partners in the rating process and will not shy away from criticisms of the rating system from filmmakers, voices on both sides of the political spectrum, advocates, and parents. Finally, the report will provide comprehensive and transparent answers to frequently asked questions about the MPAA ratings.

PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD

When the motion picture business burst onto the entertainment scene at the turn of the last century, there were few established definitions and rules. The film industry was initially met with mistrust and fear of moral corruption by some parts of society, including some of the same organizations that pushed for prohibition. Violent and sexual content in films and alleged scandalous real-life exploits by movie stars – including drug use, affairs, and even murder – led to fierce criticism from politicians, clergy, and civic leaders across the country and accusations that Hollywood lacked decency.³ The advent of sound and other new technologies and film trends gave rise to even more so-called objectionable material.

At the same time, censorship boards had started popping up at the state and local level to review the suitability of films for their jurisdiction, varying wildly in their objections and administration.⁴ Pennsylvania's censorship board was especially sensitive to plot lines about, or even references to, pregnancy, explaining that "The movies are patronized by thousands of children who believe that babies are brought by the stork, and it would be criminal to undeceive them."⁵ New York's censorship board edited a film to cut a scene of a

chimpanzee getting its diaper changed,⁶ and in Boston, the censorship board decreed that certain film content could not be shown on Sundays and cut the word "bawdyhouse" from Shakespeare's *Henry V*.⁷

Some censorship boards were housed in state education departments.⁸ Chicago's board was run by the police, who once banned an educational film that demonstrated dances like the turkey trot and the tango because they worried it would lead young people to visit public dance halls where there might be liquor.⁹

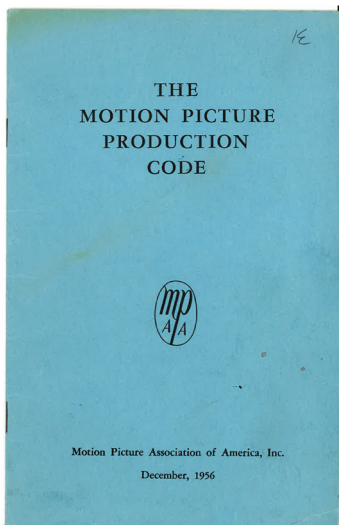
Complicating matters, in 1915, the Supreme Court ruled in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* that films were commercial products not subject to free speech protections.¹⁰ The ruling gave added legitimacy and power to the censor boards, forcing studios to allow multiple heavily-edited versions of their films to placate regional censor boards. The looming threat of government censorship had also begun to reach the federal level.

THE HAYS CODE

In 1922, movie studio heads selected Harding administration official William Hays to form the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (the predecessor to the MPAA), in an effort to self-regulate and stave off government censorship and intrusion. Early in his tenure at MPPDA, Hays released a list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” a set of guidelines that evolved in 1930 into the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code.¹¹ The Hays Code had few teeth until 1934, when the newly established Production Code Administration within the MPPDA began requiring that films get certificates of approval before release or risk a \$25,000 fine.¹² Hays intended for the Code to act as a moral policing mechanism, warning, “the industry will develop a means to put bad boys in their places.”¹³ Hays chose as his top code enforcer Joseph Breen, a Catholic layman, who, according to *Variety*, “More than any single individual... shaped the moral stature of the American motion picture.”¹⁴

Hays Code restrictions included many rules that seem outrageously prudish today, such as prohibitions on “lustful” kissing, “toilet gags,” and the use of certain slang words. More troubling, Hays Code guidelines often enforced antiquated and bigoted moral judgments that made the Code particularly incompatible with changing

times. For example, a key provision from an early iteration of the Code was a ban on the depiction of interracial relationships.¹⁵ The Code also forbade content that could be offensive to other countries, which Breen used to effectively shut down production of multiple anti-Nazi films in the lead-up to World War II, including an adaptation of Upton Sinclair’s *It Can’t Happen Here*.¹⁶



THE 1956 EDITION OF THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION CODE, ALSO KNOWN AS THE HAYS CODE.

Supreme Court rules in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* that films are “a business, pure and simple,” and thus outside the scope of free speech protections.

1915



1922



William Hays becomes president of the the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (or MPPDA, the original name of the MPAA).

Hays publishes a list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” guiding Hollywood in an effort to prevent expansion of government censorship of films.

1927



1930



The MPPDA creates the Motion Picture Production Code, more commonly known as the Hays Code, to provide guidelines to studios facing censorship boards and public outcry.

The Production Code Administration is established by the MPPDA, requiring that MPPDA member films adhere to the Hays Code and obtain a certificate of approval before release.

1934



1945



Hays retires, and the MPPDA is renamed the Motion Picture Association of America.

Supreme Court holds in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* that films are entitled to First Amendment protections, overruling its 1915 *Mutual Film Corporation* decision.

1952



1956



The MPAA revises the Motion Picture Production Code to add guidelines on blasphemy and mocking clergy, but pulling back on prohibitions against depictions of interracial relationships, abortion, prostitution, and drug use.

Supreme Court in *Freedman v. Maryland* upholds government censorship boards but mandates safeguards, including the requirement that only a court – not a censorship board alone – can bar a film’s release.

1965



1966



Jack Valenti, a former aide to President Lyndon Johnson, becomes head of the MPAA. Amid controversies related to the films *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *Blowup*, Valenti begins to explore an alternative to the Hays Code.



THE CLASSIC FILM *SOME LIKE IT HOT* UNDERSCORED THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF THE HAYS CODE. (PHOTO CREDIT: PICTORIAL PRESS LTD/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO/MGM MEDIA LICENSING)

The Hays Code was difficult to enforce and extremely slow to adapt to evolving social mores. It wasn't until 1956, after Hays had retired and the organization had been renamed the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), that attempts were made to address shifting attitudes and criticism from filmmakers. The Motion Picture Production Code was revised to eliminate prohibitions on elements like interracial relationships, prostitution, and drug use (while adding guidelines on religious objections, such as blasphemy and mocking clergy).¹⁷ However, outside forces sometimes superseded the Code's reach. This was the case in 1952, when the Supreme Court, in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, overturned the 1915 Mutual Film Corporation decision and confirmed that, in fact, "expression by means of motion pictures is included within the free speech and free press guaranty."¹⁸ Similarly, a 1959 Supreme Court ruling barred the state of New York from censoring *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which had been slammed by New York's highest court for "alluringly portray[ing] adultery as proper behavior."¹⁹

Beyond debates over free speech protections, some of the most popular and highest-grossing films of the 1950s flouted the Code, discouraging studios even further from adhering to it. For example, *Some Like it Hot* – which featured a whole raft of Hays Code no-nos, including cross-dressing, sexual innuendo, gambling, and gangsters – not only garnered six Oscar nominations, but was one of the top box office films of 1959.²⁰

1968



Valenti establishes the modern MPAA ratings – a voluntary, self-regulatory system that would serve as a guide to help parents make informed decisions and a tool to stave off the spread of censorship boards. Original ratings are: G, M, R, and X.

The last state film censorship board, the Maryland State Board of Censors, is disbanded.

1981



1984

PG-13

Recognizing a need for a middle ground between PG and R after films like Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom*, the PG-13 rating is added, the first significant change to the rating system since its inception.

The X Rating is replaced by NC-17, after "X" is co-opted by the adult film industry.

1990

NC-17

1990



The rating board begins adding short explanations for ratings, or "descriptors," to give parents even more information about the content of a film.

The last surviving local film censorship board, the Dallas Motion Picture Classification Board, is disbanded.

1993



1999



After the Columbine tragedy, President Bill Clinton partners with the National Association of Theatre Owners to announce that movie theaters will enhance enforcement of the rating system by requiring young people to show photo identification to see R-rated movies. Shortly after, the MPAA announced that ratings descriptors would also begin appearing in advertising for films.

During the DVD boom, the MPAA rates a record number of films in a single year: 940.

2003



2003



The MPAA's Advertising Administration begins targeted review of movie advertisements – ensuring that trailers and other marketing materials are appropriate for intended audiences.

The MPAA adds smoking as a factor in ratings.

2007



2007



The MPAA makes public the identities of the three senior raters, who interface with producers and distributors to assist with the ratings process. The filmmaker liaison position was created.

10 HAYS CODE RESTRICTIONS THAT SEEM RIDICULOUS TODAY

The Motion Picture Production Code, known colloquially as the Hays Code, stated that filmmakers had unique “moral obligations” compared to other types of entertainment given the nature and reach of movies. A version of the Code cited as a part of these obligations: “Small communities, remote from sophistication and from the hardening process which often takes place in the ethical and moral standards of groups in larger cities, are easily and readily reached by any sort of film.”²¹ With moviegoers across the country flocking to theaters to see films that flouted the Code, these staid rules quickly became obsolete. Versions of the Code over the years included restrictions on some of the following items:

- 1. Slang words and phrases like “hold your hat,” “nerfs,” and “fanny.”**²²
- 2. Depicting childbirth as “painful.”** The making of *Gone with the Wind* included many legendary Production Code-related battles, perhaps most famously over one of the most memorable lines in film history: “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”²³ However, the filmmakers also reportedly made sure to shoot a childbirth scene in shadow to compromise on Hays Code restrictions – to not only avoid imagery of childbirth itself but also the pain on the face of the mother, Mellie, as the Code emphasized a focus on the joy of family life.²⁴
- 3. Kissing that is “lustful” or lasts more than three seconds.** The 1956 edition of the Code noted: “In general, passion should be treated in such manner as not to stimulate the baser emotions.” Alfred Hitchcock attempted to sidestep the three second rule by having his *Notorious* stars Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman alternate kissing and dialogue...for over two minutes.²⁵
- 4. Romantic partners without at least one foot on floor in love scenes.**²⁶
- 5. Surgical operations.** The Code included a list of “repellent subjects” that “must be treated within the careful limits of good taste.” Along with “apparent cruelty to children or animals” and “actual hangings, or electrocutions as legal punishments for crime,” the list included “surgical operations.”
- 6. Ridicule of clergy.** The Code stated: “Ministers of religion, or persons posing as such, shall not be portrayed as comic characters or as villains so as to cast disrespect on religion.”
- 7. “Sympathy” for criminal activity.** No antihero trend. No *Godfather*.
- 8. “Toilet gags.”** The Code frowned on scenes with toilets. The 1960 film *Psycho* – more well-known for Alfred Hitchcock’s repeated flouting of the Hays Code rules on violence, nudity, and sex – was also the first film to depict a flushing toilet.²⁷
- 9. “Use of liquor when not required by the plot.”**
- 10. Banditry.** The 1930 Code warned against film content that made “criminals seem heroic and justified” listing “banditry, daring thefts...revenge” – seemingly describing plotlines in just about every classic Western.²⁸



VALENTI AND STUDIO HEADS MEET WITH PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN IN THE OVAL OFFICE, MAY 26, 1983. (COURTESY: RONALD REAGAN LIBRARY.)

JACK VALENTI AND THE CREATION OF THE MPAA RATINGS

Jack Valenti became head of the MPAA in 1966. That same year, negotiations over vulgar terms in the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the release of the film *Blowup*, which had not received MPAA approval, convinced Valenti that the existing code was no longer working.²⁹ Valenti famously lamented the absurdity of the old system, citing negotiations over the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* involving heated debate over whether to permit the word "screw" in a film, which ultimately settled on the phrase "hump the hostess."³⁰ Against the backdrop of major social change and upheaval of the time, in 1968, Valenti proposed a new rating system that could not only evolve nimbly with changing times, but would also act as a guide for moviegoers rather than a set of rules for filmmakers.

In a remarkably short period of time – within two years of becoming MPAA president – Valenti was able to get diverse stakeholder groups to coalesce around the new voluntary rating system, a major industry change. Valenti met with everyone from studio heads, actors, and Hollywood trade unions to politicians and religious groups to solicit their opinions.³¹ In November 1968, the MPAA instituted the new ratings system in partnership

with the National Association of Theatre Owners, which had been formed in 1965 with the merger of the Theater Owners of America and the Allied States Association of Motion Picture Exhibitors.³² The current head of the rating board, Chair Joan Graves, noted that "the fact that he was able to convince all those different parties – the makers of films, the exhibitors of films, and the censors of films, and the church groups to take a chance on this – seems even more remarkable today I think than it was then."



Jack set up the system in a way that accounts for changing values, to account for how to get information to parents, and how to reflect standards rather than set them, which is one of the more important parts of our operation and I think one of the keys to why we've been successful for this long.

- CARA Chairman Joan Graves

Once the MPAA ratings were established, Valenti lobbied local newspapers across the country to regularly print information boxes explaining the ratings as a public service.³³ He even reached out to newspapers in small towns with only part-time movie theaters. In 1969, Valenti explained in remarks to a newspaper



MPAA CHAIRMAN AND CEO JACK VALENTI WITH VANS STEVENSON, SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR STATE LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS, DURING A SENATE HEARING AT THE U.S. CAPITOL, MAY 10, 2004. (PHOTO BY TOM WILLIAMS/ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES)

association: “We do not assert that the rating system is perfect. When someone criticizes it to me, I always ask: ‘Do you have an alternative – a plan better than ours outside the bludgeon of the law?’ For that is the alternative I see – censorship and/or classification by law...If censors should be set loose upon the land to curb the freedom of the motion picture, can anyone seriously believe that any medium – newspaper or magazine, radio or television, could much longer be safe? Or any individual?”³⁴

LAST OF THE CENSORSHIP BOARDS

Despite Hollywood’s work to create a self-regulating system, some state and local censorship boards lived on for decades after both the advent of the Hays Code and the modern MPAA ratings. The last state holdout, the Maryland State Board of Censors, was established in 1916 and had consistently banned or edited movies on moral grounds.³⁵ Their effectiveness began to wane in the 1960s after state courts overturned their bans of multiple documentaries that included nudity. The Maryland board’s reputation for blocking nudity and sexual content from being shown in the state’s theaters even spawned a minor celebrity in Baltimorean Mary Avara, who spent over twenty years on the board and made appearances on late night shows, once telling Johnny Carson “I made up my own ratings...G for

garbage and R for rotten. How else could you describe such filth?”³⁶ The board finally folded in 1981 due to a Maryland sunset provision “designed,” as the New York Times put it, “to purge useless state agencies.”³⁷

A dozen years later, the very last active censorship board in the US closed its doors. In 1993, the Dallas City Council voted to disband the Dallas Motion Picture Classification Board, calling it an unnecessary expense for taxpayers.³⁸ The board, which was formed in 1965 and at one point consisted of 26 reviewers, had used its own rating system that included a “not suitable” grade that was repeatedly overturned by legal action undertaken by film distributors.³⁹ The ACLU praised the vote to shutter the board, saying it “offended the First Amendment and freedom of expression,”⁴⁰ but the panel’s chairman blasted the decision, lamenting, “They have signaled to the world that Dallas no longer cares and is a partner with Hollywood in the war on America.”⁴¹ MPAA Senior Vice President of State Government Affairs, Vans Stevenson, who at the time spent almost a year in Dallas fighting efforts by conservative backers of the censorship board to preserve it, put it simply to the *Dallas Morning News*: “Requiring that movies be viewed by government before they can be shown is wrong.”⁴²

IN 1993, THE LAST GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP BOARD, THE DALLAS MOTION PICTURE CLASSIFICATION BOARD, WAS DISBANDED. THE LAST STATE BOARD, IN MARYLAND, HAD ENDED OPERATIONS IN 1981.





A SCENE IN *INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM* OF A STILL-BEATING HEART BEING PULLED FROM A MAN'S CHEST HELPED PAVE THE WAY FOR THE PG-13 RATING. (PHOTO CREDIT: LUCASFILM LTD.)

EVOLVING WITH THE TIMES

By the 1980s, special effects and other aspects of blockbuster Hollywood films with broad audience appeal created a need for a middle ground between PG and R ratings. Director Steven Spielberg raised the issue with Valenti after a scene in his film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* featuring a realistic, still-beating heart ripped from the chest of a human sacrifice angered many parents who had not expected such frightening content in a PG film. Valenti and the MPAA considered the proposal and ultimately made the most significant change to the ratings since its inception in 1968. Spielberg recalled: "Jack was proactive about it, completely agreed, and before I knew it there was a PG-13 rating."⁴⁷

Not long after, the ratings underwent two major changes in one year. In 1990, the X rating was changed to NC-17 after the pornography industry co-opted X in branding their products. Despite the now synonymous association with adult films, many X-rated films had been highly regarded and even Oscar-nominated, including *Midnight Cowboy* and *A Clockwork Orange*.

ENSORSHIP BOARD FACTS

- ➔ In 1907, Chicago instituted the first local film censorship board in the country, run by the police department, after fears about the impact of nickelodeons on young people.⁴³
- ➔ In 1911, Pennsylvania created the first state censorship board. However, Ohio's board began reviewing films first after funding for Pennsylvania's board was delayed.⁴⁴
- ➔ By 1926, seven state censorship boards, representing some of the biggest movie markets, had been established: New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, Kansas, Maryland, and Massachusetts.⁴⁵
- ➔ Over 100 cities created their own censorship boards from 1907 to 1926.⁴⁶

The same year, the MPAA introduced “descriptors” – short explanatory phrases listed alongside the rating to give parents even more information to determine whether a film is appropriate for their families. Initially, descriptors were only assigned to R-rated movies, but in subsequent years, they were added to PG and PG-13 rated films in order to give parents fuller explanations for a rating designation. Descriptors have also adapted with evolving parental and societal concerns, as in 2007, when raters began to formally note smoking and tobacco imagery as a factor in ratings.

The partnership with movie theaters in utilizing the MPAA ratings has also been responsive to national events and changing times. After the Columbine tragedy, some media reports blamed violent films for the shooting, which sparked a legislative effort to create a government-mandated ratings system across the entertainment industry to regulate marketing to children.⁴⁸ While the MPAA and NATO opposed efforts to make the rating system mandatory (as the voluntary nature had been key to the success of the ratings), they actively supported measures to improve its

effectiveness. NATO and President Clinton announced in 1999 that theater owners would start requiring photo identification for young people attempting to see R-rated movies.⁴⁹ In 2000, the Federal Trade Commission began “secret shopper” checks on whether theater operators were complying with the new guidelines. The most recent survey reflected significant improvement in enforcement.⁵⁰

Also in 2000, after the FTC highlighted its concerns regarding movie advertising practices, the MPAA and its member companies announced a 12-point set of initiatives to restrict marketing of violent content to children and to clearly disclose rating information in movie advertisements.⁵¹ The first of the twelve initiatives provided that R-rated trailers would no longer be shown prior to G-rated movies. However, the MPAA and the industry went a step further and, at the same time, began restricting R-rated trailers from being shown before PG and certain PG-13 movies that draw younger audiences. In 2003, the MPAA’s Advertising Administration began reviewing the content of ads and trailers for targeted placement with specific films

FAMILIES HAVE MORE CHOICES THAN EVER TO VIEW FILMS. (PHOTO: ALEXANDER DUMMER ON UNSPLASH)



through which they consider each trailer's placement on a case-by-case basis. More recently, in 2013, the Advertising Administration made changes to the tag accompanying movie trailers to clearly display to audiences that "the following preview has been approved to accompany this feature," making it clear that the trailers being viewed prior to a film were suitable for the film's intended audience. The Advertising Administration is constantly evolving and continues to be responsive as new challenges arise.

LOOKING AHEAD

The digital age continues to create new challenges and opportunities for the rating system. And the availability of information online has given parents vast resources to learn more about the content of films, including the MPAA's Filmmratings.com site, which launched in 2010, making the ratings database, rules and regulations, policies and procedures available to the public.

The digital era has also presented new challenges for enforcement of the rating system at theaters. As part of the post-Columbine reforms, theater owners became responsible for including rating information in online materials. The shift in ticket purchasing from brick-and-mortar box offices to digital alternatives like Fandango and electronic ticket kiosks has made enforcement more difficult. Theater owners have adapted to the challenge: Online retailers post age policy information at checkout, and ticket-takers have absorbed the responsibility for checking IDs when a customer appears to be younger.

While industry changes have altered the ways families experience films through advances in streaming and home entertainment, the MPAA ratings remain an essential tool for parents as film industry technology changes in other ways. The expanding use of more sophisticated 3-D, 4-D, and even virtual reality film formats pose new concerns for parents, especially those with young children. The rating board strives to view a film the same way an audience will see it, and they have found that 3-D films can make a difference at the G and PG level when it comes to potentially frightening scenes for children.

Advances in CGI (computer-generated imagery) have given movie studios the power to create more realistic and fantastical scenes, particularly those with action and violence, making clear descriptors for PG-13 films even more important. But it has also impacted the process for rating a film, as post-production CGI work takes extra time. Raters often give a preliminary rating to a CGI-heavy film, flagging areas that may warrant a higher rating in the completed product, but the rating is never final until the raters view the final cut.

As filmmakers continue to find new ways to tell stories, whether through an enhanced moviegoing experience or more incredible imagery, the MPAA's mission to give parents a clear picture of a film's content is more vital than ever.



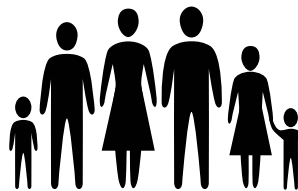
NEW FILM TECHNOLOGIES LIKE CGI, USED HERE IN THE FILMING OF *DAWN OF THE PLANET OF THE APES*, POSE NEW CHALLENGES FOR THE RATERS. (CREDIT: 20TH CENTURY FOX.)

PART II. THE RATING PROCESS

THE FILM RATING SYSTEM

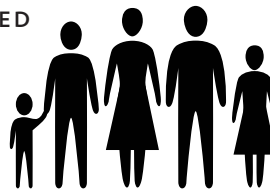
EMPOWERING FAMILIES TO MAKE INFORMED MOVIE CHOICES

GENERAL AUDIENCES



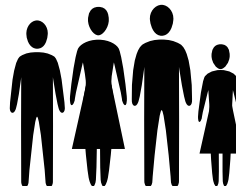
Nothing that would offend parents for viewing by children.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED



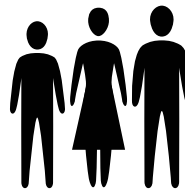
Parents urged to give "parental guidance." May contain some material parents might not like for their young children.

PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED



Parents are urged to be cautious. Some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers.

RESTRICTED



Contains some adult material. Parents are urged to learn more about the film before taking their young children with them.

NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED



Clearly adult. Children are not admitted.



SENIOR RATERS (L TO R) MARIO MOOGAN, SCOTT YOUNG, AND TRACEY DOWNS-BERLE HELP FACILITATE MOVIE RATINGS AND ACT AS LIAISONS WITH THOSE SUBMITTING FILMS. (CREDIT: STACY PEARLMAN, MPAA.)

THE RATING BOARD - A PANEL OF PARENTS

The rating board's primary purpose is to provide guidance to parents, so it's only fitting that the people deciding those ratings are parents themselves. The MPAA rating board is led by Chair Joan Graves and is made up of eight to thirteen raters at any given time, three of whom are "senior raters." The rating board screens an average of two to three films per day, and their job is to rate each movie "the way a majority of American parents from across the country would rate it," Graves explains.

In choosing film raters, Graves seeks to create a board that reflects the diversity of American parents and a diversity of opinion. "I like to have equal fathers and mothers, and we try to find them from different backgrounds across the country, small town, big cities, and different regions," she says. To find raters, Graves relies on referrals but also recruits from a range of sources, from PTA meetings to doctors' offices to hair salons. One of her favorite raters was the wife of a college administrator: "She had moved – I can't tell you how many times – across New England and the South, and she'd been exposed to so many different communities and different ways of looking at things that she was extremely valuable," Graves explains. "We look

for people like that, who also can put aside their own biases and rate for a majority of parents in the country."

Including Chair Joan Graves, the rating board is currently made up of nine part-time and full-time raters – five moms and four dads who hail from California, New York, Illinois, Ohio, Maryland, and Hawaii. Senior rater Tracey Downs-Berle, who has three kids under 17, describes her job as being "an out-spoken mamma bear that acts as a voice for parents around the country." While the raters are a diverse cross-section of American parents, they do have some key things in common. Raters live in Los Angeles while they are on the board and have no ties to the entertainment industry. With the exception of the senior raters and the Chair, raters must have children between the ages of five and 15 when they begin the job, leave the post once their youngest child turns 21, and serve on the board for no longer than seven years.

Along with Graves, the three senior raters —Tracey Downs-Berle, Mario Moogan, and Scott Young—are the only members of the board who are known publicly. Senior raters lead rating discussions after screenings and serve as the point of contact for the filmmaker, producer, or distributor submitting the film for rating. They routinely make themselves available to filmmakers to discuss pre-production or script questions about what

level of content might lead to certain ratings. The rest of the raters on the board are anonymous, “primarily so they won’t be subjected to any activism from interest groups or lobbying by filmmakers who seek to influence them,” Graves explains. “We just want them to be like a regular parent going to a movie, assessing it for elements other parents need to know about without outside pressure.”

The rating board’s job is to reflect standards, not set them. While raters adhere to general guidelines to determine a movie rating, as parents’ opinions on sex, profanity, and violence evolve throughout the years, the board’s ratings have adjusted to reflect those changing views. The board continuously strives to ensure the ratings mirror the concerns of American parents, and they do so in a number of ways: The MPAA surveys parents, asking them about both the effectiveness of the ratings and the types of content that cause concern. Graves and the senior raters receive and respond to feedback directly from parents via letters, phone calls, emails, and social media posts with questions about specific ratings. And individual raters stay in tune with fellow parents’ concerns the same way any other parent would: following the news, talking to friends at weekly soccer games and playdates, and of course, checking social media.

BUT AT THE END OF THE DAY, OUR JOB AS RATERS IS SIMPLE – TO ASK THE QUESTION ANY PARENT WOULD ASK: WHAT WOULD I WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THIS FILM BEFORE I DECIDE TO LET MY CHILD SEE IT?⁵²

- CARA CHAIRMAN JOAN GRAVES



JOAN GRAVES IS SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT AND CHAIRMAN OF THE CLASSIFICATION AND RATING ADMINISTRATION

MEET THE PARENTS (BEHIND THE RATINGS)

How many children do you have?

Scott Young: 2 adult sons

Tracey Downs-Berle: 16-year-old son and 2 daughters, ages 12 and 4.

Mario Moogan: 7-year-old daughter and 2 sons, ages 11 and 3.

Rater 4: 2 girls

Rater 5: 1 boy, age 12

Rater 6: 2 boys, 1 girl.

Rater 7: 3 girls, 1 boy

Rater 8: 2 girls/1 boy, ages 13, 11, and 9

What is your current or previous career?

Scott Young: I previously worked in construction, furniture/cabinet making, and retail furniture.

Tracey Downs-Berle: I was a social worker.

Mario Moogan: I was in finance.

Rater 4: Mother and long-time school volunteer

Rater 5: Special education assistant

Rater 6: 16 years as an AT&T service rep

Rater 7: Chiropractor

Rater 8: Corporate communications and marketing

How do you stay connected to what everyday parents care about?

Rater 4: I am very involved in my daughter's school – board for three years, parent body executive team – and in her Girl Scout troop. I love talking to parents and kids about what they are reading and watching.

Rater 7: Having a lot of kids, seeing a ton of movies (outside of MPAA), talking about movies to patients and friends every day.

Rater 5: Talking with friends and family who have children under the age of 18 years, reading related news articles, and Joan Graves keeping us in the know.

Rater 8: My elementary school PTA, junior high school parent board, Girl Scout troop moms, and lots of mom friends.

Rater 6: I also keep in regular contact with friends and family who have young children through social media.

Did anything surprise you about the job?

Rater 5: I did not expect to see such a wide variety of films. That so many films are based on shocking true stories, involving racism, sexuality, and terrorism.

Rater 6: You will never hear half the things said in the screening room, in any other job setting, ever.

Rater 4: I thought I would bring the emotions of horror films home with me and really at the end of the day I can block them out...mostly. It can be emotionally draining.

Have you noticed any recent trends so far this year?

Joan Graves: More and more documentaries in the last five years have come to us for ratings because they are drawing big audiences. Three of my favorite movies this year have been documentaries.

Rater 5: More powerful, educated, and talented lead female characters are emerging.

Rater 8: I have noticed a slight increase in films by diverse filmmakers.

Rater 7: A lot more vaping, texting, and using social media.

Do you still go to the movies outside of work?

Rater 7: Yes, all the time!

Rater 6: Sometimes, but not as often as I did before I started working here.

Rater 8: Occasionally for the big budget films or if there is a film with a good message that I want my kids to see.

Rater 5: On occasion, if it's one I did not see on the job or a blockbuster type film.

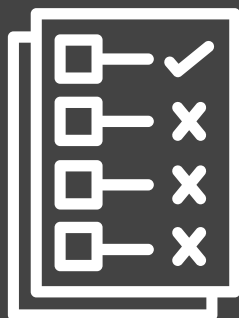
What's your favorite movie snack?

Rater 8: In the screening room: Almonds and coffee. In the theaters: Milk duds.

Rater 4: I am trying not to eat in movies but popcorn and some kind of chocolate.

Rater 5: Pistachios

Rater 7: MOVIE POPCORN!

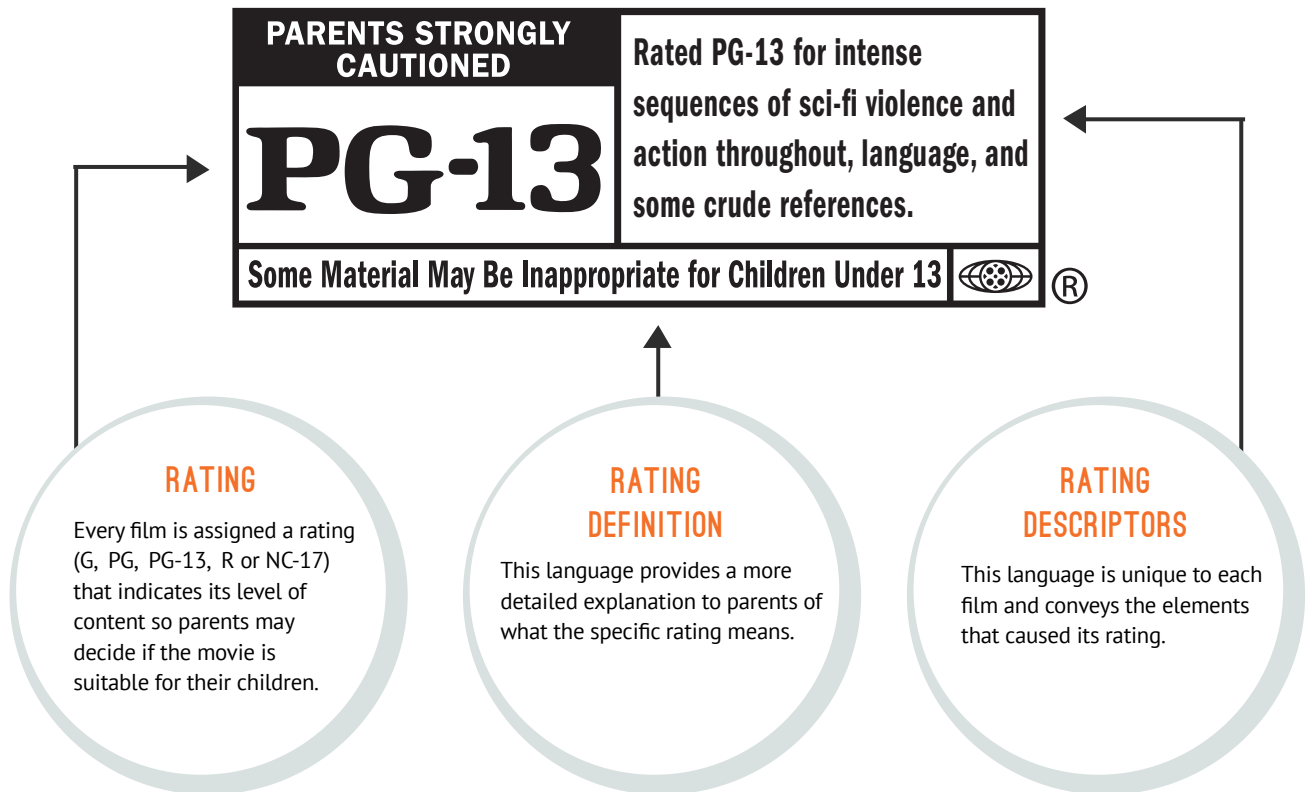




AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR WAS RATED PG-13 IN PART FOR "INTENSE SEQUENCES OF SCI-FI VIOLENCE AND ACTION THROUGHOUT."
 (PHOTO CREDIT: MARVEL STUDIOS)

ANATOMY OF RATING

Ratings exist to inform parents about the content of films, so that they can determine why movies are appropriate for their children to see and at what age. For example, here is a breakdown of the rating for the popular 2018 film *Avengers: Infinity War*.



HOW DOES A FILM GET RATED?

1. Filmmakers submit their film to the rating board at the film rating website along with a submittal fee. The fee is based on a formula that takes into account the size of the company submitting the movie and the net cost of production. This is to allow greater access to the rating system, Graves explains, “so that the little guys pay much less than the bigger guys.”
2. Raters watch the film at the same time. Immediately after, each rater fills out a ballot for what he or she thinks a majority of parents would consider the film’s appropriate rating: G, PG, PG-13, R, or NC-17. That preliminary vote is taken without any discussion, so it is independent of influence. In 2013, raters traded in paper ballots for iPads.
3. The senior rater announces the result of the initial vote and then facilitates a discussion in which the raters indicate how strongly they feel about their vote and what factors contributed to their rating decision. Following that discussion, raters agree on a rating and a rating descriptor, or short explanatory phrases about the content in the film. Graves notes that “The descriptor is made up of all the elements that are present at that rating level. And we form it immediately after seeing the film while it’s fresh in our minds.” In case of a tie among the raters, the Chair casts the tie-breaking vote.
4. The senior rater then offers the rating to the submitter via phone or in-person conversation, resulting in one of four outcomes:
 - A. The filmmaker agrees with the rating, accepts it, and the rating is certified.
 - B. The filmmaker understands the reasons for the given rating given, but wants a lesser rating. The filmmaker can choose to edit the film and send it back for review (with no additional fee). The rating board will review the film again.
 - C. The filmmaker disagrees with the rating and appeals to the Appeals Board.
 - D. If they are not a member of the MPAA, the filmmaker can choose not to accept the rating and release the film unrated.

APPEALS PROCESS

If a filmmaker disagrees with the rating, he/she can appeal the rating to a board comprised of people in the movie industry – exhibitors and distributors, with some representation from independents and other industry stakeholders. There are two observers on the appeals board representing religious groups and one from the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. A successful appeal requires a two-thirds majority finding that the rating is “clearly erroneous.”

In a recent appeals decision, the R rating for Clint Eastwood’s *15:17 to Paris* was overturned by the board, and replaced with a PG-13. While such instances can gain media attention, in practice, film ratings are rarely appealed – and even more rarely overturned. In 2017, a total of 563 films were rated. Of those 563 films, just five were appealed, and only one rating was overturned.

563

Total films rated in 2017

5

Number of films appealed

1

Number of films overturned

HOW DO THE RATERS DECIDE?

Ratings are not meant to be a determination of whether a film is “good” or “bad.” Rather, they are a tool to help parents make informed decisions about what they want their children to watch. In testimony before a House committee in 1978, former MPAA President Jack Valenti put it this way: “From the outset, the purpose of the rating system was to provide advance information to enable parents to make judgments on movies they wanted their children to see or not to see. Basic to the program was and is the responsibility of the parent to make that decision. The rating board does not rate for quality or the lack of it.”⁵⁴

As noted previously, the raters seek to channel parental concerns about content when deciding on a rating. While the board decides the rating for a film on a case-by-case basis, there are some rules and guidelines that the rating board follows (the complete set of rules can be found on the FilmRatings.com website):



A G-rated motion picture contains nothing in theme, language, nudity, sex, violence, or other matters that, in the view of the Rating Board, would offend parents whose younger children view the motion picture.



The PG rating indicates that parents may consider some material unsuitable for their young children. There may be some profanity and some depictions of violence, sensuality or brief nudity. But these elements are not deemed so intense as to require that parents be strongly cautioned beyond the suggestion of parental guidance. There is no drug use content in a PG film.



A PG-13 motion picture may go beyond the PG rating in theme, violence, nudity, sensuality, language, adult activities, or other elements, but does not reach the restricted R category. The theme of the motion picture by itself will not result in a rating greater than PG-13, although depictions of activities related to a mature theme may result in a restricted rating for the motion picture. Raters look for the following elements in deciding whether a movie is PG-13:

- ➔ Any drug use will initially require at least a PG-13 rating.
- ➔ More than brief nudity will require at least a PG-13 rating, but such nudity in a PG-13 rated motion picture generally will not be sexually oriented.
- ➔ There may be depictions of violence in a PG-13 movie, but generally not both realistic and extreme or persistent violence. A film's single use of one of the harsher sexually-derived words, though only as an expletive, initially requires at least a PG-13 rating. Typically, more than one such expletive requires an R rating, as must even one of those words used in a sexual context.

The Rating Board may, however, rate a film with more than one such expletive PG-13, with a special 2/3 majority vote. This vote occurs if the raters feel that most parents would find a PG-13 rating appropriate, given the context of the expletive or if its use is inconspicuous.



R-rated films contain some adult material. An R-rated film may depict adult activity, hard language, intense graphic or persistent violence, sexually oriented nudity, drug abuse, or other elements. Parents are counseled to take this rating very seriously.

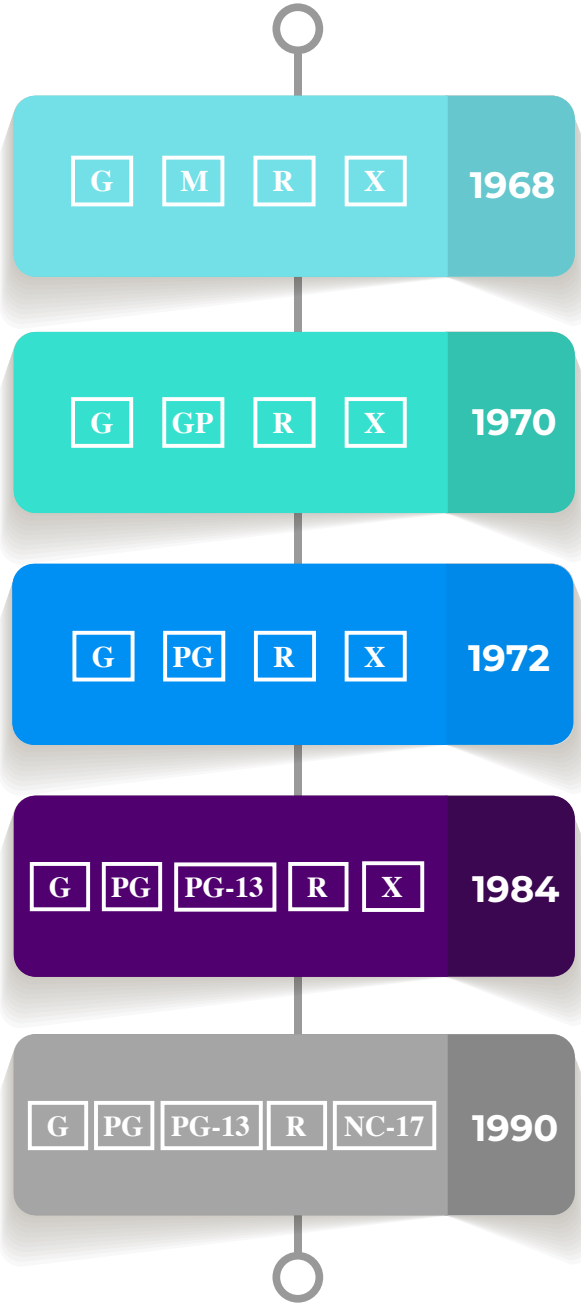


NC-17-rated films signal that the content is appropriate only for an adult audience. The rating does not necessarily mean “obscene” or “pornographic.” An NC-17 rating can be based on violence, sex, aberrational behavior, drug abuse, or any other element that most parents would consider too strong and therefore off-limits for viewing by their children.

EVOLUTION OF THE RATINGS

The rating system is constantly evolving. As American parents’ sensitivities change, so too do the ratings. Elements such as violence, language, drug use, and sexuality are continually reevaluated through surveys and focus groups to mirror contemporary concern and to better assist parents in making the right viewing choices for their families.

The rating grades and the content of the ratings box have evolved since their creation to allow for better clarity and guidelines for parents. In 1968, today’s PG rating was originally “M” for Mature, which resulted in some confusion among moviegoers. In 1970, the MPAA changed the M to GP for “All Ages Admitted – Parental Guidance Suggested,” before changing again in 1972 to PG for “Parental Guidance Suggested.”



DESCRIPTORS

In 1990, in response to feedback from parents and theater operators that providing additional information might enhance its guidance for parents, the MPAA began adding brief explanatory phrases or “descriptors” to ratings. Initially, descriptors were added only to R-rated films, but they were subsequently added to PG, PG-13, and NC-17 ratings.⁵⁵ Descriptors are unique to each movie and are decided by the raters the moment after a movie is screened in order to capture their immediate impression of elements in the film at that specific rating level.

In general, descriptors fall into a handful of major rating factor categories: violence, language, sexual content, alcohol and drugs, and tobacco. A final category, thematic elements, includes factors that are not easily covered by these categories, such as accidents, death, rape, incest, abortion, alcoholism, illness, family discord, or coming-of-age issues. However, it’s important to note that there is no finite list. Some descriptors, like “sexual themes” or “strong language,” have been used for many years, but changes in film trends can lead to an uptick in certain terms. For example, the rise of superhero movies has led to more prevalent use of terms like “action violence” and “sci-fi action.” The following is a list of commonly used descriptors:

Violence

- ➔ Rape/Brutal rape sequence
- ➔ Bloody
- ➔ Grisly images
- ➔ Strong Terror
- ➔ Disturbing/bloody images
- ➔ Combat action/war images
- ➔ Sci-fi action/peril
- ➔ Horror
- ➔ Action
- ➔ Adventure

Language

- ➔ Brief
- ➔ Throughout
- ➔ Pervasive
- ➔ Racial epithets

Sexual Content

- ➔ Nude images (graphic)
- ➔ Nudity (graphic, brief, partial)
- ➔ Crude sexual references
- ➔ Teen sexuality

Alcohol and Drugs

- ➔ Drinking
- ➔ Underage/teen partying

Drug use

- ➔ Tobacco
- ➔ Historical
- ➔ Glamorized
- ➔ Smoking throughout
- ➔ Smoking
- ➔ Tobacco imagery (i.e. advertisements, an ashtray)

Thematic Elements

- ➔ Suggestive
- ➔ Disturbing
- ➔ Mature
- ➔ Rude humor



CHARLIE AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY WAS RATED PG FOR "QUIRKY SITUATIONS, ACTION AND MILD LANGUAGE." (PHOTO CREDIT: LICENSED BY: WARNER BROS. ENTERTAINMENT INC.)

In some cases, a film's unique content requires the creation of a new descriptor.

"Vampire violence and gore"

- *Interview with the Vampire* (1994)

"Macabre humor"

- *Addams Family Values* (1993)

"Intense depiction of very bad weather"

- *Twister* (1996)

"Fantasy action/violence involving scary images and situations, and for a smoking caterpillar"

- *Alice in Wonderland* (2010)

"Salty language"

- *My Fellow Americans* (1996) and *Grumpier Old Men* (1995)

"Mayhem throughout"

- *GI Joe: Rise of the Cobra* (2009)

"Quirky situations"

- *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005)

"Graphic crude and sexual humor, violent images and strong language — all involving puppets"

- *Team America: World Police* (2004)

"Scary and intense creature action"

- *Goosebumps* (2015)

"Mild fisticuffs"

- *Father and Scout* (1995)

"Non-stop ninja action"

- *3 Ninjas Knuckle Up* (1995)



MARILYN GORDON IS SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT OF ADVERTISING AND VICE-CHAIR OF THE CLASSIFICATION AND RATING ADMINISTRATION.

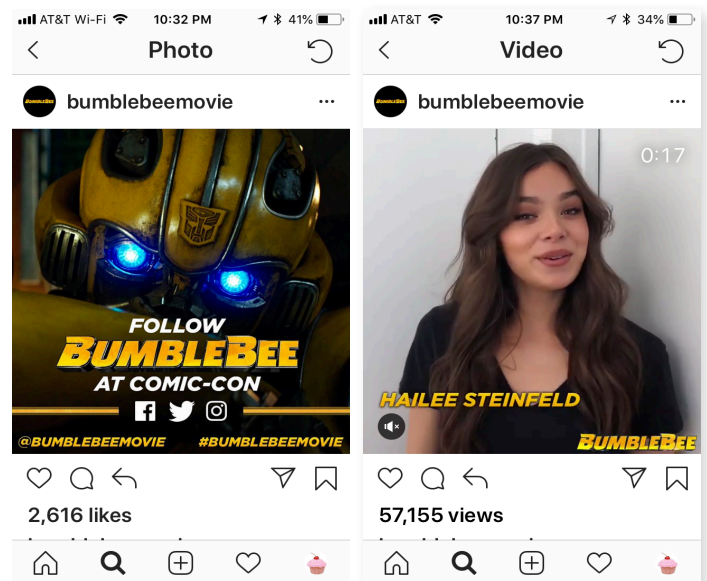
ADVERTISING REVIEW

A lesser-known part of the ratings process is approval of film advertising by the MPAA Advertising Administration. Led by Senior Vice President of Advertising Marilyn Gordon, the eight-person team is responsible for reviewing all advertising and publicity materials for films rated by the MPAA. In the last year, they reviewed a whopping 68,000 pieces of advertising content - everything from theatrical trailers, one-sheets, billboards, TV and radio ads, movie theater lobby standees, and DVD packaging to Facebook ads, promotional gifs, and Snapchat filters - to determine suitability for different audiences. And they promise a 24-hour turnaround!

In addition to advertising reforms implemented after Columbine, in 2003, the Advertising Administration enacted significant changes and began reviewing content targeted at specific audiences, as opposed to approving content for "all audiences." Unlike the ratings board, the Advertising Administration does not assign ratings to different types of advertising content. Rather, Gordon and her team approve, approve with restrictions, or disapprove of the content - all depending on the intended placement of the advertising and its targeting. These determinations are made on a case-by-case basis. For example, ads for movies that run on television receive approval for specific placement based on the content of the ad, the rating and rating reasons, the program, and network. The Advertising

Administration might approve a TV spot that includes violence to play during *Law & Order SVU* but reject that same ad to run during *America's Got Talent*, which tends to have more children watching. Gordon notes, "It takes a lot of experience to really understand the nuances of content that would scare a child and what we need to be careful about."

Recent years have seen exponential growth in online and mobile marketing by the studios - and the Advertising Administration has added additional staff to meet the increased demand. Of last year's more than 68,000 total pieces of content, 16,087 were digital. Digital submissions include online-only trailers, interactive games, immersive 3-D experiences, online-only posters, Instagram and Facebook images, Snapchat filters, gifs, and whatever other cutting-edge creative technologies studio marketing teams can imagine. Gordon emphasizes that they are ready to review any new type of advertising or marketing on the horizon, "Whatever the marketing teams submit to us, we just get right on top of it and we do it. We are open to anything they want to try."



THE ADVERTISING ADMINISTRATION REVIEWED 68,000 PIECES OF CONTENT IN THE LAST YEAR, INCLUDING DIGITAL ADS LIKE THIS INSTAGRAM POST.

Occasionally, the team will reach out to outside sources to help make determinations - for example, when staff was unsure if the word "queer" in a movie ad would be deemed offensive, they contacted the LGBTQ organization GLAAD.⁵⁶

Given the volume and the quick turnaround time, Gordon notes her team's impressive track record for approving age-appropriate content. "For the amount of content we look at, the complaints are few," she says.

THEATRICAL TRAILERS

In 2003, to ensure movie previews were targeting the appropriate audiences, the Advertising Administration began reviewing trailers for placement with specific films. In 2013, the tagline shown before each preview was changed to: "The following preview has been approved to accompany this feature," to more clearly communicate the advertising team's case-by-case review of each trailer for suitability with the film it accompanies. Gordon explains this change was instituted so that "it's clear that we approved this particular trailer to play with this particular movie."



There are general guidelines listed in the administration's handbook on which trailers can be shown before different rated movies - for example, a trailer advertising an R-rated movie may not be shown before G or PG movies at all, and only run prior to PG-13 movies that draw older audiences. Trailers for NC-17-rated movies can only be shown prior to R-rated and NC-17-rated movies.⁵⁷ While Gordon's team adheres to those guidelines, determining a trailer's suitability is not solely based on a movie's rating. Gordon explains, "PG-13 is a pretty big bucket. For children going to see *Harry Potter*, it would not be suitable for them to be exposed to *The Last Exorcism*," both of which were rated PG-13.

In establishing these more targeted processes, the Advertising Administration has worked closely with the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO). NATO's

president John Fithian speaks highly of the partnership. "I don't think the public has any idea the diligence with which the advertisements for the industry are reviewed," he said. "Marilyn and her team are in contact with us all the time." When a trailer is approved, the advertising team will send a report to NATO to distribute to its members, and that information is clearly laid out for theater owners on an online website that's continuously updated. "It's a really good system," Fithian adds.

This relationship has also allowed the ratings to be responsive to parent feedback. For example, if a theater receives complaints about a trailer parents consider inappropriate for a certain feature, the theater - through NATO - conveys those concerns to the Advertising Administration. "We'll go back to Marilyn and say, we may need to intercede with the distribution company and change the recommendations on where the trailer's placed. We have a very fluid, but cooperative partnership," Fithian said.

While complaints are pretty rare, Gordon notes that the strong collaboration allows the department to quickly resolve any issues. "We are lucky to be able to work with the theaters," she said, "Our primary focus is that we really want to appropriately target to the proper audience, because kids are a captive audience in the theater," she said.

The Advertising Administration reviewed over 68,000 pieces of content in the last year. From September 2017 - August 2018, they reviewed:

15,835
pre-show trailers

16,087
online ads

16,448
print/outdoor

15,492
TV/radio spots

3,975
clips/promos

PART III. COMMENTARY AND OPINIONS ON THE RATINGS



G for Good

rate the tenth an- but that is what America has been s the movie-rating ent of the MPAA, makers were oper- individual cities and oc codes. In April their constitutional ers were in danger. to hundreds of sepa- tional norm in which en considered risqué. dios had operated ac- of the Production Code had been

they eventually were bound to Mr. Valenti's idea avoided b made it possible to produce a he ies, ranging from "A Clockwork Can Wait," while enabling pare difference between "The Shag the Cat."

Naturally, the rating system The X rating, for example, has a duced junk, thereby falsely sug- bility of explicit sexuality and s have been reasonable complaint individual pictures, along with questions as whether violence is sex, and so forth. On the whole, system has allowed the more im- their best, and has encour-

By VINCENT CANBY
Special to The New York Times

HOLLYWOOD, Oct. 31—In ample offices here above xall drug store, Geoffrey Shurlock, director of the n F

Movies

BY GARY ARNOLD
1978, The Los Angeles Times- Washington Post News Service

On the 10th anniversary of the film industry's rating system, Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, has contemplated his handwork and pronounced it a "steady and sturdy" institution. According to Valenti, the curve is up on public endorsement of the scene today.

Each year, the MPAA, the trade organization representing the major film companies, publishes the results of a poll to determine attitudes of the ratings. A sample group of 2,194 people 18 and over is asked, "How useful do you find the motion-picture industry's rating system?" The symbols G, PG, R and X — is as a very useful, fairly useful, not very useful, and not heard of the rating system."

A survey indicates two-thirds of the public regards the ratings as fairly to non-moviewers. 33 percent do not and 40 percent do not seem fair. When the approval rate went down with children, the system is judged not and not useful by 29 percent. When the first time, an MPAA press release said the results as a "landslide," so that with the latest survey

at the most substantial in- al rate seem to have com- of attendance. Results rose from 53 to 64

Warner Brothers-Seven Arts' "The Girl on a Motorcycle," a British-French film directed by Jack Cardiff, having to do with adultery; Universal's "Birds in Peru," a story of nymphomania, starring Jean Seberg, the first film directed by her husband, in Gary the French novel-

tem. He noted that although "Blow-Up" failed to receive code approval three years ago (because of scenes of nudity and fornication) theater owners had not at that time agreed to restrict audiences for disapproved pictures. "Blow-Up," however, was an artistic and commercial success.

cards—bridge, poker or even hearts," he said the other da Then he added more seriously: "This has to be a bit of a ivory tower job." In addition to being the head of the code, he is a vice president of the Motion Picture Association of America, the code parent body.

Backgrounds Are Varied
staff consists

Rated: OK

On the 10th anniversary of the film rating system, Jack Valenti says of his handwork: 'It is part and parcel of the American scene today.' A recent survey indicates Valenti's enthusiasm is justifiable.



Ultimately, common sense demanded th serious pictures originally rated X — M Cowboy, Medium Cool, Clockwork Orange re-evaluated. Under our procedures, a pr can withdraw his film from release for 90 and then re-submit it for rating; with or-w re-editing. As I recall, minor cuts were ma Midnight Cowboy and Clockwork Orange b they were re-rated R." The rating system is voluntary. For en ment the MPAA depends on the cooperatio exhibitors. It cannot apply sanctions. The owners themselves estimate that the ratings enforced systematically at 80-85 percent of theaters in the country. This percentage may have taken a plunge the case of an R-rated sensation like Satur Night Fever. Several exhibitors have confid that box-office vigilance tended to slacken dur weekdays because of the film's intense, ong appeal to young customers. With lines around block on weekends, it was easier to be choos about I.D.s. More often than not MPAA literature will main tain that "the only objective of the ratings is to advise the parent in advance, so he may determine the possible suitability or unsuitability viewing by his children." In fact, this public relations objective emerges out of a self-interest objective: to protect the film business from local, state or national censorship. Typically, it has taken crisis situations to evoke acknowledgement of the dual purpose. For example, responding to the dual purpose

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC!

Criticisms of the MPAA ratings are as old as the ratings themselves. Movie directors, elected officials, film critics, advocacy groups, and religious leaders have all registered objections over the years. The ratings have been called both confusing and overly simple. They have been maligned both for being too harsh and too permissive, for making decisions based on overarching themes and for focusing too much on minutiae. Some critics feel that the ratings should not reflect societal changes, while others feel that the ratings are not adapting quickly enough. The 2006 documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated* turned a harsh eye on the board's structure, transparency, and rating process.

Conversely, many of the same groups, editorials, and individuals who criticize the ratings will occasionally offer praise (or at least begrudging acceptance) when a particular rating decision aligns with their perspective. As a general policy, the rating board does not publicly discuss the process behind the rating for a specific film beyond the rating itself and the descriptors, which can sometimes create a vacuum that results in inaccurate media reports. While the MPAA welcomes feedback and input from every corner of society, the rating board remains focused on its primary constituency: parents.

"G for Good...The rating system has allowed the more imaginative filmmakers to do their best and has encouraged a sense of public responsibility on the part of the movie industry generally. Any idea that can do that can't be all bad. — *The Washington Post Editorial Board* on the 10th Anniversary of the Ratings, 11/5/1978

"Rated R for ridiculous" — Kirby Dick, filmmaker, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, *LA Times*, 1/24/07

"Kirby, if you think the MPAA does a lousy job rating movies right now, wait until the government takes over." — *TMZ*, 1/24/07

"RATE MOVIES WITH SMOKING 'R'..." — Anti-Tobacco Advocate Stanton Glantz, "Effective Clinical Practice," *January/February 2002*

"In The Fight Against Tobacco, Advocates Shouldn't Send Free Speech Up In Smoke." — Culture Columnist Alyssa Rosenberg, *The Washington Post*, 5/11/16

"The ratings themselves need to be sharpened. In the movie industry, films with very sexually explicit content are rated NC-17, meaning no children allowed at all, but few if any films with comparably graphic violence receive this rating. The [MPAA] should rectify this imbalance."

– Senator John McCain (R-AZ) and former Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CT) *New York Times* Op-Ed, 5/12/99

"MPAA, you can do better than this. Have the courage to give hormone-soaked movies an R rating, or at least give parents specific information about what our kids are being exposed to. We really do care about our kids – and not just that they don't puff Marlboros." – Bob Waliszewski, Director of Focus on the Family's "Plugged In Online," on *Yes Man's* PG-13 rating, *LA Times*, 12/25/08

"Over the past few decades, the ratings for violent movies have become progressively more tolerant. Movies once rated R for violent content are now rated as acceptable for anyone over age 12." – Dan Romer, Associate Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, *The Hill*, 11/4/14

"Here's the thing: I have a lot of respect right now for the MPAA because they reversed the decision [on *Blue Valentine*]. The film didn't change, they changed. That shows me that it's a system that actually does work. And it doesn't often... it very rarely happens, but it does happen and it proves that it is possible for them to realize that they made a mistake. The fact that they were humble enough to admit to that is great." – *Blue Valentine* Director Derek Cianfrance, *CinemaBlend*, 12/13/10

"Parents Television Council rips MPAA for 'Blue Valentine' rating change," – *Entertainment Weekly*, 12/10/10

"Perhaps only three categories are needed: 'G,' for young audiences, 'T' for teenagers, and 'A' for adults." – Roger Ebert, *The Wall Street Journal*, 12/11/10

"15 Times the MPAA Got it Wrong," – *IndieWire* Headline, 10/7/14

"I think it [*Bully*] probably should have been PG-13. If these kids can see what's going on in schools around the world, maybe they'll want to make a change." – Justin Bieber to *TMZ*, via *Hollywood Life*, 3/22/12

"The public should be aware of this important film, but the film was accurately rated based on the MPAA guidelines." – Parents Television Council President Tim Winter, *LA Times* Op-ed, "Bully Deserved an R" 3/28/12

"Moving the yardstick from one 'f-bomb' to three essentially removes the yardstick altogether." – Tim Winter, on the edited version of *Bully* being rated PG-13, *Entertainment Weekly*, 4/6/12

"For an hour and forty minutes, *Killer Joe* scrapes the bottom of the barrel of human impulse, earning every inch of its hard NC-17 rating. The blood splatter is thick, the depiction of sexual violence is flooring..." – *Mother Jones*, 8/3/12

"The whole thing is so arbitrary and so random. I've certainly seen a lot of movies that are just as violent as this and they're an R." – Actress Gina Gershon on her film *Killer Joe's* NC-17 rating, *E! News*, 5/9/12

"*Eighth Grade*, the movie, is rated R, and for some pretty obvious reasons." – Paul Asay, Focus on the Family's Plugged In, 8/9/18

"I didn't want to make it R-rated. I just wanted to portray the way kids' lives are...I would love kids to be living in a PG-13 world. They just aren't." – Bo Burnham, Director of *Eighth Grade*, *Variety*, 7/20/18

"Hugh Jackman's final Wolverine outing rightfully (and thankfully, in our opinion) earns the first R-rating of the franchise...So should you keep your children from seeing it? The short answer: Yes. It's a movie for adults and MPAA isn't misleading you." – *USA Today*, 3/4/17

Ryan Reynolds@VancityReynolds
Replying to @DPKlok051
"@DPKlok051: Is it going to be rated R or PG-13?"
I want #Deadpool to be R. Always have. Fighting the good fight still. Lotta yelling today.

10:21 AM - 30 Mar 2015

"Dirty '*Deadpool*' really earns its 'R' rating," – *NY Post* Headline, 2/12/16

"Hollywood celebrates the 20th birthday of its voluntary movie-rating system today, but never has it been more clear that you can't please all of the people all of the time." – *The Wall Street Journal*, 11/1/1988

PARENTS GIVE THE RATINGS HIGH MARKS - 2018 SURVEY RESULTS

While seemingly everyone has strong feelings about the accuracy and efficacy of the ratings, for the rating board, the opinion of parents is paramount. Rating Chair Joan Graves notes that before every screening the board asks themselves: “What would I want to know before letting my child watch this film?” In order to rate the way a majority of American parents would, raters look to the results of parent surveys for feedback and guidance.

A new 2018 survey of 1,559 parents of children between the ages of seven and 16 conducted by Nielsen on behalf of the MPAA found that the overwhelming majority of American parents are familiar with the rating system and find it helpful and accurate.

- ➔ 91 percent of parents are extremely familiar (54%) or very familiar (37%) with the rating system, and 80 percent are extremely (40%) or very (40%) familiar with rating descriptors.

- ➔ 95 percent say they agree either strongly (59%) or somewhat (36%) that the ratings are helpful tools. 95 percent also agree that rating descriptors are helpful tools (60% agree strongly, 35% somewhat).
- ➔ 84 percent of parents agree that the rating system is accurate in its classification of movies, and even more – 88 percent – agree the rating descriptors are accurate.

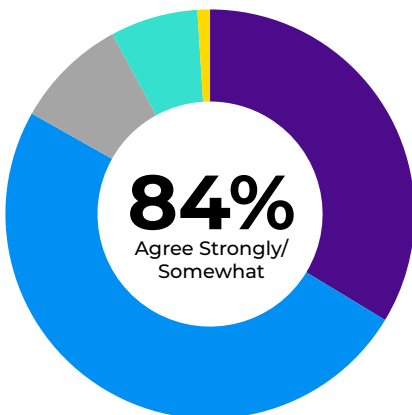
The Nielsen survey also collected data on what specific film elements parents are most concerned about their children being exposed to, and graphic sex scenes are at the top of the list (79% of parents are extremely or very concerned about graphic sex scenes). Other leading parental concerns include:

- ➔ Full male nudity (69%)
- ➔ Use of hard drugs (67%)
- ➔ Full female nudity (67%)
- ➔ Graphic violence (60%)
- ➔ Use of the F-word (56%)

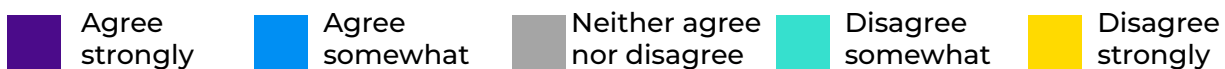
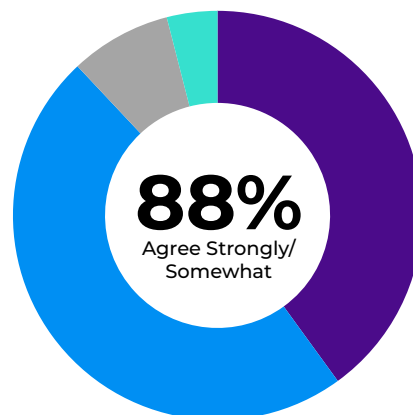
ACCURACY OF RATINGS

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (Total Parents N=1559)

The Ratings Are Accurate



The Rating Descriptors Are Accurate



RESULTS OF A 2018 SURVEY OF 1,559 PARENTS OF CHILDREN BETWEEN THE AGES OF SEVEN AND 16 CONDUCTED BY NIELSEN ON BEHALF OF THE MPAA.

Almost half of parents said that the “F-word” and graphic sex scenes appear too often in films rated PG-13, reinforcing parents’ level of concern with these types of content, as the “F-word” is seldom present and graphic sex scenes are never present in the PG-13 rating. For R-rated films, strong sexual content was also mentioned the most as being too prevalent.

The results of the in-depth Nielsen survey regarding usefulness and awareness of the ratings among parents are consistent with decades of tracking data collected every year since 1968. ORC International (now known as Engine Insights), a leading market research company, has surveyed parents annually by phone on behalf of the MPAA to determine the awareness and perceived usefulness of the rating system. Year after year, these surveys have shown that the majority of parents are not only aware of the ratings and accompanying descriptors, most parents find them useful in deciding what movies are appropriate for their children.

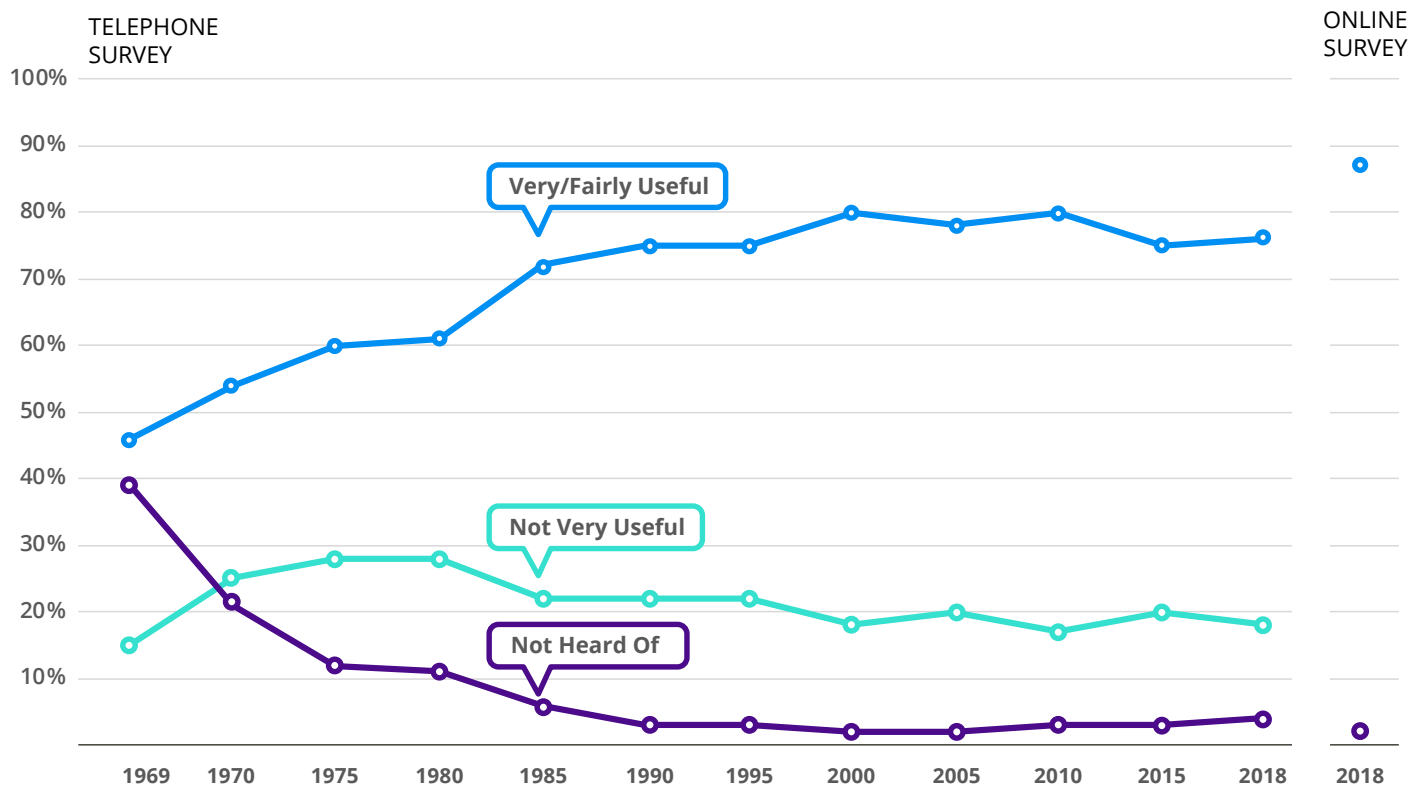
The most recent ORC/Engine study conducted by phone found that 76 percent of those surveyed say the ratings are very (37%) or fairly (39%) useful—a level that has

remained steady since the 1980s. This year, for the first time, the annual survey was also conducted online, as reaching participants online has become easier than by phone. Online audiences are more media engaged and have higher awareness of the ratings—89 percent of parents online find the ratings very (44%) or fairly (45%) useful.

The most recent ORC/Engine phone survey also found that 81 percent of parents who have heard of the movie rating system say the descriptors that accompany the ratings are very or fairly useful – a number that jumps to 90 percent when conducted online instead of over the phone.

The raters take seriously their mission to rate films the way a majority of American parents from across the country would rate them. Through these surveys, engagement in constant dialogue with parents, and by incorporating their own experience as parents, the raters endeavor to assign ratings that reflect evolving parental concerns. And as parents’ perspectives change over the years, the board will adapt to meet them where they are.

AWARENESS AND USEFULNESS OF THE RATINGS



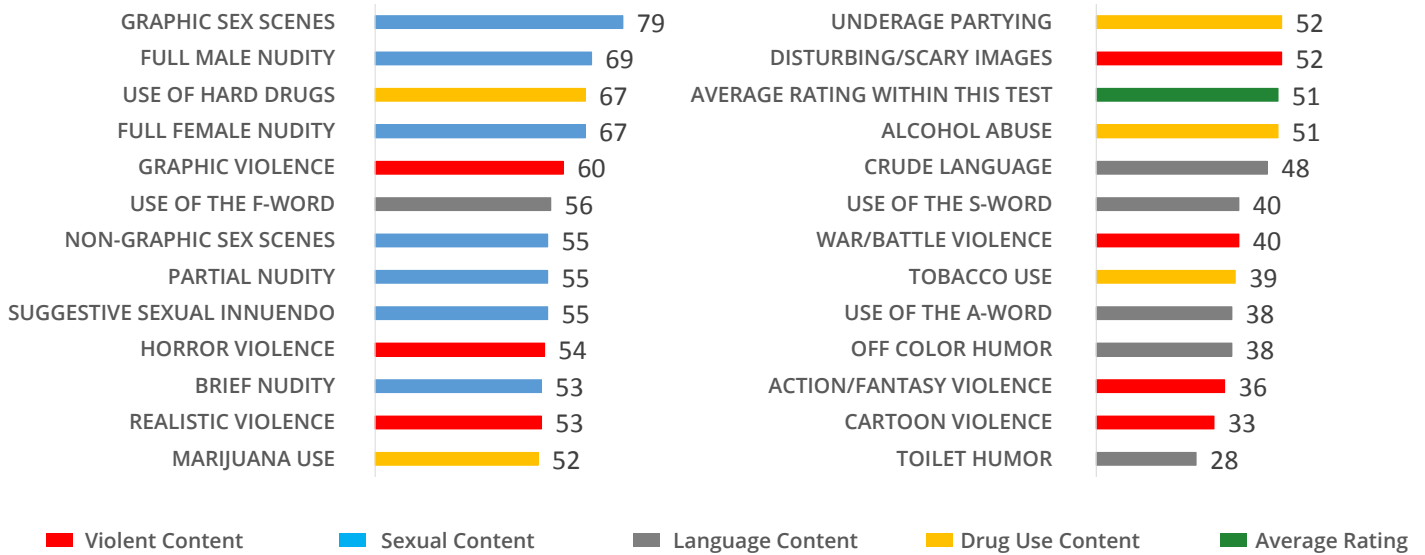
EVERY YEAR SINCE 1968, ORC / ENGINE HAS SURVEYED PARENTS ON BEHALF OF THE MPAA TO DETERMINE THE AWARENESS AND PERCEIVED USEFULNESS OF THE RATING SYSTEM.

CONTENT CONCERNS

Sexual content is a top concern among parents. Violence and language context, except for the strongest types, falls to the lower end of the spectrum of concern.

How concerned are you with the content...appearing in movies your child would see?

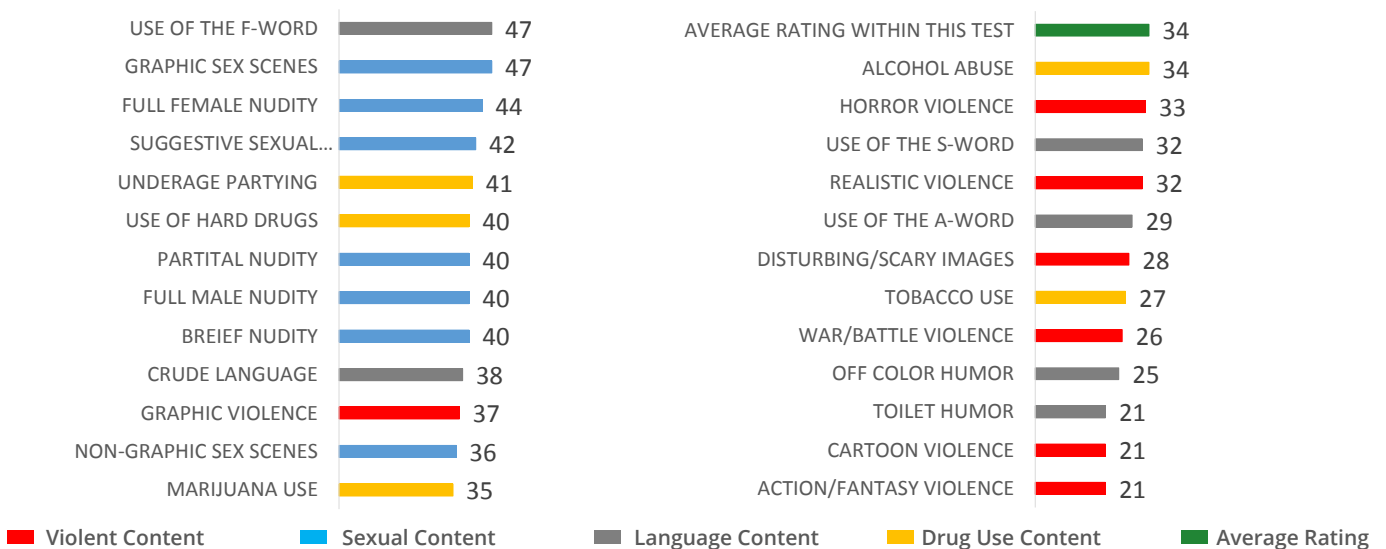
% Extremely/Very Concerned (Total Parents N=1559)



CONTENT IN PG-13 RATINGS

Nearly half of parents think the F-word appears in PG-13 rated movies too much. Sexual content of various types follows closely behind.

Based on your experience with the PG-13 rating, how do you feel about the amount of ... currently in the PG-13 rating? % Saying "Too much is in the PG-13 rating." (Total Parents N=1559)



PLEASE NOTE THE MENTION OF SPECIFIC CONTENT TYPES DOES NOT IMPLY THE CURRENT PRESENCE OF THAT CONTENT IN THE PG-13 RATING. PARENTS MAY BE INDICATING THAT ANY PRESENCE OF THAT CONTENT TYPE WITHIN THE PG-13 RATING WOULD BE TOO MUCH.

RATER FOR A DAY

In conjunction with the survey, Nielsen also engaged parents in an interactive exercise, in which they were asked to act as raters. Parents were asked to assign a rating to 15 different hypothetical movie descriptions containing movie content, including different types of profanity, sex, and violence. The results – combined with the survey findings – show that the ratings parents assigned to movies hew closely to the rating board’s rules and/or typical rating. For example:

MPAA Rating	Parent Rating
Language MPAA rating rules generally call for an R rating if a movie contains more than one F-word or even one used in a sexual manner.*	On average, parents begin assigning an R rating to a movie when it contains around three F-words. Their survey responses indicate the majority of parents (68%) do not feel that the F-word should be in PG-13 movies at all.
Sex MPAA rating rules indicate that “sexually-oriented nudity” will typically result in an R rating.	On average, most types of sexual content, ranging from brief nudity to explicit scenes of sexual intercourse, received an R rating. Their survey responses indicate that sexual content is a top concern among parents.
Violence While there may be depictions of violence in a PG-13 movie, violence that is both realistic and extreme or persistent will likely result in an R rating.	The graphic nature of how violent content is depicted impacts how parents rated on average – on-screen, explicitly bloody, and graphic violence tends to garner an R rating regardless of the type of violence. Their survey responses indicate that graphic violence is a concern among parents (60%), but less graphic forms of violence fall toward the lower end of the spectrum of concern.

* Note: As previously mentioned, the official rating rules allow for raters to vote to overrule this.

Where Parents Can Find Ratings

Families are at the center of the rating system. The MPAA and theater owners provide parents with information about a movie’s ratings in a variety of ways.

- ➔ FilmRatings.com maintains a searchable database of all rated movies and updates it weekly: <https://www.filmratings.com>.
- ➔ Weekly bulletins with new ratings for films rated the previous week are posted to FilmRatings.com to inform parents, theater operators, and news outlets.
- ➔ The Red Carpet Ratings, an email newsletter, gives parents ratings for films currently in theaters: <https://filmratings.com//RedCarpetSignIn/SignIn>.
- ➔ Rating information accompanies film advertisements, including posters, billboards, radio, television, print, and online.
- ➔ MPAA ratings are posted on [Twitter.com/filmratings](https://twitter.com/filmratings).
- ➔ Theaters display rating information at the box office.

PART IV: INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE



Q&A WITH NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF THEATRE OWNERS PRESIDENT AND CEO JOHN FITHIAN

John Fithian is the President and CEO of the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), an organization that represents 600 theater companies in the United States and around the world. NATO has been a key partner on the MPAA ratings from the very beginning. In a recent interview, Chair Joan Graves indicated the rating system might not exist had NATO not committed to enforcing it at their theaters, “The fact that the theater owners said ‘we’ll back you up’ really helped put the rating system into existence.”⁵⁸

As the ratings continue to evolve, NATO remains a strong partner, continuing to provide information to parents in new ways and enforcing the ratings at the box office. NATO members also relay parental feedback to both the rating board and the Advertising Administration.

Q. Why do you think a voluntary rating system is helpful for theater owners and local theaters?

Fithian: Theater operators and our group, the National Association of Theater Owners, have partnered with the MPAA on the ratings from day one. It’s just a great way to educate parents and help them make informed choices about what movies they allow their kids to see, either with them or without them. A voluntary rating system that the industry respects and uses to inform parents is highly preferable to a government-mandated system. We know that we have to be vigilant in how we respect, evolve, develop, and explain the ratings in order to keep it voluntary.

Q. Can you talk about the history and the impact the creation of the ratings had on the movie theater industry?

Fithian: In one form or another NATO has been around since 1948 and was very active in the 1960s when Jack Valenti led an effort to put together this comprehensive system. At the time, local governments all across the country were creating censorship boards to impose standards on how movies should be rated. And the idea



NATO PRESIDENT AND CEO JOHN FITHIAN

that A) local governments would censor what you can do in movies and impose penalties for not following that and B) that it would be a patchwork of rules, so you could not have a single rated version of the movie nationally, was a big threat to the business. There needed to be something more modern and responsive to parental concern than a locality-by-locality censorship system. So Jack reached out to his members, the major studios, and also to the leadership of our association at NATO. And we were very supportive of what Jack was trying to do in developing the ratings. We are very appreciative that we were included from the beginning, because we are the ones that face the customer, the ones that sell the tickets and interact with parents on the ground.


Q. Have there been any major reforms?

Fithian: After the shooting at Columbine High School, there were legislative proposals to have the government regulate movies and prohibit certain forms of violence, to tax certain forms of violence in movies, or to take the rating system, write it into law, and create civil and potential criminal penalties for not enforcing it. Instead, we took additional steps – both the MPAA and NATO – to enhance the voluntary nature of the ratings

as an alternative to government regulation. We had an announcement at the White House with then-President Clinton about enhancing our part of the ratings by establishing nationwide protocols on checking IDs. In other words, not to have the ratings be theoretical, but to actually train all of our box office attendants so that every time someone who looks too young tries to buy a ticket, we card them.

Q. Can you tell us about some ratings controversies?

Fithian: I'm quite proud to say that Harvey Weinstein called me a "Cro-Magnon" in *The New York Times* over our insistence that movies be rated and enforced.⁵⁹ The movie behind that controversy was *Bully*. He argued that kids should be able to see the movie without their parents. But he knew from the beginning, because it's quite clear in the rating rules, that the language used in *Bully* would result in an R rating. If a movie uses the F-word in a certain way, or a certain number of times, it gets an R rating. And that rule is based on surveys of parents on what they consider to be appropriate. And some 70 percent of American parents think that kind of language should warrant an R rating.



PARENTS TELL US WHAT'S IMPORTANT, THE RATINGS EVOLVE TO REFLECT WHAT PARENTS THINK IS IMPORTANT, THE RATING TEAM WORKS TO APPLY THAT PARENTAL GUIDANCE, AND THEATER OPERATORS THEN ENFORCE THE GIVEN RATING."

-John Fithian, President of the National Association of Theatre Owners

Parents tell us what's important, the ratings evolve to reflect what parents think is important, the rating team works to apply that parental guidance, and theater operators then enforce the given rating. Those have to be the driving principles. And we can't let one-off attacks for the sake of free publicity change the ratings, because the system works.

We – both the MPAA and NATO – are extraordinarily vigilant about the fact that it's not theme or the cause or the philosophy that matters, it is the content. We have a rating system that describes what content gets rated, how we rate it, and how we enforce it. We are not making political or theological judgments on the content itself.

Q. Have there been pivotal changes to the ratings system, such as the introduction of PG-13 and descriptors – that had an impact on movie theater owners?

Fithian: The PG-13 idea came from Spielberg and the studios and the MPAA. The descriptors idea was something we advocated for, and that's because our theater employees are on the front lines talking to parents about why a certain movie was rated. The rating itself did not provide enough information. Moreover, attitudes about content in ratings vary greatly by region: on the coasts people care more about violence, less about sexuality or nudity. In the middle of country, it's the opposite. And all of these elements have to be considered in deciding a rating. Our argument was: if all these elements are factored in by the rating board, the rating should also say why the movie got its rating, because parents will react differently in different geographic areas and at different theaters.

The MPAA responded really well and worked with its members to come up with these descriptors. Through promotional campaigns, such as "Check the box," the MPAA urged parents to gather more information. Don't just say: "Oh, it's PG-13. It's fine for my kids to go on their own." Use the descriptors to decide what is appropriate for your kids and what is not. It's been a really helpful evolution of the ratings, because parents pay more attention and understand the information is there. And surveys regularly show that parents appreciate both the existence of the ratings and the descriptors.

Q. And how do theater employees typically convey ratings information at the theater?

Fithian: Today, a lot of this information is conveyed digitally, but at the box office usually there is a list of movies currently playing, a plot summary, the rating, and rating descriptors. Some theaters have handouts with the rating and descriptors for each movie. We encourage our employees to help educate parents as well. For example, if a parent is with an eight year-old and headed into *Saw*, an employee should speak up and say: Do you know what's in the movie?

Q. How has the era of digital purchasing impacted how theater owners communicate and enforce the ratings?

Fithian: When we started, the only way you could buy a ticket was a face-to-face contact with the box office attendant. Now, more and more customers are purchasing online, at kiosks, or on mobile devices. So it has made ratings enforcement more complex.

We responded to this first by making sure that rating information appears at each of those contact points. One of the 10 planks in the post-Columbine reforms for NATO was to include ratings information on all of our websites, but online ticketing did not really take off until the aughts. So as we were trying to enhance our policies post-Columbine, we actually sent out guidelines to all of our members about how to incorporate ratings information on websites. We have periodically updated and reissued all those guidelines over the last 18 years.

But then there's the question: how do you *enforce* the ratings rules in a digital age when a purchase has been made without face-to-face contact? That's where the ticket taker comes in. Even when purchased by phone, the customer still has to scan a barcode or print something out that can be checked. There's still a point at which a human being can ask to see your ID. But it's much harder in the digital age to both educate and enforce the ratings than it was in the analog age.

Q: Why do you think the ratings have remained useful and vital for 50 years?

Fithian: Despite the fact that our name is the *National* Association of Theater Owners, we have members in 96 countries around the world. So I know something about censorship and ratings laws in other countries. And the American system is *a lot* better. For example, in Canada, every single province has its own mandatory rating system, and they are not consistent. A movie might get one rating in Nova Scotia and another in British Columbia. In Greece, you have some kids getting into the wrong movie, and the theater manager goes to jail for a couple nights. China does not have a rating system, so you are either allowed in or not, which means that any movie that comes into China has to be acceptable to everyone.

There are a range of legal systems created on ratings and censorship. That's bad for a lot of reasons. It stifles speech, because if a theater owner is worried about criminal sanctions, they simply won't take a chance on showing a risky movie that kids will try to see. That's not good for filmmakers either. A voluntary system means filmmakers are much freer to put whatever content they want in their movies, and then have it be rated and let parents decide. In regimes where the rules are enforced by law, filmmakers are much more hesitant to do that.

So from a creative point of view, from a censorship point of view, from an enforcement point of view, voluntary ratings are a lot better than having a rigid, government-enforced system. In comparison to all the other countries, the American system is the best. And I hear from other theater operators around the world who are very envious, because it works, it's respectful of creative content, but it also allows parents to make those decisions.

PARTNERSHIP WITH FILMMAKERS

While the primary purpose of the MPAA ratings is to provide information to parents, the ratings also serve filmmakers. The MPAA's self-regulatory system protects filmmakers' First Amendment rights and their freedom to create without the threat of government censorship.

The rating board connects with hundreds of filmmakers every year. After reviewing the film, they provide ratings and descriptors. Sometimes a certain rating designation means a filmmaker will choose to go back and make changes, especially if they are under contract from a distributor to deliver a film at a specified rating. "I know that a filmmaker taking apart his/her work of art is very personal and can even be painful for them," says Joan Graves. "So over the last decade, we have made ourselves available to filmmakers to call if they have questions about what factors contribute to a rating." The senior raters are not just a resource for the filmmakers as they make post-production edits, she adds, "they are also available to discuss pre-production or script questions if filmmakers have them."

It is not always a smooth or easy process, and some directors and studio heads have pushed back publicly on the ratings for their films outside of the formal appeals process. Despite occasional high-profile cases, the overwhelming majority of ratings are non-controversial. Only a small percentage of the assigned ratings are appealed, and many filmmakers recognize and appreciate the role the ratings system plays in their industry. Director Steven Spielberg, who played a key role in the development of the PG-13 rating in the 1980s, has noted - "The rating system is important. As a filmmaker, it protects my First Amendment rights, but as a parent, it's even more important."⁶⁰

The producer of *Brokeback Mountain* said of that film's rating experience, "We assumed it would be R; it was R. It was totally fair. It's an adult, grown-up movie. It's a movie I think young people could see or should see in the context of their parents talking to them about it. That's an R rating to me."⁶¹



THE X-RATED *MIDNIGHT COWBOY* (1969) WON THREE ACADEMY AWARDS. (PHOTO CREDIT: MGM MEDIA LICENSING)

Graves has noticed a better spirit of cooperation with filmmakers over the years. "We are all in it together - if a film is rated correctly, the parents are much more likely to go to the next movie, and it's like a circle...The producers benefit, the theaters benefit, the cast and crew benefit—everybody benefits. If we get it wrong, then parents have a bad taste in their mouth, and may be less likely to go to the movies the next time, so it really behooves us to get it right. And I think that we have convinced the submitters of films to believe that as well."

PART V: MPAA RATINGS BY THE NUMBERS

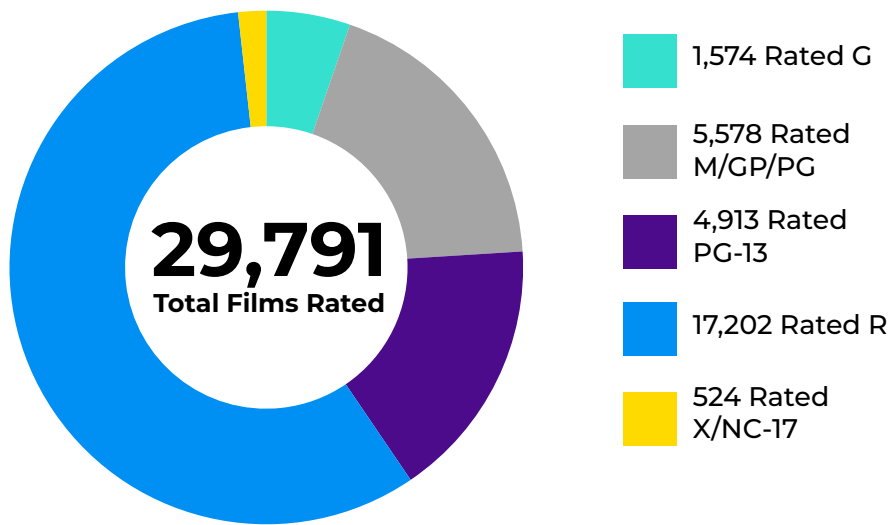


For the first time ever, the MPAA is releasing comprehensive data on all films rated throughout its 50-year history. The rating board is fast approaching an impressive 30,000 films rated since 1968. Below are some key facts and figures on ratings and appeals throughout the years.

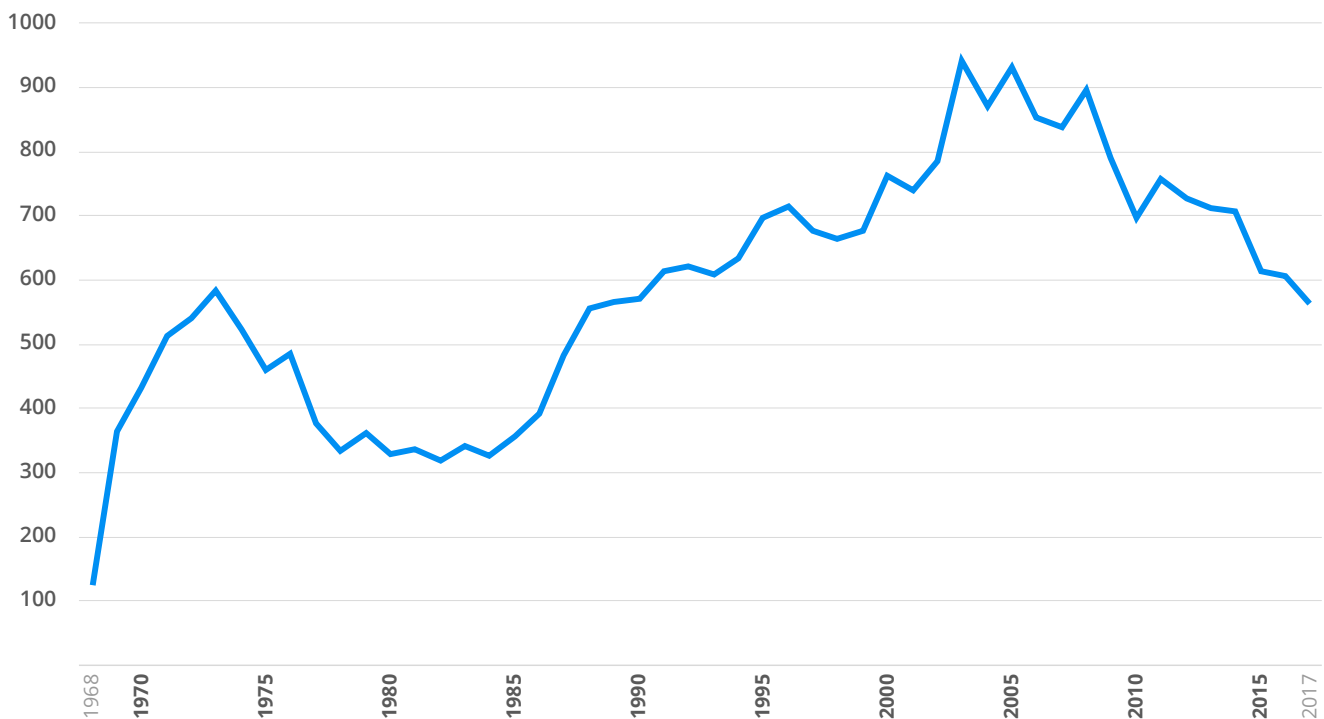
RATINGS

- ➔ Over its 50-year history, the MPAA has rated a total of 29,791 films. *Note: As of September 30, 2018*
- ➔ The MPAA has rated an average of 587 movies a year, with a high of 940 films rated in 2003, near the peak of the DVD boom. *Note: Excluding 2018, since full numbers are not yet available for the year.*

BREAKDOWN BY RATING *Note: Figures include re-ratings*



TOTAL FILMS RATED

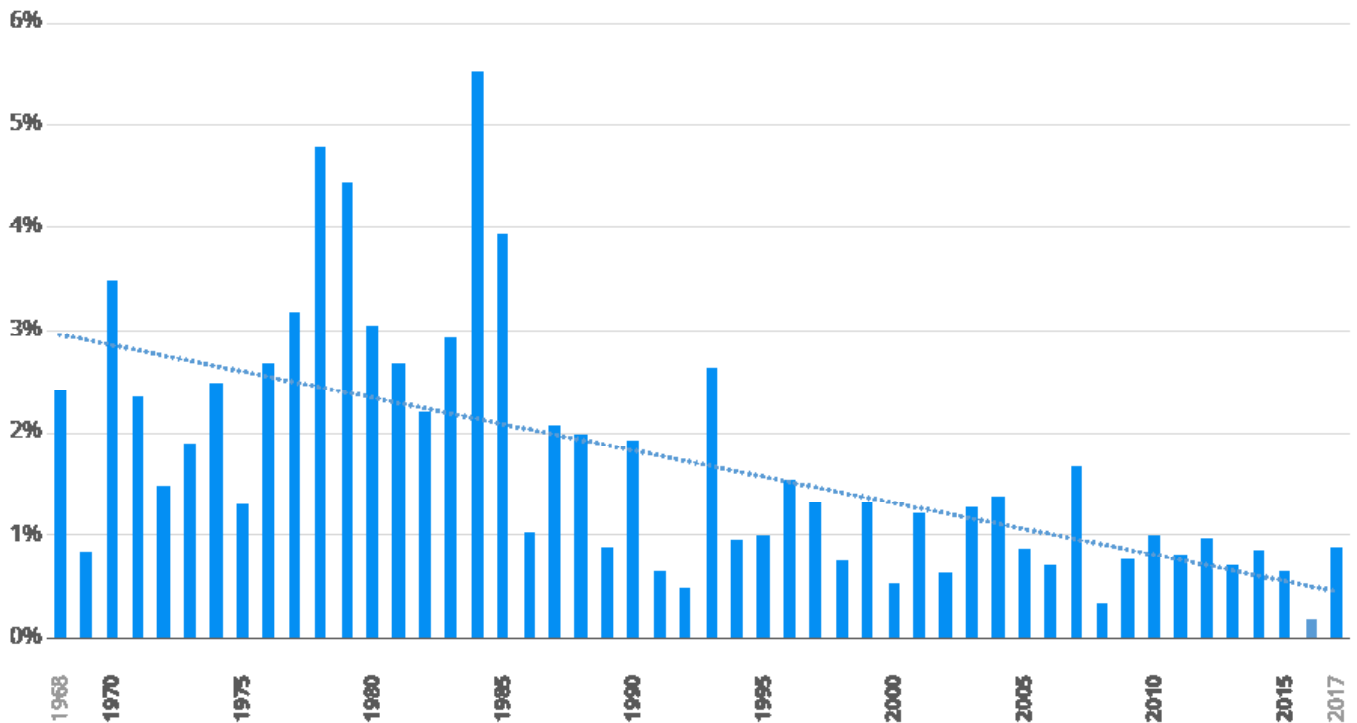


- ➔ Last year, 75 percent of films rated were submitted by independents, compared to just 47 percent in 1969, the first full year of the rating system’s existence. Early on, more than half of films submitted for ratings were MPAA member studio productions. That has shifted over time, in part because as parents increasingly relied on the ratings, more independent distributors began submitting their films for rating, but also because there are now more independent film releases today compared to MPAA member releases.

APPEALS & OVERTURNED RATINGS

- ➔ Since 1968, of the nearly 30,000 films rated, 1.4 percent have been appealed (428), and 0.6 percent have had their rating overturned (165). Since the introduction of the PG-13 rating, most years have seen one percent or fewer ratings appealed.
- ➔ Historically, an average of nine films have been appealed each year. More recently, the number of films appealed is even lower. Since 2010, an average of five films have been appealed per year. *Note: Excluding 2018, since full numbers are not yet available for the year.*

% OF TOTAL FILMS APPEALED



- ➔ 1984, the year the PG-13 rating was introduced, saw the highest number of rating appeals. 18 ratings were appealed, or six percent of the total number of films rated. 1984 was also the year with the highest number of ratings overturned on appeal (3.4%).
- ➔ 2016 had the lowest number of rating appeals, with only one.
- ➔ On average, less than one percent of films have their ratings overturned on appeal each year (0.7%). There were five years – including 2016 – in which no ratings were overturned.

PART VI: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS





What is the purpose of the MPAA ratings?

The MPAA ratings' primary mission is to provide parents with advance information about content in films to help them make appropriate viewing choices for their children.

Who are the raters?

The rating board is comprised of eight to 13 raters who are themselves parents. Raters must have children between the ages of five and 15 when they join the rating board and must leave when all of their children have reached the age of twenty-one. Raters can serve for up to seven years, at the discretion of the Chair. With the exception of the senior raters, the identities of raters are kept confidential to avoid outside pressure or influence.

What is a senior rater?

Senior raters are selected by the Chair from among the raters and have demonstrated experience and judgment in the rating of films. They serve as points of contact with the submitter to answer any questions about the rating of a film, and their identities are public.

How does the rating process change over time?

The MPAA ratings do not set standards; they reflect them. As the concerns and sensitivities of American parents change over time, so too do the ratings, as the rating board is made up of current parents. The MPAA is also constantly engaged in dialogue with parents to ensure elements such as violence, language, drug use, and sexuality are frequently re-evaluated to reflect contemporary concerns.

Are the ratings a form of censorship?

No, quite the opposite. The MPAA has resisted government censorship since its early days, and the rating system was developed as a voluntary, industry-led alternative to government censorship boards. The focus on providing information to parents about what's in a film, rather than dictating what can and cannot go into films, serves the dual purpose of providing information to parents to help them make suitable viewing choices for their children and protecting the free speech rights of filmmakers from government intervention.

Does the rating board tell filmmakers what type of content is appropriate?

No, the purpose of the ratings is to help inform and guide parents, not to prescribe social policy. Filmmakers are free to put whatever content they want into their films. The rating board reviews each film on a case-by-case basis and reacts just as parents would, assigning a rating that corresponds with the level of content in each film. The rating board does not take into account the artistic merit of the films it rates. A rating is not a judgment of whether a film is good or bad.

Is it true that a film's rating level can have an impact on its commercial viability?

Audiences, film critics, and often times, good, old-fashioned, luck are the ultimate arbiters of a film's success – not the rating. In fact, each rating level has seen its share of box office hits and flops. That said, sometimes a film's director is under contract by a studio to deliver a film at a certain rating level, based on the studio's target audience. For this reason, directors frequently make edits to their films to achieve a certain rating and thus fulfill those contractual obligations.

How much does it cost to request a rating for a film?

The submittal fee is based on a formula that takes into account the size of the company submitting the film and the net cost of production. This is to allow greater access to the rating system for smaller, independent companies.

Are producers or distributors required to submit their film for a rating?

From the beginning, MPAA member companies agreed to submit their films for a rating, and to this day, all films distributed theatrically by MPAA member companies must be submitted for rating. Independent distributors are not required to submit their films for rating, but the majority do. Some foreign and independent films, particularly those intended for distribution in so-called art-house theaters with mostly adult audiences, often choose not to.

If it costs money, why would an independent distributor choose to submit their film for a rating?

When former MPAA Chairman Jack Valenti created the ratings, he enlisted the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) as a partner, recognizing that the rating system could not be effective without the help of those who sell tickets directly to customers. Over the years, as parents came to rely on the ratings for guidance, theater owners developed a strong preference for rated films, because it limits instances of parents being surprised or upset about a film's content.

Are parents required to follow ratings guidance?

Ratings are intended to help parents make smart, informed decisions about viewing choices for their children. Most movie theaters in the United States, as members of NATO, enforce the ratings at their facilities. Two ratings are restrictive: R and NC-17. R indicates the film contains some adult material, and parents are encouraged not to take young children, although they are not prohibited from doing so. NC-17 indicates the film is patently adult, and children are not admitted.

Are violence and sexuality treated the same in film ratings?

The rating board considers all aspects of a film to determine its suitability for children, including themes, language, depictions of violence, nudity, sensuality, depictions of sexual activity, smoking, adult activities (i.e. activities that adults, but not minors, may engage in legally), and drug use.

Some anti-tobacco advocates have called for an automatic R rating for any instance of smoking. How do raters consider smoking in films?

The MPAA acknowledges the public health dangers associated with glamorized images of tobacco, particularly to children, and in 2007, added smoking as a rating factor. While the system strongly weighs the presence of any tobacco-related imagery, it is not designed to impose societal change or censor filmmakers. The board considers context, historical mores, frequency, and glamorization of smoking in every film and adds tobacco-specific film descriptors as they do for other factors.

Is male nudity viewed differently by raters than female nudity?

Male nudity is not treated differently than female nudity – context, what happens on the screen, and how a theme or scene is depicted, are key. The most important thing is how persistent and graphic the nudity is and how parents may perceive it.

Is female sexual pleasure viewed more harshly by the rating board than male sexual pleasure?

No. Again, context is key.

Why does "male nudity" have its own descriptor?

In some cases, once we give a rating, the submitter asks CARA to be more specific, for example, by identifying male nudity.

Are homosexual or transgender scenes rated more harshly than heterosexual ones?

No, it is graphic depictions or graphic descriptions that may lead a film to receive an R or NC-17 rating. A film is never rated more than PG-13 for theme alone.

ENDNOTES

Overview & History

1. Richard Corliss, "What Jack Valenti Did For Hollywood?," *Time*, [April 27, 2007](#)
2. (Timeline) "The Evolution of the Film Rating System," [Filmmratings.com](#); *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Comm'n of Ohio*, 236 U.S. 230 (1915); Mike Mashon, "When 'Pre-' Met 'Code' — Eighty Years Ago Today," *Library of Congress Now See Hear! The National Audio-Visual Conservation Center Blog*, [July 15, 2014](#); *Freedman v. Maryland*, 380 U.S. 51 (1965); David M. Halbfinger, "Jack Valenti, 85, Confidant of a President and Stars, Dies," *New York Times*, [April 27, 2007](#)
3. Bob Mondello, "Remembering Hollywood's Hays Code, 40 Years On," *NPR*, [August 8, 2008](#); Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*, 1999
4. "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code," *PBS*, 2000
5. Susan Doll, "Before The Production Code: Trips To Hell For A Nickel," *Filmstruck Streamline Blog*, [April 1, 2013](#)
6. Richard Andress, "Film Censorship in New York State," *New York State Archives*, October 7, 2015
7. William K. Zinsser, "The Bold and Risky World of 'Adult' Movies," *Life Magazine*, February 29, 1960
8. Richard Andress, "Film Censorship in New York State," *New York State Archives*, [October 7, 2015](#); Ivan Brychta, "The Ohio Film Censorship Law," *Ohio State Law Journal*, Vol. 13, 1952
9. Stephan Benzkofer, "When a Chicago police censor ruled over films with an iron fist," *Chicago Tribune*, [February 20, 2015](#)
10. *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial Comm'n of Ohio*, 236 U.S. 230 (1915)
11. Bob Mondello, "Remembering Hollywood's Hays Code, 40 Years On," *NPR*, [August 8, 2008](#)
12. "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code," *PBS*, 2000
13. Ina Rae Hark, *American Cinema of the 1930s*, June 21, 2007
14. Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*, 1999
15. Rebecca Sun, "From the Hays Code to 'Loving': Hollywood's History With Interracial Romance," *Hollywood Reporter*, [May 22, 2016](#)
16. David Denby, "Hitler in Hollywood," *The New Yorker*, [September 16, 2013](#)
17. Thomas Doherty, "Hollywood, Censorship, And The Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968," [Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#); [National Coalition Against Censorship](#)
18. *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952)
19. *Kingsley International Pictures Corp. v. Regents of the University of the State of New York* 360 U.S. 684 (1959)
20. Bob Mondello, "Remembering Hollywood's Hays Code, 40 Years On," *NPR*, [August 8, 2008](#); Evan Andrews, "8 Classic Films That Ran Afoul of Hollywood Censors," *History.com/History Channel*, [March 31, 2015](#); [Turner Classic Movies](#)
21. The Motion Picture Production Code, *Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.*, December 1956
22. Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry*, December 2000
23. Evan Andrews, "8 Classic Films That Ran Afoul of Hollywood Censors," *History.com/History Channel*, [March 31, 2015](#)
24. Leonard J. Leff, Jerold L. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code*, 1990; Steve Wilson, *The Making of Gone with the Wind*, 2014
25. Michael Duncan, "This supercut of kissing in films by Hitchcock definitely breaks Hays Code," *AV Club*, [September 14, 2015](#)
26. James Bates, "Jack Valenti, Formidable Force for Hollywood, Dies." *Los Angeles Times*, [April 27, 2007](#)
27. Jon Lewis, *Hollywood v. Hard Core: How the Struggle Over Censorship Created the Modern Film Industry*, December 2000; Peter Howell, "How Hitchcock's Psycho changed everything," *The Star*, [December 4, 2009](#); Walter Goodman, "No Sex Please - We're Hollywood," *New York Times*, [April 3, 1988](#)
28. Luc Sante, "Reaching for It," *New York Times Magazine*, [November 11, 2007](#)
29. David M. Halbfinger, "Jack Valenti, 85, Confidant of a President and Stars, Dies," *New York Times*, [April 27, 2007](#)
30. Brooks Boliek, "A legacy of passion, a legacy of respect," *Hollywood Reporter*, [April 27, 2007](#)
31. Jack Valenti, "Ratings born of conflict," *Variety*, [December 3, 2006](#); Connie Bruck, "The Personal Touch," *The New Yorker*, [August 13, 2001](#)
32. "MERGER APPROVED BY THEATER OWNERS," *New York Times*, [September 3, 1965](#)
33. MPAA/Valenti Personal Archives

34. Jack Valenti Remarks to Inland Daily Press Association, February 24, 1969
35. Jeremy Geltzer, "Banned in Baltimore: film censorship in the Free State," Baltimore Sun, [April 10, 2016](#)
36. Jeremy Geltzer, "Banned in Baltimore: film censorship in the Free State," Baltimore Sun, [April 10, 2016](#)
37. Ben A. Franklin, "Last State Board Of Censors Fades Away After 65 Years," New York Times, [June 29, 1981](#)
38. "Dallas City Council disbands 28-year-old film rating board," Variety, [August 13, 1993](#)
39. "Dallas Film Classification Board Disturbs the Industry," Associated Press/New York Times, [December 24, 1979](#)
40. "Dallas City Council disbands 28-year-old film rating board," Variety, [August 13, 1993](#)
41. Elizabeth Kastor, "It's A Wrap: Dallas Kills Film Board," Washington Post, [8/13/1993](#)
42. Sherry Jacobson, "City cuts power of movie board; Enforcement authority lost; ratings to be printed weekly," Dallas Morning News, December 10, 1992
43. Rick Kogan, "Chicago's film censorship era on display," Chicago Tribune, [June 27, 2014](#)
44. Harris Ross, "The Pennsylvania State Board Of Censors: The Great War, The Movies, And D. W. Griffith," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, [Spring 2008](#)
45. Laura Wittern-Keller, *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915-1981*, [2008](#)
46. Ibid
47. Ryan Parker, "How 'The Temple of Doom' Changed the MPAA Ratings System," Hollywood Reporter, [May 23, 2017](#)
48. Faye Fiore, "Media Violence Gets No Action From Congress," Los Angeles Times, [November 20, 1999](#); [H.R.1501](#) - Violent and Repeat Juvenile Offender Accountability and Rehabilitation Act of 1999; [S.2497](#) - Media Violence Labeling Act of 2000; "An Examination Of The Entertainment Industry's Efforts To Curb Children's Exposure To Violent Content," Subcommittee On Telecommunications And The Internet Of The Committee On Energy And Commerce House Of Representatives, [July 20, 2001](#)
49. President William J. Clinton, "Remarks Following a Meeting With Representatives of the National Association of Theatre Owners and an Exchange With Reporters," The American Presidency Project, [June 8, 1999](#)
50. "FTC Undercover Shopper Survey on Entertainment Ratings Enforcement Finds Compliance Highest Among Video Game Sellers and Movie Theaters," Federal Trade Commission, [March 25, 2013](#)
51. "Marketing Violent Motion Picture Products To Children," Hearing Before The Senate Committee On Commerce, Science, And Transportation, [September 29, 2000](#)

The Rating Process

52. The Movie Rating System - Its History, How It Works and Its Enduring Value, MPAA Classification And Rating Administration, [December 21, 2010](#)
53. The Movie Rating System - Its History, How It Works and Its Enduring Value, MPAA Classification And Rating Administration, [December 21, 2010](#)
54. U.S. House of Representatives, "A Report of the Subcommittee on Small Business Problems, of the Committee On Small Business," March 21, 1978
55. Joanne Lipman, "Advertising: Ratings for PG, PG-13 Films Tightened," Wall Street Journal, July 29, 1992
56. Brooks Barnes, "Deciding What Is 'Suitable' in Movie Ads," New York Times, [April 22, 2010](#)
57. MPAA Advertising Administration Handbook, [2014](#)

Impact On The Industry

58. Kathryn Lyons, "Famous Five - MPAA's Joan Graves On How Movies Get Rated," FamousDC, [August 17, 2018](#)
59. Michael Cieply, "The Dust Kicked Up By 'Bully' Still Flies," New York Times, [April 7, 2012](#)
60. The Movie Rating System - Its History, How It Works and Its Enduring Value, MPAA Classification And Rating Administration, [December 21, 2010](#)
61. Fox News, [5/19/15](#)