

Where's the P in PG?: An Analysis Connecting Filipino Parenting Patterns with Viewing of "Parental Guidance" Rated Programs on Television with Children *Menard Edu M. Molina*

Television (TV) can be found in most households in the country, broadcasting numerous programs that aim to inform and entertain. Its contents are watched every day by thousands of audiences at a single time, and most practically consider it a calendar and clock by using the programs as guides. TV sets at home are usually the centerpiece of rooms—the focal point in which members of the household would gather. In rural communities, people gather at the window of a "better-off", meaning television-owning neighbor. Watching television has become a familial and communal activity for Filipinos.

Research in the mass media has more or less kept aside the issue of the family as audience. Media scholars treat the family only as a part of the natural viewing group or target audience. It is for this reason that studying the relationship among parenting practices, structure of Filipino families, and the consumption of the PG (parental guidance)-rated TV programs becomes important. As television watching is a social activity at the Filipino home, it is important to consider the disparity that the PG-intended programs bring into the equation.

This study analyzed the consumption of participant parents residing in households in urban communities in Laguna, specifically in the municipalities of San Pedro, Biñan, and Sta. Rosa, and focused on the actual interaction of the parents (whether biological or surrogate) and/or the guardians with the children during the viewing of PG-rated TV programs. The viewing environment, the activities the family undergoes while watching the program, and the parenting practices in the particular households were also factored in the study to identify the actions that parents take when they watch these programs and to trace the factors that could affect the parents-children interaction in TV viewing.

Based on the data gathered, including those in a previous study, parents do notice and understand the PG warnings on television and the possible effects that TV can give to children. Despite this awareness, parents do not mediate over their children's television viewing. Whether the parenting pattern in a family is strict or more lenient, parents are inclined to use television in its limited ways: as a pleasure and entertainment tool, as an instrument to keep children preoccupied while they are unavailable because of work or chores, and as a form of reward and punishment for their children.

Moreover, the study stresses that parents should be more responsible for their children's well-being by mediating over any TV program, with or without the PG rating. This will lead to a habitual reinforcement of the real meaning of the PG rating.

For many people, pressing the “on” button on a television remote control is as automatic as waking up. And in a country like the Philippines where more than 90% of all households have a television set, it is not surprising that switch buttons and remote controls have become powerful devices. As one of the most accessible modes of communication, it has constantly provided information and entertainment around the country and the world. Some households even have a television set in their bedrooms, making it a more intimate medium than it already is. We would hear people say how their favorite television stars made their day or how they lost half of their lives missing one particular show. For some, watching television programs has become part of a personal and social routine, necessary for everyday “survival.”

According to the 2005 survey conducted by Asia Research Organization, commissioned by the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas (KBP), out of more than 14 million respondents, 95% of Philippine households own at least one television set (KBP, 2006). Compared with the 1994 data from the National Statistics Office (NSO), the KBP data showed a 44% increase of ownership of television in the country in the past 11 years (NSO, 1994). The

target audience seemingly increases every minute—a factor accounted by media conglomerates that conceptualize, produce, and air particular programs. Audiences, as active TV viewers, interpret and use media messages according to their specific needs, uses, and/or gratification. In the same way, media corporations conduct exhaustive research on audiences, trying to identify the audiences' socio-economic class, lifestyles, motivation, expendable income, or desires. Moreover, by using the results of these researches, it enables them to know their specific audience and produce specific programs that are suitable for their target audience's needs, delving into various themes, from the conservative Dophy comedies to the racy "reality" genre.

However, incidental viewers could be watching programs not intended for them, such as youngsters viewing adult content—and this could cause some problems. Violence, for instance, is one of the most researched subjects about television and children. Many psychological studies explain that violence in media influences children's behavior.

As discussed elsewhere, children may imitate the violence seen on television, behave more aggressively, resort to physical violence when resolving conflicts with others, or expect others to do so (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, 1973; Joy, Kimball & Zabrack, 1986; Leifer & Roberts, 1972). Similarly, they may develop an innate fear with the world (Singer, Singer & Rapaczynski, 1984). Exposure to excessive violent scenes can traumatize them. Watching violent TV programs can also desensitize them to actual acts of violence, for they might think that these behaviors happen every day (Thomas, Horton & Lippincott, 1977).

TV programs do not have to be violent or vulgar to have negative effects on children. Studies show that they can affect children's self-image. McCoby states, "There is not any doubt that children pick up all sorts of content from the programs they watch. Teenage girls watch the movie stars and the TV stars very carefully to see what the proper thing to wear is" (in Cheng, 2006: 14). Watching too much TV has resulted in low physical activity



Parents watching TV with their child. Retrieved August 21, 2008 from <http://pro.corbis.com/images/CB111576.jpg?size=572&uid={F677EAD8-C2ED-4E35-B49A-F38493377C9B}>

and obesity among many viewers, including adolescents and children. And this effect, in stark contrast to models they see on TV, contributes to negative changes in their behavior. Dr. Lillian Juadiong, a family life and child development expert, adds that children's self-image is indeed distorted by television. She accounts one child who thinks of herself as ugly because TV programs do not portray girls with curly hair and brown skin as beautiful. The uncertainty of the nature of TV content and the way it can influence children's mindsets are potentially disturbing.

Most of these outcomes also apply to adolescents and adults, but it is nevertheless important to focus on children because their TV viewing habits are formed early on. As Josephson (1995) noted, a child's cognition and emotion start to develop when he or she reaches eight years old. Thus, the earlier parents are involved in their children's TV viewing habits, the better chance they have in guiding them towards appropriate programs.

With the growing number of sexual, violent, and other explicit content in television, there is a clamor for strict regulation among the networks and the government. Most of us notice these contents, but no one really takes into account that children could possibly watch shows that are unsuitable for them. Even while watching TV with their parents, they might still see adult-oriented scenes. And with the advent of cable TV, a wider range of possible indecent content could be watched by unsupervised children. Thus, certain actions have to be taken to prevent children from viewing programs that are inappropriate for them.

During the martial law years, then President Ferdinand Marcos created the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) to filter out and classify contents in movies and television programs. These media products would be evaluated if they are "...objectionable for being immoral, indecent, contrary to law and/or good customs, injurious to the prestige of the Republic of the Philippines or its people, or with a dangerous tendency to encourage the commission of violence or of wrong or crime" (Presidential Decree No. 1986). The MTRCB was also tasked to classify TV programs and determine who might or might not watch them. One classification being used is the "Parental Guidance" (PG) rating. This suggests that an adult should supervise the young audience while watching a certain program.

Likewise, the KBP has policies that member networks should follow when airing programs on their channels. As incorporated in their code, the KBP believes that:

It is not machines but television's men and women who write the script, read the news, entertain, sell airtime, and put the whole show together. They are the ones whose talent shapes the minds and influence the psyche of the viewer...taking into consideration TV's various publics - men and women, young and old, of all walks and persuasions - with the vision of serving them the best that all of TV could give. (KBP, n.d.)

Furthermore, TV networks perform a self-regulatory function by posting advisories on certain shows. In effect, these allow them to transfer the responsibility to the parents in judging the propriety of television content. This also implies that parents are rendered responsible for whatever effects PG-rated TV programs may have on their children.

Thus, despite these practices and regulations from the networks and the government, the decision as to what kind of TV programs children should watch lies on their parents. With their guidance, children are able to understand the content and context of what they see on TV. As Hefzallah (1987) explains, “Adults should realize that as viewers they are ... full participants in the television system, as responsible as the industry itself for how things are, and in a better position to break free and cause change than in any other part of the system.” Furthermore, he states:

Without an audience, television does not exist. Accordingly, we share the responsibility with the television industry in both the bad and good about television programs, and there is no way of avoiding the challenge of becoming critical viewers and intelligent consumers of television programs. (Hefzallah, 1987: 68)

Upon seeing a PG advisory, parents are informed that the program to be shown has content deemed unsuitable for children. They are tasked to heed the warning and to undertake such an obligation.

Whetting the Watcher

On the whole, results for this study were analyzed using James Carey’s perspective on communication. Carey challenged the transmissive approach of communication in 1975 and suggested that communication “is no different with a religious ritual. In one

mode it represents the nature of human life, its condition and meaning, and in another mode—its ‘for’ mode—it induces the dispositions it pretends merely to portray” (1989: 14). This means that the media and the symbols they provide are inseparable and may foster habit through constant identification. By putting the “Parental Guidance” notice throughout the airing of certain programs, TV networks are then informing viewers that not all scenes are suitable for children; thus, parents should guide them while watching.

The study likewise adopted Burrhus Frederick Skinner’s Reinforcement Theory and Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory. Skinner’s theory states the notion that learning is made through a change in behavior, which is in turn a result of “an individual’s response to events (stimuli) that occur in the environment” (Skinner, 1953: 84). A response produces a consequence such as answering a question or doing a specified action. A stimulus-response (S-R) pattern is reinforced when the subject is conditioned to respond or is rewarded. In analogy, parenting practices affect children and can positively or negatively reinforce their behavior, including their TV viewing habits.

On the other hand, Urie Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory explains how a child and the child’s environment affect his or her growth and development. He states that:

...the ecological environment is conceived as extending far beyond the immediate situation directly affecting the developing person—the objects to which he responds or the people with whom he interacts on a face-to-face basis. Regarded as of equal importance are connections between other persons present in the setting, the nature of these links, and their indirect influence on the developing person through their effect on those who deal with him at first hand. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 14)

The child is shaped by his or her culture, family beliefs and values, and by individual behaviors of family members. Just as they are influenced by what they see on television, they are also influenced by the family's reactions to different programs.

Active engagement in or even mere exposure to what others are doing often inspires the person to undertake similar activities on her own. A three year-old is more likely to talk if other around her are talking and especially if they speak to her directly. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 6)

Consistency of parental supervision while watching TV programs would affect children's viewing habits. In reinforcement, time and frequency are crucial in developing and sharpening behavior. Parents who consistently guide their children while watching PG-rated TV programs would certainly elicit response from their children. Preventing them from seeing unsuitable scenes should make them understand that these are not good for them. Over time, children by themselves would consciously or unconsciously shift viewing patterns when they see PG warnings on TV. The same principle applies to parents: By exercising mediation on a consistent basis, they would acquire a behavioral pattern in guiding their children accordingly whenever the PG warning is shown. And, at the same time, they would also learn to shift their roles as a passive audience to a more vigilant and responsible parent audience, ready to watch over and guide their children's TV viewing. Thus, after a considerable amount of time, parental supervision becomes an indispensable part of the family ritual, i.e., television viewing.

As a reception study of parenting styles and parent's interaction with children while watching PG-rated programs, this paper deals greatly with audience research. It aims to see how the cited theories operate in different households. Four urban-community families that own at least one working TV set participated in the study.

Informal interviews were first done to gain background information on the families. Uninvolved observation was then conducted in each of the four households which comprise of at least one parent (or a legal guardian) and a child aged 3 to 12, during primetime TV viewing (7 p.m. until 10 p.m.), unless the children slept earlier. The observation period lasted for four days, Thursday to Sunday, with at least 12 hours of observation for each household. These observations were keys to determining the actual scenario of the respondents when they watch TV programs with PG rating, including the behavior of parents and the interaction between them and their children.

The researcher used reception analysis in dealing with the information gathered from the interviews and observations. The qualitative data from both instruments were analyzed separately and interpreted concurrently. Using the data gathered from the observations, personal level-qualitative analysis was conducted. In addition, Dr. Lillian Juadiong, a parenting counselor at the Department of Family Life and Child Development (DFLCD) of the University of the Philippines College of Home Economics, was interviewed to gain knowledge on the different situations that the researcher observed about the families.

Watching the Watcher

In this study, certain patterns were observed from the families during TV viewing—children could watch TV as long as they do not misbehave, or they could watch any programs that are available for them, or none of the children should argue with an adult who switches the TV channel when primetime programs would be airing. Typically, when adults watch TV, it becomes almost automatic that they are the ones who decide which programs to watch. The children, of course, are expected to simply sit and watch, with no concern as to whether or not the programs are unsuitable for them. Although it may be unobservable if children like the programs that adults watch, their disregard for this implies that a ritual has

already been established in the household. And even if they do like these programs, proper guidance should still be carried out by the parents and other adults in the household.

However, this ritual and power relations between members are not the same for all families. Parent-child interaction figures significantly in the household ritual and power relations. And through the same interaction, parenting patterns are determined. As evidence of good parenting, families where children were taught how to deal with siblings during TV viewing showed that the one who holds the power to choose which programs to watch is the one who could negotiate with other members who are watching. On the other hand, families that practice harsh parenting disregarded how PG-rated TV programs could affect children's behavior. Adults with strong personalities and who use harsh language and aggressive behavior determine what TV programs would be watched, regardless of who may be watching along with them.

TV, according to Dr. Juadiong, is a socializing agent at home. Members of the household tend to gather in front of the TV to watch certain programs. This holds true not only when the programs they like are airing, but also when the TV is merely turned on. As a socializing agent, TV should be used as a tool to start interacting with other family members who may also be watching, particularly parents and their children. Based on the family observations, however, it was deduced that families have different reasons for watching TV. And such functions of TV are also affected by the parenting styles.

Certain families use TV merely as a medium of entertainment, regardless of what might transpire in the programs that could affect children in various ways. On the other hand, the extended family parents consume television content as an instrument in restraining the children to behave and not disrupt other people who are watching TV. When children get disruptive or misbehave, adults implement forceful disciplining and prohibit TV watching as a form of punishment. However, if children are

not interested in TV programs, such function becomes ineffective. In the same way, TV also serves as a motivational tool for children to finish their assigned work. As a form of reward, parents use television to encourage children to do their tasks, especially when they want to watch particular TV programs.

TV now becomes a mere instrument for reward and punishment. By establishing this form of parenting, TV viewing affects children's behaviors, for they only behave well so they can watch programs they like, and misbehave when they do not want to watch TV. Almost everyone in a household acts as passive viewers and ordinary audiences when the TV is turned on. No one generally carries out the parent's responsibility nor minds the PG rating. It is only when children misbehave during the television-viewing ritual that prompts parents or adults to supervise.

Knowledge of the television content and its effect on children is crucial for parents to act on the PG advisory. But mere knowledge is not enough. If parents think that they do not have to supervise their children while watching TV, the PG warning would not motivate them to do so.

The focus group interview showed that the parents were aware of the possible effects of TV programs on their children. They especially pointed out the violent fighting scenes children see on TV and its influence on their behaviors. They said that their children sometimes imitate the violent action sequences in cartoons, and noted that these cartoons, although made specifically for children, ironically had PG warnings.

However, observation results showed that programs watched by the family during primetime were PG-rated and obviously unsuitable for very young audiences. All of the observed families watched drama series on the local channels that portray themes of revenge, physical and emotional abuse, and vulgarity. Also noted was the children's use of the kind of language taken from TV dramas. Nevertheless, these programs, along with its possible effects, were still watched routinely by all of the household members. Parents just ignored the PG warnings.

Parents know that many TV programs are unsuitable for their children, particularly primetime TV dramas. *Asian Treasures* features fight scenes, while *Super Ingggo* includes costume-clad children fighting evil powers with weapons. Parents admitted that many of the fight scenes were imitated by their children. Similarly, the heavy dramas *Sana Maulit Muli* and *Maging Sino Ka Man* present abusive and sexual themes that are unsuitable for children. The effects of these were observed when a child immediately asked her parents if the scene she saw, where a man slapped a woman, was real.

It is true that parental guidance is subject to the parents' discretion and values, but even though there is no PG warning, parents know that they still have a responsibility on what their children watch. Parents in the focus group interview believe that the PG warnings are important in reminding them that they should be vigilant while watching TV with their children. Some disclosed that they switch channels when sexual scenes are shown. However, they do not make other necessary actions to increase their children's awareness of how TV programs can affect them. Even though mothers realize the potential harm of television content, they do not change their TV viewing habits according to the PG warning. They also claim that watching TV is already an intrinsic part of their lifestyles.

Results of the said study showed that PG advisory has led parents to distinguish which TV programs are good and bad for their children. However, they were mum about other measures they have to undertake to supervise their children's TV viewing habits. As long as the programs are deemed "enjoyable," disruptions must be avoided then.

Parent-audiences, for the most part, remain largely oblivious to the impact of TV programs on their children. Although parent-interviewees "understand the meaning of the warnings", they "do not take the necessary actions for it."

Observation results conclude that when warnings were shown on TV, parents are not motivated to mediate over or



Children imitate what they see on television. Retrieved August 20, 2008 from <http://amysrobot.com/files/filipino.jpg>

comment on their children's TV viewing, especially during primetime hours. They tend to think that they are already guiding their children by merely being beside them while they watch programs on TV. They have yet to realize that interacting with them is a rather different aspect of family TV viewing.

Waking the Watcher

The PG symbol is a network's exercise of self-regulation in accordance to MTRCB laws, giving adult audiences a precautionary signal to mediate TV viewing especially when children are around. This warning shifts most of the responsibility from the networks to the parents in protecting children from the adverse effects of TV programs.

From the observations, it was deduced that parents and legal guardians see TV watching with children as a habit—"an

unbreakable ritual”. PG warnings become just that—a mere advisory, always seen but never really understood. They do not necessarily motivate parents to be more involved with their children’s TV viewing habits. Parents definitely see the warnings and are aware that the programs during primetime may not be suitable for their children, but their understanding does not translate to intervening action. And while they appreciate the scenes of adult programs, they become almost oblivious to their roles as their children’s guides.

Even though it is important for parents to review the content of TV programs, competing demands on their time often make this approach impractical. Usually, the children are left without adult supervision for the most part of the day. In these situations, child caretakers or babysitters need to be briefed by the parents as to how the children should be supervised while watching TV programs.

Television viewing may be restricted based on program content during particular time slots. A comforting gesture during sudden violent scenes, a hint of discouragement at violent and vengeful means of resolving problems, or an explanation of inappropriate content—these efforts could contribute to the shaping of children’s behavior with regard to television viewing.

Parents can protect their children from potentially harmful content and use TV to educate and cultivate values. They can maximize family television viewing time by teaching children critical viewing skills, such as recognizing stereotypes, distinguishing fact from fiction, identifying scenes showing behavior and values that conflict with family values, or describing alternative, nonviolent means of resolving problems. They can also examine their own viewing habits, which could influence their children’s.

In addition, this study may serve as a wake-up call for adults who remain unmindful of the potential effects of TV programs with inappropriate content on children and ignore the responsibility that PG warnings require the “PG” symbol is more than just a symbol, but a demand for vigilant mediation.

As a major influence to a child's development, parents should have a clear understanding of what good parenting is and should be able to practice it consistently. If they want to shape their children's viewing habits, they must start early on. The most fundamental of interactions with their children, such as talking to them about programs they watch, is already a leap towards reinforcing the child's behavior. This kind of parental supervision also facilitates the child's understanding of family values and ideologies.

Parents should understand that they have the moral high ground on what they think the TV networks do with their programs. Networks are in fact only lessees of air waves that they use for profit. Audiences have the power to demand acceptable television programming and ask for the best quality programs that uplift the viewing standards of audiences all over the country. In effect, the results of this study could also help improve program conceptualization and regulation policies of networks. This may increase their awareness of the possible effects of unsupervised TV viewing on a vulnerable sector of their audience – the young. The responsibility does not solely lie on the parents, but on media practitioners creating television content as well. Both must do their part in creating a child-friendly broadcast media for children.

This study could also help determine the culture behind Filipino family TV viewing practices. Audience studies related to Filipino parents would be a good area to further explore. In addition, this study may result in developments in media awareness for parents. This would greatly improve their media literacy and inspire them to provide their children with better environment and nurturing.

Moreover, the data gathered could facilitate further research on family TV viewing habits and how these could affect or be affected by culture.

The need for media literacy surfaces on this aspect where all adults should be able to understand the importance of guiding and mediating over children's TV viewing. Children are evidently

vulnerable to what they see on television and must be guided by adults who recognize their responsibility as direct influences on the child's mental and emotional development. Increasing guidance from parents is just as important as simply reducing inappropriate content of TV programs. They may learn negative behavior patterns and values from what they see on TV, and parental guidance is needed to help them sort out these influences and develop the ability to make sound decisions on their own. As Josephson (1995) writes, "In a world in which violent television is pervasive and children are susceptible to its effects, parents are the best mediators of their children's viewing."

Parenting involves an active participation in activities that children undertake. Since television viewing is a daily activity, it becomes a more pressing obligation for parents to be vigilant and to be able to guide their children as they take part in this family ritual.

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