Parental Controls

Technologies that can help parents protect children from TV and Internet content that may be inappropriate.

BY MICHAEL GREBB

THE EXPLOSION OF CABLE TV CHANNELS OVER THE LAST COUPLE of decades has given consumers a dizzying and wonderful array of content choices. And broadband content delivered over cable wires has opened up a new multimedia world on the Internet. But these innovations have also created new challenges for parents concerned about what images and sounds reach their children's eyes and ears. While parents may differ on what they find acceptable, one thing is certain: They have never had so many control tools at their disposal. Whether the concern is about TV viewing or Internet surfing, the blocking technologies available now are like nothing that has preceded them in terms of convenience, ease of use, and effectiveness.

Not only do television shows now operate under a detailed ratings system that distinguishes between violent, sexual, and other mature content, but the V-chip required in all new TV sets gives parents the power to block any show they find offensive. In addition, most cable operators provide easy-to-use parental-control tools in their set-top boxes—and have committed to providing blocking technology free of charge to customers who don't already have it. Many cable companies also provide sophisticated Internet blocking tools that can filter out offensive Web sites, and several third-party vendors sell commercial parental-control software as well.

Of course, no control technology is foolproof—some screen out the good with the bad, and none can educate as well as filter. But when combined with media-literacy awareness and skills—understanding the effects, sources, and intentions of any media content—controls offer parents a first line of defense against content that may be inappropriate for children.

TV Ratings and the V-Chip

So let's start with the most basic of controls: the television ratings system. Similar to the familiar movie ratings system that has been around for more than 30 years, these ratings offer even more guidance about the content and appropriateness of most TV programs (excluding news and sports). Here's the basic breakdown:

TV-Y: Appropriate for all children.

TV-Y7: Appropriate for children age seven and above.

TV-Y7-FV: Appropriate for older children, but includes "fantasy violence."

TV-G: General audience. Most parents would find material appropriate for all ages.

TV-PG: Parental guidance suggested. Some material may be unsuitable for younger children.

TV-14: Parents strongly cautioned. Some material may be unsuitable for children under 14.

TV-MA: Mature audience only. Material may be unsuitable for children under 17.

Often these ratings are accompanied by additional letters to denote specific red flags, including violence (V), sexual content (S), or crude language (L). Whew. Try memorizing all that! Fortunately, the technology in your TV or set-top box can do the work for you.

The ratings on their own are merely informational, but they become a powerful parental-control tool when combined with the V-chip,

www.ciconline.org/accesslearning

which is in every TV set 13 inches or larger manufactured after January 2000. (It's also included in some sets that were sold as early as July 1999.) New TV sets come with the V-chip turned off, so you need to go through the menu guide (or check the manual) to activate it and set the appropriate filtering level. The V-chip is perhaps the easiest and most universal tool parents have at their disposal. Take the time to learn how to use it.

Controls Through Cable

While TV ratings and the V-chip are a great start, the cable industry also provides parental-control features that further enhance parental power. In March 2004, the cable industry announced the Cable Puts You in Control initiative, which emphasizes viewer choice, control, and education. As part of the campaign, the National Cable & Telecommunications Association (NCTA) and Cable in the Classroom launched the Control Your TV Web site to provide additional information to parents, with information about programs appropriate for the whole family, instructions on how to use parental controls on a range of different cable set-top boxes, and media-literacy information. Recently, the cable industry stepped up their commitment with a $250 million public service ad campaign, enhanced TV ratings advisories, and, in partnership with the National PTA, 100 Control Your TV educational community events in the coming year.

Individual cable operators are also doing their part to educate subscribers. Cox Communications, for example, has launched its Take Charge! initiative, which includes diagrams explaining how parents can program their set-top boxes to block content, information on Web blocking tools, and media-literacy information. Comcast, Time Warner Cable, and several other cable operators have set up similar Web sites to educate parents. Another nifty option is the Weemote, a commercially available remote control for young children—parents can program the device to only access approved channels.

Bringing Order to the Internet

While some parents have raised alarms about television content in recent years, the amount of objectionable material on the Internet can make even the most controversial TV shows seem like *Ozzie and Harriet*. Whether you know it or not, your children are well aware of what's out there—or will come across it soon enough. Let's face it: It has never been easier to obtain objectionable video clips and other multimedia

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content—even the kind of material that used to be relegated to adult video stores. At the same time, the Internet offers children a vast amount of educational content vital to their competitiveness in school and to their ability to prepare for the workplace. A broadband cable connection is the best way to give them that edge.

So what to do? Some cable operators have stepped up with controls at the ISP level, allowing you to filter content before it even gets into your computer. For example, Comcast's Online Security Manager includes a parental-control feature that allows parents to filter inappropriate Web content, set times for children's Internet use, and monitor and supervise Internet activity. Cox Communications' online security services include password-protected filter settings and controls to block inappropriate Web sites. Charter Communications offers special parental controls to block unwanted e-mail. Check with your cable operator to see what tools are available for you.

Outside the Box: Parental-Control Software

Whoever provides your Internet connection,

you can choose from a variety of third-party software designed to set limits on the Internet using multiple filtering methods. The field of available software has become relatively crowded, however, so it's smart to shop around to find the software that fits your goals.

While dozens of software tools exist (far too many to list here), parents can narrow the search by going to the GetNetWise site and entering the specific features they seek. A list of programs that fit the bill is only a click away. Some software focuses on filtering sexual and explicit content. Other programs can monitor or set time limits on your children's Internet access. Some even automatically block outgoing data to keep kids from providing their personal information to strangers. There are also Internet browsers for kids that only allow access to pre-approved Web sites. To learn more about the dangers for kids on the Internet, or for an interactive, educational Internet-safety workshop, parents can check out NetSmartz, a site created by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and Boys & Girls Clubs of America.

Parents can increasingly control what comes into their homes on TV or the Internet by turning to powerful tools customized to their specific needs. The power is out there for those who want to use it. ◄

Related Resources

Books

Safety Monitor: How to Protect Your Kids Online. Detective Michael Sullivan (Bonus Books, 2002)

Online

Control Your TV
www.ControlYourTV.org

Cox Communications: Take Charge!
www.cox.com/takecharge/parents.asp

CyberSafety
www.cybersafety.us

Family Safe Media: The Weemote
www.familysafemedia.com/weemote.html

FCC: V-Chip
www.fcc.gov/vchip

GetNetWise
www.getnetwise.org

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