

**TESTIMONY OF
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SENIOR FELLOW
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**HEARING ON
"IMAGES KIDS SEE ON THE SCREEN"**

**BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND THE INTERNET
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

JUNE 22, 2007

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Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Digital Media Freedom
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me here today and giving me the opportunity to testify. My name is Adam Thierer and I am a senior fellow with the Progress & Freedom Foundation (PFF) where I serve as director of PFF's Center for Digital Media Freedom.

This hearing is particularly timely for me because this week PFF released a new special report that I spent the last two years compiling entitled, *“Parental Controls and Online Child Protection: A Survey of Tools and Methods.”* The booklet provides a broad survey of everything on the market today that can help parents better manage media content, whether it be broadcast television, cable or satellite TV, music devices, mobile phones, video game consoles, the Internet, or social networking websites.

(Incidentally, this booklet can be downloaded free-of-charge at www.pff.org/parentalcontrols, and I plan on making frequent updates to the report and re-posting the document online as new information comes to my attention).

As I note in my book, we live in an “always-on,” interactive, multimedia world. Parents need to be prepared to deal with media on multiple platforms, screens, and devices. While this can be a formidable challenge, luckily, there has never been a time when parents have had more tools and methods at their disposal to help them determine and enforce what is acceptable in their homes and in the lives of their children. And that conclusion is equally applicable to all major media platforms, or all the screens our children might view.

In the past, the OFF button was the only technical control at a parent’s disposal. Today, by contrast, parents like me have myriad tools and methods to restrict or tailor media content to their own household tastes and values. I could spend all my time here today merely discussing the *restrictive* tools on the market that parents can and do use to block or curtail media. Those restrictive tools include: the V-Chip and TV ratings; cable and satellite set-top box screening tools; DVD blocking controls; cell phone blocking tools; video game console controls; Internet filtering and monitoring tools, instant messaging monitoring tools; operating system controls; web browser controls; search engine “safe search” tools; media time management devices, and so on. You will find an exhaustive discussion of all these tools and many others in my book.

But while those restrictive tools are important, they are only part of the parental control story. *Enabling or tailoring* tools are what makes today's parental control market so exciting. By enabling or tailoring tools I mean any tool or method that a parent might use to enable their families to see, hear, or consume content they would regard as more appropriate, ethical, or enriching.

For example, for televised media, VCRs, DVD players, and personal video recorders have emerged as important parental control devices. These technologies give parents the ability to accumulate libraries of preferred programming for their children and determine exactly when and where it will be viewed. Pay-per-view options also help parents better tailor viewing choices for their kids. And don't forget about the huge and growing market for educational DVDs, video tapes and computer software.

Speaking of computers and the Internet, parents can now tailor their children's online activities in similar ways. In my new book, I document dozens of kid-friendly search engines and Internet portals that are essentially online "walled gardens" filled with pre-screened content and safe chat areas.

And even in the world of mobile media, new wireless handsets and services offer parents the ability to not only monitor the content their child might

try to access, but to also establish pre-approved calling lists and tailor the communications experience to make it safe enough for even very young kids.

Also, it is vital that we not overlook the importance of informal household media rules in this discussion. Oftentimes, debates about inappropriate content get so caught up with disputes about technical controls, ratings or even regulation that we forget that parents often view all these things merely as backup plans. In my book, I identify four categories of household media rules that surveys show almost all parents use some combination of to control their children's media consumption. These household media rules include:

- (1) "where" rules (assigning a place for media consumption);
- (2) "when and how much" rules (creating a media allowance);
- (3) "under what conditions" rules (carrot-and-stick incentives); and,
- (4) "what" rules (specifying the programming kids can and cannot watch).

I don't have the time here to run through all the possible examples, but certainly most of us are familiar with widely used household media rules like, "No watching TV or playing games until your homework is done," or "You can't watch that movie until you complete your chores." Such household media rules can actually be more effective in controlling children's media habits than technical controls. But debates about parental controls and media policy treat these

household media rules almost as an afterthought, if they are mentioned at all. It's time we start talking about them.

Finally, let's not forget about the ultimate parental control tool: the "power of the purse." In most cases, when kids want to consume a certain type of media—or even consume something they see advertised in the media—they need money to do so. Televisions, movies, video games, cell phones, computers, and so on, do not just drop from high-tech heaven into our kids' laps! When our kids want those things—or want things that are advertised on those media platforms—they must come to us and ask. And, although at times it may be difficult, we all have the power to say "No." That is the ultimate way to control the images our kids see on the screen.

Thank you again for inviting me today.

[Attachment: "The Right Way to Regulate Violent TV," by Adam Thierer]