Kijkwijzer: The Dutch Rating System for Audiovisual Productions

PATTI VALKENBURG, HANS BEENTJES,
PETER NIKKEN, and ED TAN

Abstract

Kijkwijzer is the name of the new Dutch rating system in use since early 2001 to provide information about the possible harmful effects of movies, home videos and television programs on young people. The rating system is meant to provide audiovisual productions with both age-based and content-based ratings. It is designed to enable self-regulation by the audiovisual sector. The development of Kijkwijzer, which took place under the auspices of NICAM, the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Media, is based on consumer research among Dutch parents, as well as theories and research on children and the media. The consumer survey that preceded the development of Kijkwijzer revealed that 70% of Dutch parents indicated that they would use a rating system. The majority of parents liked to receive information on the content of media productions, particularly about violence, frightening content, sexual depictions, discrimination, drug abuse, and coarse language. Parents also wanted age categories. Kijkwijzer distinguishes four age categories: All Ages, 6, 12 and 16. This article gives an overview and account of the various principles underlying Kijkwijzer version 1.1. It also offers suggestions for improvement of future versions of Kijkwijzer.

Keywords: AV media, children, AV content, media ratings, media classification

Introduction

Kijkwijzer is the name of the Dutch rating system in use since early 2001 to provide information about the possible harmful effects of movies, home videos and television programs on young people. The aim of this article is to explain the various principles underpinning *Kijkwijzer*. All of the authors are members of the academic committee of NICAM, the

Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Media, which is responsible for the development and application of *Kijkwijzer*. The academic committee was closely involved in the creation of *Kijkwijzer*. It advised NICAM on the design and content of *Kijkwijzer*. However, the management of the NICAM was not supported by the academic committee alone, but also by the NICAM board and other advisory bodies. So it should not be simply assumed that the advice provided by the academic committee on the *Kijkwijzer* was always followed by NICAM.

Kijkwijzer was created to enable self-regulation, which means that it is not the government that is responsible for measures to protect young people against harmful influences from the media, but rather the audio-visual sector itself. At present, self-regulation is seen by policy-makers in the Netherlands and Europe as an effective means of protecting under-age viewers against the harmful effects of visual material. In a European context, this vision has been laid down in the recommendation from the Council of the European Union of 24 September 1998. This recommendation argues for an effective European rating system to protect young people by means of self-regulation.

According to the government of the Netherlands, full self-regulation is not sufficient. An amendment to the Dutch Media Act [Mediawet] and the Criminal Code [Wetboek van Strafrecht], recently passed by the Dutch Parliament, states that the distribution and broadcasting of media content that may cause harm to the young is subject to self-regulation, whereas the broadcast and distribution of media content that can cause *serious* harm is governed by the Media Act and the Criminal Code. To this end, a new article (Article 52d) was added to the Media Act in the spring of 2001, prohibiting the broadcast on television of programs that can cause *serious* harm to persons younger than sixteen years of age, for example films featuring child pornography. Supervision of compliance with this act is the responsibility of the Dutch Media Authority [*Commissariaat voor de Media*]. The ban on distribution of seriously harmful media productions through video rental shops and cinemas is described in Article 240 of the Criminal Code.

Using *Kijkwijzer*, NICAM gives parents and other consumers information on the *possible* harmful effects of media productions. Harmfulness is a problematic term in general, but *possible* harmfulness is particularly difficult, because there is no objective definition of what can be termed possibly harmful. The decision on the possible harmfulness of media productions is a subjective one, which reveals what is considered desirable for individuals and society. Academic research has demonstrated, for example, that media violence may lead to aggressive behavior (Paik and Comstock, 1994). Whether or not this effect is considered

harmful depends on how strong one's feelings are about the use of violence in human interaction.

Judgments about possible harmfulness are subjective and depend on the morals and standards in a particular time and place. The classification of media productions inevitably takes place within this subjective context. Because *Kijkwijzer* is a subjective system, its users can demand that the decisions taken in the ratings are transparent. The subjectivity and culture-dependent nature of *Kijkwijzer* also demand that the system is flexible, in the sense that it must be open to criticism and that it must adapt to new scientific insights and changing social morals and values.

We believe that the debate on the rating of audiovisual productions benefits from open discussion. For this reason, in addition to an explanation of the content, this article also includes some critical comments on *Kijkwijzer*. The rest of this article is divided into six sections. In the first three of these, we discuss the principles underlying the creation of *Kijkwijzer* and provide an explanation of the various content and age categories. In the fourth section, we explain the coding form and the rating key. In the fifth section, we touch on a number of preconditions, with which we believe a rating system based on self-regulation must comply. In the sixth and final section, we make a number of critical comments and suggestions for the further development of *Kijkwijzer*.

Consumer research guiding the development of *Kijkwijzer*

The goal of a rating system is to inform parents about the possible harmful effects of media productions and help them supervise their children's use of the media. *Kijkwijzer* therefore focuses on parents. Because estimating the level of harmfulness of media productions is a subjective activity, it is important to gauge the opinions of parents and use these in the development of a rating system. After all, a rating system can only be successful if it fulfils the requirements of its users.

Parents' wishes and opinions were assessed by means of two consumer surveys. In 1997, the Dutch Broadcasting Audience Research Department [NOS-KLO] asked parents to indicate their major concerns about children and the media. This survey revealed that parents were worried in particular about their children picking up bad language from the media, becoming frightened or having nightmares, imitating media violence, becoming more aggressive in dealing with other children, and being exposed to sexual content too early (Valkenburg, 1997).

A new survey asked parents whether they would like to see a rating system, and if so, what sort of rating system they wanted. This survey revealed that more than three quarters of parents would like a rating system, and that 70 % of them reported that they would actually use

such a system. The majority of parents chose information on the content of media productions. In particular, they would like to be informed about violence, frightening scenes, sexual content, discrimination, drug abuse, and coarse language. In addition, parents wanted the rating system to contain age categories (Peeters and Valkenburg, 1999). As far as age is concerned, NICAM has chosen four categories: All Ages, 6PG (adult supervision recommended for children younger than six years), 12 and 16.

In sum, the decisions taken concerning *Kijkwijzer* were largely guided by consumer research among parents, the users of the system. As stated above, research among users is of great significance, in particular because academic research into children and the media can form only a limited basis for the development of a rating system. The academic research performed to date has concentrated predominantly on the effects of media violence in two content categories, *aggression* and *frightening content*. Research into media effects in the area of the other four content categories, *sexual content*, *discrimination*, *drug abuse* and *coarse language* has not been carried out, or is at a very early stage. As for these latter content categories, it is of great importance to take note of the results of consumer research.

The age categories

Kijkwijzer distinguishes between three age groups: younger than 6 years, younger than 12 years and younger than 16 years. The choice for three age limits is clear, but also somewhat misleading. First, it seems that the age of a child *within* a particular age group is not relevant. However, there are considerable differences between, for example, children of 7 and 10 and children of 12 and 15. Secondly, the development of cognitive and emotional capacities can vary dramatically between children. However, it is not practical to create a system with more age categories and impossible to take account of all possible differences between individual children. The age categories must therefore be seen as a guideline. In practice, parents will have to assess the suitability of age categories to their own children themselves. A variety of arguments can play a role in such decisions. Below, we will provide the arguments that we have used to make a distinction between the three proposed age categories.

6PG (Parental guidance recommended for children younger than six years)

The age category 6PG was developed to protect young children against certain types of frightening and violent media content, to which older children are less sensitive. It is generally recognized in current literature that children up to the age of seven do not distinguish adequately be-

tween fantasy and reality in the media (Davies, 1997). Children below this age are therefore just as susceptible to frightening or aggressive cartoons or animated films as to realistic media content. For this reason, cartoon and animated films that depict certain types of violence are rated 6PG. It is assumed that children older than seven years are able to discount the violence that occur in these types of film, reducing possible negative effects.

Research has demonstrated that children below age seven can be frightened by specific categories of images, such as grotesque fantasy characters (e. g., the bottled ghost in the film *Alladin*), transformations (e. g., the *Hulk* or *Power Rangers*), and images of animals and children that are physically abused. Specific questions covering each of these elements are included in *Kijkwijzer*. If one of these is answered positively, the production is rated 6PG.

12 years

Between the ages of ten and twelve, children start to see the world differently. They begin to realize that people belong to certain social groups and that these groups differ from one another (Hoffman, 2000). They are also able to understand other people's behavior within the perspective of their social background (Hoffman, 2000). From the age of 10, children's capacity of abstract thinking rapidly increases, and they are able to appreciate more abstract types of humor, such as parody, irony, and satire (McGhee, 1979; Selman, 1980). Because children undergo such radical changes between the ages of ten and twelve, 12 years is an important age limit.

16 years

From the age of ten onwards, children predominantly like to watch media productions intended for adults. From this age, they increasingly use films and television programs to learn social lessons and to see how actors solve everyday problems they experience themselves. Young adolescents in particular are able to strongly identify with realistic actors. Late childhood and adolescence are periods in which children are likely to idealize particular psychological and social characteristics of media figures, heroes and idols.

Research shows that criminal behavior among young people peaks during adolescence and then declines. The largest group of youthful delinquents participates in opportunistic delinquency: vandalism, shoplifting and fighting (Junger Tas, 2000). Risky delinquent behavior is attractive to young people because they are by definition somewhat on the

margins of society and do not yet have as much to lose as adults. The media show young people a host of examples of criminal behavior. Young people, especially boys, can strongly identify with criminal media heroes. They are looking for a new identity and are deliberately searching for information and ideas they can use to this end. The media and media heroes play an important role in this process (Strasburger, 1995). Therefore, in *Kijkwijzer* we have assigned certain types of violence to the 16 years age category.

Fear of violent and horror films often occurs during adolescence. This can be explained in two ways. First, children's need for excitement and sensation is at its peak during adolescence (Zuckerman, 1979). Young people test their boundaries and seek exciting and risky activities. Watching violent films offers them an opportunity to fulfill their demand for sensation. Secondly, the influence of peer groups is at its peak during adolescence (Durkin, 1997). Young people sometimes have a competitive attitude when it comes to watching violent films (Goldstein, 1998). However, they are likely to overrate their limits and to remain frightened after watching certain horror films (Cantor, 2001). Thus many of these films, such as *Hannibal* and the *Exorcist*, are rated 16.

The content categories

Based on the results of the consumer survey conducted in 1999, we have recognized six content categories that may have harmful effects on young people. These are violence, frightening content, sexual content, discrimination, hard drugs use (e. g., heroin, coke) and excessive soft drugs (e. g., marihuana, hashish) and alcohol use, and coarse language. We will consider each of these content categories in more detail.

Violence

Audiovisual violence can have several harmful consequences. Watching media violence can (a) promote aggressive behavior in children, (b) desensitize children to violence, and (c) make children fearful (Potter, 1999). With respect to the violence content category, we have focused on theories regarding the first two effects of media violence: (a) aggressive behavior and (b) desensitization. The third effect of media violence will be addressed in the next section on frightening media content.

It is generally assumed that watching media violence does not always result in aggressive behavior and desensitization. Research has demonstrated that various context characteristics of media violence may increase the danger of aggressive behavior and/or desensitization (Wilson et al., 1998). We will discuss the most important characteristics.

Degree of realism. A first context characteristic that may increase aggression and desensitization is the degree of realism of the violence (Paik and Comstock, 1994). In this rating system, we assume that violence that is not credible will have comparatively little harmful effect on children. It should be borne in mind, however, that credibility is age-related. What adults may consider innocent (*Power Rangers, Pokémon*) or deliberately exaggerated (*James Bond*), may in fact be realistic to young children.

Serious injury. A second context characteristic of media violence that may stimulate desensitization is the extent to which the consequences of the violence are shown (blood, serious injuries, mutilation). Such images increase the risk of viewers becoming desensitized or indifferent to violence (Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod, 1984).

Attractive protagonist. A third context characteristic that is known to increase aggression is the extent to which the perpetrator of the violence is attractive. Although the violence used by villains or maniacs is often more impressive, aggressive behavior is principally encouraged by violence on the part of people with whom children can identify (Paik and Comstock, 1994).

Justified violence. A fourth context characteristic is the extent to which the violence is justified. In many media productions, there is a legitimate reason for the perpetrator to use violence, for example to prevent natural disasters or save innocent victims. Seeing justified violence can stimulate children to take violence in reality less seriously (Paik and Comstock, 1994).

Rewarded violence. A fifth context characteristic is the extent to which the media violence is punished. If violence is punished one way or another, the risk of aggression in the viewer is decreased. However, content-analytic research has shown that in the majority of media productions, the violence is rewarded (Wilson et al., 1998). Children's heroes are usually clever, powerful and attractive and they are rarely reprimanded for their violent acts. Various studies suggest that rewarded violence on the part of the good character tends to increase aggressive behavior (e. g., Bandura, 1986).

The first two context characteristics, *degree of realism* and *serious injury*, were incorporated in *Kijkwijzer.* The latter three, however, were left out because in almost all fictional media productions, a large part of the violence is justified, rewarded or committed by an attractive protagonist (Wilson et al., 1998). Therefore, these context characteristics were not sufficiently discriminating and difficult to reconcile with the age ratings.

Frightening content

A possible harmful effect of media violence is that children become fearful in everyday situations or have nightmares because they cannot deal

with what they have seen. The kind of media content that can cause fear in children is age-related. For example, young children are more often afraid of fantasy content, while older children are more frequently frightened by realistic fiction and news content (Cantor, 2001; Valkenburg, Cantor and Peeters, 2000).

A number of content characteristics may induce fear in viewers. A first and significant characteristic is whether frightened people are shown. Danger is often illustrated in the media through fear on the part of main characters. In this way, the actual threat does not have to be explicitly depicted − the fear of the main characters is enough to terrify the viewers. The mechanism underlying this process is empathy with the main character.

A second characteristic is the viewer's familiarity with the setting of a media production. Research has shown that people are more frightened by dangers that are close to home, or in any event plausible than by threats that are more remote and less plausible. Frightening images placed in an everyday context are easily associated with objects or events that commonly occur in the everyday lives of children, such as toys, a school building or a trip to the seaside. For example, in *Poltergeist*, the fear is associated with the television set and toys are possessed by malevolent spirits. In *Jaws*, the fear is associated with the sea and the beach. Fear responses to media content seem to be more intense and longer lasting if they are evoked again during a confrontation with the same situations or objects that have been seen in the frightening media production. This explains why some films, such as *Jaws* and *Psycho*, are more likely to provoke long-term, intense fears than films with a more remote context, such as *The Alien*.

Two final characteristics that can contribute to the degree to which a production causes fear are the sound effects and music. As early as the 1950s, Himmelweit, Openheim and Vince (1958) discovered that children considered specific sound effects, especially music, to be frightening elements in films. Other studies have also shown that the addition of frightening music to a film can increase fear responses to this film. A study by Thayer and Levenson (1983) revealed, for example, that the addition of 'horror music' to a documentary on industrial accidents caused more fear than the addition of ordinary 'documentary music'.

Fear is strongly dependent on the viewer's level of cognitive development. Research shows that adults and older children can watch a scary film in two ways. They can give emotions free reign and enjoy the scary sensation. However, they can also weaken their emotions by thinking that what they are seeing is not real. In these cases, mature viewers and older children are using a coping mechanism referred to as 'adult discount'. Research has shown that children under the age of seven are not

able to apply this 'adult discount' when they are watching fiction. Children under the age of seven, even when they are fully aware that what they are seeing is fantasy, may not yet be able to use this knowledge to cope with frightening media content (Harris, 2000). In *Kijkwijzer*, we have taken this specific characteristic of young children into account. Questions are included that concern a number of typical fears of children below the age of seven, as well as questions about frightening content that may apply to all children.

Sexual content

Sexuality is a content category that is used in virtually all rating systems. The two consumer surveys underlying *Kijkwijzer* revealed that Dutch parents consider it important to know whether a media product contains sexual content or not. Content analyses of the nature and frequency of sex in the media have found that, at the end of the 1990s, there was more sexual content in the media than ever before and that the sex was also depicted more explicitly (Donnerstein and Smith, 2001). It should be noted, however, that the term sexual content in these analyses has been broadly interpreted. It included actions such as petting, kissing and sexual intercourse, but also images of scantily clad or seductively dressed people, and conversations about sex.

Whether the presence of sexual content in television programs or films can have harmful effects on children below the age of 16 years is unknown. This fact is fully acknowledged in the research literature (Malamuth and Impett, 2001). Unlike in the case of media violence, research into the effects of sexual content on children has not been conducted, and research among adolescents is sparse. Nevertheless, many parents are convinced that it is not advisable to allow children to watch sex at a young age.

Due to the lack of effect studies, we are forced to rely on *educated guesses* in the case of sexual content. Although there are no empirical grounds for such an assumption, we believe that young children are not yet able to correctly interpret explicit sexual content, as they do not yet have any experience with sex. One possible misunderstanding is that they see such actions as violence, and become afraid of them, which is a harmful effect. Another possible harmful effect is that they become uncomfortable about the sexual behavior of adults in their environment. A number of studies among children between eight to twelve years have shown that these children can feel uncomfortable when seeing images of sex and other intimate behavior (Wartella et al., 2000). Children who are not yet sexually mature state that they would rather not be confronted by kissing, petting and overly intimate cuddling on the part of adults.

Another potentially harmful consequence for children is that they may form an undesirable idea of sexual relations on the basis of what they see in audiovisual productions. After all, sex is often presented in ways that are far removed from reality. Sex in fiction, for example, is rarely planned. Contraceptives are rarely used and women who initially are unwilling often yield completely to just a little persistence. The risk that young viewers pick up incorrect ideas from sexual media presentations is particularly present in the case of adolescents. Because at this time of life, children are still forming their sexual identity, they are eagerly in search of information about sexual relations. Particular distorted forms of sexuality are seen as harmful in *Kijkwijzer*. Unpunished forcing of sexual actions, for example, is rated 16.

Discrimination

The consumer research made it clear that parents would like to be informed about discrimination in the media on the basis of gender, race, religion, nationality or ethnic background. One possible harmful effect of discrimination in audiovisual media is that children come to see such actions as normal. If discrimination is presented as being tough or macho, it is even possible that they will be seen as worth copying. If characters with whom children can identify discriminate, and if this discrimination is not explicitly discouraged, the media production is rated 12.

Hard drugs use and excessive use of soft drugs and alcohol

As in the case of discrimination, a possible harmful effect of the use of hard drugs (e. g., heroine, cocaine) and excessive use of soft drugs (hashish, marihuana) and alcohol in audiovisual media is that children accept these as normal. If such use is shown in a positive light, children and adolescents may even see it as worth imitating. It is well known that many characters in films and television series drink alcohol. Often, these are characters with whom young adolescents can identify. Research has demonstrated that alcohol and drugs use often starts during adolescence (Strasburger, 1995). It is therefore plausible to suppose that children are particularly susceptible during this period to information about alcohol and drugs. Whenever use of hard drugs or excessive use of soft drugs or alcohol is shown in a favorable light, the production is rated 16. If it is shown as not advisable or implicitly discouraged, the media production is rated 12. If it is explicitly discouraged, the production is rated All Ages.

Coarse language

Consumer research has shown that parents are relatively worried about the large amount of coarse language in the media and want to be informed about this (Peeters and Valkenburg, 1999). Although coarse language is included as a content category, unlike the other content categories, coarse language is not given an age rating. In the test ratings, we found many examples of coarse language, including coarse language by characters with whom children could identify. It is conceivable that children follow this example, which is a possible harmful effect. However, it is uncertain at what age children are most sensitive to the effects of coarse language. After all, already at the age of two children regularly imitate slogans and phrases they have heard on the television. Bad and obscene language also appears to be frequently adopted within subcultures of older children and adolescents. For this reason, we have chosen to inform parents about the presence of coarse language, but not to link this to a particular age rating.

The coding form and the rating key

The first version of *Kijkwijzer*, version 1.0, was introduced in the spring of 2001. The moment that version 1.0 was introduced, however, so many changes were already in the pipeline that we waited with presenting the scientific arguments until version 1.1 was ready. The comments in this section therefore concern only version 1.1 of *Kijkwijzer* and no other versions.

The *Kijkwijzer* coding form consists of a series of questions on the *content* of the audiovisual production (see www.kijkwijzer.nl). These questions are presented to the coder via Internet. As mentioned above, the coders are employees of the distributors and broadcasters in the audiovisual sector. Using a password, the coders can access the Internet site to rate their media productions. A computer program then automatically calculates the age rating of the media production (i.e., All Ages, 6PG, 12, 16).

Not all of the questions in the coding form apply to all media productions. For example, if the production is a slapstick cartoon (e.g., *Tom and Jerry*), the coder need not answer the other questions in the form. If one or more questions are not relevant, the computer automatically moves on to the next relevant question. The number of questions to be completed therefore depends on the nature and content of the production.

Generally speaking, the questions are accompanied by very explicit examples. This may have a comic effect. However, these explicit examples have proven necessary for achieving a reasonable degree of reliabil-

ity between coders. In future versions of *Kijkwijzer*, it is desirable that the examples accompanying the questions are not in print, but in audio-visual form. The website will then show the coder a number of film fragments along with the various answer options. The intercoder reliability will undoubtedly benefit from such audiovisual examples.

The *Kijkwijzer* version 1.1 coding form is accompanied by a specific rating key. In the section below, we will discuss not only the coding form, but also the most significant elements of this rating key. A complete description of the rating key can be obtained from NICAM. The questions in the coding form for *Kijkwijzer* version 1.1 concern seven categories: (1) the type of media production, (2) violence, (3) frightening content, (4) sexual content, (5) discrimination, (6) hard drugs and excessive soft drugs/alcohol use, and (7) coarse language. These categories are discussed below.

The type of media production

Kijkwijzer starts with a number of questions about the type of media production. The first three questions concern fictional productions and the last three non-fiction productions. In the questions on the nature of fictional programs, it is asked whether the production is (1) a slapstick cartoon or slapstick animation (e. g., *Tom en Jerry*), (2) another type of cartoon or animation (e. g., *Pokémon*), or (3) another fiction/drama product. These three questions are intended to ascertain the reality status of the production. As was made clear earlier, the reality status of a production plays an important role in terms of effects on aggression, desensitization, and fear. Academic research has shown that children above the age of seven see physical violence in cartoons and animated films as less credible and therefore do not take this violence as seriously as violence in productions featuring real-life people (Wilson et al., 1998). It has also been demonstrated that cartoon violence has less effect in terms of fear and aggression on children aged seven and older.

Children younger than seven years do take cartoon violence seriously, because they are not yet able to distinguish effectively between violence in cartoons and realistic films. For this reason, the violence in cartoon and animated films is coded, but this type of violence is not rated higher than 6PG. There is one exception to this, however. 'Slapstick cartoons or slapstick animated films' are not coded, because we assume that children from the age of three years do not take the violence in these cartoons seriously.

It should be noted that the three questions about fictional programs are not intended to identify the various genres. We initially attempted to base the coding on genre (e. g., Western, art house film, documentary),

but this proved impossible. In recent years, there has been an increasing *hybridization* of genres. Whereas in the past the content of a cartoon, for example, could be predicted with a reasonable degree of accuracy, this is no longer the case at all. Cartoons such as *South Park* and *Beavis and Butthead*, for example, contain forms of language, discrimination, and sexuality that do not belong in traditional cartoons. Contemporary cartoons also no longer necessarily consist of drawn pictures. In *South Park*, for instance, images of real people are used on occasion. Due to this increasing blurring of genre borders, it was decided to make the ratings independent of genre.

A second reason not to classify media productions by genre is the fact that, in the case of television, children often zap back and forth between various programs. This means that children can be confronted by scenes that have no relationship whatsoever with the nature or character of the media production in question taken as a whole. Neither can possible harmful effects of such out-of-context scenes be viewed in the perspective of the specific genre of the production. In other words, it is irrelevant whether a violent or frightening scene, which children come across while zapping, occurs in an action adventure film, an art house film or an educational documentary.

Version 1.1 of *Kijkwijzer* is also meant to rate non-fiction productions, including reality TV, documentaries and talk shows, because these productions can include elements that may be harmful to young viewers. Live programs, news, and current affairs programs are not classified using *Kijkwijzer*. The last three questions in this section concern these non-fiction programs.

Violence

The rating of violence occurs in six blocks. The first block, *talk shows*, concerns a specific type of violence that occurs in talk shows and that cannot be dealt with in the other questions about violence in this section. The starting point for the questions about talk shows is that the violence in these shows is in fact realistic. A characteristic of violent talk shows is that physical violence is used, that threats of physical violence are made, or that *psychological* violence is used in the sense that people are mocked. Another characteristic of such shows is that the physical or psychological violence is approved or even stimulated by the presenter and/or audience. This sanctioning of violence by the presenter or audience is seen as a possible harmful effect. In one of the most widely accepted effect theories, Bandura's social learning theory (1986), it is assumed that the risk of aggressive behavior increases if the violence is rewarded or approved of. Talk shows in which physical or psychological

violence is approved of or stimulated by the presenter or audience are therefore rated 12. If the presenter explicitly rejects the violence, he or she may neutralize the harmful effect. In this case, the talk show is rated 6PG.

In the second block, addressing programs other than talk shows, the coder is asked to indicate how often various types of physical violence occur. These include (1) *rape or visibly attempted rape*, (2) *physical hand-to-hand violence*, (3) *violence with firearms, blunt or edged weapons*, (4) *war violence*, (5) *physical torture,* and (6) *violence against criminals*. In this block, we deliberately included a certain amount of duplication. After all, both *war violence* and *violence against criminals* often imply physical *hand-to-hand violence*. This and other duplications were included to minimize the risk of coders overlooking certain types of violence in the production. Violence against criminals, for example, proved to be easily overlooked if committed by the police.

We have not included questions on psychological violence for fictional programs. We did initially attempt to, but questions on psychological violence did not result in reliable ratings in the first draft versions of *Kijkwijzer.* In practice, however, it transpired that psychological violence in a particular production is mostly accompanied by physical violence, which diminishes the need for rating psychological violence.

It is important to know that it is irrelevant for the rating key what types of violence and how many types of violence are coded. Indicating one type of violence leads to the same age rating as indicating two or more types of violence. It is also irrelevant how often the violence occurs. The basic assumption is that parents are informed whenever violence is an ingredient in a media production. A single violent scene can be sufficient to make a production unsuitable for young children.

The third block regarding violence is concerned with the *feasibility* of the violent actions. As with the questions on the type of fictional production, this question has been included in order to distinguish between more and less realistic productions. If there are no acts of violence in a media production that could be performed by people, this is an unrealistic production. As stated above, because children do not take such productions seriously, productions containing violence which is not feasible are given a lower age rating.

The fourth block, *impressive violence*, consists of three questions that are aimed at measuring the impressiveness of the violence. The questions in this block have been included in order to make nuances in the age ratings. In the case of feasible violence, a positive answer to one of these questions is sufficient to ensure that the production will be given the age rating 12. The idea behind this question is that impressive violence in-

creases the risk of aggressive behavior and desensitization and therefore requires a higher age rating.

The fifth block, *injuries*, consists of two questions. The first question is concerned with whether injuries occur in the production. If this is the case, it is asked whether these are *serious* injuries. A number of ideas underlie these two questions. The question of whether injuries occur at all is intended for realistic programs (documentaries, reality TV). The underlying thought is that an injury in realistic programs is seen as more serious than the same injuries in fictional programs. We are assuming that a child sees injuries ensuing from a shooting as more serious if these occur in a realistic program than if these are shown in a police series.

The sixth and last block, *slapstick context*, is intended to prevent that the violence in fictional series such as *Laurel and Hardy* and *Home Alone* result in too high age ratings. Every child older than seven years realizes that violence in this type of series is different from the violence in series such as *Miami Vice*. If the violence is committed in a slapstick context, this results in a lower age rating. A film such as *Home Alone* shows violence that is both feasible and impressive. Such a film would quickly lead to a *Kijkwijzer* age rating of 12. However, because the violence is committed in a slapstick context, *Home Alone* is given the label 6PG.

Assignment of age ratings for violence in fictional productions. In *Kijkwijzer*, three types of fictional productions are distinguished: (1) slapstick cartoons or animations (e. g., *Popeye*), (2) other cartoons and animations, and (3) other fictional productions. Slapstick cartoons or animations are always given the rating All Ages. Other cartoons and animations that contain one or more types of violence, will be given the label 6PG at the most. In the case of other fictional productions, featuring real-life people, rating is more complex. If the fictional production does not contain any violence, it will of course be rated All Ages. If it does contain violence, it will be rated at least 6PG. In addition, the following key is applied:

- Violence that (a) is feasible, (b) is impressive and (c) leads to serious injury, is rated 16.
- Violence that (a) is feasible, (b) is impressive and (c) does not lead to serious injury, is rated 12.
- Violence that (a) is feasible, (b) is not impressive and (c) leads to serious injury, is rated 12.
- Violence that (a) is not feasible, (b) is impressive and (c) leads to serious injury, is rated 12.
- Other productions in which violence occurs are rated 6PG.

If the violence described above takes place in a slapstick context, the age ratings are lowered from 16 to 12 and from 12 to 6PG.

Assignment of age ratings for violence in documentaries and reality TV. The assignment of age ratings for realistic productions parallels that for fictional productions. One important difference, however, is that the violence in realistic productions is always feasible. Feasibility is therefore not a discriminating factor in realistic productions. It is also true for realistic productions that, if one or more types of violence occur, it must be rated at least 6PG. Hence, the following key applies.

- Violence that (a) is impressive and (b) leads to *serious* injury, is rated 16.
- Violence that (a) is not impressive and (b) leads to *serious* injury, is rated 12.
- Violence that (a) is impressive and (b) leads to injury, is rated 12.
- Violence that (a) is not impressive and (b) leads to injury, is rated 12.
- Violence that (a) is impressive and (b) does not lead to injury, is rated 12.
- Other productions in which violence occurs are rated 6PG.

Assignment of age ratings to talk shows. Talk shows in which violence occurs are given the age rating 12 or 6PG. The 12 rating is given to talk shows in which the physical or psychological violence (mocking) is approved of by the presenter or audience. A production in which physical violence is used that is not condoned, is rated 6PG. Productions in which people are mocked, but in which this is not condoned, are rated All Ages.

Frightening content

The rating of productions with frightening elements takes place in four blocks. The first block of questions contains eight questions about situations that are particularly frightening for young children. Because children below the age of seven are not yet able to apply knowledge of fantasy and reality when watching fiction, they can be frightened by elements that may be amusing to adults. If one or more of the questions from the first block is answered positively, the production is rated 6PG.

The second block contains questions that attempt to ascertain whether the production features people who are extremely afraid as a result of accidents, disasters or war or as a result of violent acts by living beings. It was explained above that media productions often use fear on the part of characters to convey fear to the audience. If these questions are answered in the affirmative, the production is rated 12, unless there is always an immediate happy outcome for the frightened people in the production.

This type of situation can occasionally occur in series such as *Baywatch*, for example if someone is in danger of drowning and very frightened. In this series, the frightening situation is always resolved so quickly, that it hardly has a chance to affect the viewer. In such cases, the production is rated 6PG.

Alongside images of very frightened people, there are other elements of audiovisual productions that can arouse fear. In the third block, three of these are distinguished: frightening noises, serious injuries and extreme horror effects. In the fourth and last block, questions are asked concerning the familiarity of the setting in which the frightening events take place, as an everyday environment increases the risk of viewers continuing to be afraid after seeing the production.

Assignment of age ratings. Cartoon or animated films never score higher than 6PG in the case of fear. The same rules apply to other fictional and realistic programs. If a positive answer is given to one or more of the questions in the first block, this will result in rating 6PG and a fear pictogram. In three cases, frightening content leads to the age rating 16. Firstly, a production that contains (a) very frightened people or sounds, in combination with (b) serious injuries and (c) horror effects, which are located in a (d) everyday environment. Secondly, a production with (a) very frightened people or sounds, in combination with (c) horror effects, in (d) an everyday environment. Thirdly, a production that presents: (b) serious injuries, in combination with (c) horror effects, in (d) an everyday environment.

The fear question leads to the 6PG age rating in four cases. First, if a positive answer was given to at least one of the questions from the first block. Secondly, if the following are present: (a) very frightened people/sounds, (b) without serious injury and (c) horror effects in (d) a non-everyday environment. Thirdly, if there are (a) very frightened people in (d) an everyday environment but whereby there is an immediate happy outcome in all cases. Fourthly, if the following are present: (a) very frightened people in (d) a non-everyday environment whereby there is a happy outcome in all cases. In all other cases, positive answers to the fear question result in age rating 12.

Sexual content

There are two blocks about sexual content. The first block contains questions on the frequency of the sexual acts and the visibility of genitals. The second block is intended to ascertain whether sexual acts are imposed and then whether this imposition has negative consequences for the perpetrator. In the literature, rape and serious forms of sexual violence are sometimes included under sexuality. Rape or attempted rape is

not categorized as sexuality in *Kijkwijzer*, but as violence, and coded accordingly.

Assignment of age ratings. A production that (a) shows sexual acts and (b) shows details of genitalia, is given the age rating 16. A production that (a) shows sexual acts, (b) without showing genitals, but in which (c) the sex is imposed, (d) without this having negative consequences for the perpetrator, is rated 16. Productions in which no sexual acts occur or productions in which (a) sexual acts occur once or a few times, and (b) in which no genitals are shown, and (c) in which the sexuality is not imposed, is given the rating All Ages. Other productions in which sexual actions occur are rated 12.

Discrimination

Three questions are asked on the subject of discrimination. It is asked whether discriminatory expressions or behavior occur in the production, whether these expressions or behavior are explicitly discouraged, and whether the expressions and behavior are committed by a comic 'anti-hero' who cannot be taken seriously (such as *Al Bundy* in *Married with Children*).

Assignment of age ratings. If the discrimination is not explicitly discouraged, an age rating of 12 is given. If discrimination is explicitly discouraged, the age rating All Ages can be given. Even if the discrimination is not explicitly discouraged, but all discriminatory expressions are made by an 'antihero' who cannot be taken seriously, such as *Basil* in *Fawlty Towers*, the production can be given the rating All ages.

Drug abuse and excessive alcohol consumption

This block consists of three questions. The first question is whether use of hard drugs or excessive use of soft drugs is shown in the production. It is also asked to what extent this use is placed in a favorable light and whether it is explicitly discouraged.

Assignment of age ratings. If hard drugs are used in the production or excessive use is made of soft drugs or alcohol, the rating 12 is given. If drug or excessive alcohol use is shown in a favorable light, the production will be rated 16, and if it is explicitly discouraged, the production is rated AL.

Coarse language

Coarse language refers to Dutch terms and well-known English terms such as *fuck* and *bitch*. In English or American series, Dutch subtitles are rated, except in the case of well-known English terms that Dutch

children understand without dubbing. Coarse language does not lead to an age rating because there is no reason to assume that coarse language is potentially more harmful to one particular age group than another.

Preconditions for a successful rating system

Kijkwijzer is created to enable self-regulation by the audiovisual sector. In practice, the rating of media productions takes place by individual coders working for a media broadcaster or distributor. A rating system based on individual opinions can work only if the criteria below are fulfilled.

Transparency. As explained above, *Kijkwijzer* is a subjective system. Interpretation plays a considerable role at several levels. Not only has the existing scientific research literature been interpreted by the members of the academic committee, but the coding itself also is an interpretative process. Although the system is not objective, it is transparent. Interested consumers can check not only what rating was assigned to a particular production but also how the rating came about.

Validity. The rating system must be valid. Sound validity of the system means that the questions in the coding form are drawn up in such a way that they result in the intended and desired age ratings. In *Kijkwijzer*, coders are not asked to give an age rating to media productions. They are asked to answer questions on the *content* of the production, and the answers about this content determine the final age ratings. Sound validity also means that the answers about the content of the production lead to the age rating most parents would give to the media production in question on the basis of their experiences with children. If, for example, the content codes for films with impressive violence, such as *Hannibal*, lead to the age rating 16, the validity of the system is sound. If such a film were to lead to an age rating of 12, 6PG or All Ages, the validity of *Kijkwijzer* would be questionable.

Reliability. The system must be reliable. This means that if various coders code one film or television program, they should arrive at the same coding result. The coding form is designed in such a way that every question has direct consequences for the age rating that follows from the answers. So the system has to be set up so that the chance of coders filling in the same response to any particular question is optimized. A great deal of time was spent on the reliability aspect during the development of the system. Some questions in the form have been tested several times, with students from Amsterdam and Nijmegen University as coders, and with the NICAM coders themselves.

Competent coders. Although the creators of the coding form have done their best − and still are doing their best − to make the coding form as clear as possible, coding is not so simple that anyone can do it, without

effort and knowledge. It is therefore very important that the coders are trained. In order to arrive at a correct rating, it is essential that coders have a feel for children's cognitive level and perception of their environment at different ages.

Openness to criticism. Kijkwijzer was initially developed for fiction on television and in the cinema. The application of the system to other genres and media productions may create surprises, as less research has been conducted into these genres and productions. If these surprises have consequences for the validity or reliability of the ratings, *Kijkwijzer* will have to be adjusted accordingly. Alongside possible surprises, there are other reasons why *Kijkwijzer* must be open to criticism. The first of these is that new media content is always being developed. Secondly, academic knowledge is developing, albeit much more slowly than the development of new media content. Finally, we will have to wait and see how the results of *Kijkwijzer* are received by the consumers. If a large section of the general public is not happy with the ratings ensuing from *Kijkwijzer*, it may be desirable to adjust the instrument.

Conclusions and suggestions for further development

There is a great deal of interest in *Kijkwijzer*, also from outside the Netherlands. *Kijkwijzer* meets parents' demand for reliable information on audiovisual productions, as they are concerned about the effects on their children and on society. Furthermore, the system seems useful as part of self-regulation. Some people are already talking about a *Kijkwijzer* for the whole of the European Union. Given this feeling of exaltation, it would be sensible to make a number of critical notes.

The 6PG rating

We do not consider the 6PG rating to be well chosen. First, in the scientific literature, the age of seven, rather than six, is seen as a critical age. One year may seem a small difference, but at this age a lot is happening in terms of cognitive and emotional development. From the start, the academic committee has pointed out the importance of the introduction of an age rating of seven years. Unfortunately, this was not implemented − a move that is regrettable for a number of reasons.

The 6PG label can be misleading for parents. Firstly, it can arouse the incorrect assumption that a media production that may be harmful to children below six years of age, can be watched by this age group as long as an adult is co-viewing. However, as was made clear earlier, children below the age of seven cannot yet apply the 'adult discount'. Even if an adult watches with the children and explains that what they are

seeing is not real, young children can still be adversely affected by productions that are not suitable for them. The 6PG label is particularly misleading in the case of cinema films, which are highly impressive because of the volume of the sound and the size of the screen, because it gives parents the impression that watching with their children (accompanying them to the cinema) is sufficient to counteract negative effects in young children. This is not the case. Some films are unsuitable for children below the age of seven, irrespective of whether a parent watches with the children or not.

The 6PG label is also misleading because it gives the impression that parental guidance while watching is only important for children younger than six. *Kijkwijzer* is intended to inform parents about the *content* and the *ages* for which a media production is suitable. Based on this information, parents can decide themselves whether they should watch with their children or not. By associating the PG label exclusively with the age of 6 years, an implicit and incorrect suggestion is made that watching with children older than six is not necessary. This suggestion too is confusing and not in agreement with scientific studies that demonstrate that parental guidance of television also has positive effects on older children.

Regular research

A second comment we would like to make is that *Kijkwijzer* can only function well if the weak points of the system are systematically and regularly identified. Precisely because the system is transparent, it is easy to detect incorrect ratings. During the first months of the system, we regularly found incorrect ratings in the TV listings of magazines. A rating of 6PG for the television series *Poltergeist the Legacy* is a good example. An incorrect rating can be caused by a number of factors: it is possible that the coding form was not clear enough, the key not satisfactory, or perhaps the coder, deliberately or not, gave an incorrect answer to one or more questions. *Kijkwijzer* is a system in progress that can only be optimized if systematic research demonstrates if and where incorrect ratings are occurring, who is making these, and why they are being made.

Training the coders

Kijkwijzer is used within the context of self-regulation by the audiovisual sector and the rating is performed by individual coders associated with one of the parties that have an immediate interest in the outcomes of the ratings. At present, the competence of the coders is not tested. In our opinion, however, the system is not so easy that any coder can use

it without prior practice and knowledge. The system only works if the coders are carefully trained. It is essential that coders have a feel for the cognitive and emotional level of children of different ages. We firmly believe that incorrect ratings can be minimized in future versions of *Kijkwijzer* by including audiovisual examples, in the form of film fragments, with the various answer categories in the coding form, instead of written examples. One audiovisual example of impressive violence is of course much more effective than several pages of written text.

The content codes

At present, *Kijkwijzer* is focused on violence, frightening content, sexual content, discrimination, drugs abuse, and coarse language. Alongside these content categories, there are other media content about which parents are concerned (e. g., the portrayal of dangerous behavior). During the test ratings, we found many examples of dangerous behavior that children probably would not come across in everyday life. Much of this behavior is glossed over. Examples include dangerous driving in traffic, jumping off roofs, playing with weapons, taking large quantities of sleeping pills and having sex without using a condom. Some of these behaviors, which are presented as normal or 'cool' in the media, lend themselves for imitation. For practical reasons, it was decided not to add more content categories. However, it may be necessary to reconsider this decision in the future.

Negative versus positive advice

Based on the legislative proposal adopted in the spring of 2001 concerning the rating and broadcast of program components, at present *Kijkwijzer* only gives information on the harmful and therefore negative aspects of a media product. However, *Kijkwijzer* is often presented to the public as a system for providing product information to consumers. Good product information should however provide information on both the positive and negative attributes of productions. The consumer research revealed that, alongside a need for information on the potentially harmful nature of a product, many parents also have a need for information on the positive, desirable effects of media productions on children. We believe that NICAM will have to form a vision in the shorter or longer term of a more integral information system that can inform parents of both the positive and the negative aspects of a media product. Such a role expansion would of course have significant consequences for the instrument. For example, thought would have to be devoted to the ways in which positive (desirable) and negative (harmful) aspects relate

to one another within one media production and on the way in which consensus on these aspects can be reached between different parties (e. g., parents vs. coders).

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