

**Remarks of Dan Glickman  
MPAA Chairman and CEO  
To The Media Institute  
40 Years of Freedom: A Progress Report on the Modern Movie Ratings System  
Washington, DC—September 10, 2008**

**Introduction**

Thank you for the invitation. It's great to be back at The Media Institute. The timing's right having just come back from Denver and the Twin Cities. Frankly, I don't think Hollywood could have scripted this election any better...war hero and hockey mom versus Kennedy-esque voice of a new generation and elder statesmen. These are exciting times for our nation and our democratic process.

...And, it's made for the movies. Obama has said he'd like Will Smith to play him. Everyone wants Tina Fey for Sarah Palin. So at least the armchair casting is well underway—even if the movies have yet to be greenlit.

Of course, in Hollywood, we all tend to be a little better looking...have more hair...and the prerequisite ultimate fighting skills needed to go *mano a mano* with the bad guys. But in terms of our ideals, when we see our political process up on the big screen, we do tend to see a lot of ourselves reflected back at us.

There are cynical moments:

- The 1962 film *Advise and Consent* deals with Presidential nominations and teaches—quote—“a Washington, D.C. kind of lie (is) when the other person knows you're lying and also knows you know he knows.” Surely none of us know about that.

There's romance:

- Michael Douglas as *The American President*. Who can forget Annette Bening hanging up on the Commander in Chief when he calls to ask for a date—thinking it's a hoax?

And, there are genuinely uplifting films:

- In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a freshman Senator takes on a pork-barrel project in his own state and famously notes that the only causes worth fighting for are lost causes. ...Imagine that.

Whether playing for laughs or to our highest ideals, the heart and soul of this genre is the quintessentially democratic belief that one person can make a difference. Safeguarding that principle in the real world, of course, is the first amendment...the first freedom granted every American as their birthright...the freedom of expression...the freedom to speak truth to power. It's something we too often take for granted in this country, without fully appreciating what a profound and still-rare freedom it remains in the world today.

Coming to this organization that exists as a guardian of the first Amendment, I can't help but think of *All the President's Men*. I'll never forget Jason Robards playing *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee. In deciding to run a key story, he senses the weight of history and the

stakes for democracy and excitedly declares, “Nothing's riding on this except the first amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press, and maybe the future of the country.”

Movies demonstrate to the world that here in America we can look honestly, without fear of censorship, into the highest levels of government and live to tell the tale. So as I thought about this visit, the thing I wanted most to talk with you about is something in this country and my industry that has become synonymous with the first amendment...with political, artistic and creative expression in this country...and that is our movie rating system.

#### **40 Years of Freedom**

On November 1, 2008, three days before this monumental election, the rating system will quietly mark its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It is the world's only voluntary, non-governmental film rating system. I thought I'd talk about what that has meant to this artform...and what it continues to mean to our democracy and our people—particularly parents of young children for whom the system primarily exists.

With a birthday in the late 1960s, it's no coincidence that the rating system was born in a time of immense social change—the profound progress secured by the civil rights, women's rights and labor movements of that era. Art reflects society. And, out of this fertile ground sprang a new kind of American movie—frank and open.

At the time, filmmaking was governed by an outmoded regime of self-censorship known as the Hays Code—named after the first MPAA President Will Hays. Viewed through modern eyes, it's both humorous and troubling. Only “correct standards of life” could be presented. No depictions of childbirth. No criticisms of religion. Forget about “lustful” kissing or “suggestive” dancing. If married couples were shown in bed, then typically each actor had to keep one foot on the floor at all times.

Under the Hays Code, films were simply approved or disapproved based on whether they were deemed “moral” or “immoral.” And, even this was considered progress. The Hays Code had replaced government censorship imposed by dozens of censor boards across the country. MPAA, in fact, was founded in 1922 to help steer the medium out of that morass.

Some of you, I know, had the opportunity to meet my predecessor, Jack Valenti. We lost Jack a little over a year ago. He left us and me many legacies. But perhaps his greatest is the rating system. He came to the MPAA in the 1960s. He took one look at how our nation was changing...how the art of filmmaking was reflecting those changes, and he saw the Hays Code for what it was. As only Jack could put it, he said, “there was about this stern, forbidding catalogue of do's and don'ts the odious smell of censorship.”

New to the job, Jack quickly became embroiled in controversy over the film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*. Ultimately, the uproar led to a three-hour sit-down with studio execs to discuss the first-ever on-screen use of the word “screw”— outside the traditional home improvement context – and one even more colorful line. In the end “screw” was relegated back to the toolbox and “hump the hostess” went on to make cinematic history.

But the experience left Jack uneasy. He knew the solution wasn't imposing on filmmakers a long list of "thou shalt nots." So instead, he and others came up with the ratings system.

### **What the Ratings System Is (and Is Not)**

Like the first amendment itself, it's not unusual for the system to be a source of controversy. To a certain extent, that's healthy and to be expected in a diverse society. But a lot of the controversy stems from some fairly basic misunderstandings. While many find ratings informative, they really exist for one primary, core purpose—to give parents clear information about a film's content to help them decide if a movie is OK for their kids.

Ratings do not exist to cast judgment on whether a movie is "good" or "bad." The system is not a gatekeeper of society's morality and values. It does not require artists to promote behavior and beliefs deemed socially or morally upright. Some, from time to time, try to pressure the system into taking on these inappropriate roles in a free society. But the primary mission is transparency for parents—clear information about the content of films.

Raters themselves are parents. They have no prior industry affiliation. Their job is to reflect what they believe would be the majority view of their fellow parents. So in rating a film, they ask questions any parent would ask: Would I let my kids watch this? At what age? With or without an adult? What would I want to know about this film to make my decision?

In this way, the system does not set social policy. But it does reflect modern parental concerns. Drug use is a classic example. In the 1960s and '70s, many thought it was somewhat socially accepted. That changed over time...and the ratings now reflect that change.

And, while the system has its critics, it has consistently maintained near 80% approval ratings among those it exists to serve—and that's parents of young children.

### **Modern Changes to the System**

Over time, we've made changes. We added PG-13 in 1984. With the release of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, we realized there was too wide a gulf between PG and R, so we created this new category with a sterner warning to parents that these films may well be inappropriate for their young children.

In 1990, we added rating descriptors—brief explanations of why a film received its rating. This way, it's clear to parents that *Shrek* was rated PG for "mild language and some crude humor," while *The Dark Knight* is PG-13 "for intense sequences of violence and some menace." These descriptions essentially offer truth in labeling for parents' consideration.

Last spring, we added smoking—alongside violence, sexuality, language and other factors in the rating system. Teen smoking had always been considered under the category of "adult activities"—that is: something you don't want your kids to do. Now, we ask three additional questions: Is smoking pervasive in the movie? Does the film glamorize smoking? And, is there a mitigating historic or public health context? So even a film like *Good Night and Good Luck* that portrayed a period in American history where smoking was ubiquitous would likely carry the descriptor "pervasive smoking," so there's clear disclosure to parents.

...And, we get that parents lead busy lives. So we've made a commitment to making it easy to get this information. When I came to MPAA, we launched Red Carpet Ratings, which is a free weekly email service with ratings information on current films.

I also want to see the sunshine extend to filmmakers. We now have a liaison to the independent film community, going out to festivals, working with the Independent Film and Television Alliance and others to share information about the system and demystify the process. We rate over 850 films each year. The overwhelming majority are independent films. So we're working hard to make the system more transparent...to help all filmmakers understand its purpose and value...that there is no censorship...just clear information to parents...and an essential safeguard for filmmakers' ability to bring their unique visions to life. Building and maintaining understanding and trust in the system—on all sides—is essential to its survival.

And, we are very fortunate in this effort to have the partnership of the National Association of Theatre Owners, which oversees the rating system alongside MPAA and enforces the ratings in theaters, and the Directors' Guild of America, which understands how important ratings are to maintaining creative freedom in this country. The rating system simply would not have the tremendous success of these past 40 years without the support and leadership of these committed partners. And, I want to personally acknowledge and thank John Fithian, the head of NATO, Jay Roth, the executive director of the Directors Guild, as well as the current DGA president, Michael Apted, for standing with us in these efforts.

Do I occasionally find a film offensive? You bet. I'm a movie-goer with my own political, social and moral views like anyone else. But that's beside the point of the rating system. It's about information...truth in labeling...allowing diverse voices and visions to be heard and seen...protecting freedom of expression...all while respecting parent's desire for the information they need to raise their kids according to their beliefs, not those of whoever happens to be in charge at the time in either Washington or Hollywood. That's something I hear loud and clear from parents: We do not want you to do our job. Give us the information, and we will make our own decisions.

### **What about Advertising?**

I should add that we are also very cognizant of the fact that parental concerns today extend to advertising of movies. Many don't know this but every film that goes into theaters with an MPAA rating must have all of its advertising approved—posters, billboards, Internet ads, you name it. Our focus is on age-appropriate ads. So certain TV spots might be allowed late at night. More provocative trailers might be OK if shown only with similarly themed and rated movies. This is something we're paying significant attention to as an industry, and we have an entire Advertising Administration working full-time to keep this commitment.

### **Why We Rate Films**

We've had an incredible diversity of films this year. Among them was a terrific animated movie called *Kung Fu Panda*. It was a global phenomenon, and it caused some hand-wringing in China, which—to put it mildly—isn't likely to join The Media Institute anytime soon.

*Kung Fu Panda* was the highest-grossing animated film in Chinese history. The panda is the national symbol of China. The film is a joyous celebration of Chinese culture. And, it was made in America. Many asked why China could not have made such a film?

Here's the answer that came back—anonymously, of course—to a *New York Times* reporter, “China has first-class directors, first-class playwrights, first-class actors, but it's a shame that we have censorship by government officials. If they don't like your work, then there's no way.” The censors, the articles said, would have objected to a Panda with weight problems. Does it suggest a lazy nation? And, so on. The life...the spirit...would have been red-lined out of the film.

In our country, anything goes—and we rate it accordingly. Whether the aim is family entertainment or exposing corruption in the corridors of power, creativity and freedom reign.

Is the system perfect? No. It reminds me of that famous Winston Churchill quote about democracy: It's the worst form of government—except for all the rest. Does it do a good job of conveying clear information to parents? Yes. Does it safeguard artistic freedom? So far, yes. But we make this decision anew with every shift in political power in this country.

...Whenever the system is challenged, I think about that great speech at the end of *The American President*, where Michael Douglas says, “America is advanced citizenship. You gotta want it bad, 'cause it's gonna put up a fight. It's gonna say ‘You want free speech? Let's see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil.’”

Jimmy Stewart's Mr. Smith put it in a more positive way: “Liberty's too precious a thing to be buried in books...Men should hold it up in front of them every single day of their lives and say: I'm free to think and to speak. My ancestors couldn't, I can and my children will.”

Whether you're a journalist, filmmaker or policymaker, we have the great fortune in this country to hold up liberty every day and speak our minds. That is what we celebrate in this forum. That is what we champion together. And, that is why the rating system and this great and powerful medium of American film not only endures but thrives.

I firmly believe that the bedrock of American liberty is the first amendment. I'm proud to represent an artform that showcases to the world what democracy means. And, I thank you for this opportunity to commemorate 40 years of freedom in American filmmaking.

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