

105TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 471

To amend the Television Program Improvement Act of 1990 to restore the applicability of that Act to agreements relating to voluntary guidelines governing telecast material and to revise the agreements on guidelines covered by that Act.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

MARCH 19, 1997

Mr. BROWNBACK (for himself, Mr. LIEBERMAN, Mr. DEWINE, and Mr. KOHL) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

A BILL

To amend the Television Program Improvement Act of 1990 to restore the applicability of that Act to agreements relating to voluntary guidelines governing telecast material and to revise the agreements on guidelines covered by that Act.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Television Improve-
5 ment Act of 1997”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress makes the following findings:

1 (1) Television is seen and heard in nearly every
2 American home and is a uniquely pervasive presence
3 in the daily lives of Americans. The average Amer-
4 ican home has 2.5 televisions, and a television is
5 turned on in the average American home 7 hours
6 every day.

7 (2) Television plays a particularly significant
8 role in the lives of children. Recent figures provided
9 by Nielsen Research show that children between the
10 ages of 2 years and 11 years spend an average of
11 21 hours in front of a television each week.

12 (3) Television has an enormous capability to in-
13 fluence perceptions, especially those of children, of
14 the values and behaviors that are common and ac-
15 ceptable in society.

16 (4) The influence of television is so great that
17 its images and messages often can be harmful to the
18 development of children. Social science research
19 amply documents a strong correlation between the
20 exposure of children to televised violence and a num-
21 ber of behavioral and psychological problems.

22 (5) Hundreds of studies have proven conclu-
23 sively that children who are consistently exposed to
24 violence on television have a higher tendency to ex-

1 hibit violent and aggressive behavior, both as chil-
2 dren and later in life.

3 (6) Such studies also show that repeated expo-
4 sure to violent programming causes children to be-
5 come desensitized to and more accepting of real-life
6 violence and to grow more fearful and less trusting
7 of their surroundings.

8 (7) A growing body of social science research
9 indicates that sexual content on television can also
10 have a significant influence on the attitudes and be-
11 haviors of young viewers. This research suggests
12 that heavy exposure to programming with strong
13 sexual content contributes to the early commence-
14 ment of sexual activity among teenagers.

15 (8) Members of the National Association of
16 Broadcasters (NAB) adhered for many years to a
17 comprehensive code of conduct that was based on an
18 understanding of the influence exerted by television
19 and on a widely held sense of responsibility for using
20 that influence carefully.

21 (9) This code of conduct, the Television Code of
22 the National Association of Broadcasters, articulated
23 this sense of responsibility as follows:

24 (A) “[I]n selecting program subjects and
25 themes, great care must be exercised to be sure

1 that the treatment and presentation are made
2 in good faith and not for the purpose of sensa-
3 tionalism or to shock or exploit the audience or
4 appeal to prurient interests or morbid curios-
5 ity.”

6 (B) “Broadcasters have a special respon-
7 sibility toward children. Programs designed pri-
8 marily for children should take into account the
9 range of interests and needs of children, from
10 instructional and cultural material to a wide va-
11 riety of entertainment material. In their total-
12 ity, programs should contribute to the sound,
13 balanced development of children to help them
14 achieve a sense of the world at large and in-
15 formed adjustments to their society.”

16 (C) “Violence, physical or psychological,
17 may only be projected in responsibly handled
18 contexts, not used exploitatively. Programs in-
19 volving violence present the consequences of it
20 to its victims and perpetrators. Presentation of
21 the details of violence should avoid the exces-
22 sive, the gratuitous and the instructional.”

23 (D) “The presentation of marriage, family,
24 and similarly important human relationships,
25 and material with sexual connotations, shall not

1 be treated exploitatively or irresponsibly, but
2 with sensitivity.”

3 (E) “Above and beyond the requirements
4 of the law, broadcasters must consider the fam-
5 ily atmosphere in which many of their programs
6 are viewed. There shall be no graphic portrayal
7 of sexual acts by sight or sound. The portrayal
8 of implied sexual acts must be essential to the
9 plot and presented in a responsible and tasteful
10 manner.”

11 (10) The NAB abandoned the code of conduct
12 in 1983 after three provisions of the code restricting
13 the sale of advertising were challenged by the De-
14 partment of Justice on antitrust grounds and a Fed-
15 eral district court issued a summary judgment
16 against the NAB regarding one of the provisions on
17 those grounds. However, none of the programming
18 standards of the code were challenged.

19 (11) While the code of conduct was in effect, its
20 programming standards were never found to have
21 violated any antitrust law.

22 (12) Since the NAB abandoned the code of con-
23 duct, programming standards on broadcast and
24 cable television have deteriorated dramatically. Lurid
25 and sensational talk shows are aired regularly

1 throughout the day and profanities have become
2 commonplace during the early hours of prime time,
3 when millions of young children are watching.

4 (13) In the absence of effective programming
5 standards, public concern about the impact of tele-
6 vision on children, and on society as a whole, has
7 risen substantially. Polls routinely show that more
8 than 80 percent of Americans are worried by the in-
9 creasingly graphic nature of sex, violence, and vul-
10 garity on television and by the amount of program-
11 ming that openly sanctions or glorifies criminal,
12 antisocial, and degrading behavior.

13 (14) At the urging of Congress, the television
14 industry has taken some steps to respond to public
15 concerns about programming standards and content.
16 The broadcast television industry agreed in 1992 to
17 adopt a set of voluntary guidelines designed to “pro-
18 scribe gratuitous or excessive portrayals of violence”.
19 Shortly thereafter, both the broadcast and cable tele-
20 vision industries agreed to conduct independent
21 studies of the violent content in their programming
22 and make those reports public.

23 (15) In 1996, the television industry as a whole
24 made a commitment to develop a comprehensive rat-
25 ing system to label programming that may be harm-

1 ful or inappropriate for children. That system was
2 implemented at the beginning of this year.

3 (16) Despite these recent efforts to respond to
4 public concern about the impact of television on chil-
5 dren, millions of Americans, especially parents with
6 young children, remain angry and frustrated at the
7 sinking standards of television programming, the re-
8 luctance of the industry to police itself, and the
9 harmful influence of television on the well-being of
10 the children and the values of the United States.

11 (17) The Department of Justice issued a ruling
12 in 1993 indicating that additional efforts by the tele-
13 vision industry to develop and implement voluntary
14 programming guidelines would not violate the anti-
15 trust laws. The ruling states that “such activities
16 may be likened to traditional standard setting efforts
17 that do not necessarily restrain competition and may
18 have significant procompetitive benefits. * * * Such
19 guidelines could serve to disseminate valuable infor-
20 mation on program content to both advertisers and
21 television viewers. Accurate information can enhance
22 the demand for, and increase the output of, an in-
23 dustry’s products or services.”.

24 (18) The Children’s Television Act of 1990
25 (Public Law 101–437) states that television broad-

1 casters in the United States have a clear obligation
2 to meet the educational and informational needs of
3 children.

4 (19) Several independent analyses have dem-
5 onstrated that the television broadcasters in the
6 United States have not fulfilled their obligations
7 under the Children’s Television Act and have not no-
8 ticeably expanded the amount of educational and in-
9 formational programming directed at young viewers
10 since the enactment of the Act.

11 **SEC. 3. PURPOSE.**

12 (a) PURPOSE.—The purpose of this Act is to permit
13 the broadcast and cable television industry—

14 (1) to work collaboratively to respond to grow-
15 ing public concern about the current content of tele-
16 vision programming and the harmful influence of
17 such programming on children;

18 (2) to develop a set of voluntary programming
19 guidelines similar to those contained in the National
20 Association of Broadcasters Television Code; and

21 (3) to implement the guidelines in a manner
22 that alleviates the negative impact of television pro-
23 gramming on the development of children in the
24 United States and stimulates the development and

1 broadcast of educational and informational program-
 2 ming for such children.

3 (b) CONSTRUCTION.—This Act may not be construed
 4 as—

5 (1) providing the Federal Government with any
 6 authority to restrict the content of television pro-
 7 gramming that is in addition to the authority to re-
 8 strict such programming under law as of the date of
 9 enactment of this Act; or

10 (2) approving any action of the Federal Govern-
 11 ment to restrict the content of such programming
 12 that is in addition to any actions undertaken for
 13 that purpose by the Federal Government under law
 14 as of such date.

15 **SEC. 4. APPLICABILITY OF TELEVISION PROGRAM IM-**
 16 **PROVEMENT ACT TO AGREEMENTS ON**
 17 **GUIDELINES FOR TELECAST MATERIAL.**

18 (a) RESTORATION OF APPLICABILITY.—Subsection
 19 (d) of section 501 of the Television Program Improvement
 20 Act of 1990 (title V of Public Law 101–650; 104 Stat.
 21 5127; 47 U.S.C. 303c) is amended—

22 (1) by striking “LIMITATIONS.—(1)” and in-
 23 serting “LIMITATION.—”; and

24 (2) by striking paragraph (2).

1 (b) SCOPE OF EXEMPTION.—Subsection (c) of such
 2 section is amended by striking “designed to alleviate” and
 3 all that follows and inserting the following: “designed—

4 “(1) to alleviate the negative impact of telecast
 5 material such as, but not limited to, violence, sexual
 6 content, criminal behavior, or profane language; or

7 “(2) to promote telecast material that is edu-
 8 cational, informational, or otherwise beneficial to the
 9 development of children.”.

10 (c) LIMITATIONS.—Subsection (d) of such section, as
 11 amended by subsection (a) of this section, is further
 12 amended by striking “which results in a boycott of any
 13 person.” and inserting “which—

14 “(1) results in a boycott of any person; or

15 “(2) concerns the purchase or sale of advertis-
 16 ing, including (without limitation) restrictions on the
 17 number of products that may be advertised in a
 18 commercial, the number of times a program may be
 19 interrupted for commercials, and the number of con-
 20 secutive commercials permitted within each interrup-
 21 tion.”.

