

# Avoiding the Mess in Mass Media

BY CARL F. HOOVER

Searching for the commendable and praiseworthy in our culture, while screening out the bad, has never been more difficult. Internet resources help Christians find the good in films, TV programs, music, and video games.

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*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

*Philippians 4:8*

Searching for the commendable and praiseworthy in our culture, while screening out the bad, must have been easier in another day and time. When salacious images existed in tangible form, music was live rather than recorded, performers and their audience occupied the same space, culture had no “pop” prefix, and “media” referred only to an artist’s means of expression, rather than to myriad modes of distribution.

If we connect selective dots in our current entertainment environment, we can draw a lurid picture of a society rotting from within. *Spider-Man* and *Star Wars: Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, two record-breaking films, exposed our pre-teens this summer to characters being impaled and decapitated. When Eminem, the popular and controversial rapper, released a somewhat tempered album, both media critics and fans wistfully longed for more tunes from his virulently misogynistic and homophobic alter ego, Slim Shady. Network television shows now speak a language that would have startled viewers of a generation ago and stunned their parents.

Connect another set of dots, though, and the picture reveals the cultural contradictions of a complex, diverse society. The large audience turnout for family-friendly movies has caused Hollywood studios to shift

the majority of their product to PG and PG-13 rated films, not limited to adult viewers. Parental and political pressure has led to voluntary rating systems or warning labels not only for movies, but also for television programs, music CDs, video games, and computer software. Retail giant Wal-Mart and video/DVD rental chain Blockbuster refuse to sell music or videos with adult content, and their market impact is forcing film studios and national recording labels to listen. Hundreds of websites are devoted to entertainment reviews and commentaries, many examining their subjects through the prism of Scriptural principles and Christian values.

We have several tools at hand, then, to find the commendable and praiseworthy in pop culture. Ratings provide an initial, general level of screening. The Motion Picture Association of America led the way in 1968 with their film rating system. When a film is submitted to the MPAA, a private panel of parents rates its suitability for different age levels due to profanity, violence, nudity, and adult themes. This is a voluntary system with no criminal penalties for violations.

Though flawed, this MPAA system has served as a model for other entertainment industries. In 1985 the Recording Industry Association of America, pushed by the Parents Music Resource Center and the National Parents Teachers Association (PTA), agreed to put black-and-white parental advisory stickers on the covers of music CDs or albums with overly profane or vulgar lyrics. Television followed suit in 1997 with its own voluntary ratings system;

then, national legislation required that televisions sold after January 1, 2000, include a "V-chip," or computer chip that allows owners to filter out programming rated too violent for children. A 2001 Kaiser Family Foundation survey found, however, that only one out of every six Americans with a V-

chipped television set actually used it in guiding their viewing. The Entertainment Software Ratings Board is the newest addition in entertainment ratings, targeting computer and video games.

Ratings can be too generic to provide specific guidance. Mild profanity to some adults may be blasphemy to others. Some parents approve nudity in certain circumstances, but abhor violence, while others react in the opposite manner. Furthermore, most ratings systems evaluate only levels of sex, violence, and profanity, rarely addressing moral issues of lying, greed, self-centeredness, excessive consumerism, or prejudice.

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**The media's voluntary ratings are too generic for parents and adults who need specific guidance. And they may evaluate only levels of sex, violence, and profanity, rarely addressing moral issues of lying, self-centeredness, greed, excessive consumerism, or prejudice.**

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Before the Internet, parents often relied on word-of-mouth from trusted friends, the judgment of authorities, or on media critics' reviews for additional information on content and values in pop culture. The explosion of the globe-spanning Net now adds a wide range of readily available sources of evaluation. Admittedly, the thoughtfulness and reliability of some of these new websites are spotty. Yet the immediacy of Internet reviews and critiques can be valuable in offsetting the considerable pressure of multi-million-dollar marketing campaigns urging us to purchase on impulse a ticket for the all-important (to film studios) first weekend showing.

The Internet expands our Christian community beyond the local church in some interesting ways. Faith-oriented discussion forums and Web rings allow us to share ideas, questions, and beliefs about pop culture. Some Christian websites hawk high-tech solutions to problems of bad language: Clean Cut Cinemas, a company that splices profanity and adult scenes out of customers' videotapes; and TV Guardian™, a device that automatically deletes profanity from television broadcasts. Others advocate in-church media literacy programs that give young people the spiritual tools to discern the overt and hidden messages of television, music, and film.

Here is my list of online resources that can help Christians, young and old, find the good and screen the bad in our popular culture.

First, let's talk about going to a movie or renting a video. Do you want to know a film's rating by the MPAA and the reasons why? Just type in the film's name at *Motion Picture Association of America Movie Ratings* ([www.filmratings.com](http://www.filmratings.com)) and its rating, plus a general explanation, pops up.

*Rotten Tomatoes* ([www.rotten-tomatoes.com](http://www.rotten-tomatoes.com)) provides a quick consensus opinion from among many of the leading print and Internet film reviewers. You can see whether a new movie is rated good (green tomato) or rotten (red, splattered tomato), while you enjoy pithy quotes from the reviews.

Like Rotten Tomatoes, *Movie Review Query Engine* ([www.mrqe.com](http://www.mrqe.com)) allows you to sample the range of critics' opinions. Though it is not as quick to post reviews as Rotten Tomatoes, MRQE is more comprehensive. Its extensive database comes in handy when checking titles for video rentals.

Despite its goofy name, *Hollywood Jesus* ([www.hollywoodjesus.com](http://www.hollywoodjesus.com)) is a serious effort at finding Biblical themes in contemporary films. Evangelical minister David Bruce and a panel of contributors gently introduce secular visitors to Christian spiritual issues. The *Hollywood Jesus* reviews are good discussion starters, since they emphasize a movie's artistry and themes over whatever questionable content it might contain.

Affiliated with *Christianity Today's* comprehensive website, *The Film Forum* ([www.thefilmforum.com](http://www.thefilmforum.com)) offers a variety of Christian views, presenting both theological and artistic considerations in healthy dialogue. Of special interest is the conversation board, a joint effort by *The Film Forum* with *Chiascuro* ([www.chiafilm.com](http://www.chiafilm.com)) and *Looking Closer* ([promontoryartists.org/lookingcloser/movies.htm](http://promontoryartists.org/lookingcloser/movies.htm)), two other websites that explore the interplay

between the creative and Christian spirituality.

You will find movie and video reviews from a Catholic perspective at [www.nccbuscc.org/movies](http://www.nccbuscc.org/movies), the *United States Catholic Conference of Catholic Bishops* webpage. Top films are recommended for each year since 1965; all past reviews are archived.

*Ted Baehr's Movieguide* ([www.movieguide.org](http://www.movieguide.org)) reviews films from a conservative Christian viewpoint. The reviews detail any profanity, sexuality, violence, alcohol or drug use, and other moral lapses. Evangelical theology is emphasized over artistic considerations. Likewise *ScreenIt.com* ([www.screenit.com](http://www.screenit.com)) offers detailed content analysis of the major movie releases, with each graded in fifteen categories, but not on artistic merit.

For parents who worry about how films affect their children, movie critic and "mother of two teenagers" Nell Minow hosts *Movie Mom* ([www.moviemom.com](http://www.moviemom.com)). She provides commonsense reviews of current films, identifying material that might be unsuitable for younger viewers, along with tips for parents on handling media usage with kids. Another source for detailed content examination of major film releases is *Kids-In-Mind* ([www.kids-in-mind.com](http://www.kids-in-mind.com)).

Popular syndicated newspaper column, *Grading the Movies*, developed an Internet presence, [www.gradingthemovies.com](http://www.gradingthemovies.com). Identified reviewers grade films from a parent's perspective, often suggesting alternative movies.

The whipping boy of Christian movie review sites is *ChildCare Action Project* ([www.capalert.org](http://www.capalert.org)), due to its hypercritical judgment of almost all films. This site evaluates movies according to Wanton Violence, Impudence/Hate, Sex/Homosexuality, Drugs/Alcohol, Offense to God, and Murder/Suicide, resulting in a composite W.I.S.D.O.M. rating.

Several websites review popular culture in several media, including the games that we play. *Parental Guide* ([www.parentalguide.org](http://www.parentalguide.org)) is a handy

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## Web Resources At A Glance



### Film industry ratings

[www.filmratings.com](http://www.filmratings.com)



### Overviews of film critics' reviews

[www.rotten-tomatoes.com](http://www.rotten-tomatoes.com)

[www.mrqe.com](http://www.mrqe.com)



### Theological and artistic analysis of films

[www.hollywoodjesus.com](http://www.hollywoodjesus.com)

[www.thefilmforum.com](http://www.thefilmforum.com)



### Moral content summary of films

[www.nccbuscc.org/movies](http://www.nccbuscc.org/movies)

[www.movieguide.org](http://www.movieguide.org)

[www.screenit.com](http://www.screenit.com)



### Films' suitability for families

[www.moviemom.com](http://www.moviemom.com)

[www.gradingthemovies.com](http://www.gradingthemovies.com)

[www.kids-in-mind.com](http://www.kids-in-mind.com)

[www.capalert.org](http://www.capalert.org)



### Other media and kids

[www.parentalguide.org](http://www.parentalguide.org)

[www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org)

[www.entertainment.crosswalk.com](http://www.entertainment.crosswalk.com)

[www.dove.org](http://www.dove.org)

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website because it provides links to the home pages for each of the film, television, video game, and music rating systems discussed in this article.

*National Institute on Media and the Family* ([www.mediafamily.org](http://www.mediafamily.org)) is a good clearinghouse of information concerning the suitability of all sorts of popular entertainment aimed at kids. Movies, television programs, and video games are rated on levels of profanity, sex, and violence. This website also contains sensible guidelines for parents on television watching, video games, and Internet use by children and teens.

The Christian lifestyle website, *Crosswalk.com*, features reviews of movies and Christian music on their webpage, [www.entertainment.crosswalk.com](http://www.entertainment.crosswalk.com).

With its approval seals awarded to qualifying movies, *Dove Foundation* ([www.dove.org](http://www.dove.org)) is a non-profit organization that encourages family film production and recommends “family-edited versions” of worthy PG, PG-13, and R-rated movies. The site critiques films, television programs, video-cassettes, and video games with an eye to content.

*Morality in Media, Inc.* ([www.moralityinmedia.org](http://www.moralityinmedia.org)) is a conservative inter-faith watchdog organization that evaluates television and radio programming for children and families. Another advocacy group that monitors television programming and lobbies against increased levels of profanity, sex, and violence is *Parents Television Council* ([www.parentstv.org](http://www.parentstv.org)).

One of the few Christian-oriented websites to review computer and video games is *Christian Answers*. Teens through forty-somethings post reviews at [www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/games/home.html](http://www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/games/home.html), allowing for broad swings in discretion, context, and theological depth! Nevertheless, you should come away with at least a sense of a game’s content.

*The Lion & Lamb Project* lobbies against violent toys for children. Its website, [www.lionlamb.org](http://www.lionlamb.org), lists recommended and non-recommended toys as well as suggested reading for adults and children.

Pop culture tends to squeeze our lives into its mold of ideas and manners precisely because they are *popular*. Its ways of living, which are always a mixture of good and bad, are promoted to us today powerfully and rapidly by the mass media. Are we prepared for the challenge of discerning the commendable and praiseworthy in its mix? When we are confronted with objectionable material in popular culture, with the help of trustworthy and thoughtful reviews we can engage it with Christ-transformed minds.



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