V-Chip Keeps Television Violence From Reaching Children

Simon Fraser University

Tim Collings was an engineering professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, when a man shot and killed 14 female students at Montréal's École Polytechnique on Dec. 6, 1989, before turning the gun on himself.

That tragedy, which rocked relatively peaceful Canada, set him down a path that led to the invention of the internationally hailed V-chip. Parents across North America now use V-chip to control the amount of violence, sex and foul language their children are exposed to through television.

"I don't come from a social science background," says Collings, who notes that he was already aware of violence on television before the Montreal murders. "But I did follow the studies that showed that the killer was affected by violent media material that he had seen," he says. "It has an impact, no doubt about that."

"I became interested in wanting to do something," he says. "I wanted to help break the cycle of violence that seemed to be growing in our society."

Applying Engineering Skills to Help Parents

Collings says he did not favor censorship or controlling the content on televisions at the source. Instead, he set about using his engineering skills to — at a minimum — allow parents to control the amount of violence their children watched on television.

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He was in luck because at about the same time, closed captioning systems were being introduced to North American television. And in 1990 the U.S. Congress began requiring television receivers to contain circuitry designed to decode and display closed captioning. Collings was able to figure out a way use the same data packet systems that delivered the closed captioning text to carry program ratings information.

He designed the V-chip so parents can click on a menu that presents a rating system. If they want to limit the programs that their children see to those rated PG, they can block the others that have ratings for violence, sex or profanity.

"When I started working on this, there was no V-chip technology that would read codes and respond to the preferences of viewers and their parents," says Collings, who now has three children ages 10, 12 and 14. Ironically, Collings says he didn't have a television in his home until 2000. He believes the V-chip is an especially important tool for parents whose children are 12 or younger.

When Collings developed his prototype, he took it to the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission, the equivalent of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission. There, he found an ally and sponsor in chairman Keith Spicer. "It was a watershed moment," Collings says. "Spicer really pushed this and it became one of his main legacies."

Written Into the Telecommunications Act of 1996

Spicer introduced Collings to then FCC Chairman Reed Hundt. "I demonstrated it to him and congressmen and senators," he says. "Eventually, and to my surprise, it made its way into the Telecommunications Act of 1996 that required the device in every television built after 1999 with a screen size of 13 inches or larger."

In 1997, Collings and SFU awarded the international rights to his invention to Tri-Vision International Ltd., a public company that trades on the Toronto Stock Exchange. Tri-Vision Trademarked the technology as V.gis™ and has worked with Collings to ensure all electronics manufacturers in Canada and the United States are properly licensed to use his invention.

Collings continues as a director of Tri-Vision and chairs its research committee. He also owns a portion of the company.

Murray Eldon, a spokesman for Tri-Vision, says the company has earned between $16 and $18 million in royalties from the technology and that revenues could go up significantly in coming years because the FCC now requires all digital receivers to have digital V-Chips as of March 16, 2006. In the United States alone, annual television sales range between $25 million and $32 million. In Canada, the figure is about $1.8 million a year.

Praise for a Great Idea

Joanne Cantor, a professor emeritus in communications studies at the University of WisconsinMadison is a noted researcher on the psychological effects of media violence on children. She praises Collings as a "real pioneer whose

work has had some very positive effects ... He's the one who really got this going," Cantor says.

"No one ever imagined that Congress would pass a law that would require the networks to do anything. Just the requirement of ratings is a concept that is enormously new," she says. "It is a great idea. Unfortunately, research shows that the V-chip has as yet not been widely adopted by parents.

"In my opinion, it is hard to program and understand," she says. "Companies may be required to put them in all televisions, but they are not required to make them easy to use."

Eldon, of Tri-Vision, agreed that television manufacturers have not made the V-chip simple to program. "It could be a lot more user friendly," he says. "The FCC has noted that the current tools have not worked as well as envisioned."

Making the V-Chip Easier to Use

Eldon says that many advocates of parental television control hope that the ratings system will be revised to be more accurate and that V-chips will become easier to use and understand.

Cantor does not fault Collings. "It's not Tim's fault," she says. "His impact has been significant and influenced other devices that will block what kind of programs get into our homes."

Collings acknowledges that the number of people using V-chips may be relatively small at this point. "I've spoken to people who use it, but It is a somewhat new technology," he says. "And those inclined to use it are parents with young children."

"I don't know if my work has saved lives," Collings says. "I'm not going to go that far. But the effects of violence on television have been studied ad nauseam. The three main (effects) are desensitization to violence, creating the fear that society is really like that — especially in little kids — and the creation of copy cats," he says. "I would like to think, though, that my work has made society safer for people."

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