



Teen-Targeted Broadcast TV Can Be Vulgar...  
But *Stranger Things* Are Happening On Netflix



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The entertainment industry has, for decades, cautioned parents who want to protect their children from explicit content to rely on the various age-based content ratings systems. The movie industry, the television industry, the videogame industry and the music industry have, individually, crafted medium-specific rating systems as a resource to help parents.

In recent years, the Parents Television Council has produced research documenting a marked increase in profanity airing on primetime broadcast television. All of the television programming analyzed by the PTC for those research reports was rated as appropriate for children aged 14, or even younger.

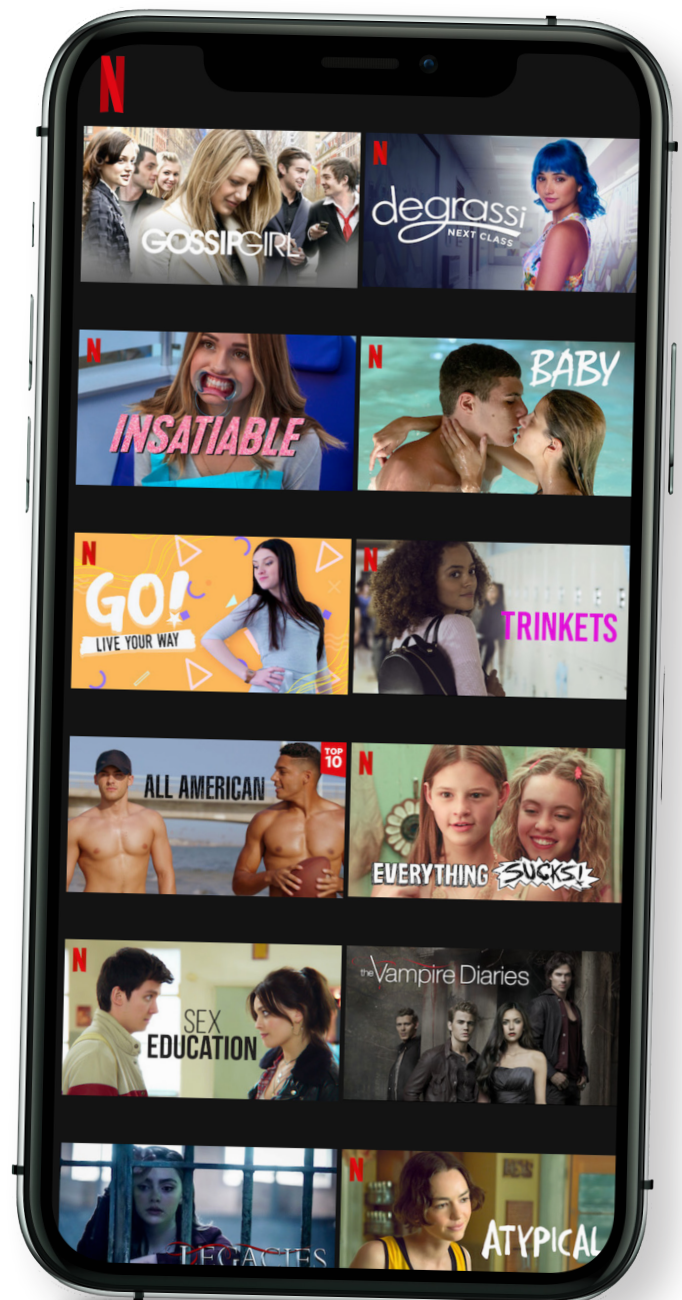
Today, with much of the nation ostensibly on lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, children are at home instead of at school; and as a result, they have far greater access to entertainment media. While all forms of media consumption are up, the volume of entertainment programming being consumed through over-the-top streaming platforms has spiked dramatically.

The PTC investigated programming that is produced by, and which airs on, the most widely-used streaming platform: Netflix. Specifically, the investigation focused on titles which are categorized by Netflix as intended for teenagers. Netflix employs the Motion Picture Association (MPA) movie content rating system (e.g. PG, PG-13, R, etc.) for its long-form programming; and the TV Parental Guidelines (TVOMB) television content rating system (e.g. TV-PG, TV-14 and TV-MA, etc.) for its TV programming.

**The findings of this investigation show that much of the Netflix content targeted at teens carries a “Mature” content rating; and of those programs that carry a “Teen” content rating, the vast majority contains harsh profanity, with “F-words” and/or “S-words” nearly ubiquitous.**

Parents who rely on Netflix for accurate age-based content ratings and appropriate age-based recommendations will likely be exposing their children to harsh profanity. Either the content is being rated inaccurately, or there has been considerable “ratings creep” with the criteria used to determine an age-based rating. Neither option allows parents to do their job effectively. Netflix is marketing explicit content to children, and we call on the company to cease doing so immediately.

The Parents Television Council renews its call for wholesale reform to the entertainment industry-controlled ratings systems and their oversight. There should be one uniform age-based content rating system for all entertainment media; the system must be accurate, consistent, transparent and accountable to those for whom it is intended to serve: parents; and oversight of that system should be vested primarily in experts outside of those who produce and/or distribute the programming – and who might directly or indirectly profit from exposing children to explicit, adult-themed content.





# INTRODUCTION

Words like “unprecedented” and “challenging” have been thrown around a lot in recent weeks to describe the impact of the COVID-19 virus on American lives. As of this writing, most Americans are living in some form of quarantine or lockdown.

Such an abrupt and total change from routine has necessarily led to changes in behavior. In the early-stages of the worldwide pandemic, media analysts anticipated a surge in media consumption with so many people forced to stay home. Media-usage monitoring company Nielsen [expected to see](#) a 60% increase in TV viewing; this, on top of already-historically-high levels of media consumption in the US pre-pandemic. According to [recent Nielsen reports](#), that increase was actually closer to 85% for the first three weeks of March.

Nielsen [reports](#) that three-fourths of consumers have been adding streaming subscriptions and TV connected devices on top of regular broadcasting and cable TV. A *Morning Consult* survey found that 19% of adults expected to spend more money on movie and TV streaming services in light of stay-at-home orders; while a separate *Morning Consult* survey revealed that Netflix has been the most-watched streaming platform during this pandemic, with 35% of respondents saying it was the platform they had watched most often.

TV viewing is also up across all dayparts. [A new report from Comscore](#) shows that in top media markets, “During the week of March 16, 2020... 20% of sets were in use at 6 a.m., up from 18%. Sets in use grows to 30% at 8 a.m., 36% at noon, 38% at 3 p.m. and 49% at 6 p.m.”

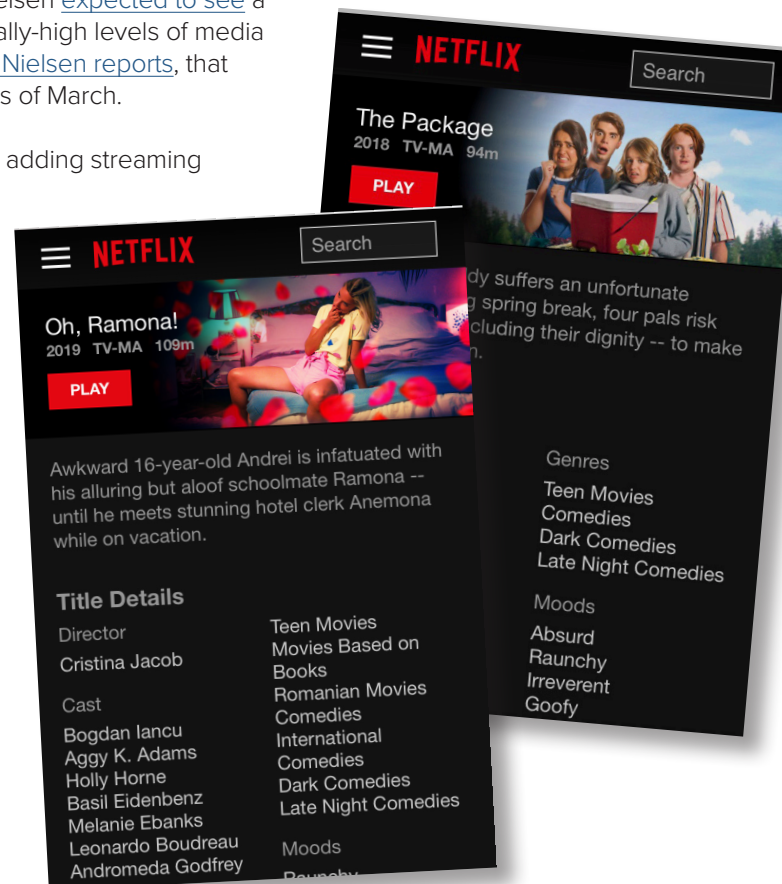
But it is not just adult workers who are affected by stay-at-home orders. Schools are closed too, and with so many parents distracted by trying to meet the demands of working remotely, children are also spending more time with media – as much as 50% more time in front of screens daily, according to [SuperAwesome](#), a kids technology company -- and they are as likely as adults to be streaming media: linear cable viewership numbers continued their downward trend (albeit at a slower rate), while streamers that offer children’s programming like CBS All-Access and Disney+ saw a spike in viewership.

According to [a survey](#) of 2,000 Americans with access to a streaming service, the average person is now streaming eight hours of content per day and binge-watched three shows in the past week; and 65 percent of parents polled admitted they’ve been allowing kids to watch more movies and TV shows.

And a [new Nielsen report obtained by Variety](#) said that American consumers spent an estimated 400 billion minutes streaming content to their televisions over the first three weeks of March, an 85 percent increase from the same period in March 29. Per the report, Netflix has the biggest share of video streaming on television at 29 percent, followed by YouTube with 20 percent, Hulu at 10 percent, and Amazon Prime Video at 9 percent.

So what are teenaged children seeing on the most popular streaming platform, Netflix? Can parents trust that a program, which is listed on the Netflix program guide in the “teen” category, is actually going to be appropriate for their teens – or pre-teens – to consume? And can parents trust that a program carrying a teen content rating is actually safe for their children to watch?

The purpose of this report is to answer these specific questions.



## METHODOLOGY

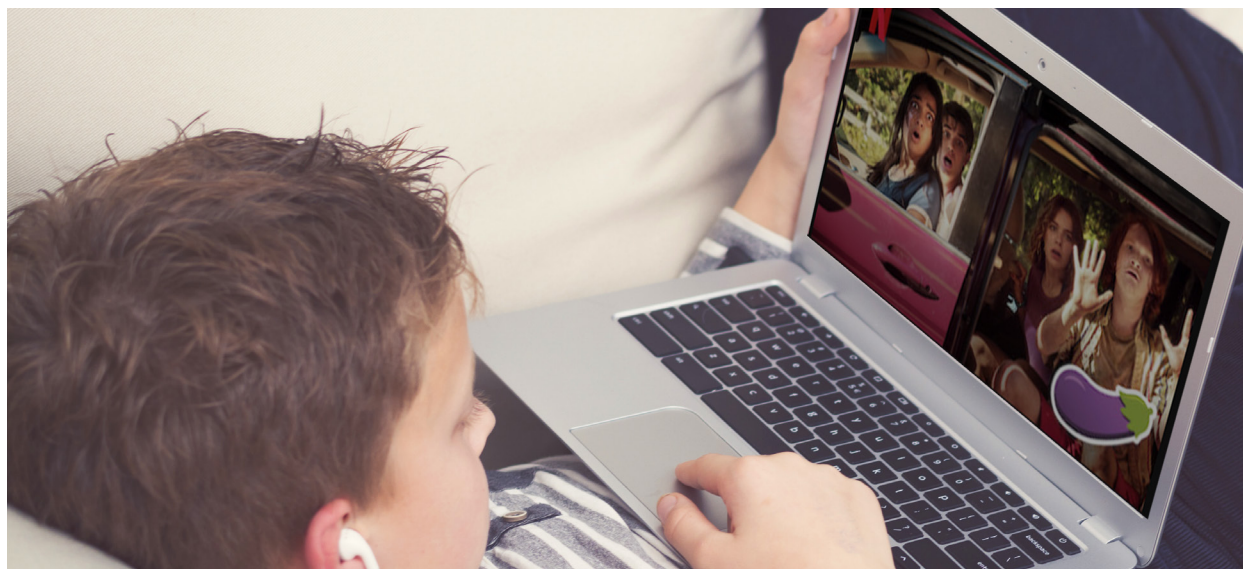
For this study, the PTC looked at the age-based rating for all Netflix programming listed in a “Teen” category or with a “Teen” designation as of April 6, 2020. Out of more than 3,600 category designations used by Netflix, 23 were identified as “teen” programming:

### TEEN CATEGORIES

Emotional Teen Dramas	Teen Action & Adventure
Emotional Teen Movies	Teen Comedies
Feel-Good Teen Dramas	Teen Coming-of-Age Dramas
Feel-Good Teen Movies	Teen Coming-of-Age Movies
Goofy Teen Movies	Teen Dramas
Inspiring Teen Movies	Teen Independent Comedies
Irreverent Teen Comedies	Teen Movies
Romantic Teen Comedies	Teen Screams
Romantic Teen Coming-of-Age Comedies	Teen Sports Comedies
Romantic Teen Coming-of-Age Dramas	Teen Sports Movies
Romantic Teen Dramas	Teen TV Shows
Romantic Teen Movies	

Although there is significant overlap within these 23 categories (i.e. titles that appear in more than one category), we identified 255 distinct programs or titles across all teen categories; and of those 255 distinct programs, 96 were labeled as “Netflix Originals.” ”

PTC further analyzed the program content – and specifically, the profanity within those programs – by overlaying content filtering data from the streaming video company VidAngel on all Netflix Originals for which filters were available. VidAngel content filters identify in specific detail every kind of explicit content that may be found in these programs.

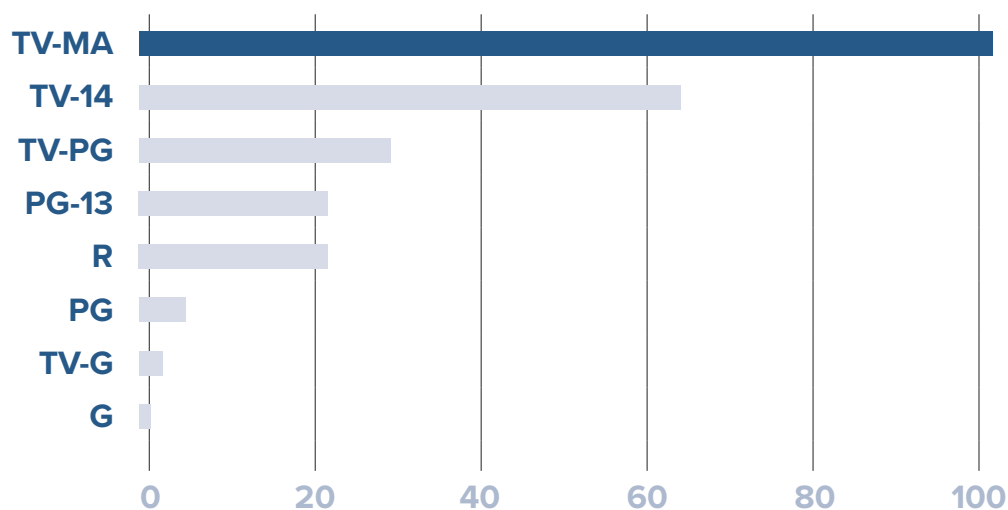


## FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

### What the Content Ratings Show

By far, the most frequent age-based rating for what Netflix calls “Teen” programming was TV-MA (Mature Audiences); which means that, by definition, the programming is unsuitable for the audience for whom it is intended. The TV Parental Guidelines states that a TV-MA rating is “specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. This program may contain one or more of the following: crude indecent language (L), explicit sexual activity (S), or graphic violence (V).”

### TV-MA appears most often



Out of 255 “Teen” movies and TV series on Netflix, 104 (40.8%) were rated TV-MA. And of those “Teen” programs that were identified as Netflix Originals, 53 (55.2%) were rated TV-MA.

RATING	“TEEN” TITLES		NETFLIX ORIGINALS	
	#	%	#	%
G	1	0.4%	—	0.0%
PG	5	2.0%	—	0.0%
PG-13	23	9.0%	3	3.1%
R	23	9.0%	—	0.0%
TV-G	2	0.8%	—	0.0%
TV-PG	31	12.2%	10	10.4%
TV-14	66	25.9%	30	31.3%
TV-MA	104	40.8%	53	55.2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Among “Teen” titles that followed the MPA movie ratings system (as opposed to the TV ratings system), the R-rating appeared as frequently as PG-13, with 23 titles (9.0%) for each rating.

Only 39 titles (15.3%) in the “Teen” category had a rating of PG or younger; and 89 titles (34.9%) were specifically rated as appropriate for a teen audience (PG-13 or TV-14).

### What Filtering Data Shows

Out of 11 program titles rated TV-14 by Netflix and for which VidAngel filtering data was available, **every single program contained multiple uses of the word “sh\*t”** (44 uses in one 98 minute-long movie, *Rim of the World*); the popular Netflix series *Stranger Things* used the “s-word” 257 times across three seasons – that’s an average of 10 uses per episode.

**Almost every Netflix original program rated as appropriate for teens (TV-14) had at least one use of the word “f\*ck”** (the only exceptions being *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* and its sequel, *P.S. I Still Love You*). *Stranger Things* did not introduce the “f-word” until part-way through its second season, but then used it six times in season 2, and 5 times in season 3. The teen movie, *Rim of the World* used the “f-word” five times in 98 minutes. It is useful here to remember that under the MPA ratings system, more than one use of the “f-word” is enough for them to change the age restriction from “PG-13” to “R.”

## Netflix Original Titles - TV-14 (VidAngel Profanity Filter Data)

Program Title	# Seasons/# Episodes/Duration	# S-Word	# F-Word
<i>Locke &amp; Key</i>	1 Season/10 Episodes	52	2
<i>Stranger Things</i>	3 Seasons/25 episodes	257	11
<i>On My Block</i>	(Filtering data for season 1 only)	48	4
<i>Atypical</i>	2 seasons/28 episodes	58	3
<i>Everything Sucks!</i>	1 Season/10 Episodes	20	5
<i>To All the Boys I've Loved Before</i>	1 h. 39 min	2	—
<i>To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You</i>	1 h. 41 min	3	—
<i>The Last Summer</i>	1 h. 49 min	7	4
<i>Candy Jar</i>	1 h. 32 min	7	1
<i>The Kissing Booth</i>	1 h. 45 min	12	3
<i>Rim of the World</i>	1 h. 38 min	44	5

We acknowledge the considerable developmental changes that take place between early-teen years and late-teen years. But we remind readers that of the seven years that transpire between entering and exiting teen-hood, a person is considered to be a legal adult only for the last two of those years.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an apparent disconnect not only between that which Netflix deems appropriate for teen viewers and what the average parent might consider appropriate for their teen; but also between Netflix's own content ratings and that which they choose to market to teen audiences. Nearly half of all programming designated as "Teen" by Netflix was rated either TV-MA (104 titles, or 40.8%) or R (23 titles, or 9.0%); and every single program that carried a TV-14 moniker included the harshest profanity.

Words like "f\*ck" and "sh\*t" were once unthinkable for dialogue on programs rated as appropriate for 13- and 14-year old children; but on Netflix they are becoming ubiquitous. Either the content is being rated inaccurately, or there has been considerable "ratings creep" with the criteria used to determine an age-based rating. Neither option allows parents to do their job effectively.

This report suggests that Netflix has opened the profanity floodgates for children – a finding that is particularly troubling because Netflix streams programming to cell phones, laptop computers, tablets and other devices that are routinely outside the purview of a parent. And setting parental controls on those media devices will fail to do what parents expect.

Parents deserve a ratings system that is transparent and consistent across platforms. Our report suggests there to be a vastly different standard between streaming content and broadcast content – even if that content is similarly-rated. If a TV-14 doesn't mean the same thing on Netflix as it does on CBS, it is of little to no value to parents.



In order to remedy this inconsistency, Netflix (and other streaming media platforms) should be active participants in the national dialogue about content ratings which commenced in earnest last year by the FCC under the express direction of Congress. And while the FCC has no regulatory authority over the content on streaming media, the Commission can – and should – ensure that digital media platforms are present and part of this overall content ratings conversation.

The Parents Television Council renews its call for wholesale reform to the entertainment industry-controlled ratings systems and their oversight. There should be one uniform age-based content rating system for all entertainment media; the system must be accurate, consistent, transparent and ultimately accountable to those for whom it is intended to serve: parents. Oversight of that system should be vested in experts outside of those who produce and/or distribute the programming – and who might directly or indirectly profit from exposing children to explicit, adult-themed content.

We are unsure whether Netflix – in its application of content ratings and in its determination of what is appropriate for "Teen" audiences – is acting in bad faith, or if they're just plain sloppy. Regardless, we hope this report serves as a clarion call for Netflix to step up immediately with meaningful engagement on this issue, and with a corporate commitment to implementing remedies to address our findings.



**The Parents Television Council**® ([www.parentstv.org](http://www.parentstv.org)) is a non-partisan education organization advocating responsible entertainment.

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