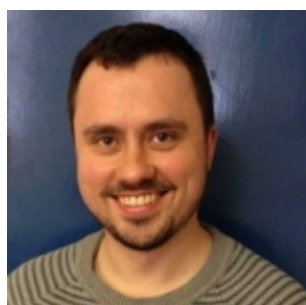


Hello from the ~~other~~ side of music video regulation

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*If we were rating music videos from the 80s, would Boy George's be considered too subversive? The scantily clad women on Addicted to Love not for our children's eyes? Or should common sense prevail? **Rafal Zaborowski** is an LSE Fellow in the **Department of Media and Communications**. He is interested in music reception and social practices of listening, the co-evolution of media audiences and media institutions as well as in critical, qualitative methods of academic inquiry. He tweets via [@myredtowel](#). [Header image credit: Seika, CC BY 2.0]*

Parents are worried about unrated music videos. This has emerged from a **pilot research evaluation** conducted by the **British Board of Film Classification** (BBFC) in 2014, conducted with the UK government, music industry and online video platform providers. The BBFC venture into music videos is an extension of their work on movies and DVDs – they have, in the past, rated concert DVDs by Rihanna (*Loud*, 2013, rated 15) and Miley Cyrus (*Bangerz*, 2015, rated 12), for example.

Before the pilot research with the public, UK branches of Sony, Universal and Warner Music sent domestic music videos to the BBFC that they thought might receive a '12' or higher rating. The BBFC **rated** the videos and sent appropriate labels to Vevo and YouTube to display when videos are broadcast. As it was **announced last August**, 'measures trialled will be now be made permanent for videos produced in the UK.'

Why music videos?

The BBFC sees its role in helping audiences, especially families, in '**making more informed viewing decisions**.' The focus on family and parental controls links to David Cameron's **efforts to regulate music** videos in the UK, which increased especially after **Ofcom's regulation of Rihanna's S&M video**, reviews from organisations like **Mothers' Union** and a public outcry of media panics, essentially focusing on Rihanna, Nicky Minaj and Miley Cyrus wearing too little clothing in their music videos. But risky online content is no joke, of course, and the stakes remain high. Sexualisation of culture **has been raised** by observers across disciplines, urging us to **consider**

how imagery and representations of sexuality, gender roles and social life connect to lives outside the screen.

Parents, surveyed online and interviewed by the BBFC, remain very concerned – 70% worry about children’s exposure to inappropriate music video content. They appreciate age ratings of music videos (78%), they would like their children to stick to channels with appropriate age labels (86%), and they would like the labels to be linked to parental controls (75%). And why wouldn’t they worry, if 6 out of 10 children say they have seen music videos of which the parents would disapprove?

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“I find pop videos are far worse than anything in film”, says one parent in the study. Complex issues are impossible to portray in a nuanced way in a three-minute clip, suggests another parent when discussing drugs and self-harm in Pink’s video, which “makes it seem that it’s acceptable and ... normal and this is how you want to be.” Music videos are worrying, because the experience is so intense and short – and so easily available online.

Hello from the other side

BBFC’s approach is interesting and relatively uncommon. Here, a non-governmental institution regulating content conducts a consultation study with the public about the details of said regulation – and (while we may debate methodology and balance of children’s participation) includes voices of those for whom the regulation is envisioned. But regulating remains complicated. The link between risky and harmful content has proven elusive to establish empirically and, at best, **research points to** the qualified and highly contextual nature of media effects. Evidence of causal connections between negative effects and media **remains thin**.

There are other concerns, too. In the examples raised by parents and stakeholders, we hear about Rihanna, Nicky or Miley – nude women, semi-nude women or sexually suggestive women, but almost always *women* and most often non-white women. Dizzee Rascal’s *Couple of Stacks* video, rated 18 for language and violence (perpetrated by a male), remains seemingly a lesser concern. Surrounding the question of music video regulation are issues of feminism and exploitation (**Team Sinéad vs Team Miley**) and issues of race. There are issues of history and the emergences of moral panics concerning music across the ages (think Elvis’s hips, think heavy metal, but also think **Wagner’s operas**), and there are issues of censorship, power and resistance through music.

Music is tricky

For UK children, it’s safe to say that those who have the opportunity (and I am alluding here to a range of structural, social and economic factors excluding children from ‘the digital’) will always manage to see Rihanna’s newest music video. They will, because of the relative ease of access and multiplicity of online platforms, but also because of their peers. They will, because music videos are cool, and because forbidden music videos are even cooler.

They will, because music is the medium of generational voice. People’s interpretations of musical texts **are revealing** of their generational self-recognition and identity. It might be more difficult, then, to apply to music videos the advice researchers have given parents about managing access to online content (**work with your children, stay aware yet engaged, emphasise positives**) when that content is a rabid expression of generational values. Some BBFC findings allude to that, when the report talks about music stars as role models. But more broadly, music (unlike apps, movies or social media) might be something we simply share less, something we tend to keep more private. Unpacking what a child found upsetting on YouTube is one thing, but discussing the intricacies of Arctic Monkeys’ *Why’d You Only Call Me When You’re High?* with a teen is another, because, as philosophers Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince famously proclaimed, **‘parents just don’t understand’**.

Parents definitely should try to understand, because regulation is never the full answer. Looking at BBFC’s framework historically, more questions arise. Would Donna Summer’s *Love to Love You Baby* (1974), banned for a while by the BBC for its erotic moans throughout, get anything **lower**

than a '15'? Would George Michael's *I Want Your Sex* (1987) worry the parents of today as much as *Wrecking Ball* or *S&M*? Is Madonna's *Like A Prayer* (1989) still controversial now – or just confusing? And while I suspect *Every Breath You Take* would get a U or PG, its lyrics are often interpreted as a ~~message of a~~ possessive stalker. Despite its innocent melody, *Pumped Up Kicks* talks about violence and homicidal youth.

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In the BBFC study, only 35% of 10- to 17-year-olds thought their parents might disapprove of Maroon 5's *Animals* video (58% of parents thought it was inappropriate for under-15s), with its bloodbath sex scene and stalker fantasy lyrics. These figures for Katy Perry's *Roar* (girl-power-affirming, but sung in a skimpy animal-skin bikini) are 24% of the children and 40% of the parents. The relative proximity of these figures is precisely why more discussion is needed.

Music is many things, and we cannot uncritically fixate on nudity as an organising category for regulation.

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