

The Government has accepted the recommendation by the Ministerial Committee on the portrayal of violence, that the V-chip should be built into all new television sets. John Mikler, ABA policy section, looks at how it works.

V-chip technology

With the introduction of a 'V-chip' into Australian television sets people will be able to self-censor programs they receive. The censoring will be based on the rating these programs are given for attributes such as violent or sexual content, or coarse language.

How would this work? The system which has been most discussed to date involves giving each program rating a code which is transmitted with the broadcast.

In Australia, each frame of a television signal is made up of 625 lines, 575 of which are used to create the video image. Twenty of the remaining lines are set aside for special information such as closed captioning for the hearing impaired, teletext services and picture control. These lines are known as the 'vertical

blanking interval' which appears as the black bar that can be seen on a television screen when the vertical hold is not working.

The coded information transmitted with broadcasts which contains a program's rating could be placed on the vertical blanking interval. The V-chip could then translate this coded information. Based on instructions given to it by a viewer using a remote control, the V-chip would then block programs with a rating above a certain level.

Depending upon the approach finally adopted, when a program is blocked by the V-chip, the screen will go blank and graphics may appear to inform the viewer of the reason as to why the program has been blocked (e.g. the viewer has programmed the V-chip to block all programs rated above a certain level).

A viewer could activate or de-activate the V-chip with the use of a personal identification number.

At present, the V-chip has been trialled only with analog video signals, such as those presently used for free-to-air broadcasts in Australia. However, the idea of transmitting coded information for program ratings could also be equally applied to

digital broadcasts and cable television services. Such systems are already offered on some digital satellite services and are partially implemented in the parental control systems provided with cable television services.

Presently, the vertical blanking interval is not used much in Australia. Aside from closed captioning for the hearing impaired, only one network broadcasts teletext. Teletext and closed captioning use only a portion of the space available on the vertical blanking interval. Therefore, space is available on the vertical blanking interval for the purpose of coded information for the V-chip. Trials in Canada have demonstrated that using the vertical blanking interval for this coded information is feasible, and it should not be difficult to adapt to the Australian environment. Adaptation is necessary because trials to date have been conducted only with NTSC broadcasts (the analog standard used in the US, Canada, other countries in the Americas and Japan). Australia uses the European PAL television system and some development will be required to adapt V-chip technology to the PAL system.

As far as the ABA knows, little work has been done on adapting V-chip technology to the PAL system. However, a special committee of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), representing the major users of the PAL system worldwide, held its first meeting on 3 July 1996 to commence discussion on the requirements for a suitable system. This includes the number of categories and levels to be accommodated in ratings, the way in which the viewer will interact with the system to program the V-chip and how it will be integrated into all relevant receiving devices. The Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) is an associate member of the EBU and has registered as a corresponding member of this committee.

Whether or not the eventual European solution is suited to Australia, and when a solution may be forthcoming, remains uncertain at this stage.

Detailed discussions with television receiver manufacturers and the television broadcasting industry in Australia are also needed to define exactly how V-chip technology could be implemented and the practical timetable for its introduction. □

