Technology and Parental Responsibility: The Case of the V-Chip

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Abstract In this paper, the so-called V-chip is analysed from the perspective of responsibility. The V-chip is a technological tool used by parents, on a voluntary basis, to prevent children from watching violent television content. Since 1997 in the United States, the V-chip is installed in all new televisions sets of 12″ and larger. We are interested in the question whether and how the introduction of the V-chip affects who is to be considered responsible for children. In the debate, it has been argued that the V-chip reduces parents' responsibility for children, but it has also been argued that it gives parents a tool to exercise their responsibility. It may appear as though all debaters are discussing the same thing and merely have different opinions. However, we argue that there are at least three notions of responsibility underlying these claims and that these should be kept separate. First, arguments on responsibility may refer to responsibility as task distribution. Second, they can refer to responsibility as control. Finally, a thicker concept of parental responsibility understood as a virtue may be referred to. It becomes clear that whereas task distribution changes to some extent and the possibilities for control are increased, only certain parts of parental responsibility as a virtue are affected. The finding that there appear to be different notions of responsibility involved in a debate that prima facie is about one issue, indicates that discussions on other technologies and how they affect responsibility may suffer from the same conceptual lack of clarity.

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Introduction: Technology and Responsibility

There are primarily two ways in which responsibility can be affected by technology. First, tasks could be delegated to technology, which may lead people to think that responsibility is transferred to the artefact.[1] In this paper, we are interested in a second way in which technology may affect responsibility, i.e. whether responsibility distributions between human actors may be affected a new technology. The case we will discuss is the V-chip, an electronic device that can be built into television sets to block programs that are violent or otherwise deemed unsuitable to children (FCC 2009). It has been argued that the V-chip wrongly reduces parental responsibility, i.e. that the V-chip wrongly makes other actors responsible for what children watch on television. It has also been argued, to the contrary, that the V-chip is a tool for parents to exercise their responsibility. In this paper, we are interested in the question whether technology may re-distribute responsibility and we analyse the V-chip as an example of the potential of new technology to re-distribute responsibility.

The V-chip is one of many technologies used to shield children from allegedly damaging media. There is now content-controlled software than can be used to block violent and pornographic material on the Internet. Technology is also used to protect children from violence and another example is the "nanny cam", a camera used by parents to monitor the nanny taking care of their children. Sometimes the nanny is aware of the fact that she is being monitored, but in some cases it is done secretly when parents suspect their child is being abused. The tendency to want to protect one's child is quite natural and it is likely that parents will use available technology if they can afford it. It is, of course, another question whether it is right or wrong to do it.

The question raised by the nanny cam is whether it is right to use technological tools to find out whether one's children are properly taken care of. What makes the case of the V-chip interesting is the involvement of several actors. The V-chip issue, and to some extent content-controlled software, raises the question of who is to be considered responsible for children and in what ways. In this sense, it is a question about responsibility distribution.

We believe the arguments referring to responsibility in the V-chip case are based on one of three, or a combination of, notions of responsibility and these will be discussed in turn. First, the argument that responsibility is affected (wrongly or rightly) by the V-chip can be interpreted as an argument concerning tasks and task responsibility. Second, it could be referring to control and the related idea that the more/less control an agent has the greater/lesser is her responsibility. Control is usually considered one of the conditions for responsibility and is related to the notion of freedom and voluntariness. If an agent was acting under compulsion when

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[1] We doubt whether this actually implies a transfer of moral responsibility to technology, but this is not the place to pursue that argument.

doing X, it is argued, she is not to be held responsible for doing X. If she, on the other hand, was in control and not coerced, she is to be held responsible for X. The V-chip could arguably be seen as a way of changing who is in control of what children watch on television. Finally, a thicker concept of parental responsibility, based on virtue ethics and the ethics of care will be discussed as the third notion of responsibility underlying this debate.

We will only be concerned with the arguments related to responsibility. Other arguments, for instance those referring to human rights and artistic freedom or about the actual consequences of the V-chip on the behaviour of parents and children will not be discussed here. What is interesting is that there is not one single "responsibility argument" about the V-chip, but one concerning how the V-chip increases or enhances parental responsibility and the opposite that the V-chip reduces parental responsibility.

The V-Chip and Responsibility

In the USA, the V-chip is installed in all new television sets of 12″ and larger since January 1997. The V-chip basically functions as follows. The TV stations broadcast a rating as part of the program. Parents program the V-chip by setting a threshold rating. All programs above the rating are then blocked by the V-chip if it has been turned on. The V-chip was an added provision to President Bill Clinton's Telecommunications Act in 1996. Clinton argued that the V-chip could "become a powerful voice against teen violence, teen pregnancy, teen drug use, and for both learning and entertainment" and that "This is not censorship, this is parental responsibility" (Montgomery 2007).

However, not everybody agrees with this assessment of how the V-chip affects responsibility. In a blog Michael Yamamoto has argued: "One point that is often glaringly absent from discussion, however, is the responsibility of parents in supervising their children. Many continue to use the boob tube as a babysitter, if not a primary caregiver—and while content control mechanisms can be useful in some circumstances, they can also serve simply to encourage the abdication of familial duties" (Yamamoto 2006). He and other commentators, for example on the Internet, believe that the V-chip redistributes responsibility in a way that wrongly reduces parental responsibility (Calcagno 1999).

The notion of responsibility is used in many different meanings. Discussions about responsibility therefore often suffer from a lack of conceptual clarity. For the purpose of this article, we think that two common distinctions between meanings of responsibility are relevant. First, there is distinction between moral responsibility and non-moral responsibility. Moral responsibilities are responsibilities we have on moral grounds; non-moral responsibilities are based on non-moral grounds, for example organisational rules or the law.[2] An example of non-moral responsibility is

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[2] Non-moral is not necessarily immoral. Some organisational or legal responsibilities may be entirely moral; non-moral only refers to the grounds of these responsibilities. It is possible that some responsibilities have both moral and non-moral grounds.

Table 1 Notions of responsibility that play a role in the V-chip debate

	Forward-looking	Backward-looking
Non-moral	Task responsibility	
Moral	Parental responsibility as virtue	Moral liability

task responsibility. Task responsibility can, for example, be based on tasks in an organisation. Task responsibilities are not necessarily immoral, but they may sometimes be. Under Nazi rule, Eichmann had a task responsibility to transport Jews and other minorities to concentration camps, but it seems obvious that he did not have a moral responsibility to do so, quite the contrary.

Second, a distinction should be made between forward-looking and backward-looking responsibility. Backward-looking responsibility is related to blame and liability for things that have happened in the past. We will refer to this variety of responsibility as moral liability. Forward-looking responsibility refers to the taking of responsibility for things that are still in the future. Forward-looking moral responsibility can be linked to the notion of responsibility as a virtue. In the case of the V-chip the relevant forward-looking moral responsibility is parental responsibility. Table 1 summarizes these distinctions.

We believe the arguments in the V-chip debate referring to responsibility use three different notions of responsibility. First, the V-chip can be seen as representing a new distribution of tasks and thereby the responsibility to carry out those tasks. Second, the V-chip could be seen as affecting who is control of children and what they watch on television and that control is a condition for moral liability is widely accepted. Third, the V-chip can be seen as affecting parental responsibility, conceived as a virtue, in a deeper sense.

The V-Chip and Task Responsibility

Three tasks can be distinguished that need to be done to let the V-chip function properly[3]:

1. Broadcasting programs (without programs on TV the V-chip would be senseless)
2. Rating these programs (otherwise the chip cannot select programs)
3. Setting the threshold on an individual TV (otherwise the chip cannot select programs)

Typically these tasks are carried by:

1. TV stations
2. A rating committee
3. The parents

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[3] Actually there may be much more task that need to be done like maintenance or repair but those three seem relevant for the topic we want to discuss.

Note that in principle it would be possible for one actor to perform more than one task: e.g. TV stations can do the rating (as is now the case in the USA[4]), or the rating committee could set the threshold for each individual TV. It would, however, make little sense that the individual parents did the rating (activity 2 above) because then the chip would have no added value.[5] It is also worth noting that, in order for the V-chip to function properly, it requires not only someone doing the rating, but also a uniform rating system. In the USA, the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable Television Association, and the Motion Picture Association of America have established a ratings system known as "TV Parental Guidelines". The program makers or TV stations give ratings to the programs. A TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board monitors the application of the rating system and deals with complaints.

Contrary to what some opponents of the V-Chip suggest (e.g. Vradenburg III 1997) the American government has only a very indirect role in the rating of programs. The actual rating is done by TV stations and program makers and the rating is monitored by an independent board. The only task performed by the government is to enforce that this system is in place. The government does therefore not decide what people watch on television, as is sometimes suggested. Still, opponents could have two other objections. One is that the system in principle opens the possibility for governments to do the rating, even though this is not the case in the actual implementation in the USA and, secondly, they might object to the fact that other actors than the individual parents do the rating and in this way get a say in what children watch on television.

If one compares the V-chip with the previous situation, or the situation existing outside the USA, some interesting shifts in the division of tasks become clear (see Fig. 1). In the traditional situation, parents decided directly what their children saw on television. They did so presumably by turning off the TV whenever they decided it was appropriate to do so. In most countries, there were no formal or legal restrictions for TV programs although there were some moral and aesthetic constraints, for example of "good taste." The second situation is one in which the programs contain a rating, which may be helpful for parents to decide which programs their children should be allowed to watch. Many European countries adhere to this system. In this system the parents still mainly decide what their children watch, although the judging of the programs have partly been taken over by others, who are applying the ratings to programs. With the V-chip the actual role of the parents has further diminished (or so it seems). If they choose to use the V-chip, they only have to set the rating they find acceptable for their children.

Thus, the V-Chip does affect the task responsibility of the actors involved. However, although the re-distribution of tasks gave us a first impression, we need to look deeper to see how moral responsibility may have been altered by the V-chip. For this reason, we now turn to the relation between control and moral responsibility.

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[4] Together with the program makers; overseen by a monitoring committee.

[5] Of course the rating committee can consist of parents, but not off *all* parents who use the chip.
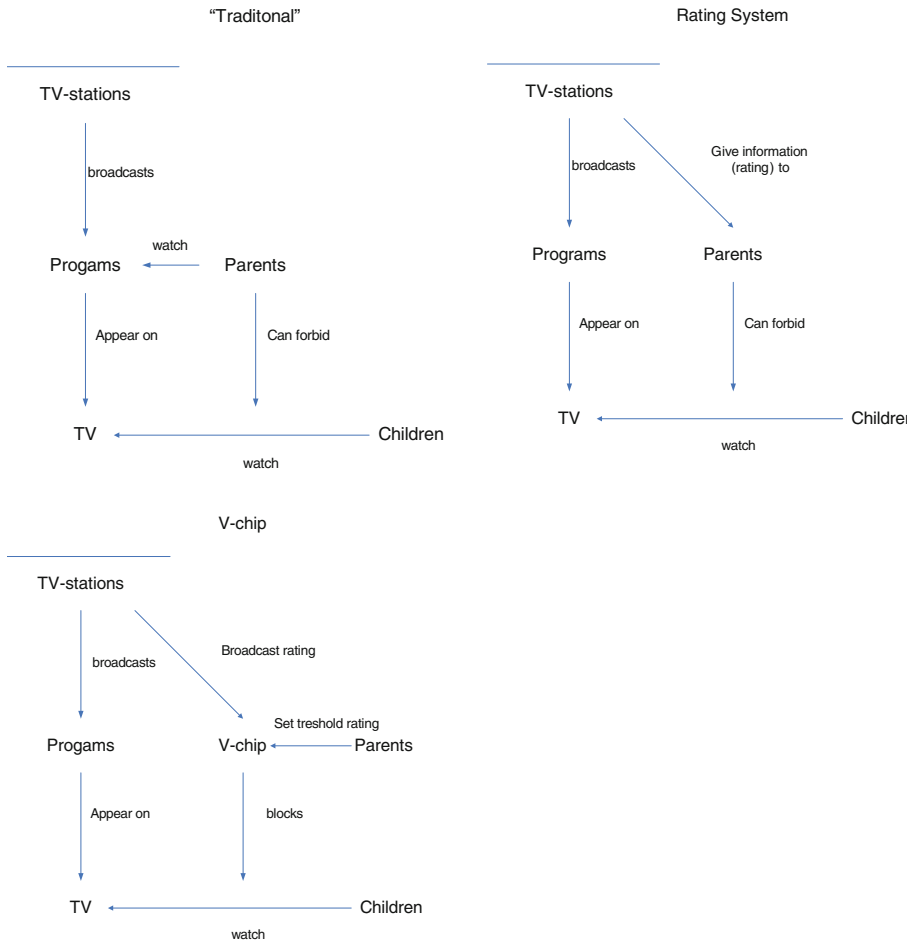
Fig. 1 Divisions of tasks with respect to violence on television

The V-Chip and Control

Control is relevant to moral liability because we usually consider it improper or unreasonable to hold people responsible for outcomes that are beyond their control. The V-Chip primarily affects the degree of control of two groups: parents and the rating committee.[6] With respect to the first group, the V-Chip increases the control of parents. It gives parents more control over what their children watch on TV in their absence (assuming that their children are not able to sabotage the system). Parents are also able to set different levels of protection. Still it appears that they lose some control to the rating committee or the party doing the rating (in the US: TV stations and program makers), who also get increased control over what children watch on TV. It should be noted, however, that they get this control only if parents

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[6] We leave aside children for the moment; they might get less control.

use the V-Chip and switch it on. Although TV's are legally required to have a V-chip, it is not legally required to actually use it. So parents still control the use of the V-chip and are still able to decide whether they want to rely on the ratings given by the rating committee or on their own judgment of what is acceptable. They could, for example, also decide to switch on the V-chip when their children are watching TV alone and to watch TV programs that they consider appropriate together. To the extent that increased control implies increased moral liability, the V-chip increases rather than diminishes the moral liability of parents for what children watch on TV. This is not to deny that the V-Chip also increases the moral liability of the rating committee which also gets a larger degree of control (assuming that at least some parents will use the V-Chip). To some, it might appear paradoxical that the V-Chip increases the total 'amount' of responsibility but it is not as soon as one realizes that increased control entails increased responsibility and the V-chip, like many other technologies, increases the possibilities for control. Acting together, parents and the rating committee can control what children watch to a greater extent than they previously could.

As we have seen, technology can affect moral responsibility and the main reason for this is that just like the accepted idea that 'ought implies can', 'can implies ought' in some cases. This phrase is used by Garvey when he argues that a greater share of responsibility for climate change should be ascribed to affluent states (Garvey 2008). We think many people share an intuition that the more power, resources and capacity someone has the greater her responsibility is. Technology is one way to increase capacity and this increased power could be seen as entailing greater responsibility.

Although the effect of the V-chip on moral liability is important, we think that the real issue revolves around the effect of the V-chip on forward-looking parental responsibility rather than on the moral liability of parents. After all, we tend to think of parental responsibility mainly as a forward-looking moral responsibility of parents for their children and much less to focus on what reactive attitudes are appropriate if parents did not discharge these 'responsibilities' (the latter seems to be the focus of moral liability).

Interestingly, by affecting the degree of control, the V-chip also affects forward-looking parental responsibility. Control appears to be relevant for forward-looking responsibility in two ways: (1) in order to assume forward-looking responsibility for something you should be able to exercise at least some control over that something (2) if we are forward-looking responsible for something we will in general seek increased control over that something in order to be able to better exercise our forward-looking responsibility.

With respect to (1), the V-Chip increases the control of parents and thereby increases the ability of parents to take forward-looking responsibility for their children. With respect to (2), we might expect that some parents will use the V-chip to exercise their responsibility. However, we might still ask the question whether this is a proper, or the best, way to assume parental responsibility. Opponents of the V-chip may argue that the V-chip gives some control and hence responsibility to the rating committee or the party doing the rating, for example the TV stations and program makers. If one believes that parents have a responsibility for what their

children watch on TV and believes that this responsibility is exclusive, i.e. cannot be shared with others, it might be undesirable to use the V-chip. To judge the soundness of this argument, we need to delve deeper into the forward-looking moral responsibility of parents, which we will do in the next section.

Parental Responsibility as a Virtue

We have seen that the responsibility arguments in the V-chip debate could be seen as referring to tasks or to control. However, we believe there is also a thicker concept involved. The concept of "parental responsibility" involves ideas of the very essence of parenthood, i.e. what it means to be a good or ideal parent. Hence, the notion of parental responsibility extends beyond tasks and control, touching on the core ideas of ideal parenting.

First, let us be clear about what we mean by parenthood. There is an extensive philosophical debate in bioethics concerning the issue of who is a parent. We will not go into that debate here, only stipulate that our concept of a parent is not biological but more pluralist. There are several kinds of relationships that can be sufficient for parenthood (Bayne and Kolers 2003). Furthermore, in the ethics of care debate, mothering is an important concept. We would like to emphasise that what is said to be mothering or maternal practice by, for example Sara Ruddick (1989), is as relevant for fathers as it is for mothers. Consequently, we are more comfortable with the term "parenting" to cover both mothers and fathers.

Utilitarian theories as well as Kantian and liberal theories are badly equipped for analysing the concept of parenthood. The reason for that is that they are constructed for the "public sphere", the family and children being referred to as the "private sphere". As a parent to claim that one aims at maximising utility, even if it is family utility of the utility for children would probably be considered highly questionable. Someone who merely refers to duties and rights in relation to his children would also strike us as a bit odd, perhaps a bit rigid and too focused on rules. Virtue ethics is substantially better apt to deal with the issues of parenthood. Parenthood appears to be generally about what an ideal parent would be like and the virtues of parenting: Should I be a tolerant parent or a strict parent, is friendship a virtue for parents or should I be an authoritative person my children will be able to respect? Parenthood appears to be more about what kind of a person and what kind of a parent one wants to be than it is about particular acts.

In addition to the centrality of virtues and exemplars, parenting involves a great deal of improvisation. Parents constantly have to deal with the unexpected and the role of being a parent almost by nature or definition is likely to cause moral conflicts or role conflicts, e.g. between one's role as a parent and one's role as a working person. Garrath Williams agues that responsibility as a virtue represents "a willingness to respond to a plurality of normative demands" (Williams 2008). This seems to be a very suitable description of the responsibility implied by being a parent as well.

A theory which is related to virtue ethics is the ethics of care. Whereas some theorists argue that care is a virtue, others emphasise the relational aspects of care and take this as a feature that makes care theory different from virtue ethics (Noddings 2002; Held 2006). The development of the ethics of care has gone in different directions. One offspring is maternal ethics and in this theory we find some useful ideas that we can apply to the V-chip discussion. Maternal ethics, or the ethics of mothering, values the work traditionally done by women taking care of children and its proponents argue that this work should be seen as the foundation of ethics. We will now look at the concept of mothering, but would like to note that in spite of the terms associations with women, it might as well be called "parenting", since men as well as women can be maternal thinkers, i.e. think like good mothers or good parents.

Sara Ruddick argues that there are three dimensions of maternal practice: preservation, growth, and acceptability of one's children and a meta-virtue which is the foundation for this work: "attentive love" (Ruddick 1989). The requirements imposed on anyone doing maternal work, according to Ruddick, include preserving the life of the child, fostering the child's growth, and shaping an acceptable child in the eyes of the social group to which the mother is identified. To be a mother (parent) is to be committed to meeting these demands by preservative love, nurturance and training (Ruddick 1989). This description of maternal work, if applied to fathers as well, appears to be a reasonable notion of what parental responsibility amounts to:

– *Preservation*. Preserving the child's life. This does not require love, just seeing vulnerability and responding to it. To achieve this aim is the constitutive maternal (or parental) act.
– *Nurturance/growth*. Fostering the child's emotional and intellectual growth. This is more historically and culturally specific.
– *Social acceptability*. Creating an acceptable child.

Attentive love is what knits together maternal work and it consists in a cognitive ability (attention) and a virtue (love) (Ruddick 1989).

There is one thing we would like to qualify in Ruddick's theory. It may be essential to create a socially acceptable child both for the sake of the child and for society, but it is also important to teach the child to reflect on the norms imposed by society. Although this may be difficult for many parents, it seems at least ideally to be important to raise children who will be able to evaluate the norms of the social group instead of merely trying to conform to them. This is important to help children become morally autonomous agents and it possibly also helps them to develop a sense of self-worth. One example could be children who discover that they are homosexual, but who live in a society with a strong heterosexual norm. This could also be about norms concerning gender roles, for instance it is arguably a parent's responsibility to teach his son that it is acceptable for boys to cry occasionally regardless of whether the social group approves or not. MacIntyre argues that moral agents should be able to question the social and cultural order, not merely accept it as it is (MacIntyre 2002). In order for children to become autonomous agents, it is important that they learn to question norms. Furthermore,

society has a need to make sure its new citizens grow up being able to question habits, customs and political decisions.

If we explicate Ruddick's requirements of attentive love as the meta-virtue and preservation, nurturance, and creating a socially acceptable child, parental responsibility can be seen as a cluster of obligations and tasks. The notion of parental responsibility is primarily forward-looking with a long-term goal to produce a healthy, relatively happy and socially productive person. We will now try to formulate a number of more specific forward-looking responsibilities on the basis of Ruddick's three requirements and our own additional requirement. The list is probably not exhaustive but gives an impression of what more specific responsibilities flow from Ruddick's requirements. It is, also, helpful to identify which responsibilities are affected by the V-chip and which ones not.

The virtue of attentive love identified by Ruddick appears to imply a meta-responsibility to see to it that the rest of the tasks are performed. This long-term responsibility is the continuous practice of caring for and taking an active interest in the child's well-being. The requirement of preservation implies the obligation to take care of the child, to defend the child and to love the child. The requirement of nurturance and growth is to a great extent about education, interpreted broadly. The specific responsibilities involved are to make sure the child develops morally and that the child is educated. The requirement of social acceptability entails the more specific responsibility of making sure the child does not harm others. And the fourth requirement of critical thinking requires a responsibility to teach the child to think for herself and to question unreasonable norms.

Some more specific responsibilities derive from a combination of Ruddick's requirements. For example, parents' responsibility to balance the reduction of exposure to harm with the ideal to learn from mistakes follows partly from the requirement of nurturance and partly from the requirement of preservation. The responsibility to see to it that the child develops morally, learns to respect other people and abide by the law is entailed by the requirement of social acceptability as well as the requirement of nurturance.

Some of the responsibilities entailed by parenthood are a consequence of the quality of the relationship between the parent and the child. However, there is a second relationship which is important when analysing parental responsibility, i.e. the one between parents and society. The first has been called the custodial relationship and the second the trustee relationship. According to Bayne and Kolers, parenthood inhabits the intersection between the two relationships. This means that, as a parent one has a responsibility to the child and to society. "To be a parent is thus to attempt to maintain an equilibrium among the rights and responsibilities associated with two kinds of relationships that sometimes seem to pull in different directions" (Bayne and Kolers 2008).

Table 2 summarizes the different aspects of parental responsibility we have distinguished in this section. As we can see, whereas preservation and nurturance primarily concern the parent–child relationship, social acceptability primarily concerns the parent–society relationship. To create a child who can think for herself is (or should be) in the interest of parents as well as society. The only requirement which is merely a parental responsibility, i.e. cannot be shared or transferred is the

Table 2 Elements of parental responsibility

Requirement:	Type of relation:	
	Custodial (parent–child)	Trustee (parent–society)
Attentive love		
A meta-responsibility to see to it that the rest of the tasks are performed	X	
Preservation		
Taking care of the child materially, physically and emotionally	X	(X)
Loving the child		
Defending the child against potential 'enemies' and threats		
Balance between well-being and learning through mistakes*		
Nurturance/fostering growth		
Doing what is in the child's specific and unique interest	X	(X)
Balance between well-being and learning through mistakes*		
Moral development*		
Proper education		
Making sure the child does not harm others*		
Social acceptability		
Moral development*	(X)	X
Proper education		
Making sure the child does not harm others*		
Critical thinking		
Moral development*	X	X
Proper education		
Teaching the child to think for herself and to question unreasonable norms		

X means primarily responsible; (X) indicates that the responsibility can possibly be shared

Responsibilities affected by the V-chip are denoted by an *

virtue of attentive love, which entails the long-term responsibility to see to it that the other obligations are met.

Parental Responsibility, Society's Interest and the V-Chip

We have presented some philosophical ideas on what is entailed by parental responsibility. Let us turn to the case of the V-chip and apply the ideas to this particular technology and its effects on the responsibility of parents. Against the discussion above, our current notion of parental responsibility is as a virtue entailing the requirements of preservation, nurturance/growth, social acceptability and critical thinking. Furthermore, as we have seen these requirements can, in turn, be

explicated as specific responsibilities. The question, of course, how is parental responsibility, understood in this way, affected by the V-chip? Is it increased or reduced and what aspects of parental responsibility and the relations of parents to the child and to society are involved?

The V-chip primarily affects the following parental responsibilities (see Table 2):

- Striking a balance between the child's well-being and learning through mistakes
- Moral development of the child
- Making sure the child does not harm others

Due to the V-chip, some of these parental responsibilities may become shared with other actors like the rating committee or the government. The question is whether this should be considered a problem. We would argue that it is not a great concern. The reason for that is that almost all of the specific responsibilities listed in Table 2 should be considered as temporarily "transferable" or at least "sharable." Most people probably think that parents are, by default, the ones who are primarily responsible for their own children. Nevertheless, analysing what this responsibility may consist of, it is noticeable that parents already share many of the tasks involved. Parents may be the sole responsible party in some rare cases when children are home schooled and the family lives in an isolated environment. However, most people live in societies where teachers, grandparents, friends and neighbours take part in teaching a child about right and wrong, directly or indirectly. For example, many people are involved in teaching children to refrain from violence. Although it may vary to some extent throughout a child's life exactly who these other people are, most children have other grown-ups who help them to develop morally and prevent them from harming others. We believe most people see this as reasonable and in that sense would agree with the old saying that "It takes a village to raise a child", which can be seen as another way of saying that these responsibilities are shared.

We are inclined to believe that the only parental responsibility mentioned in Table 2 that cannot be shared with others is the meta-responsibility to make sure the long-term goals are met. This is uncompromisingly connected to the parent/parent-like person because it requires that the person knows the child very well and is possible to have a long-term perspective of the child's life. This is what Ruddick calls the meta-virtue of attentive love.

One may still wonder whether the government has a moral right to encourage the use of the V-chip by requiring the chip to be implemented in all TV sets and requiring the rating of programs. To analyse this, we have to look at the particular threats against which the V-chip are intended to protect. These threats are (i) children becoming violent and criminal and (ii) damage to children's mental health and wellbeing. The first threat concerns the requirement to create a socially acceptable child, i.e. primarily the parent's responsibility to society. It may be seen as society's way of giving parents a tool to make sure their children become acceptable, which is primarily a societal interest. The second threat could be seen as entailed by the requirement of nurturance, i.e. as a part of the responsibility to help the child grow, to protect her from harm and to not let fear and anxiety affect her

negatively. To watch violent movies may cause fear and inhibit the child's development.

The societal interest is justified to some extent although caution is warranted in order to keep the boundary between public and private matters. It appears reasonable that society has a justified interest in preventing children from becoming violent grown-ups. Some research suggests a strong connection between children watching violent television content and violent behaviour (American Academy of Pediatrics 2001; Huesmann 2007). Furthermore, some studies suggest that children who watch violent programs become fearful and anxious to a greater extent than children who do not consume violent media (Huesmann 2007).

The trustee relationship entails that parents have a responsibility to society in addition to their responsibility to their children. Therefore, it is reasonable to conceive of the responsibility to prevent children from becoming violent as a shared responsibility between parents and society (government and industry). One way of sharing such responsibility is through sharing control. Because the government has decided that the V-chip should be installed in all TV's of a certain size, it could be argued that they have taken their part of the responsibility related to violent television content. It is up to the parents to decide whether and how to use the device, so they still have the ultimate control and responsibility. Of course, the crucial question is whether violent television content leads to violence and this is not uncontroversial. However, society also has an interest in the mental health and wellbeing of children and perhaps it is less controversial to claim that regardless of whether children become violent there are few benefits of having them watch violent content. It appears likely that there is a risk to their wellbeing if they do watch violent content to a great extent. In sum, the trustee relationship and the requirements to nurture the child and to create a socially acceptable child and later a socially acceptable grown-up make it reasonable that society makes an effort to reduce exposure of children to the media violence. One question that should be addressed is whether the V-chip is the right way to do that. Its intrusiveness is quite low since the parents still have ultimate control and can decide whether and how to use it. Of course it also depends on whether people are actually using it and theorists have argued that there are additional measures that should be considered, for example that parents should be educated about the media (American Academy of Pediatrics 2001). However, we are mainly interested in the ethical justifiability of the V-chip and we believe that it is currently a tool for parents to use at their discretion as one way to take their parental responsibility to protect their children from unnecessary fear and anxiety as well as to help them become socially acceptable non-violent people. It is one way of reducing their children's exposure to detrimental media violence. However, if parents choose to, they are currently allowed to refrain from using the V-chip and take their responsibility in other ways, for instance by not allowing television sets in their rooms and so forth.

The V-chip does not appear to substantially affect the ultimate long-term responsibility of parents. Some of the responsibilities, which can be shared, are shared through the use of the V-chip, but the only non-transferable and non-sharable responsibility to see to it that all the other obligations are met, the meta-virtue of attentive love, does not appear to be reduced.

Conclusion

We have seen that there are three notions of responsibility underlying the debate of the V-chip. The responsibility arguments refer either to task responsibility, control, to the notion of parental responsibility as a virtue or to a combination of these three.

The introduction of the V-chip appears to affect the distribution of tasks. Tasks are changed and new tasks are added. Parents now have to set the V-chip instead of judging programs themselves or relying on ratings in for example the TV guide. Parents thus get different and fewer tasks, i.e. this can be seen as reducing their task responsibility, but this hardly seems morally problematic. A new task is created for the rating committee, i.e. rating the programs. This may be considered problematic in a liberal society if this new task is used by the government to enforce ideological choices on its citizens. However, in the actual implementation in the United States, the government is not part of the rating committee nor can it directly influence it. Moreover, parents still have the freedom not to use the V-chip. In these circumstances, the creation of a rating does not appear to be morally problematic. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to have some requirements for the rating committee, e.g. to keep the committee transparent and to have parents involved in the discussions and decisions concerning the rating.

Focusing on control, the V-chip is a way of increasing parents' control, i.e. to give them the opportunity to exercise their responsibility. However, it also gives control to the new actor called the rating committee. Together, parents and the rating committee can now control what children watch to a greater extent than before. It appears control is not a zero-sum game. Some technologies increase the possibilities for control and the V-chip, when parents and rating committee work together appear to make it possible to control how much media violence children are exposed to. Given the evidence suggesting that media violence affects the behaviour of children, our conclusion is that this new possibility for control is advantageous in that sense.

The third notion of responsibility referred to in this debate is what we call the virtue of parental responsibility. We conceptualise this notion as follows. It includes two relations, i.e. the custodial relation between the parent and the child and the trustee relation between the parent and society. Furthermore, we adopted Ruddick's description of mothering as a reasonable view of what parental responsibility amounts to, i.e. to preserve the child, to nurture and foster the child's growth and to create a socially acceptable child. We added the fourth requirement of helping children critically examine social and moral norms. The V-chip concerns the custodial relationship as well as the trustee relationship and the requirement of growth as well as the requirement of creating a socially acceptable child. This is so because the V-chip is intended to protect children against threats to their wellbeing and development, but also to protect society by preventing children from becoming violent partly as a result of having consumed media violence. When these general requirements are made explicit in the list of specific responsibilities, it becomes clear that most of them are sharable and can be performed by many different people and institutions. What should not be shared is the ultimate responsibility and the long-term commitment to see to it that the tasks are performed. This can be seen as a parental meta-responsibility or, as Ruddick's idea of attentive love.

Our intuition is that whether people's behaviour actually changes as a result of the V-chip is likely to vary depending on the parents. Some parents may loosen their attention and feel a reduced need to actively take responsibility when the V-chip is installed. However, it appears likely that most parents, if they feel responsible enough to make the effort to use the V-chip actively, will not let that affect their attentive love in any substantial way. Moreover, even if some parents' sense of responsibility is reduced due to the V-chip it is more reasonable to blame the parents for that and not the V-chip or its designers. After all, they are still very much—or even more than before—in control.

Finally, it should be noted that the finding that there are different notions of responsibility involved in a debate that seemingly is about one issue, indicates that discussions on other technologies and how they affect responsibility may suffer from the same conceptual lack of clarity. This illuminates the importance of conceptual analysis in debates on how particular technologies affect responsibility.

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