The FCC’s not our mommy and daddy
Why the federal agency is wrong to recommend regulating violence on TV.

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AT THE BEHEST of Congress, the Federal Communications Commission issued a report last week on "violent television programming and its impact on children" that calls not just for expanding governmental oversight of broadcast TV but extending content regulation to cable and satellite channels for the first time. The FCC also recommended that some shows be banned from time slots when children might be watching and that cable and satellite operators be forced to offer "a la carte" service in which subscribers would pick and choose among individual channels.

Despite its sober tone, the study rests on the demonstrably false idea that violent TV breeds violence in reality, and it also fails to take seriously the vast increase in child-friendly programming and parent-empowering viewing tools. The result is a list of recommendations to Congress that seems as comically and absurdly detached from contemporary America as an episode of "SpongeBob SquarePants."

"America is hooked on violence," laments Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein, who ostensibly believes that the FCC’s proposed policies would make the United States safer. "Particularly in light of the spasm of unconscionable violence at Virginia Tech," he continues in his statement approving the report, "but just as importantly in light of the excessive violent crime that daily afflicts our nation, there is a basis for appropriate federal action to curb violence in the media."

Yet the report itself cites a 2001 U.S. surgeon general report that concluded "many questions remain regarding the short- and long-term effects of media violence, especially on violent behavior." More to the point, if fantasy violence translates readily into its real-world counterpart, then why have juvenile violent crime arrests dropped steadily for 12 years? According to a 2006 Department of Justice report, such arrests have fallen "to a level not seen since at least the 1970s."

The same trend is true for violent crime among the larger population. There seems little question that depictions of violence in popular culture — including TV, movies, music, video games and more — have become more frequent and more graphic since 1994. If Adelstein’s thesis were true, the facts on the ground would be otherwise.

But the FCC commissioners speak less as social scientists and more as parents. "I am deeply concerned about the negative effects violent programming appears to have on our children," writes Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate. "Many of us, as parents, have witnessed our children acting out a fighting scene from an episode of ‘Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles’ … or been awakened by a frightened child climbing into bed after having a nightmare because of something they saw on television."

The ultimate goal of the report, she argues, is not simply to empower parents who worry about what’s on TV in their house but to change "the media landscape outside our homes" (emphasis hers) and to increase "the amount of family-friendly, uplifting and nonviolent programming being produced."

It’s safe to say that when a quartet of do-gooder, pizza-chomping cartoon reptiles has become a predicate for federal regulation, American governance has gone seriously off the rails. Similarly, if the FCC is in the business of banning children’s nightmares, look for the agency to go after circus clowns any day now.

More to the point, the FCC seems to be wholly unaware that, in recent years, cable TV has become jam-packed with channels dedicated to the sort of fare Tate demands. Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, Disney Kids, Sprout, Noggin and others devote most or all of their hours to kid-friendly culture.

At the same time, parents have gained unprecedented control over the tube. Since 2000, all new TV sets have come equipped with a government-mandated "V-chip," which allows parents to automatically block specific programs based on violence, language or sexual content ratings. The typical TV or cable/satellite box includes other
controls as well that allow the blocking of channels and restrict access to the set. And, of course, all TVs come with an on/off switch. (Though as FCC Chairman Kevin J. Martin, perhaps channeling TV’s laziest father, Homer Simpson, said in 2005: “You can always turn the television off and, of course, block the channels you don’t want…. But why should you have to?”) The report notes all this but assumes that the low usage rates of such tools — only about 12% of parents report regularly using the V-chip or cable channel blockers — mean that parents’ wishes are being thwarted rather than fulfilled.

Maybe. But in a report that systematically misreads contemporary America, it’s more likely that the FCC is simply mistaken.