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Question Lingers as F.C.C. Prepares V-Chip Standards

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Today, the Federal Communications Commission will formally approve the much-debated television rating codes, and will issue technical standards for manufacturing the microchip inside new television sets, known as a V-chip, that will let parents block programs with violence, sex or vulgar language from screens.

The ''V'' in V-chip stands for violence and was coined by Representative Edward J. Markey, Democrat of Massachusetts, who helped write it into the 1996 Telecommunications Act. But if he invented the term, who invented the gizmo?

The answer could mean millions of dollars in licensing fees, since about 25 million new television sets are sold in the United States each year. There are three competing claims.

Most often, the V-chip idea is attributed to a Canadian engineering professor named Tim Collings, who has been promoting himself as the inventor of the V-chip since 1991. But he has no patent.

The earliest patent belongs to Carl M. Elam, who in 1982, as a United States Air Force engineer in Dayton, Ohio, began tinkering with a television set and invented a blocking device that worked, using the same electronic circuit used for closed captions for the hearing impaired. In 1983, he petitioned the F.C.C. to require his device on new sets. In 1985, he was granted a patent.

In 1986, an inventor named John Olivo developed another blocking device. His company, Parental Guide of Omaha, calls him ''the inventor of the V-chip.''

Mr. Elam, now retired from the Air Force and working as an engineering supervisor for the State of Maryland, said yesterday that he had invented his device because he was offended by sexual innuendo and vulgar language on television shows his three children watched. And he recalled deep disappointment when the F.C.C. showed no interest in it.

Ten years later, pressure from public interest groups and Congress forced the television industry to come up with ratings codes and blocking devices. The company with which Mr. Elam is affiliated, Soundview Technologies of Greenwich, Conn., hopes to make licensing agreements with manufacturers.

But it may be too late, said John J. Kelly, executive vice president and general counsel at the Electronics Industries Association, the trade group asked by Congress to coordinate development of technical standards for the V-chip. ''The world was aware we were working on standards to implement the V-chip technology,'' Mr. Kelly said. ''No one raised a claim.''

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