

narrative requirement of this genre. Violent acts were often shown in disjointed images intended to accompany a particular lyric or musical figure, but without prior or subsequent narrative context. For the same reason, motives for violent behavior could be identified only 44 percent of the time. Nonetheless, there was also a close link between evil motives and violent behavior. In cases where motives were known, 89 percent were negative for serious violence, as were 73 percent for all violence. Positive motives accounted for about one in ten (11 percent) of serious violence and just over a quarter (27 percent) of all violence.

	<u>All</u>	<u>Serious</u>
<b>Presentation</b>		
Shown	90	87
Aftermath	10	13
<b>Physical Harm</b>		
None	76	63
Fatal Injury	2	4
Other Injury	5	15
Property Damage	17	18
<b>Psychological Harm</b>		
None	91	81
Victims	6	13
Others	3	6
<b>Judgment</b>		
None	98	99
Right	1	1
Wrong	1	0
<b>Motives*</b>		
Positive	27	11
Negative	73	89
<b>Perpetrator*</b>		
Good Guy	51	32
Bad Guy	34	64
Mix/Neutral	15	4

\* where known

## Conclusion: The Big Picture

### Comparing Violence Across Formats

This study has examined the presence of violence in various forms of popular entertainment. Thus far, however, we have not directly compared the amount of violence in each genre. To do so requires that we consider the different presentation formats that are distinctive to each one. For example, theatrical movies are not interrupted by commercials. So a two-hour made-for-television movie actually provides less than an hour and a half of actual viewing time. In order to make valid comparisons, we calculated the average amount of violence that viewers would see per hour of actual running time of each entertainment product.

This calculation was conducted by giving equal weight to each format, summing the average rate of violence

per hour across the four formats, and dividing by four. The result tells us how much violence a viewer would encounter every hour if he or she watched equal amounts of television series, television movies, music videos and movies shown in theaters. The result: While there were distinct variations among genres for overall violence, the most serious violence was present in surprisingly similar amounts throughout popular culture.

Overall, as Table 12 shows, the various popular culture formats generated an average of 31 acts of violence per hour, or one every two minutes. Music videos topped the list with 62 scenes per hour, more than twice as much as of any other medium. Television series and theatrical films contained almost identical rates of violence - 25 scenes per hour for movies and 24 for all TV series. Within the latter group, however, syndicated series were by far the most violent, with 51 scenes per hour. Network and cable series had less than half that amount - 19 scenes for cable and 17 for network series. TV movies had the lowest rate of overall violence - 12 scenes per hour. However, cable movies were more than twice as violent as those on broadcast stations (16 versus seven).

Focusing on serious violence significantly reduced the differences among genres. The average across all genres was 14 serious acts of violence per hour, or one every four minutes, about half the rate for overall violence. Viewers would have witnessed 16 scenes of serious violence per hour on TV series, 15 in theaters, and 15 in music videos. Only TV movies were considerably lower, averaging seven scenes of serious violence per hour. However, the rate for cable movies was nearly three times higher than that of broadcast movies (11 versus four).

Among TV series, syndicated shows once again stood out, with 28 serious acts per hour versus 18 for cable series and 13 for those on the broadcast networks. Thus, the rate of serious violence was quite similar for network television series, cable movies, theatrical releases and music videos. Syndicated television series stood out as the most violent sector of popular entertainment, while movies airing on the broadcast networks were the least violent format.

Of course, the "average" popular culture product, like the average viewer, appears only rarely. Relatively few titles contain an average amount of violence, because they tend to divide between high-violence and low-violence features. This is not coincidental. Entertainment products are increasingly aimed at niche audiences or particular demographic segments of the population. Particular sub-genres, such as action-adventure TV series and slasher movies, are aimed at youthful audiences, particularly young males. So it is not surprising that much of the violence we coded was clustered in a relatively small portion of the sample.

<u>Outlet</u>	<u>Number of Scenes</u>	
	All Violence	Serious Violence
<b>Television</b>		
Broadcast Series	25	18
Network	17	13
Syndicated	51	28
Cable Series	19	9
All TV Series	24	16
<b>Television Movies</b>		
Broadcast	7	4
Cable	16	11
<b>Music Videos</b>	62	15
<b>Movies in Theaters</b>	25	15
<b>All Sources<sup>2</sup></b>	31	14

1 - Based on actual running time of TV series, TV movies, music videos, and movies in theaters.

2 - Grand mean of four genres weighted equally: (TV series + TV movies + music videos + movies in theaters) ÷ four.

In order to find out how much violence a viewer would encounter when seeking out violent entertainment, we performed the same calculations based on the top ten titles in each genre. Instead of telling us how violent the overall popular culture is, this tells us just how violent the most violent entertainment has become. The results appear in Table 13. Thus, we found that the top ten titles within each entertainment format contained a majority of the serious violence found in the entire sample for that format. The average for all genres was 90 acts per hour, or one and one-half per minute. Topping the list for overall violence were music videos, with a high of 173 scenes, nearly three per minute, reflecting the fast-paced profusion of images pioneered by this format. TV series were a distant second at 96 scenes per hour, followed by theatrical releases with 59, or one per minute. The ten most violent TV movies, the least violent genre, had 30 scenes per hour, or one violent incident every other minute.

Not surprisingly, the majority of all violent acts on high-violence shows were serious ones. The overall average was 54 acts of serious violence, or almost one per minute of actual running time. In our previous analysis of the entire sample, the proportion of serious violence in highly violent titles was fairly consistent across formats. Not so with the most violent titles. Music videos remained far and away the most violent genre, with the top ten averaging 100 acts of serious violence per hour, nearly twice the rate for television series (56 per hour). Movies in theaters were a clear increment below than television series, with 38 acts per hour. As usual, television movies finished at the bottom with 20 per hour.

## Violence and Ratings

By examining the actual running time of music videos, theatrical releases and TV series and movies, we documented the

	Number of Scenes	
	All Violence	Serious Violence
Television		
Series	96	56
TV movies	30	20
Music Videos	173	100
Movies in theaters	59	38
All Sources <sup>2</sup>	90	54

1 - Based on actual running time of the ten most violent TV series, TV movies, music videos and movies in theaters.

2 - Grand mean of four genres weighted equally: (TV series + TV movies + music videos + movies in theaters) ÷ four.

pervasiveness of violence across all genres of entertainment, as well as the variations that occasionally occur. The industry's rating system for theatrical releases and the more recent television parental guidelines are

intended to give parents reliable instruments to review or filter out content that might be objectionable for young children and adolescents. (Individual music videos are not currently rated.) This part of our study looks at the relationship between industry-designated ratings and the levels of violence in the highly violent TV series, TV movies and theatrical films that we coded.

The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has a voluntary rating system of five categories that designate the appropriate minimum age for viewers by the amount and intensity of sex and violence in each film. A "G" rating (general audience) means that the film is deemed suitable for even the youngest children; hence filmgoers of all ages are admitted. "PG" (parental guidance suggested) means some material in a film may not be suitable for children. "PG-13" (parents strongly cautioned) films may have some material that is inappropriate for children under 13 years of age. For "R" (restricted) films, anyone under 17 must be accompanied by a parent or guardian (although, as noted, enforcement of this restriction is notoriously lax). The content of a movie labeled NC-17, the strongest rating, is sufficiently violent or suggestive that no one under 17 is admitted. In practice, filmmakers avoid material that would produce this label, since it cuts them off from the lucrative teen audience.

How useful were the ratings to parents concerned about their children's exposure to violence? For our list of the ten most violent films, as Table 14 shows, half were rated R and half were rated PG-13. This means children could have seen five high violence films unaccompanied by an adult. This includes "Zorro," the second most violent film on our list,

<u>Theatrical Release</u>	<u>Rating</u>
1. Saving Private Ryan	R
2. The Mask of Zorro	PG-13
3. Lethal Weapon 4	R
4. Blade	R
5. Rush Hour	PG-13
6. Ronin	R
7. The Negotiator	R
8. U.S. Marshals	PG-13
9. Man in the Iron Mask	PG-13
10. Small Soldiers	PG-13

*\* Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 1998.*

which had 147 acts of violence, 56 percent of them (n=82) of them serious. The last three entries on the top ten list were also rated "PG-13," but each of these films had an even higher rate of serious violence. "U.S. Marshals" (63 percent), "Man in the Iron Mask" (59 percent), and "Small Soldiers" (74 percent) matched or surpassed several "R" rated films for proportion of serious violence. The other "PG-13" movie on our list, "Rush Hour," ranked number five in overall violence but had a lower rate of serious violence (45 percent).

"Saving Private Ryan," the most violent film as measured by general and serious violence (and without a doubt the most serious film in artistic terms) was rated "R". The same rating was given to "Lethal Weapon" (number three on the list), "Blade" (number four), and "Ronin" (number six). Of these three, "Ronin" had the highest rate of serious violence (77 percent). Yet another "R" film, "The Negotiator," (number seven) had the lowest rate of serious violence for the top ten films (26 percent), even when compared to all five "PG-13" movies.

TV series and movies are rated by a separate system that is derived from the MPAA categories, but employs somewhat different criteria. Parental guidelines for TV series and movies contain six categories. Two of these, which are specific to children's programs, did not appear on our lists: "TVY" is for shows deemed appropriate for all children, while "TVY7" shows may contain mild physical or comedic violence that may not be suitable for children under seven years of age. The remaining four categories are applied to programs aimed at a general audience. The mildest of these, "TVG", contains little or no violence, sex or strong language.

The other three ratings designate ascending levels of sex, violence and suggestive dialogue. "TVPG" (parental guidance suggested) contains some material that could be unsuitable for young children, so that parents may wish to watch the program with them. Shows that receive this rating may include infrequent course language, limited violence or some suggestive sexual dialogue and situations.

"TV-14" (parents strongly cautioned) urges adults to exercise greater care in monitoring this program, and cautions against letting children under 14 watch the show unattended since it may contain sophisticated themes, sexual content, strong language and more intense violence. "TVMA" shows are for mature audiences only. Since they are specifically designed for adults, they are deemed unsuitable for anyone under 17. Program content may contain mature themes, profane language, explicit sexual content and graphic violence.

Our list of the 20 most violent series on broadcast and cable television, shown in Table 15, included two that were not rated - "Special Ops Force," number 16, and "Acapulco HEAT," number 19. Among the remaining shows, 14 were rated "TVPG," two were rated "TV 14," and two received the strongest rating of "TVMA." The four shows with the most restrictive ratings were concentrated in the top half of the list. HBO's "Oz" (TVMA) was ranked number two. The top-rated martial arts western "Walker, Texas Ranger" had a milder rating of "TV14," while "LA Heat" (number five) and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (number seven) also had "TV14" ratings.

Notwithstanding the stronger caution these four shows received, a majority of the ten most violent programs carried only a mild "TVPG" rating. (Similarly, half of the ten most violent top grossing theatrical films were rated "PG13.") Extending our view to the 20 most violent series, we found they averaged 78 incidents of overall violence, with 47 serious acts, per hour of running time. This raises the question of how consistent current ratings are and how violent entertainment must be before it garners strong cautions.

Ironically, TV movies were most likely to receive restrictive ratings, although they were less violent than either TV series or theatrical releases. This can be seen in Table 16. Of the ten most violent TV movies, seven received a "TV14" rating, and only three were rated "TVPG." In contrast, six of the ten most violent TV series rated were designated "TVPG." All TV series rated averaged 56 acts of general violence per episode, with 34 of them serious, while TV movies averaged 43 acts overall, 29 serious. Once again, the ratings do not reflect the violence we found in different genres of entertainment.

## Summary

For this study we examined 573 distinct products of popular entertainment, including many of the most widely seen television series, movies, and music videos that appeared during the 1998-99 season, and the most popular feature films released during 1998. In formats ranging from three-minute videos to movies that lasted over two hours, we catalogued 8,350 scenes of violence, the majority of which (4,204) were serious or life-threatening. Some of the findings are not surprising. For example, feature films proved to be the most violence-filled vehicles, and made-for-TV movies shown on cable were more violent than their broadcast counterparts. A few television series stood out from the rest, led by a host of first-run syndicated series that are aimed at a youthful audience - "Mortal Kombat," "Crow," "Viper," and the like. Among the broadcast networks, CBS stood out, led by "Walker, Texas Ranger." Taking the dubious honors on cable were HBO, led by the graphic prison drama "Oz,"

Series	Outlet	Rating
1. Walker, Texas Ranger	CBS	14
2. Oz	HBO	MA
3. VIP	SYN	PG
4. Mortal Kombat: Conquest	SYN	PG
5. LA Heat	TNT	14
6. New Adventures of Robin Hood	SYN	PG
7. Buffy the Vampire Slayer	WB	14
8. Viper	SYN	PG
9. 7 Days	UPN	PG
10. Team Knight Ridder	SYN	PG
11. Crow: Stairway to Heaven	SYN	PG
11. Xena: Warrior Princess	SYN	PG
13. Nightman	SYN	PG
14. Hercules: Legendary Journeys	SYN	PG
15. Diagnosis Murder	CBS	PG
16. Special Ops Force	SYN	-
17. Martial Law	CBS	PG
18. Air America	SYN	PG
19. Acapulco H.E.A.T.	SYN	PG
20. Stargate SGI	SYN	PG

and TNT, which featured the nonstop shoot-em-up "LA Heat." But the similarities proved more interesting and less predictable than the differences in entertainment violence. After taking into account differences in program length and commercial interruptions, the different varieties of popular culture produced remarkably similar rates of violence. This was particularly true for the most graphic and brutal material, which we labeled "serious violence." Across all genres, viewers watched an average of about one scene of serious violence every four minutes of actual running time. Theatrical movies, music videos, and television series produced almost identical rates of serious violence.

In every format, the bulk of all violent material - especially serious violence - was concentrated in relatively few shows, which were clearly aimed at a youthful audience. The "top ten" lists we compiled typically contained a substantial majority of all serious violence shown in each format. These "high-violence" shows averaged nearly one scene of serious violence per minute of running time across all formats. Nonetheless, fully half of the ten most violent movies carried PG-13 ratings, and a majority of the ten most violent television series were rated TVPG.

In addition to tabulating the amount of violence, we examined the way violence was shown and the role it played in the story that was being told. Apart from minor exceptions stemming from the brevity of the music video format, the narrative context of violent behavior was surprisingly similar across all formats of popular entertainment. Most acts of violence were not presented as causing either physical or emotional harm. In the world of popular entertainment, bullets frequently miss their mark,

<u>TV Movie</u>	<u>Rating</u>
1. Dollar for Dead	TV-14
2. Killers in the House	TV-14
3. Purgatory	TV-14
4. Fatal Error	TV-PG
5. Noah's Ark*	TV-14
6. Horatio Hornblower	TV-PG
7. Invasion Earth*	TV-PG
8. Jack Bull	TV-14
9. Baby Monitor: Sound of Fear	TV-14
10. Naked City: Justice With a Bullet	TV-14

*\* Multi-part movie; violence totals prorated to reflect average totals for a single segment. However, cumulative "top ten" totals include all segments.*

heros bounce back from beatings without a scratch, and few victims of violence are emotionally traumatized by the experience. Further, violence is often carried out by good guys who act out of laudable motives, such as self-defense or the defense of others. Finally, scripts almost never carry explicit criticism of the use of violence. In Hollywood's fantasy world, violence just happens, it happens often, and it often happens for a good reason.

Before leaving this topic, however, it is necessary to give the devil its due. There are clearly instances in which frequent and graphic violence is integral to the narrative and even to the artistic value of a work of popular culture. In our study this was epitomized by "Saving Private Ryan," the award-winning film that was by far the most violent movie in our sample, due to its realistic portrayal of the horrors of battle. This film follows in a dramatic tradition that depicts violence in order to produce an emotional catharsis in the audience, a tradition that leads back to Shakespeare and Greek tragedy. It would be both foolish and short-sighted to suggest that such works should be condemned purely for their violent content. (It would be equally foolish to suggest that such works are suitable for viewing by most children, as "Private Ryan's" R rating illustrates.)

In the context of contemporary popular culture, however, what is significant about "Private Ryan" is how unusual it is. Far more typical of film violence in our sample were cookie-cutter shoot-em-ups like "Lethal Weapon 4," gruesome sci-fi fantasies like "Blade," and the martial arts mayhem of the PG-13 rated "Rush Hour." Nor would many critics rush to defend the high artistic purpose of such vast wasteland fare as "Walker, Texas Ranger" and "LA Heat," or music videos like "Body Movin'" and "Hate Me Now." Indeed, an advantage of examining a representative sample of popular culture artifacts is to learn just how infrequently highly violent programs aspire to serious artistic or moral purposes. "Saving Private Ryan" is precisely the exception that proves the rule.

This point was made even more systematically by James Hamilton of Duke University. In a study of 5,000 movies labeled with violence indicators, he found that fewer than 3 percent of high-violence films were rated highly by critics. Hamilton concluded, "Though high-quality violent films exist, they are not the norm..."<sup>(7)</sup> In other words, for every "Schindler's List" there are scores of Schwarzenegger and Seagal vehicles that pollute the popular culture with graphic and gratuitous gore. No sensible person wants to throw out the baby with the bathwater. But the converse also holds true: The bathwater can become so polluted that it threatens the health of the baby.

1. "TV Violence: More Objectionable In Entertainment than in Newscasts," Times Mirror Center for People and the Press, March 24, 1993, p.7.

2. See the polling data cited in S.R. Lichter, "America Down the Tube," Madison Review, Summer 1996, pp.22-27.
3. American Psychological Association, Big World Small Screen, Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press 1992.
4. National Institutes of Mental Health, Television and Behavior, Washington, DC, 1982.
5. Charles S. Clark, "TV Violence," CQ Researcher, Vol. 3, #12, March 26, 1993, pp.167-187.
6. Due to mechanical failures during taping, some movies from outside the top 25 were included to bring us up to a total of 25 movies. The end result is a sample of 25 movies from the top 32 made-for-network movies. The only missing features were a group of relatively low-rated sci-fi/action movies that aired on UPN.
7. James T. Hamilton, Channeling Violence, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1998, pp. xvii.

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Executive Summary

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## Introduction:

Discussion and debate about the impact of television programming on young people has focused mainly on violent content. Yet television also includes a substantial amount of sexual content, and TV's sexual messages are clearly an important part of adolescent sexual socialization. At a time when we are facing a sexual health crisis among young people — with nearly a million teen pregnancies and more than three million instances of sexually-transmitted diseases among teenagers every year — we need to pay special attention to those media depictions that could influence how young people develop their attitudes and beliefs about sex.

The purpose of this study is to examine the amount and nature of sexual messages on television today. Because *how* sex is shown on TV is as important as *how often* sex is shown, the study is not limited to counting the number of sexual situations, but rather looks as well at the context in which sex is presented on television. The findings presented here are based on a representative one week sample of all genres of television programming other than sports, news-casts, and children's TV. Using content analysis techniques to measure and assess these messages, a total of 1351 programs across ten channels were analyzed, offering the most elaborate evaluation of sexual messages on television yet produced by research.



## KEY FINDINGS:

Of all shows with sexual content, **just 9%** include any mention of the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, or any reference to contraception, protection, or safer sex.



**These findings are a broad indicator of how often television incorporates safer sex messages into sexual content. However, there are important differences in how shows address these themes. For example, a talk show could spend an hour on a highly charged sexual topic, and then include a passing reference to condoms. Half of all references to sexual risks or responsibilities in this study were minor or inconsequential.**

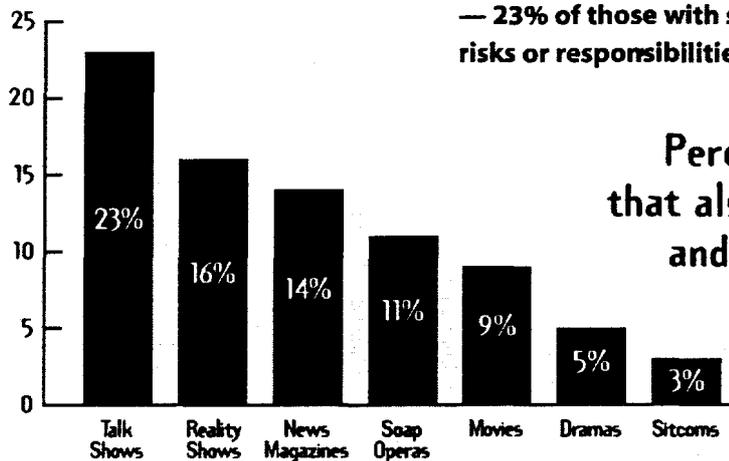
**On the other side of the equation, some shows feature issues about sexual health or sexual decision-making as one of the primary storylines of an entire episode. For example, an episode of Chicago Hope centered on a young girl who had just learned she was HIV-positive. However, this type of show was the exception rather than the rule. Just one percent of all shows with sexual content had a primary emphasis throughout the show on issues concerning sexual risks or responsibilities.**

**Likewise, not all sexual content is significant enough to warrant references to subjects such as waiting to have sex, or practicing safer sex. These topics would seem to be most appropriate in programs that show couples in bed, either strongly implying or actual showing them engaged in sex. However, none of the 88 scenes that contained sexual intercourse — either depicted or strongly implied — included even a passing reference to sexual risks or responsibilities. In scenes like these, even a brief reference — a condom on a bedside table, or a question about protection — could go a long way toward normalizing safer sex behaviors.**



Looking at this issue by genre, talk shows were the genre that included messages about sexual risks or responsibilities most often, featuring such issues 23% of the time they mentioned sex; of fictional TV shows, soap operas addressed these topics 11% of the time they included sex, dramas did so 5% of the time and sitcoms 3% of the time.

Dramas broadcast on the major networks during prime-time included such messages nearly one out of every four times they included sexual content — 23% of those with sexual content included at least some mention of the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.



Percent of shows with sexual content that also contain references to the risks and responsibilities of sex, by genre...

## Examples: References to sexual risks and responsibilities.

### Reference to condoms:

Charlie and Nina are two young adults who have established a dating relationship. Nina is helping Charlie clean out the storeroom of his restaurant, which is closed for major renovation. As Charlie reminisces about "old times" at the restaurant, a construction worker closes the storeroom door, apparently not realizing they are inside. Charlie wonders aloud if they are locked in, and says he can holler to the workers outside should they be trapped. Nina, however, seems to like the situation. "What if we were trapped?" she asks as she begins to caress and kiss him long and passionately. Responding to her signals, Charlie stam-

mers out a concern. "Great ... but what about ... because I don't actually carry one," implying that intercourse is out of the question without some protection. "I do, since our third date," Nina promptly replies, pulling a condom out of her pocket. With that, the two engage in a passionate kiss as the scene fades to black. (Party of Five, Fox)

### Reference to HIV/AIDS:

Featured throughout this episode is Ivy, a 15 year-old who first goes to see a doctor because she thinks she might be pregnant. In a brief misunderstanding, Dr. Grad tells Ivy, "Your test is positive." The teenager panics because she does not want to have a baby. But the doctor quickly clarifies that Ivy is positive not for pregnancy but rather for HIV. From that moment on, Ivy appears quite

relieved. She does not take the situation seriously, skipping her medicine and missing scheduled check-ups at the hospital. When Dr. Grad first confronts her, Ivy lies, covering up the fact that she has not told her boyfriend or her parents that she has contracted the HIV virus. Eventually, Dr. Grad forces Ivy to face her situation. In an emotional scene at the end of the program, Ivy tearfully recounts the repercussions of her sexual activity. Her pills make her tired and sick. The boyfriend she thought would marry her has left. She cries, "Who's going to date me now, let alone marry me?" Dr. Grad embraces Ivy and tries to comfort her, but the grim negative consequences of unprotected sex have no easy solution in this case. (Chicago Hope, CBS)



# KEY FINDINGS:

More than half (56%) of all shows contain sexual content; these shows average more than three scenes with sex per hour.

Fifty-four percent of all shows contain talk about sex, and 23% of all shows contain depictions of sexual behavior. Seven percent of all shows contain scenes in which sexual intercourse is either depicted or strongly implied.

Of those shows containing sexual behavior, the most common act shown was passionate kissing (50%), followed by physical flirting (26%), scenes in which intercourse is strongly implied (12%), intimate touching (7%) and depiction of intercourse (3%).

In the one-week sample analyzed for this study, there were 71 scenes in which intercourse was strongly implied, and 17 scenes in which intercourse was actually depicted, albeit discreetly.



## Examples: Types of sexual content

### Passionate kissing:

Mike and Kim meet at a bar. They talk about life and relationships and Kim comments about the importance of taking time to build a relationship. The scene shifts abruptly from the middle of their conversation in the bar to a living room couch where the two are frantically groping and kissing one another repeatedly as they tear their clothes off. In between kisses, Kim asserts, "I don't

normally do this... I like to wait for a more meaningful relationship..." Mike agrees with everything she says, all the while focusing on undressing her. As he begins to undo her bra, a beeper goes off and he remarks jokingly, "I didn't know bras came with alarms." The encounter comes to an end because of some urgent interruption. (Almost Perfect, Lifetime)

### Intimate touching:

A scene opens with the camera moving slowly along a row of cars in a parking lot, finally stopping at the last one which is rocking slowly and has fogged

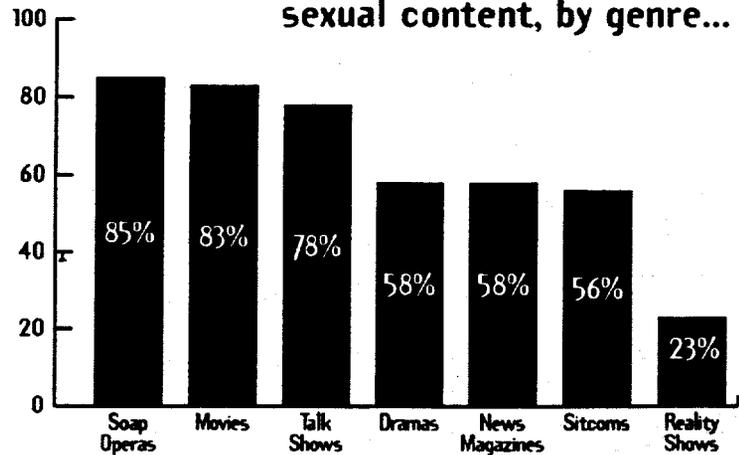
windows. Inside the car are Dennis, a cheating husband, and Gail, his attractive insurance agent. As the camera's view enters the car, the couple is locked in a steamy embrace. Between kisses, they both moan in passionate ecstasy. The bra-clad Gail writhes on top of Dennis, who holds her and a bottle of almost-empty scotch in one hand. As Gail strokes her hand along his khaki-clad thigh, Dennis reaches his free hand around her and begins working it under her skirt. Visibly aroused, Gail suggests they take their sexual activities "to somewhere that has a bigger play area" and they decide to head for a hotel. (Silk Stalkings, USA Network)



**More than two-thirds (67%)** of all network prime-time shows contain either talk about sex or sexual behavior, averaging more than five scenes with sex per hour.

Among **almost all genres** of television programming studied, more than half of shows contain sexual content.

Percent of shows that contain sexual content, by genre...



Only the genre labeled "reality" contained sexual themes in less than half its shows, including such content in about one of every four programs (23%).



**Sexual intercourse implied:**

A man and a woman are in an office. They kiss and the woman breaks away to go lock the door. She goes to the desk, moves a chair out of the way, and sweeps some papers off the desk top. The couple begins kissing and disrobing as she leans on the edge of the desk. The scene breaks, and when it picks up again the couple are putting their clothes back on.  
(The Young and The Restless, CBS)

**Sexual intercourse depicted:**

Ally makes an urgent after-hours call to the head of her law firm, Richard. The scene shifts to his bedroom where the phone is ringing. Richard is in bed with Whipper, a judge with whom he has an ongoing relationship. The two are engaged in a flurry of frantic, conjoined movement, literally bouncing around the bed as the phone rings. Whipper reaches to the nightstand and answers the phone without disengaging the sex

act. Ally is surprised to recognize Whipper's voice and to hear Richard's moaning in the background. Ally asks for Richard, but Whipper says "He's a little busy right now. Could I ask him to call you back?" Ally hangs up with a disgusted look on her face, while Richard and Whipper continue their sexual escapade.  
(Ally McBeal, Fox)

Examples: Types of sexual content continued on page 6



# KEY FINDINGS:

Of those instances of sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied:

Nearly three-quarters (73%) were among adults over 25, 23% were among young adults ages 18-24, and 3% were among teens

Half (53%) occurred among couples who had an established relationship with one another; 28% were among couples who knew each other but did not appear to have an established relationship; and 10% occurred between couples who had just met.

Eight percent of all shows included sexual content featuring teens.

Most of the scenes involving teens and sex (83%) were limited to talk about sex, while 17% included sexual behavior, most frequently kissing. Eighteen percent of all shows featuring teenage sexual content also included some reference to the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.

Relationship of characters engaged in sexual intercourse, depicted or strongly implied, on TV...

fall progra

## Examples: Types of sexual content continued from page 5

### Talk about sex:

After attending a class on sexual harassment, the office workers grow paranoid about a new "no tolerance" policy. Matt is frustrated because he has romantic interests for Jana, one of the women in his office. In front of the entire staff, he loudly declares his affection for her. "I like you. I like you a lot and it's okay if you like me too." She replies earnestly, "I just want to sleep with you!" Matt encourages the other staff members to express their true sexual feelings. Jana invites Matt for an apparent tryst, asking "Do you want to go to the edit room?" He responds eagerly and they scurry off holding hands. Another man asks the girl standing next to him, "Supply closet?"

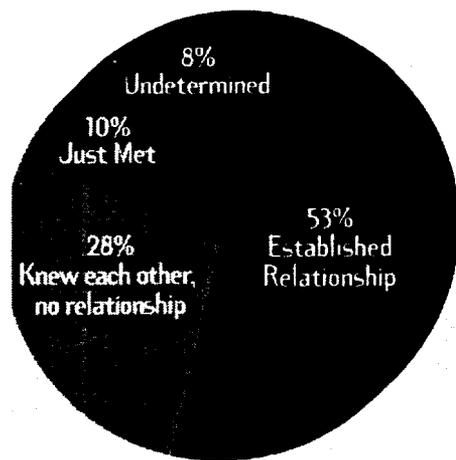
She nods and he wraps his arm around her, leading the way.  
(Working, NBC)

### Physical Flirting:

Nina is working alone in her high-rise office, talking on the phone while pulling up her nylons. She swivels in her chair and discovers a young male window washer is outside just inches away from where she is sitting. She gasps with shock and embarrassment, then tells the person on the phone what is happening. Luckily, the man seems not to notice her. Still explaining the situation on the phone, she starts to sound lustful and remarks that the man is "pretty cute." Nina turns to the window and coos

"Hello Mr. Clean. I have been a very dirty girl," while blowing him a kiss. He winks at her and the tone escalates with more non-verbal come-ons between the two. When the man starts to unzip his pants, Nina storms to the door in seeming disgust, but surprisingly closes the door and locks it. She walks seductively back to the window and says, "See how you like this, naughty boy." Nina unzips the front of her tight black dress, revealing her black bra, and jumps in front of the window flashing her body. The window washer is so stunned that he loses his balance and falls off of his platform.  
(Just Shoot Me, NBC)





Based on the composite week sample of programs (except newscasts, sports or children's programs).

## Methodology:

The study analyzes 1351 shows, covering the full range of TV genres other than newscasts and sports events. The sample includes 942 shows from a composite week of programming across ten channels, as well as 228 children's shows also from a composite week and 181 prime time broadcast network shows from a two-week over-sample. The composite week sample was drawn from randomly selected programs broadcast between October 1997 and March 1998. The main analyses in this study are based on the shows in the composite week sample. The prime-time analyses are based on the 181 broadcast network shows from the two-week over-sample, combined with the 93 network prime-time shows included in the composite week sample. Children's programs were analyzed independently of shows created for a general audience.

The ten channels in the study represent all segments of the television industry including broadcast network, independent broadcast, public broadcasting, basic cable, and premium cable. The channels studied are ABC, CBS, Fox, HBO, Lifetime, NBC, TNT, PBS, and USA, and the independent station KTLA in Los Angeles.

For purposes of this study, sexual content includes both talk about sex and depictions of sexual behavior. Sexual behavior includes depictions of sexual intercourse, scenes in which sexual intercourse is strongly implied (for example, a couple are kissing passionately and undressing each other by the bed, the show fades to black and comes up in the morning on the couple naked under the sheets), intimate touching (for example, a man running his hands over a woman's breasts or thighs), passionate kissing, and physical flirting (for example, a woman seductively undressing for a man). Only those scenes in which the sexual behavior was a substantial or primary empha-



sis of the scene were included in the study; any scenes in which there was sexual behavior but the emphasis on sex was minor or inconsequential were not included in the counts of sexual content.

For every show containing sexual content, the type of talk or behavior was categorized, the number of scenes featuring such content were counted, and the degree of focus on sex was measured. For shows featuring sexual behavior, the degree of explicitness was also assessed.

All scenes and shows containing sexual content were analyzed for any mention of any issues concerning the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, including any references to contraception, condoms, safer sex, sexually-transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion, abstinence or the possibility of waiting to have sex. All shows with sexual content were also examined to determine whether the full program contained a primary emphasis on any of these issues. Any show that contained sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied was analyzed for the presence of either positive or negative messages regarding the consequences of sex, and for such contextual factors as the relationship of the partners and the age of the participants.

All analysis was conducted by a group of trained coders whose performance was systematically monitored to ensure strong inter-coder reliability.



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# What a Difference a Decade Makes

A Comparison of Prime Time Sex, Language, and Violence in 1989 and '99

## I. Introduction

### Why Televised Sex, Foul Language, and Violence Matter

At the beginning of the last century, television was nonexistent. At the dawn of the new century, television is the most pervasive and powerful medium in America by any measure - it is almost impossible to imagine American society today without television. With a television set in over 98 percent of American households,<sup>1</sup> TV saturates American society almost completely. In 1989, around 65 percent of households had two or more televisions. Today, more than 75 percent of homes have more than one.<sup>2</sup> These multiple-set households average 2.89 television sets,<sup>3</sup> meaning that there are over 235 million televisions in American homes - one for nearly every viewer. Moreover, more than 48 percent of households have a set in a child's bedroom.

These millions of televisions are not idle. In 1998, the latest year for which figures are available from Nielsen Media Research, the average household watched 7 hours, 15 minutes of television daily. Women spent four and a half hours in front of a set and men nearly four hours a day.<sup>4</sup> Teens and children averaged three hours a day. Adults spend more time with television than with any other medium,<sup>5</sup> and almost as much as with all other media combined.

It is no wonder, then, that advertisers have voted with hard currency to make television the number-one ad medium. **This kind of access to the minds and emotions of Americans was worth \$47.5 billion dollars to advertisers in 1998**, because of television's demonstrated power to influence perceptions, attitudes, individual behaviors, and even national and world events.

Television images are tremendously influential, especially among impressionable youth. Teens, with their disposable income, and searching to find acceptance and develop an identity outside their own families, are especially susceptible to media influence, making them one of the most targeted television advertising demographics of the late 1990s.

One of the most researched ways that television influences children is by increasing their propensity to violence. "[A] review of almost 1,000 studies, presented to the American College of Forensic Psychiatry in 1998, found that all but 18 demonstrated that screen violence leads to real violence, and 12 of those 18 were funded by the television industry. In 1992, the American Psychological Association concluded that 40 years of research on the link between TV violence and real-life violence has been ignored, stating that the 'scientific debate is over' and calling for federal policy to protect society."<sup>6</sup>

Though less research has been conducted on the effect of other offensive television content

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on other behavior, there is substantial evidence that sexuality and language are also significantly affected by media portrayals. Professional organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics have drawn links between television's depictions of sexuality and real-life behaviors.<sup>7</sup> A 1995 poll of children 10 to 16 years of age showed that children recognize that "what they see on television encourages them to take part in sexual activity too soon, to show disrespect for their parents, [and] to lie and to engage in aggressive behavior."<sup>8</sup> More than two-thirds said they are influenced by television; 77 percent said TV shows too much sex before marriage and 62 percent said sex on television and in movies influences their peers to have sexual relations when they are too young. Two-thirds also cited certain programs featuring dysfunctional families as encouraging disrespect toward parents.<sup>9</sup>

The issue of broadcast networks' declining standards over the past decade matters despite the networks' dwindling audience. The Big Three broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) still command over one third (35.7 percent) of the viewing audience. More important, however, is the fact that broadcast television sets the baseline standard for the entire entertainment industry. Movies, cable, music CDs, the Internet, and videos and video games, while sometimes rated, must be sought out and purchased, and do not have any inherent content restrictions. Broadcasting standards stem from the fact that broadcast television (along with radio) is universally available. In addition, broadcasters use the public airwaves, and therefore have a legal obligation to serve the public interest.

Broadcast television no longer serves a broad public interest, and in many cases is not even suitable for viewing by a broad public audience. **What a Difference a Decade Makes: A Comparison of Prime Time Sex, Language, and Violence in 1989 and '99** quantifies the increase in sex and coarse language on prime time from 1989 to '99. Beyond that, this report reviews the character of sexual allusions, foul language, and violence that appear on television during the study periods in each of those years. Using subcategories of a variety of sexual behaviors still considered objectionable by many parents, for example, the report concludes that the depictions of sex on television today are markedly different than were those of a decade ago.

## II. Background and Methods

Many considered the prime time of 1989 inordinately sexual. In that year, for example, Detroit-area housewife Terry Rakolta made headlines with her protests to the sponsors of Fox's *Married...With Children*, which, while it may have been the smuttiest series of its day, was far from the only one that routinely contained racy innuendo.

An April '89 *Boston Globe* story stated that "the...deploring of language, nudity and those 'sexual situations' on the three major networks [is] being heard again, much as it was during the 'jiggle' era of a decade ago." (In that era, of course, ABC's *Soap* and *Three's Company* raised hackles with their risqué-for-their-time plot lines.)

According to the *Globe* story, even though "today the networks pay only lip service to the notion of the 'family hour' [8 to 9 p.m. Eastern]...programming indeed tends to change as the evening progresses. Tune in at 9 for silly double-entendres, at 10 for heavy breathing."

The viewers of '89, it turned out, hadn't seen anything yet. By the mid-'90s, even casual observers must have noticed that not only sexual material (including more than occasional heavy breathing and an avalanche of double- and single-entendre) but also foul language were becoming increasingly prevalent, not only at 10 and 9 o'clock but also at 8, as networks began to schedule libidinous shows like *Melrose Place*, *Friends*, and *The Nanny* in the first hour of prime time. The family audience was left with few options in the "family hour."

Even *People* magazine recently has been prompted to ask, "Faced with nightly sex, violence and a smut glut, parents, critics - even kids - wonder: Just how low can television go?"

Concern over raunchy content airing in time slots traditionally set aside for family programming was one of the factors that led to the formation of the Parents Television Council in 1995. The PTC has conducted several studies of sex, coarse language, and violence in prime time, and usually found significant increases therein from one report to the next.

The time is right for an extensive exploration of how prime time changed in the past decade, in those terms. This study, then, compares and contrasts programming from the first four weeks of the 1989-1990 and 1999-2000 television seasons. (The exact parameters are September 18 through October 15, 1989, and September 20 through October 17, 1999.)

For the sex category, analysts entered into a database both visual acts (scenes involving amorous couples) and, much more often, verbal content (suggestive comments or jokes; references or allusions to, but not depictions of, specific sexual acts).

Moreover, the PTC established, for the first time in a study, subcategories for six types of sexual references: oral sex; pornography; masturbation; so-called kinky practices, such as phone sex, group sex, and bondage; homosexuality; and genitalia. This was done in large part because of analysts' sense that this material, more daring than the coital references and allusions common since the '70s, became more prevalent in the '90s, and the PTC wanted to quantify that perception.

For foul language, the PTC, also for the first time, counted the so-called milder curse words like "damn" and "hell," mostly because of analysts' recollection that stronger language seldom was used on prime time in the late '80s, and, as a result, figured - correctly, it turned out - that those words would make up the bulk of what we found for '89. Additionally, we also, as is our custom, logged coarser terms such as "ass," "bitch," "bastard," and worse.

For violence, we entered portrayals, descriptions, and threats, and included the effects of violence (e.g., bodies of people violently killed, or wounds received as a result of violence).

We also looked at subcategories of violence. Categories include violence perpetrated by clearly unsympathetic characters who are identified as unsavory or evil (e.g., characters who can be identified as serial killers, thugs, henchmen, drug smugglers, etc. Incidents included in this category would only be acts initiated against individuals unable to defend themselves - scenes of mutual violence between "good" and "bad" characters were not counted). Other categories look at whether a violent scene depicted blood, involved sex, a firearm, or showed bodies or a death (ambiguous scenes where someone was shot and fell, but may not have died, were excluded). Finally, we looked for scenes involving sadism or torture, whether they involved occult violence (kicking and punching vampires would not be counted; killing one by driving a stake through its heart would) and whether a scene or allusion was extremely graphic (very bloody, dismemberment, slow-motion death, etc.).

Though this analysis does rely, to some degree, on subjective judgment, the same analysts applied the same criteria to both study periods.

### III. Overview and Results

#### Highlights:

- In terms of sexual and violent material and coarse language combined, the per-hour rate almost tripled from '89 to '99.

- On a per-hour basis, sexual content more than tripled from '89 to '99.
- Overall, material in the sexual subcategories was more than seven times as frequent in '99. The most dramatic increase therein was in homosexual references, which were more than twenty-four times as common.
- Foul language was more than five and a half times as frequent in '99, and the curse words used were, as a group, far harsher in '99 than in '89.
- The rate of violent content was almost the same in both years.
- Though still rare in absolute terms, instances where sex was mixed with violence or was graphically depicted went up significantly in percentage terms.
- One show - UPN's *WWF Smackdown!* - was responsible for more than 11 percent of all the combined sex, cursing, and violence in '99.

**For a detailed statistical breakdown, see Section VI.**

## Sex

The overall number of sexual references per hour during prime time went up by over 300%.

### Examples of sexual dialogue: 1989 v. 1999

1989

Two women, at the beach, checking out men:

"I give that guy a solid seven."

"Speaking of solid, red Speedos at two o'clock."

"That is definitely [an] eight. Four for each bun." (*Who's the Boss?*, ABC)

"Jeannine Stewart gives. Sex, Doogie, tomorrow night, after the dance."

"You said the same thing about Susie Berlutti last year."

"Hey, Susie Berlutti was in the bag. If I hadn't puked on her shoe, it would have happened."  
(*Doogie Howser, M.D.*, ABC)

"What was that line of yours? That great line of yours? 'Life is possibility, not predictability.' That got you laid a lot, as I recall."  
(*thirtysomething*, ABC)

A woman says, "Husbands are wonderful if they're not your own. They're grateful for the slightest bit of attention, they're horny as all get out, and their spirits are already broken."  
(*Married... With Children*, Fox)

1999

Susan introduces herself to a male colleague, who says, "Oh, yeah, you're the one bangin' the boss."

Susan: "Actually, when I got the job, I wasn't banging the boss."

Vicki, another colleague: "First, she was bangin' the [boss's] brother..." (*Suddenly Susan*, NBC)

"Where were they during World War II when I got wounded?"

"What do you mean, wounded? You had crabs."

"Yeah, yeah, but French crabs, they were huge... You should have seen my crotch. It was like a tide pool." (*Action*, Fox)

"Well, I'm proud of you. You had [sex with a model]. That is like regular sex with ten girls." (*Becker*, CBS)

The Solomons play a board game called Sex or Consequences. Dick reads from the box: "The naughty, bawdy, adult party game where everybody wants to be on top." When Sally quits the game, Dick asks Tommy (a teen-aged boy), "Would you please move her little metal buttocks back five spaces?" Tommy says, "Excuse me. Sally is the tongue. I am the buttocks." (*3rd Rock from the Sun*, NBC)

Dawson, a teenage boy: "What are you suggesting?"

Eve, a teenage girl: "Only the obvious. A night of scorching-hot, unbridled, mind-altering sex."

"Just like that? No first date, no months of getting to know each other?"

"Those are small-town rituals for small-town girls. Face it, Dawson, we're hot for each other." (*Dawson's Creek*, WB)

Joey gives a potential female roommate a word-association test. When he says "doggy," she says "kitten," which disappoints him, since apparently he wanted her to say "style." (*Friends*, NBC)

### **Sexual Subcategories: The More Bizarre the Better**

Material in each of the sexual subcategories identified by the PTC increased significantly. References to oral sex went from zero in '89 to 20 in '99. Otherwise, the largest increase was in homosexual references; for every one in '89 there were 24.1 in '99. As for the other subcategories, for every '89 reference there were, in '99, 7.1 references to genitalia; 6.5 to masturbation; 3.5 to kinky practices; and 3.1 to oral sex.

Those increases parallel a non-quantifiable but nonetheless real change: the sexual references of '99 were, as a group, more graphic than those of '89. This envelope-pushing, which went on throughout the decade, even caught the attention of George Will, no one's idea of a couch potato. In a 1996 column, Will denounced a typically sex-driven episode of *Friends* in which Rachel, during foreplay with her boyfriend, Ross, rolled onto a damp spot (actually caused by spilled juice) and momentarily thought Ross had ejaculated prematurely.

Sexual content on prime time is raunchier than it was when Will wrote that column. This past fall, for example, the very first scene of the season premiere of Fox's *Ally McBeal* featured the title character having sexual intercourse with a total stranger. Also this fall, two shows, NBC's *Just Shoot Me* and UPN's *The Strip*, have used the term "hand jobs."

The occasional '89 series (notably ABC's thirtysomething) broke ground as far as erotic material was concerned. The point, however, is that such a show wouldn't stand out in today's prime time climate of sexual frankness.

Finally, a numerical note: A sexual reference can appear in more than one subcategory. For example, the reference noted below (from the short-lived Fox series *Action*) to "gay porno" counts as one reference in terms of the overall numbers but is entered, for obvious reasons, in both the pornography and the homosexual subcategories.

## SUBCATEGORIES

Number of References	1989	1999	Rate of Increase*
Sexual content subcategories			(Per hour of programming)
Oral	0	20	-
Pornography	7	28	300%
Masturbation	2	17	700%
Kinky	13	60	357%
Homosexual	4	125	2,650%
Genital	10	92	650%
<b>TOTAL for all subcategories</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>342</b>	

\* Rate of increase based on 180.5 hours of 1989 programming and 235.5 hours of 1999 programming

### Examples of Oral Sex References

1989 - 0 references

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1999 - 20 references

In a spoof of a DeBeers commercial, a man presents a woman with a diamond. She kisses him, then appears to kneel in front of him. The spot cuts to a card reading, "Diamonds. She'll pretty much have to." (*Family Guy*, Fox)

In a restaurant, a woman drops her fork and reaches down to get it. Her date says, "I thought for a second there you were gonna pull a Monica Lewinsky." (*Cold Feet*, NBC)

Randy and Dennis watch a couple have sex in the building across the street. Randy says, "That man's got some serious stamina. Remind me to check out what he eats in the morning." After Randy and Dennis tilt their heads sideways, Dennis remarks, "I believe that answers your question." (*Shasta McNasty*, UPN)

After Henry puts a canine toy in his girlfriend's mouth to stop her from talking, she removes it and says, "I swear, I am not putting another thing in my mouth for a week." Ian sarcastically says, "Have a nice night, Henry." (*Stark Raving Mad*, NBC)

### Examples of Pornography References

1989 - 7 references

"I just want to know why men like those magazines. I mean, why do they want to look at a bunch of women who they don't even know?"

"Well, Becky, they actually believe those women are looking back at them." (*Roseanne*, ABC)

1999 - 28 references

"I wrote all my early movies."

"Action comedies?"

"Gay porno." (*Action*, Fox)

One teenage boy asks, "What kind of Penthouse Forum fantasy were you hoping for when you decided to parade your new girlfriend around in front of your old one?" Another responds, "She wasn't my old girlfriend, and stop stealing my magazines."  
(*Odd Man Out*, ABC)

Norm says his dog "won't mate. I tried everything. I even got him doggy porn."  
"Where do you get doggy porn?"  
"Believe me, you don't want to meet these guys." (*Norm*, ABC)

"I cannot stop thinking of those female cops. It reminds me of this porno, 'NYPD Blue.'"  
"That's a TV show, you freak."  
"No, 'NYPD B-L-E-W.'" (*Ryan Caulfield*, Fox)

## Examples of Masturbation References

1989 - 2 references

A man tells a well-known singer, "I hope this won't embarrass you, but you were my first sexual experience...Don't worry, you weren't there." (*My Boyfriend's Back*, NBC movie)

1999 - 17 references

"I have Bobbi right in the palm of my hand."  
"Well, that'd be a change of pace for the palm of your hand." (*For Your Love*, WB)

"He watches VH1 all day and gratifies himself. Whitney Houston, Madonna, Jennifer Lopez."  
(*Snoops*, ABC)

A suspect tells police that a certain model's "underwear ads were primo monkey-spank fuel."  
(*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, NBC)

## Examples of Kinky References

1989 - 13 references

"She took her underwear and wrapped it around my wrists...she pulled me back and sat on my chest... Then she pulled down my pants and she started playing with me." (*The Preppie Murder*, ABC movie)

1999 - 60 references

"There's one thing I don't like about dating Siamese twins...People just stare at you, and you can tell their sick minds are just trying to compute all the sordid, sexually perverted possibilities." (*It's Like, You Know*, ABC)

"Get on the Internet and find out what you can about these crush clubs. People getting sexually aroused by stepping on bugs..." (*The Practice*, ABC)

"Did you know that necrophilia is not only with dead people?...Supposedly, some famous actor out in Hollywood, he hires hookers to lie in an ice bath [and] waits till they turn blue with the cold before diving in."  
(*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, NBC)

Charlie and Kirsten overhear the couple next door having sex again.

Kirsten: "I think there's more than two of them in there. How else could they keep up that pace?"

Charlie: "The beds in this place, they're built stronger than that...How do they get the bedposts to flex like that to make all that noise?"

"I don't know. Maybe, I mean, if there's something tied to the posts, or someone."

"What made you think of that?"

"It was something that I tried, once or twice...It was just something that this one guy was

into." (*Party of Five*, Fox)

A pimp character offers a wrestler his "choice of any one of these fine hos [whores] for the whole night." The wrestler says, "I don't do hos... You got any farm animals? No, no, no, hey, don't look at me like I'm a freak. They're not alive." (*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

"So what happened to Gordon?"

"I wanted a threesome and he freaked." (*Love and Money*, CBS)

## Examples of Homosexual References

1989 - 4 references

1999 - 125 references

"Let me ask you something. Anybody ever take your pants off you [whom] you didn't wind up spending the night with?"

A gay character: "My tailor...no, wait." (*Spin City*, ABC)

Karen tells Jack, a gay man staying at her place, that her husband "sleepwalks, so if you bump into him in the middle of the night and he puts the moves on you, just go with it. You might get a mink in the morning." (*Will & Grace*, NBC)

A gay couple, arguing:

"New condoms? What's wrong with our regular brand of condoms?"

"Nothing. These were on sale, that's all."

"You cheap gay bastard! These things are gonna fly right off!" (*Mission Hill*, WB)

"The foundation for any friendship between a man and a woman is based on his wanting to sleep with her, unless he's gay. Then it's shopping." (*Ally*, Fox)

"Don't you ever sweat, or is that a gay thing?"

"Yes, Norris, that's a gay thing. We gays like to save our sweating for the gay sex." (*Oh Grow Up*, ABC)

A closeted action-movie star tells a film executive that he wants to be open about his sexual orientation: "My life is a living hell. The shame, the hiding. I want to be able to walk down the street with my man and say to the world... 'This is the man that I share my bed with.'" (*Action*, Fox)

Bart parades by the principal's office in a pep-squad outfit, including a sweater and skirt.

Principal: "He's gotten into the pep closet."

Homer: "I'd say he's coming out of the pep closet." (*The Simpsons*, Fox)

A cop asks a man if another man had been "your lover." The man answers, "He was my husband." (*Third Watch*, NBC)

Russell, a gay soap star terrified of being outed, has a one-nighter with a man who later rebukes him: "You've obviously mistaken me for a closeted, dysfunctional, socially unenlightened, confused, unevolved homosexual. That would be you." (*Wasteland*, ABC)

Road Dogg pulls Mankind's arm between his legs, then goes behind him and simulates anal sex.

(*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

## Examples of Genital References

1989 - 10 references

A bomb destroys quarters used by a prostitute. Someone jokes that the woman's client deserves a Purple Heart for surviving the explosion. Someone else responds, "I'm sure there must be a more appropriate organ." (*China Beach*, ABC)

1999 - 92 references

Nina learns that Elliott, a co-worker, is suffering from impotence. She hands him a bottle and says, "Apply this to Elliott, Jr. three times a day." (*Just Shoot Me*, NBC)

"He has a really big heart."

"You know what they say, you only get one really big organ." (*Norm*, ABC)

Male cops banter about their guns. A female cop asks them, "What happens next? You guys unzip, I get a tape measure?"

"You won't need much more than a keyholder for Bosco."

Bosco: "Yardstick." (*Third Watch*, NBC)

"She may be taking my popcorn, but she knows there is more in my lap than that." (*That '70s Show*, Fox)

Drew pulls his girlfriend, a handywoman, aside and asks her to explain a matchbook, hotel key, and condom in her possession. She responds, "I am fixing a restaurant which is in a hotel."

"And the condom?"

"I thought you'd want to put it on your penis when you thank me for the big-screen TV." (*The Drew Carey Show*, ABC)

Announcer Jerry Lawler, discussing the athleticism of a wrestler named Val Venis, whose ring persona is that of a porn star, says, "If you don't believe me, just ask some of the ladies he's starred in films with. They love every inch of Val." (*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

Jesse interrupts her boyfriend Kurt's date with another woman. She tells the woman she's Kurt's sponsor from a group for sexual compulsives, then says to him, "You're just going to...have sex with her all night long, and in the morning you're going to leave her...Kurt, you've got to take the power away from your penis." (*Wasteland*, ABC)

Carmen e-mails a friend about what happened during preparations for a high-school play: "Miss Ross made Sam[antha] sit on Josh Ford's lap at rehearsal this morning. And JF sprung a major pup tent." (*Popular*, WB)

## Foul Language

The language used on network television has changed dramatically. The overall use of profane language has skyrocketed over 500 percent since 1989.

In 1989, "hell" (56 uses) and "damn" (52) were easily the most commonly used curse words, making up more than two-thirds (67.9 percent) of the total. In 1999, though each was used far more often ("hell" 298 times; "damn" 220), together they constituted under half (44.2 percent) of the total.

The use of "shit" on CBS's *Chicago Hope* was a sensational, extreme example of a widespread trend. "Ass," used only 12 times in '89, was the second most frequently used word in '99 (265 times). "Bitch" went from two uses to 60; "son of a bitch" from twelve to 54; "bastard" from fifteen to 43; "crap" from five to 41; "sucks" from zero to 40; and various obscured and euphemistic forms of "f\*\*k" from one to twenty-nine. (There were about 30 percent more program hours in '99 than in '89, but the percentage increase in the use of each of

these words easily exceeds that figure.)

When a word was bleeped or otherwise inaudible but nonetheless understandable (usually through lip-reading) it was counted as if it had been audible. When it could not be determined what word was used, it was counted as [bleep].

Finally, though UPN's *WWF Smackdown!* contained plenty of sexual references and (of course) violence, it was in the foul language category that this wrestling show is most noteworthy. Its per-hour cursing average was a remarkable 26.8; it was responsible for 17 percent (201/1170) of all the foul language in the '99 study period, and for 55 percent (201/364) of UPN's foul language. (Without *Smackdown!* UPN still would have finished first in this category, but with a per-hour average of 8.58.)

## Examples of Foul Language

1989

"Miles, what the hell are you doing?" (*Murphy Brown*, CBS)

"I'm going to dance all over the island...and there's not a damn thing you can do about it." (*Jake and the Fatman*, CBS)

"And you bastards want me to wear a wire?" (*Prime Target*, NBC movie)

"I can do the rat-a-tat-tat on your sorry ass." (*Booker*, Fox)

1999

"Do you have any idea what it's like to give a two-hour summation with a pair of thong underwear crawling up your ass?" (*Family Law*, CBS)

"That little bitch takes the last shred of dignity I have." (*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, NBC)

"I think I don't want to wait around for that son of a bitch to strike again." (*Seven Days*, UPN)

"This is special agent Nathan Pimm."

"Special what? This special...bastard took a shot at me." (*The Strip*, UPN)

"I made your life a living hell. I made you screw those 22-year-olds." (*Once and Again*, ABC)

The Rock walks outside the ring, saying "bullshit" and "f\*\*k." The words are inaudible, but his lips are easily read. (*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

## Violence

The overall number of instances of violent material during prime time broadcast television was roughly the same in 1989 (1.49 instances per hour) and 1999 (1.27 instances per hour).

**Violence subcategories**

Number of References	1989	1999
Violence used by Villains	81	18
Sexual Elements	6	15
Blood	35	42
Guns	130	69
Death/or Bodies Depicted	77	64
Sadism or Torture	5	9
Occult	-	17
Graphic	4	23

Much of the 1989 televised violence came in the form of gun battles on westerns like *Young Guns* (ABC) and cop and P.I. shows like *Hardball* (NBC). There were also two shows about Vietnam (*China Beach* on ABC, *Tour of Duty* on CBS) that bolstered violence numbers. Over the next decade, ABC dropped the most in violent content, and NBC and CBS dropped slightly, too.

The decline in their violent content was made up for by UPN, whose average of 3.13 instances of violence per hour is the highest network average ever recorded by the PTC. Most of their violent content is attributable to its World Wrestling Federation program, *WWF Smackdown!*, which airs at 8:00 p.m. and is viewed by around 1.5 million children ages 2-11 each week, and another 1.5 million teens under 18. *Smackdown!*'s high violence numbers are attained even given that wrestling moves and even punches in that program are not counted as instances of violence. Instead, only beatings with objects, blows to the groin, or worse are counted.

Material in the violence subcategories was low relative to other offensive content. For example, though the per-hour average of sex mixed with violence statistically doubled from the 1989 study period to 1999, there were only six instances of violence combined with sex in 1989 (allusions to rape; sexual suggestiveness combined with violent behavior), and 15 instances during the study period in 1999. Prime time gun violence actually dropped - though so did the distinction between heroes and villains using violence. Also, graphic depictions became more common, and occult violence, which did not appear in 1989, became a staple of teen-oriented shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed*.

Again, as with the other categories, a violent depiction can be counted for more than one subcategory; for instance, a drive-by shooting by gangsters where the victims are shown being killed and blood spattering would appear under the categories of violence by villains, blood, and bodies/death.

**Examples of Violence**

1989

A man is shot in the back. Blood spurts out of a hole in his chest. (*Wolf*, CBS)

Charlie grabs the female cop who doublecrossed him. He slaps her, hard, then slaps her again, knocking her to the floor. He then holds her head underwater in a sink. She struggles and gasps and coughs. (*Hardball*, NBC)

A Vietnamese soldier hits a sergeant in the head with a rifle. (*Tour of Duty*, CBS)

A criminal shoots a policeman in the shoulder. The policeman manages to empty his revolver into the criminal.

(*Night Walk*, CBS movie)

A robber shoots a stagecoach passenger in the back with a rifle. (*The Young Riders*, ABC)

Two men chase another into a parking garage and shoot him. His body slams into a car. (*Alien Nation*, Fox)

In a long gunfight, several outlaws are shot. They are shown in slow motion, screaming and groaning in pain.

(*Desperado: The Outlaw Years*, NBC movie)

Soldiers are shown throwing dead bodies onto a pile. Several bodies are shown lying along a river.

(*China Beach*, ABC)

A group of men ambushes a man, beating him in the face and kicking him in the stomach and chest. They beat and kick him even after he loses consciousness. (*Paradise*, CBS)

1999

A female Serb refugee says in her homeland, she was "raped" every night for twenty-three days. Sometimes he was too drunk, so he did it with whatever was there. A wrench, a pistol, a broom handle." (*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, NBC)

One wrestler throws another into the wall several times. The second hits the first over the head with a metal pail, then in the neck with a metal pole. (*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

Sammo, while handcuffed to a man, takes on several thugs. He uses the man as a weapon, swinging him around and hitting the thugs with him. (*Martial Law*, CBS)

A cop tells his partner about how a previous partner, the current partner's father, was killed: "There was this loud bang from behind us... Your dad was laying right there, shot in the head." (*Third Watch*, NBC)

A soldier lies on the ground with blood on his uniform. His friend puts his hands over the wound to stanch the flow of blood, but as he presses down, blood spurts out and covers his hands. (*Harsh Realm*, Fox)

There is a shootout between assassins and policemen. Several officers are killed. A car containing a man and his wife and daughter is shot full of holes. (*Walker, Texas Ranger*, CBS)

A criminal shoots at Jesse and misses. Jesse punches him and rams his head into a few slot machines. (*The Strip*, UPN)

Buffy has a nightmare in which a demon writes in blood on her bare stomach using a long razorlike fingernail.

(*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, WB)

Faarooq picks up some steel stairs and throws them on top of Kane. Bradshaw throws Kane into the stairs. X-Pac hits Bradshaw in the head with a chair. (*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

## Examples of Violence Perpetrated by Villains

1989 - 81 references

MacGyver and a journalist take off in a makeshift airplane. The Columbian drug-lord and his men shoot at them as they fly off. (*MacGuyver*, ABC)

1999 - 18 references

A killer holds a girl hostage in a grocery store. He holds her by the ear and around the throat with a gun in her face. (*Nash Bridges*, CBS)

### **Examples of Sexual Violence**

1989 - 6 references

A man shoots at a girl posing as a boy. She falls from her horse. One of the other riders attempts to help her, and takes her into a cabin. He lifts her shirt to look at the wound and realizes Lou is a girl. He says, "Don't you know what those men would've done to you if they'd realized you were a girl?" (*Young Riders*, ABC)

1999 - 15 references

Jarrett, a male wrestler, throws Ivory, a female character, into a mud-wrestling ring. Miss Kitty, another female character, enters the ring, which is surrounded by shouting spectators, and attacks Ivory. They pull each other's hair, push and punch one another as they each attempt to pull the other's clothes off. During the match, Ivory pulls off Miss Kitty's bikini top. Though she is covered in mud and moves to try to cover herself, her breasts are visible. (*WWF Smackdown!*, UPN)

### **Examples of Bloody Violence**

1989 - 35 references

Payday shoots one of the cops. He is covered with blood seeping through his white dress shirt. He falls to the ground gasping for breath and writhing in pain. (*Paradise*, CBS)

1999 - 42 references

People are standing and sitting on a Tokyo subway train, including women, men, and a small boy. After some "eggs" filled with a lethal gas roll off a seat where they were left, people begin bleeding. A woman screams as more blood pours out of noses, eyes, and mouths. The train is then shown pulling to a stop at a station, its windows smeared with blood. A human arm is visible against the glass. (*Now and Again*, CBS)

### **Examples of Violence with Guns**

1989 - 130 references

An American soldier is shown getting hit by a bullet. Gunfire is exchanged between American and Vietnamese soldiers. Grenades are shown going off, killing soldiers. A grenade goes off near one soldier's face, blinding him. He is then shot and killed. (*Tour of Duty*, CBS)

1999 - 69 references

Max takes his father's gun from Tony and points it at him. Chastity picks up the gun and shoots Max in the back. The bullet is shown coming out of Max's front in slow motion, preceded by a spatter of blood. Chastity runs in front of the still-moving bullet, and receives the bullet in her chest. There are blood stains on Max and Chastity. (*The X-Files*, Fox)

### **Examples of Violence with Death or Bodies**

1989 - 77 references

A mobster shoots the assassin in the back of the head and puts his body in the trunk of the car. (*Wiseguy*, CBS)

1999 - 64 references

Eleanor comes home and sees Helen lying limp in the bathtub, apparently dead. George Fogelman appears. He tells Eleanor that Helen isn't dead, but that he stabbed Lindsay and

beheaded another woman. (*The Practice*, ABC)

### Examples of Violence with Sadism/Torture

1989 - 5 references

The Prince has one of his men torture Barney to get information from him. The torture device beams lasers into his eyes.

(*Mission: Impossible*, ABC)

1999 - 9 references

A Klingon tries to brand B'Elanna's face with a red-hot piece of iron. He sticks it to her face and it sizzles.

(*Star Trek: Voyager*, UPN)

### Examples of Violence with Graphic Imagery

1989 - 4 references

A wagon with what looks like an animal cage on it rides through the middle of town. Inside the cage are the bodies of several dead men. A bloodied hand is shown. (*Paradise*, CBS)

1999 - 23 references

Several dead bodies are shown lying on the ground, either covered by blood-stained sheets, or lying in pools of blood. (*Ryan Caulfield*, Fox)

### Examples of Occult Violence

1989 - 0 references

1999 - 17 references

A woman is in bed with a nude man. She lies with her chest against his back and a creature comes out of her chest and burrows into the back of the man. When Angel finds them, the woman is bloody and dead with black eyes and the demon is inside the man. (*Angel*, WB)

## IV. Conclusion

The story of sex and foul language on prime time is one of repeated envelope-pushing. As indicated above, that process began sooner for sex than for language. Television's sexual revolution started in the 1970s, whereas it wasn't until the '90s that parents truly had to worry about their children being exposed to cursing as well.

Increasingly, series are designed for niche audiences. (The youth-crazed WB, in fact, is quite forthrightly a niche network, essentially unconcerned about viewers 35 and over.) There is little overlap between regular viewers of *Dawson's Creek* and regular viewers of *Law & Order*, nor do the shows themselves have much in common. Each, however, routinely contains one or more of the types of content dealt with in this study, rendering them unsuitable for the family audience.

And, of course, it is the family audience that winds up underserved. The problem is much less acute with 10 o'clock series like *Law & Order* than with 8 o'clock programs such as *Dawson's Creek*, which occupy time slots that ought to belong to shows all ages can watch.

It seems unlikely that the major networks will offer family series in high volume anytime soon. The success of *Friends* spawned many sex-driven sitcoms; the success of *Touched By an*

*Angel* spawned few traditionally wholesome dramas. The ultimate obstacle for prime time family programming is that the genre has been neglected for so long that fewer and fewer persons in the youth-obsessed and young-adult-populated television industry even understand it anymore.

- Research by Parents Television Council entertainment analysts Melissa Caldwell, Thomas Johnson, Aubree Rankin, and Daniel Weiss, and PTC Director of Operations Steven Schwalm.

## V. PTC Policy Prescriptions

Millions of Americans are tired of having nowhere to turn for intelligent and non-offensive entertainment. Hundreds of thousands have responded to the PTC's appeals to TV sponsors to stop the verbal "filth, sex and violence you send into our homes" via the television. Several things must happen to change television:

- 1) Companies must begin to understand and accept the serious responsibility that comes with funding the most widespread and powerful form of modern mass entertainment. This means that sponsors must consider content as well as ratings and demographics when making sponsoring decisions.
- 2) Companies that have already verbally claimed to have recognized this responsibility must act on that recognition, by refusing to sponsor the most profane, violent, or sexual shows on prime-time television. Otherwise, their profession of a desire for more options for "family friendly" viewing is hypocrisy.
- 3) Networks must consider the responsibility that comes with their privileged use of the broadcast spectrum.
- 4) The public needs to continue to organize, use information, and contact the networks and sponsors, letting them know that crass, degrading, sexual and violent material are not acceptable over the airwaves, and that we will use our powers as consumers, shareholders, and citizens to stop it.

## V. Statistical Tables

1989	Hours	Sex Ref. per hour	Foul Language per hour	Violence per hour	Total per hour
ABC	56.5	128 / 2.27	40 / 0.71	87 / 1.54	255 / 4.51
CBS	59	40 / 0.68	98 / 1.66	94 / 1.59	232 / 3.93
Fox	15	7 / 0.46	9 / 0.60	18 / 1.20	34 / 2.26
NBC	<u>50</u>	<u>22 / 0.44</u>	<u>13 / 0.26</u>	<u>70 / 1.40</u>	<u>105 / 2.10</u>
	<b>180.5</b>	<b>197 / 1.09</b>	<b>160 / 0.89</b>	<b>269 / 1.49</b>	<b>626 / 3.47</b>

1999	Hours	Sex Ref. per hour	Foul Language per hour	Violence per hour	Total per hour
ABC	39	363 / 9.31	142 / 3.64	16 / 0.41	521 / 13.36
CBS	67.5	41 / 0.61	149 / 2.21	82 / 1.21	272 / 4.03
Fox	17	131 / 7.71	107 / 6.29	34 / 2.00	272 / 16.00
NBC	44.5	187 / 4.20	340 / 7.64	45 / 1.01	572 / 12.85
UPN	26.5	67 / 2.53	364 / 13.74	83 / 3.13	514 / 19.40
WB	<u>41</u>	<u>54 / 1.32</u>	<u>71 / 1.73</u>	<u>38 / 0.93</u>	<u>163 / 3.98</u>
	<b>235.5</b>	<b>843/3.58</b>	<b>1173/4.98</b>	<b>298/1.27</b>	<b>2314/9.83</b>

## ENDNOTES

- 1) Television Bureau of Advertising, Trends in Television, Executive Summary.
- 2) Television Bureau of Advertising, Multi-Set & Color Television Households, TV Basics, [www.tvb.org/tvfacts/tvbasics/basics2.htm](http://www.tvb.org/tvfacts/tvbasics/basics2.htm).
- 3) Television Bureau of Advertising, Trends in Television, Executive Summary.
- 4) NTI Annual Averages, from Television Bureau of Advertising, Time Spent Viewing - Persons, TV Basics.
- 5) Veronis, Suhler & Assoc., Wilkofsky Gruen Assoc., from Television Bureau of Advertising, Consumer Media Usage, TV Basics, [www.tvb.org/tvfacts/tvbasics/basics27.htm](http://www.tvb.org/tvfacts/tvbasics/basics27.htm).
- 6) David Grossman, "What the Surgeon General Found; As Early as 1972, the Link Was Clear Between Violent TV and Movies and Violent Youths," Los Angeles Times, October 21, 1999, Part B; Pg. 11.
- 7) See the PTC Special Report The Family Hour: Worse Than Ever and Headed for New Lows, August 31, 1999, p.2.
- 8) Claudia Puig, "Youths in Poll Say TV Is Harmful Influence," Los Angeles Times, February 27, 1995, Pg. 1.

9) Ibid.

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