Merchandizing Mayhem
Violence in Popular Entertainment 1998-99

A spate of school shootings in the American heartland has focused public attention on the role that popular entertainment may play in violent behavior among children and teenagers. This special issue of *Media Monitor* examines the amount and treatment of violent themes in recent popular movies, songs, and television series.

Major findings:

■ **Big Bang** The 50 top-grossing movies of 1998 averaged 46 scenes of violence; 28 of them life-threatening. *Page 4*

■ **The Sound of Violence** MTV music videos averaged over one violent act per minute. *Page 3*

■ **Don't Worry... Be Violent** Violence rarely hurts anyone on movies and TV shows. *Page 4*

■ **I'm OK, You're Dead** Most violent acts aren't criticized or punished. *Page 4*

■ **Don't Blame the Networks** Six of the ten most violent TV series were in first-run syndication. *Page 2*

■ **Don't Trust the Ratings** A majority of the most violent TV series were rated PG. *Page 4*

Entertainment violence has been condemned as harmful to America's youth by such prestigious groups as the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Institutes of Mental Health. Nonetheless, violence remains a staple of popular culture in such diverse formats as television, movies, music, and video games.

To find out what messages about violence the entertainment industry sends to its audience, we analyzed a representative sample of popular culture products in today's entertainment marketplace. The sample included 50 of the top-grossing films released in theaters during 1998 along with 284 episodes of original fictional television series that appeared on broadcast and cable networks or in first-run syndication, 50 made-for-TV movies, and 189 music videos that ran on MTV, all during the 1998-99 television season. Together they make up a total sample of 573 separate popular culture products, covering every major sector of the market aside from video games, whose interactive features make them difficult to compare with other entertainment formats.
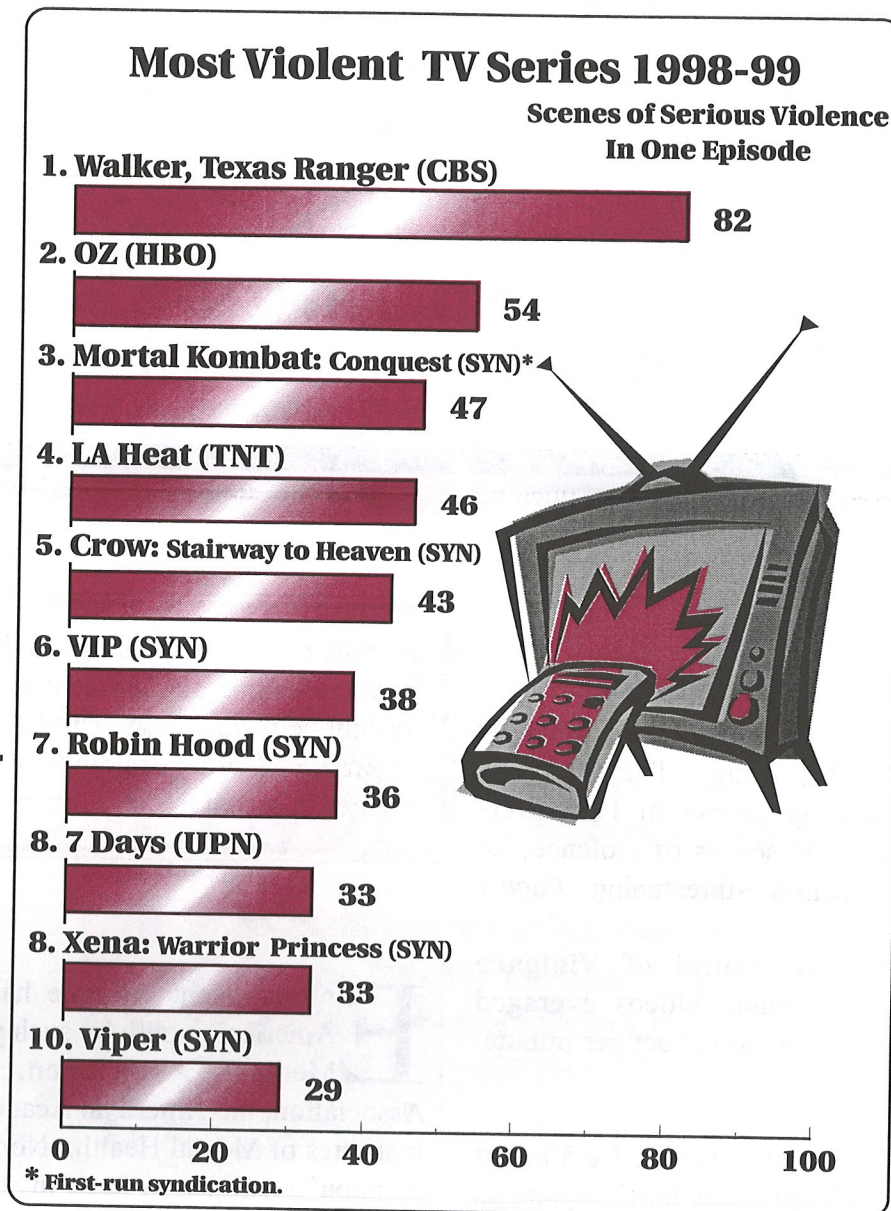
We defined violence as the deliberate use of physical force, apart from routine behavior in contact sports. This relatively narrow definition excludes accidental violence, verbal or emotional abuse, acts of nature, and animal behavior. Nonetheless, we counted 8,350 separate scenes of violence, over half of which (4,204) involved serious violence, including such acts as murder, rape, kidnapping, and assault with a weapon. Our analysis focuses on the serious violence, since this is the source of the greatest public concern.

Television

Television programming comes through several delivery systems – the traditional broadcast networks; first-run syndicated fare that appears in most major markets; basic cable networks; and premium cable networks. We examined fall and spring episodes of each original fictional evening series; mid-season replacements were represented by a single episode. Finally, we selected the 25 highest rated made-for-TV movies on both the cable and broadcast networks.

Across all series episodes, both broadcast and cable networks averaged six scenes of serious violence per episode. Among networks with five or more original series, CBS was the most violent with ten serious acts per episode; USA was second with eight.

CBS also aired the most violent show – "Walker, Texas Ranger," featuring 82 scenes of serious

Most Violent TV Series 1998-99

Scenes of Serious Violence In One Episode

Series	Scenes
1. Walker, Texas Ranger (CBS)	82
2. OZ (HBO)	54
3. Mortal Kombat: Conquest (SYN)*	47
4. LA Heat (TNT)	46
5. Crow: Stairway to Heaven (SYN)	43
6. VIP (SYN)	38
7. Robin Hood (SYN)	36
8. 7 Days (UPN)	33
8. Xena: Warrior Princess (SYN)	33
10. Viper (SYN)	29

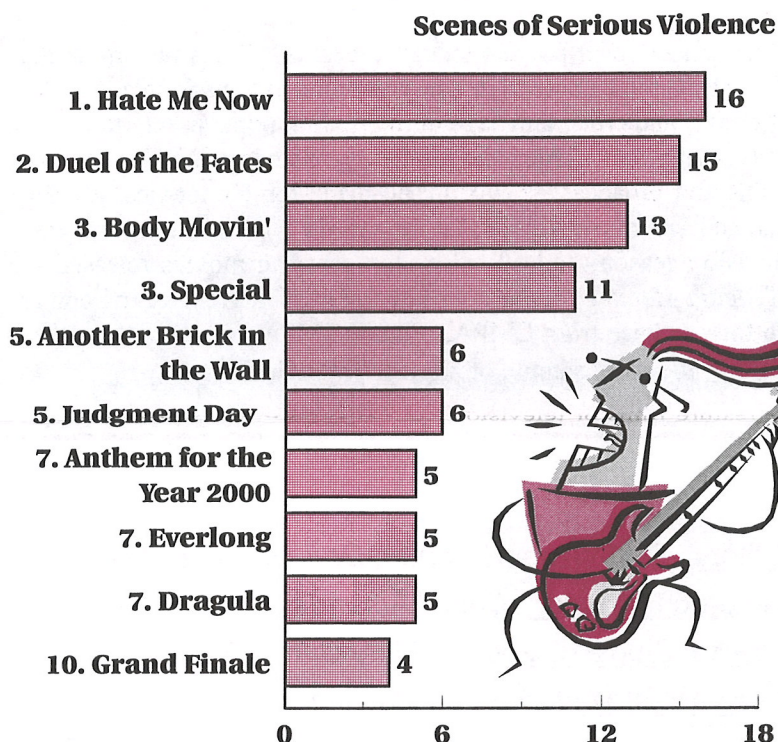*scale: 0 20 40 60 80 100*

* First-run syndication.

violence per episode. The leader on basic cable was TNT's "LA Heat" with 46 scenes, and on premium cable HBO's "OZ" with 54. But the greatest source of violence came from first-run syndicated series. They averaged 18 scenes of serious violence (three times the rate for all network series) and placed six shows in the top ten, led by "Mortal Kombat," a martial arts video game spin-off, with 47.

Serious violence was most heavily concentrated in a few series that featured action-adventure formats. On both broadcast and cable outlets, the ten most violent shows contained a majority of all serious violence for the entire program schedule.

Made-for-TV movies turned out to be less violent, on average, than television series. The 25 original movies from broadcast networks averaged only five scenes of serious violence. The cable movies were substantially more violent, averaging 15 such scenes.

Most Violent Music Videos

Scenes of Serious Violence

Rank	Video	Scenes
1.	Hate Me Now	16
2.	Duel of the Fates	15
3.	Body Movin'	13
3.	Special	11
5.	Another Brick in the Wall	6
5.	Judgment Day	6
7.	Anthem for the Year 2000	5
7.	Everlong	5
7.	Dragula	5
10.	Grand Finale	4

In four sample days we examined 189 different music videos, which were shown (with repeats) a total of 495 times. Overall, they contained 1,785 scenes of violence, 585 of them serious. On average, a single video contained four scenes of violence, only one of them serious. But the ten most violent videos contained over three quarters (77 percent) of all serious violence.
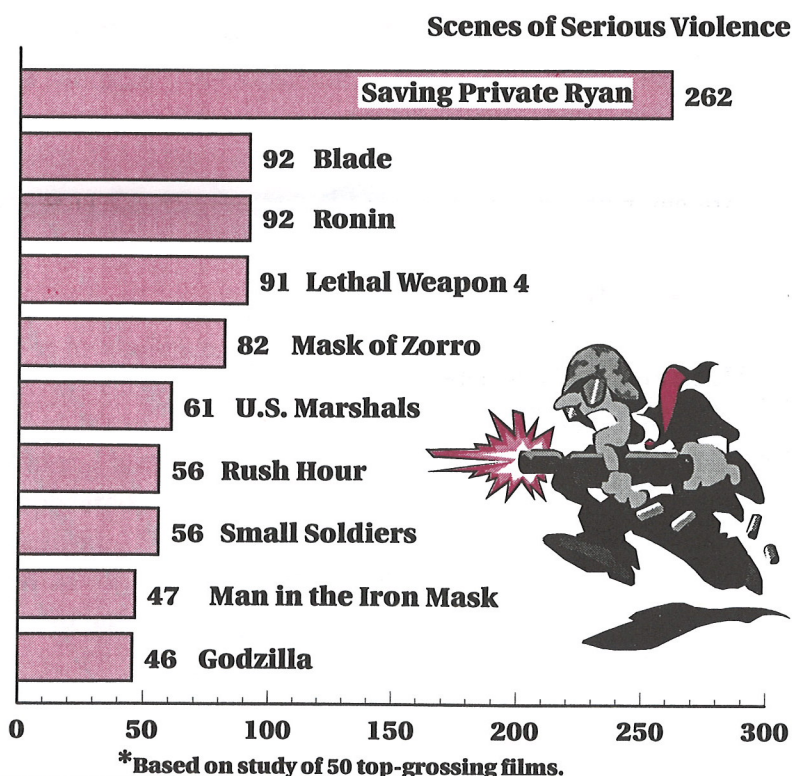
The most serious violence (16 scenes) appeared in "Hate Me Now," a rap song by Nas, whose video features a contemporary urban version of the crucifixion, with Nas in the role of Christ. Because it aired more often, the Beastie Boys' "Body Movin'" accounted for the most serious violence (156 scenes in 12 showings) in the total sample. This spoof of spy movies includes a beheading and an electrocution.

However, these totals reflect a two-hour time slot for most movies, compared to the usual half-hour or hour-long time slot for series.

Music Videos

Although songs like "Cop Killer" have been singled out for advocating violence, most of the violence associated with popular music appears in the ubiquitous music videos that are shown on MTV and other music channels. The average length of a video is about three minutes; most consist of the rapid-fire succession of changing images first popularized by MTV.

Ten Most Violent Movies 1998*

Scenes of Serious Violence

Movie	Scenes
Saving Private Ryan	262
Blade	92
Ronin	92
Lethal Weapon 4	91
Mask of Zorro	82
U.S. Marshals	61
Rush Hour	56
Small Soldiers	56
Man in the Iron Mask	47
Godzilla	46

*Based on study of 50 top-grossing films.

Movies

The 50 top-grossing theatrical films of 1998 contained 2,319 violent scenes, 1,377 of them involving serious violence. That makes for an average of 46 violent scenes per movie, 28 of them serious. However, the top ten movies accounted for almost two-thirds (63%) of all serious violence.

Topping the list was the World War II combat film "Saving Private Ryan," with 262 scenes of serious violence. In terms of any redeeming social or artistic value of entertainment violence, however, the critically acclaimed "Private Ryan" was the exception that proved the rule. The other high-violence movies were standard issue shoot-em-ups like "Lethal Weapon 4" (91 scenes) and "Ronin" (92), gruesome sci-fi fantasies like "Blade" (92), or martial arts fare like "Rush Hour" (56).

Venues of Violence

Are any points on the pop culture spectrum less violent than others? Since it isn't fair to gauge a three-minute music video against a two-hour movie, we compared the violence in various entertainment genres in terms of their actual running time, after excluding commercials and other program interruptions. The result: The rate of serious violence was surprisingly similar across entertainment genres. Movies and music videos featured slightly more serious violence per minute than television programs,

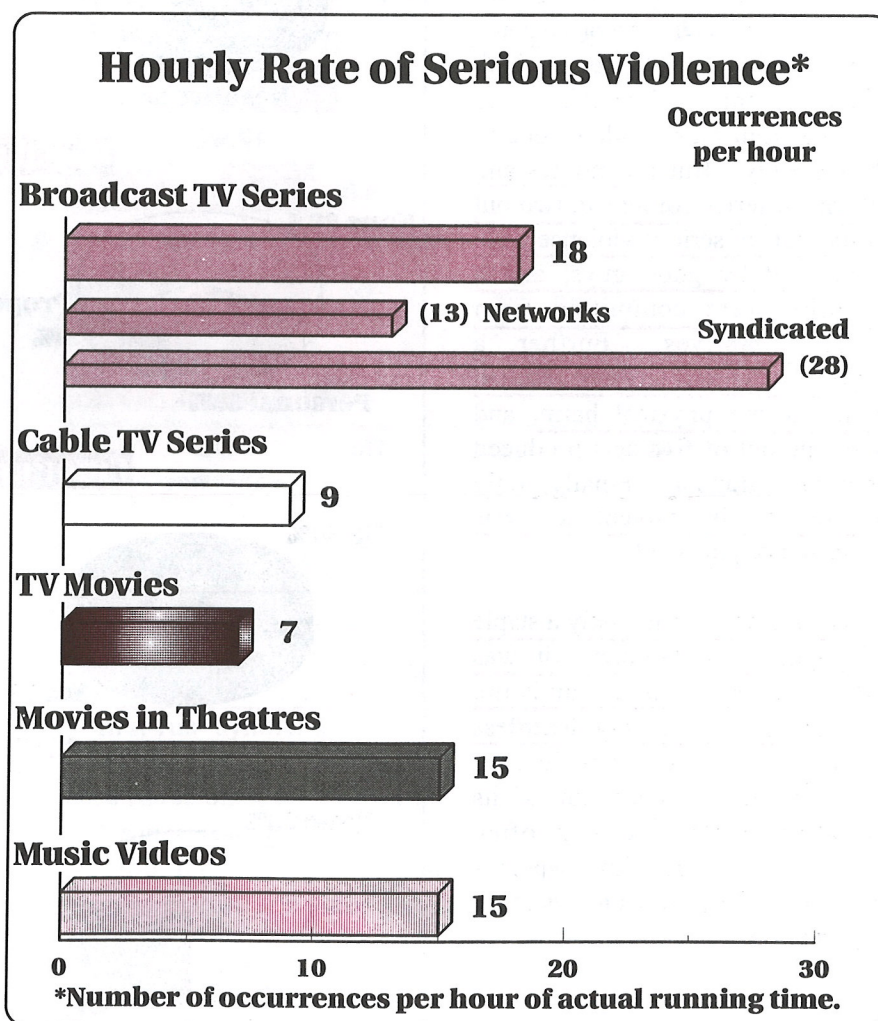and the music videos lapped the field in terms of overall violence.

Music videos and feature films each averaged one scene of serious violence every four minutes, compared to one scene every five to six minutes in both cable and broadcast television series, and one every eight minutes in made-for-TV movies. When all violence was included, however, music videos averaged more than one scene per minute, more than twice the level of either feature films or television series.

Unfortunately, parents seeking to navigate these shoals can't always trust the industry's ratings to find a safe harbor for their children. Half of the ten most violent movies that we viewed carried a PG-13 rating, and a majority of the ten most violent television series were rated TV-PG. Individual MTV music videos carry no rating (although the shows in which they appear are rated).

Violence in Context

Media violence isn't the whole story. Violence is always part of a story, an activity

Hourly Rate of Serious Violence*

Occurrences per hour

- Broadcast TV Series: 18
  - (13) Networks
  - Syndicated (28)
- Cable TV Series: 9
- TV Movies: 7
- Movies in Theatres: 15
- Music Videos: 15

0   10   20   30

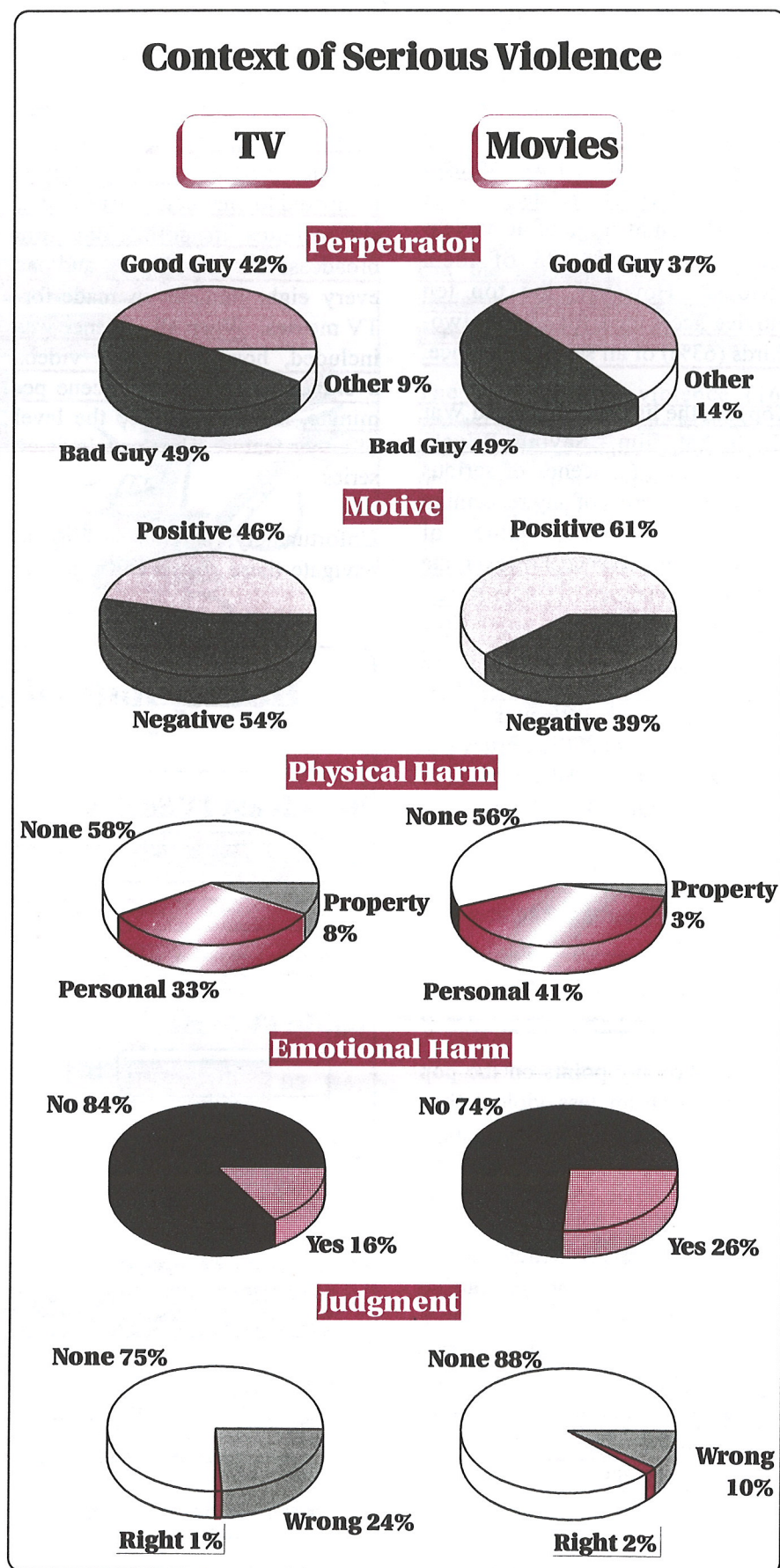*Number of occurrences per hour of actual running time.

committed by certain types of characters, for certain reasons, with certain kinds of consequences. Therefore, we looked at *how* violence was portrayed, as well as how often it occurred.

As "Saving Private Ryan" illustrates, depictions of violence can serve aesthetic and moral purposes within the context of the story. For the most part, though, popular entertainment features a value-free view of violence. It is used by heroes nearly as often as villains, it rarely causes either physical or emotional harm, and it is even more rarely condemned by the script.

Each time violence occurred, we determined who was responsible and why, as well as what effects it had. Much of this information was missing from music videos, due to their brevity. But for movies and television series combined, two out of five acts of serious violence were committed by good guys, and a majority were committed from laudable motives. Further, a majority of serious violence resulted in no lasting physical harm, and only one out of five acts produced emotional trauma. Finally, only one out of five violent acts was criticized or punished.

Thus, violence was not only a staple of popular entertainment, it was often portrayed as a laudable, necessary, or relatively harmless activity. By considering entertainment violence out of its narrative context, critics often ignore its most troubling aspect – the moral vacuum in which violence is portrayed.

Context of Serious Violence

TV **Movies**

Perpetrator

TV: Good Guy 42% | Other 9% | Bad Guy 49%

Movies: Good Guy 37% | Other 14% | Bad Guy 49%

Motive

TV: Positive 46% | Negative 54%

Movies: Positive 61% | Negative 39%

Physical Harm

TV: None 58% | Property 8% | Personal 33%

Movies: None 56% | Property 3% | Personal 41%

Emotional Harm

TV: No 84% | Yes 16%

Movies: No 74% | Yes 26%

Judgment

TV: None 75% | Wrong 24% | Right 1%

Movies: None 88% | Wrong 10% | Right 2%

CMPA's Pop Culture Study

In the wake of polls that show growing public concern over popular culture excesses, CMPA undertook the most extensive study ever conducted of controversial content in the entertainment marketplace. We analyzed all instances of violence, sex and sleaze, and crude language in the leading popular entertainment formats – television, movies, and music. Our sample included the randomly-selected equivalent of two weeks of original fictional series on all cable and broadcast television; 50 made-for-TV movies, divided evenly between cable and broadcast outlets; and 189 music videos that ran on MTV during four randomly selected days, all during the 1998-99 television season; and 50 of the top-grossing movies released in theaters during 1998. This special issue of *Media Monitor* presents our key findings on violence in popular entertainment. The full report is available for purchase from CMPA. Future CMPA reports will analyze depictions of sex, sleaze, and crude language in the same sample of popular entertainment.

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