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Hollywood Cleans Up Its Act

Changing Rates of Sex and Violence in
Entertainment Media

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Overview

After years of growing alarm over a rising tide of sex and violence in popular entertainment, there is evidence that television has started to clean up its act. From 1999 to 2001, the amount of sexual material on television fell by 29 percent, while the amount of serious violence decreased by 17 percent. These shifts were also accompanied by a slight but noticeable trend towards more restrictive parental ratings for shows that contained a high incidence of sexual material. In the most popular movies released during these same periods, the amount of sex and violence remained almost identical. These results come from the latest installment of the most comprehensive ongoing analysis of sex and violence in popular entertainment ever undertaken. It is being conducted by the non-partisan non-profit Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington D.C.

Background

In 1998, the Center for Media and Public Affairs began a systematic long-term study of popular culture in response to widespread concerns among scholars, professionals and the public that the high incidence of sex and violence in entertainment media was having a damaging effect on the culture at large. The first study covered the 1998-1999 season of first-run broadcast and cable television series, including both network and syndicated fare, and 50 of the top domestic-grossing movies with a release date during 1998. After establishing a baseline, we followed the same procedures for the 2000-2001 television season and 50 of the top domestic grossing movies released in theaters during 2000. For a fuller explanation of the methodology, see the appendix attached to this report.

Results at a Glance

- **From 1999 to 2001, the amount of sexual material on television fell by 29 percent and the amount of serious violence decreased by 17 percent.**
- **On the broadcast networks, the amount of sexual material fell by 27 percent and violence by 11 percent.**
- **On premium cable, the amount of sexual material fell by 49 percent and violence decreased by 65 percent.**
- **On basic cable, the amount of sexual material remained the same, but violence increased by 20 percent.**
- **The proportion of highly sex-oriented broadcast and cable shows with PG ratings dropped from 45 to 30 percent**
- **The amount of sex and violence in top grossing feature films remained the same.**
- **Among movies with the most sex and violence, the proportion of R ratings increased from 55 to 60 percent**

Breakdown

Broadcast Television

We analyzed the equivalent of two weeks of prime-time fictional programming by examining two episodes of every series from randomly selected dates during the 2000-2001 season. (For a fuller explanation of the methodology, see appendices at the end of this report). Our sample included all series on the ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, PAX, UPN and WB networks, as well as nationally-available first run syndicated broadcast series. From these sources we identified a total of 1,779 images or dialogue references to sexual behavior and a total of 1,441 acts of serious violence in 215 episodes.

The difficulty in assessing sexual and violent content on TV according to the sheer number of acts portrayed stems from the widely varying number of series broadcast on the respective networks. A more nuanced approach requires looking beyond the total amount of sex and violence to their relative frequency per hour. By calculating rates of sexual and violent content per hour of actual running time on each outlet, we were able to map the changing amounts of sex and violence on television as a whole.

Sexual Material on Broadcast TV (Table 1)

From 1999 to 2001 the overall amount of sexual material on broadcast TV fell by 27 percent. Though NBC holds the dubious claim to being the raunchiest network, with five shows in our top ten list of sex-oriented series (see table 2), the average amount of sexual material on NBC dropped from once every three minutes to once every six minutes.

The clearest example of this change can be seen in NBC's hit comedy series "Friends," which tied for the top spot on our 1998-1999 list of shows with the most sexual content. Thanks to the disappearance of the recurring "ugly naked guy" gag and less on-screen heat between Monica and Chandler, "Friends" dropped out of the top ten shows for sexual material in 2000-2001. The decline in sex on NBC was also a result of the departure of such series as "Suddenly Susan" and "Mad About You."

The end of the series "The Nanny" contributed to the sharp drop in sexual content on CBS, which was already the least sex-oriented of the major networks. CBS viewers, on average, saw one reference to or incident of sex every five minutes in 1998-1999 and one every ten minutes in 2000-2001. ABC and FOX registered smaller decreases. But their smaller competitor UPN took the top two spots for series with the most sexual material with "Girlfriends" (25 scenes per episode) and the short-lived "Gary and Mike" (20 scenes per episode).

Serious Violence on Broadcast Television (Table 3)

Overall, the amount of serious violence on broadcast television fell by 11 percent. The decline was sharpest on CBS, as a result of the disappearance of such series as “Magnificent 7,” “Martial Law” and “Sons of Thunder” - all of which contained substantial violent content.

On the other major networks, NBC’s already low rate of violence declined slightly, and ABC’s stayed the same. But “Dark Angel,” a post-apocalyptic drama starring a young genetically engineered soldier accounted for a large part of the 42 percent increase in serious violence on FOX.

The most violent show on TV was “Xena: Warrior Princess” (see table 4). Viewers witnessed, on average, one act of serious violence every minute on this now-defunct syndicated drama. Four of the five most violent shows on television are syndicated, and overall, syndicated series accounted for 42 percent of all serious violence on broadcast television in the 2000-2001 season.

Ratings and Broadcast Television (Table 5)

On the ten most sexually oriented shows, the parental guidance ratings became more stringent. The number given PG ratings dropped from eight in 1998-1999 to five in 2000-2001, and the number given TV-14 ratings rose from two in 1998-1999 to five in 2000-2001.

When it came to violence, however, the ratings were if anything more permissive (see table 6). The number of PG ratings given to the ten most violent shows on television increased from six to eight. The only TV-14 ratings were given by the only major networks whose shows were on the list, CBS and Fox.

Basic Cable (Tables 1 & 2)

Once again, we analyzed the equivalent of two weeks of original series shown on major cable channels that were aimed at a general audience. The basic cable channels in the sample were AMC, Bravo, Comedy Central, F/X, Fox Family, Lifetime, MTV, Sci-Fi, TNN, TNT and USA. This sample yielded a total of 53 episodes containing 361 scenes of sexual material and 465 acts of serious violence.

Overall, the rate of sexual material on basic cable remained the same. But the rate of violence increased by 20 percent, largely due to the introduction of shows like TNN’s “18 Wheels of Justice” and the Sci Fi channel’s “Farscape” and “Good vs Evil.”

Premium Cable (Tables 1 & 2)

We also examined the equivalent of two weeks of original series shown on the premium cable stations HBO and Showtime yielding a total of 16 episodes containing 241 scenes of sexual material and 37 acts of serious violence.

Despite its reputation for adult programming, premium cable registered a 49 percent decrease in sexual content and a 65 percent drop in serious violence. The sharp decrease in violence reflects the disappearance of such Showtime series as "Dead Man's Gun" and "Total Recall 2070."

The downward trend for sexual material on premium cable reflects Showtime's abandoning much of the erotic programming that dominated 1998-1999's list of most sexually oriented shows on cable (see table 7). Whereas "Beverly Hills Bordello" topped the list for raunch in 1998-1999 with over one sexual reference or image every minute, Showtime's top-place offering for 2000-2001, "Lady Chatterly's Stories," contained only one sexual reference or image every two minutes. Four of the most sex-oriented cable shows came from basic cable, led by MTV's "Undressed" in the number two spot. But the material on the premium channels was more graphic.

Ratings and Cable Television (Table 8)

The parental ratings on cable reflected the adult nature of these programs. In 2000-2001, six of the shows with the highest incidence of sex were rated TV-MA, three TV-14, and only one was rated PG - Bravo's British import "Cold Feet." The only premium cable series to appear in our list of the most violent shows on television, HBO's "OZ," was rated TV-MA.

Movies (Tables 1 & 2)

We analyzed the amount of sexual and violent material in 50 of the top-grossing theatrical films released in 2000 that were available for viewing, and compared the results to a similar sample for 1998. Overall, the amount of sexual and violent material remained the same. However, the most violent movies in 2000 got even more violent (see table 10). The ten most violent movies for 2000 contained 71 percent of all the serious violence in the sample. In 1998, the top ten contained 63 percent of all serious violence - and that figure was inflated by the extensive graphic depiction of war in "Saving Private Ryan").

Ratings and Movies (Tables 11 & 12)

The distribution of R and PG ratings among movies containing the most sexual content and serious violence changed only slightly. There was an increase in the number of "R" ratings from 55 to 60 percent from 1998 to 2000.

**TABLE 1
AMOUNT OF SEXUAL MATERIAL PER HOUR¹**

OUTLET	NUMBER OF SCENES PER HOUR		%CHANGE
	1998-1999	2000-2001	
TELEVISION			
ABC	15	12	-20%
CBS	12	6	-50%
FOX	18	14	-22%
NBC	22	10	-56%
All Broadcast	16	11	-27%
CABLE			
Basic	12	12	0
Premium	45	23	-49%
All Cable	22	15	-32%
All TV	17	12	-29%
MOVIES (THEATRICAL RELEASES)	7	7	0

1- Average is based on actual running time, exclusive of commercials, promos etc.

TABLE 2
SEXUAL MATERIAL - TOP TEN BROADCAST TV SERIES

1998-1999	OUTLET	SCENES	2000-2001	OUTLET	SCENES
1. Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer	SYN	24	1. Girlfriends	UPN	25
1. Friends	NBC	24	2. Gary & Mike	UPN	20
2. Love Boat: TNG	SYN	19	3. Law & Order: SVU	NBC	18
3. That '70s Show	FOX	18	4. First Years	NBC	15
4. Ally McBeal	FOX	17	5. Ally McBeal	FOX	12
4. Cupid	ABC	17	5. Ed	NBC	12
4. Family Rules	UPN	17	6. Sammy	NBC	11
5. Will and Grace	NBC	15	6. Two Guys and a Girl	ABC	11
6. Suddenly Susan	NBC	12	6. Dawson's Creek	WB	11
6. Just Shoot Me	NBC	12	7. Michael Richards Show	NBC	9
Total		175			169

Average number of scenes per episode ranked in order of number of scenes per episode containing dialogue references or visual images involving sexual material

TABLE 3
AMOUNT OF SERIOUS VIOLENCE PER HOUR¹

OUTLET	NUMBER OF SCENES PER HOUR		% CHANGE
	1998-1999	2000-2001	
TELEVISION			
ABC	3	3	0%
CBS	21	17	-19%
FOX	7	10	42%
NBC	4	3	-25%
All Broadcast	18	16	-11%
CABLE			
Basic	10	12	20%
Premium	17	6	-65%
All Cable	18	11	-39%
All TV	18	15	-17%
MOVIES (THEATRICAL RELEASES)	15	15	0

1- Average is based on actual running time, exclusive of commercials, promos etc.

**TABLE 4
TEN MOST VIOLENT TV SERIES¹**

1998-1999	OUTLET	VIOLENCE	2000-2001	OUTLET	VIOLENCE
1. Walker, Texas Ranger	CBS	82	1. Xena: Warrior Princess	SYN	63
2. Oz	HBO	54	2. Walker, Texas Ranger	CBS	53
3. VIP	SYN	38	3. Sheena	SYN	47
4. Mortal Kombat	SYN	47	4. Cleopatra 2525	SYN	38
5. LA Heat	TNT	46	5. Andromeda	SYN	33
6. New Adventures of Robin Hood	SYN	36	6. Freedom	UPN	31
7. Buffy	WB	20	7. Special Unit 2	UPN	27
8. Viper	SYN	29	7. Charmed	WB	27
9. 7 Days	UPN	33	9. Beastmaster	SYN	25
10. Team Knight Rider	SYN	19	10.* Oz	HBO	23
			10.* Dark Angel	FOX	23
Total		404			367

¹ Average number of violent acts per episode

* Tie, counted only once in total number of acts for top ten.

TABLE 5
SEXUAL MATERIAL - RATINGS OF TOP BROADCAST TV SERIES

1998-1999		OUTLET	RATING	2000-2001		OUTLET	RATING
1. Secret Diary of Desmond Pfeiffer		UPN	14	1. Girlfriends		UPN	14
1. Friends		NBC	PG	2. Gary & Mike		UPN	PG
2. Love Boat: TNG		UPN	PG	3. Law & Order: SVU		NBC	14
3. That '70s Show		FOX	PG	4. First Years		NBC	14
4. Ally McBeal		FOX	PG/14*	5. Ally McBeal		FOX	PG/14*
4. Cupid		ABC	PG	5. Ed		NBC	PG
4. Family Rules		UPN	PG	6. Sammy		NBC	PG
5. Will and Grace		NBC	PG	6. Two Guys and a Girl		ABC	PG
6. Suddenly Susan		NBC	G/PG*	6. Dawson's Creek		WB	14
6. Just Shoot Me		NBC	PG	7. Michael Richards Show		NBC	PG
	PG	14	MA		PG	14	MA
TOTAL	8	2	0		5	5	0

* The two episodes viewed had different ratings. Only the higher rating was counted

**TABLE 6
RATINGS OF MOST VIOLENT TV SERIES**

1998-1999		OUTLET	RATING	2000-2001		OUTLET	RATING
1. Walker, Texas Ranger		CBS	14	1. Xena: Warrior Princess		SYN	PG
2. Oz		HBO	MA	2. Walker, Texas Ranger		CBS	PG/14
3. VIP		SYN	PG	3. Sheena		SYN	PG
4. Mortal Kombat: Combat		SYN	PG	4. Cleopatra 2525		SYN	PG
5. LA Heat		TNT	14	5. Andromeda		SYN	PG
6. New Adventures of Robin Hood		SYN	PG	6. Freedom		UPN	PG
7. Buffy the Vampire Slayer		WB	14	7. Special Unit 2		UPN	PG
8. Viper		SYN	PG	7. Charmed		WB	PG
9. 7 Days		UPN	PG	8. Beastmaster		SYN	PG
10. Team Knight Ridder		SYN	PG	9* Oz		HBO	MA
				9* Dark Angel		FOX	14
	PG	14	MA		PG	14	MA
TOTAL	6	3	1		8	2	1

* Tie

TABLE 7
SEXUAL MATERIAL - RATINGS OF TOP CABLE TV SERIES

1998-1999	OUTLET	RATING	2000-2001	OUTLET	RATING	
1. Beverly Hills Bordello	SHO	MA	1. Lady Chatterly's Stories	SHO	MA	
2. Hot Springs Hotel	SHO	MA	2. Undressed	MTV	14/PG*	
3. Welcome to Paradox	SCI-FI	14	2. Queer as Folk	SHO	MA	
4. Compromising Situations	SHO	MA	3. Son of the Beach	FX	14	
5. Rude Awakenings	SHO	MA	4. Sex and the City	HBO	MA	
6. Oz	HBO	MA	5. Cold Feet	BRAVO	PG	
7. Linc's	SHO	MA	6. Soul Food	SHO	14	
8. Sins of the City	USA	14	7. South Park	COM	MA	
9. Any Day Now	LIF	PG	7. Chris Isaak Show	SHO	MA	
10. Arli\$\$	HBO	MA	8. The Sopranos	HBO	MA	
	PG	14	MA	PG	14	MA
Total	1	2	7	1	3	6

* The two episodes viewed had different ratings. The higher rating was counted

TABLE 8
SEXUAL MATERIAL - TOP TEN CABLE TV SERIES

1998-1999	OUTLET	SCENES	2000-2001	OUTLET	SCENES
1. Beverly Hills Bordello	SHO	68	1. Lady Chatterly's Stories	SHO	34
2. Hot Springs Hotel	SHO	48	2. Undressed	MTV	29
3. Welcome to Paradox	SCI-FI	27	2. Queer as Folk	SHO	29
4. Compromising Situations	SHO	25	3. Son of the Beach	FX	25
5. Rude Awakenings	SHO	21	4. Sex and the City	HBO	22
6. Oz	HBO	20	5. Cold Feet	BRAVO	18
7. Linc's	SHO	19	6. Soul Food	SHO	17
8. Sins of the City	USA	18	7. South Park	COM	9
9. Any Day Now	LIF	13	7. Chris Isaak Show	SHO	9
10. Arli\$\$	HBO	11	8. The Sopranos	HBO	8
Total		270			200

Average number of scenes per episode ranked in order of number of scenes per episode containing dialogue references or visual images involving sexual material

TABLE 9
SEXUAL MATERIAL - TOP TEN MOVIES

THEATRICAL RELEASE 1998¹	SCENES	THEATRICAL RELEASE 2000²	SCENES
1. Something About Mary	64	1. Scary Movie	43
2. Stella Got Her Groove Back	53	2. Road Trip	41
3. The Wedding Singer	45	3. Nutty Professor II: The Klumps	40
4. Primary Colors	33	4. Me, Myself & Irene	33
4. Out Of Sight	33	4. Next Friday	33
5. Six Days Seven Nights	32	5. What Women Want	30
6. Urban Legend	19	5. Charlie's Angels	30
7. The Waterboy	18	6. Hollow Man	27
8. Lethal Weapon 4	18	6. Bring It On	27
9. Hope Floats	12	7. The Whole Nine Yards	21
Total	327		325

¹ Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 1998 and 1999.

² Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 2000 and 2001.

TABLE 10
TEN MOST VIOLENT MOVIES

1998-1999 ¹	VIOLENCE	2000-2001 ²	VIOLENCE
1. Saving Private Ryan	262	1. The Patriot	159
2.* Blade	92	2. Gladiator	110
2.* Ronin	92	3. Mission Impossible II	108
3. Lethal Weapon 4	91	4. Shanghai Noon	99
4. The Mask of Zorro	82	5. Romeo Must Die	88
5. U.S. Marshals	61	6. Rules of Engagement	79
6. Rush Hour	56	7. Shaft	77
7. Small Soldiers	56	8.* Scream 3	66
8. Man in the Iron Mask	47	8.* U-571	66
9. The Negotiator	26	9. X-Men	65
Total	865		917

¹ Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 1998 and 1999.

² Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 2000 and 2001.

* Tie

TABLE 11
SEXUAL MATERIAL - RATINGS FOR TOP TEN MOVIES

THEATRICAL RELEASE 1998¹	RATING	THEATRICAL RELEASE 2000²	RATING
1. Something About Mary	R	1. Scary Movie	R
2. Stella Got Her Groove Back	R	2. Road Trip	R
3. The Wedding Singer	PG-13	3. Nutty Professor II: The Klumps	PG-13
4. Primary Colors	R	4. Me, Myself & Irene	R
4. Out Of Sight	R	4. Next Friday	R
5. Six Days Seven Nights	PG-13	5. What Women Want	PG-13
6. Urban Legend	R	5. Charlie's Angels	PG-13
7. The Waterboy	PG-13	6. Hollow Man	R
8. Lethal Weapon 4	R	6. Bring It On	PG-13
9. Hope Floats	PG-13	7. The Whole Nine Yards	R

¹ Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 1998 and 1999.

² Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 2000 and 2001.

TABLE 12
RATINGS - MOST VIOLENT MOVIES

THEATRICAL RELEASE 1998¹	RATING	THEATRICAL RELEASE 2000²	RATING
1. Saving Private Ryan	R	1. The Patriot	R
2. Blade	R	2. Gladiator	R
2. Ronin	R	3. Mission Impossible II	PG-13
3. Lethal Weapon 4	R	4. Shanghai Noon	PG-13
4. The Mask of Zorro	PG-13	5. Romeo Must Die	R
5. U.S. Marshals	PG-13	6. Rules of Engagement	R
6. Rush Hour	PG-13	7. Shaft	R
7. Small Soldiers	PG-13	8. Scream 3	R
8. Man in the Iron Mask	PG-13	9. U-571	PG-13
9. The Negotiator	R	10. X-Men	PG-13

¹ Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 1998 and 1999.

² Based on sample of 50 top-grossing films released in theaters during 2000 and 2001.

Appendix

Sample Selection Methods

To analyze and compare two distinct genres of entertainment programming – first-run broadcast and cable television series (including both network and syndicated fare) and recently released theatrical movies – we chose a sampling approach that would provide the best representation of programming viewed by the largest audience. Each genre required a slightly different selection method to accomplish that goal.

For broadcast and cable television series, we sampled two “constructed weeks” of programming. A constructed week consists of one episode from every series that appears on the prime time schedule over the course of a single week. The individual episodes are drawn from the entire schedule throughout the season, so that the sample is not skewed by accidents of timing. These weeks were constructed so that one represented the fall schedule and the other the spring schedule of programs. To make the sample as inclusive as possible, we also sampled any mid-season replacement series that were televised. In this way, as several unsuccessful fall shows were canceled, we were able to examine their replacements. Because of this sampling structure, some shows appear only once in the sample, while successful shows that lasted throughout the entire season appear twice.

In selecting theatrical films, we chose those with the highest domestic box office receipts and a release date during 2000. We relied on taping from premium and pay-per-view cable channels as well as videotape rentals to obtain copies of each film. Some films were not yet available from any of those sources by the end of our sampling period. To replace those features we continued down the list of box office rankings. The final sample represents 50 of the top 68 grossing films released during 2000. For ease of presentation, this group is referred to as the “top 50” in the text. In 1998, the final sample represented 50 of the year’s top 72 grossing movies.

Unit of Analysis

The basic unit of analysis in our study was the “scene.” We defined a scene as a group of interconnected actions and dialogue that take place in the same location, in the same time frame, among a similar group of characters. A scene may consist of one act or multiple incidents or acts. If there were multiple violent acts as in a beating or a brawl, then the individual blows were grouped together and coded as one scene that depicts an assault. Similarly, a scene showing several couples kissing at a party would be coded together as one depiction of sexual behavior. If there was any break in the action, change in locale, time frame, or characters involved, the material following the change was considered to be a new scene. For a more varied presentation, we refer interchangeably

to scenes, acts, incidents or instances of sex or violence, but all such terms are based on the above definition.

Definition of Violent Content

Violence was defined any deliberate act of physical force or use of a weapon. Only violence that was shown on-screen or whose immediate aftermath was seen on-screen was coded; discussions or descriptions of violence were not coded. Also excluded from our definition of violence were unintentional acts of physical contact, such as people bumping into one another in a dark room by accident. Violence that is a routine part of contact sports, such as tackling in football, punches in a boxing match or checking in a hockey game, were not included. Any fights or other violent acts that are not part of the game were counted as violence. Acts of nature such as hurricanes, floods and earthquakes were not coded as violence unless they were somehow under human control (e.g., in a science-fiction or fantasy setting). Animals reacting violently were dismissed unless a human being was using the animal as a weapon (e.g., guard dogs or police dogs). Verbal threats or emotional abuse that did not rely on physical force were also excluded. However, threats that were backed up by an individual wielding a weapon were coded.

Although violence included in entertainment programming runs the gamut from petty to severe, the majority we observed could be described as serious. By serious we refer to acts that could reasonably be expected to cause significant injury or death to the victim (even if this is not evident in the scene). This includes gunplay, assaults with other weapons, and severe beatings, as well as suicides and sexual assaults. The violence classified as minor includes such behaviors as pushing and dragging, slapping, or throwing a punch. In this comparative study, we included only rates of serious violence.

Definition of Sexual Content

Sexual material was defined as behavioral or verbal content that was linked to feelings deriving from sexual desires or instincts. Unlike violence, sexual material could be alluded to or implied. Examples are scenes which fade out at the beginning or fade in at the end of implied sexual activity by lovers who are shown in bed together. Also unlike violence, the category includes verbal descriptions of sexual activity and use of sexual innuendo. The content analysis system also distinguishes between “soft-core” and “hard-core” sexual depictions. Soft-core depictions include cheesecake or beefcake scenes when the camera serves as a “leering eye,” passionate kissing or groping, masturbation, exhibitionism, voyeurism etc. Hard core depictions include sexual intercourse, oral sex, sadomasochism, bondage and discipline etc.