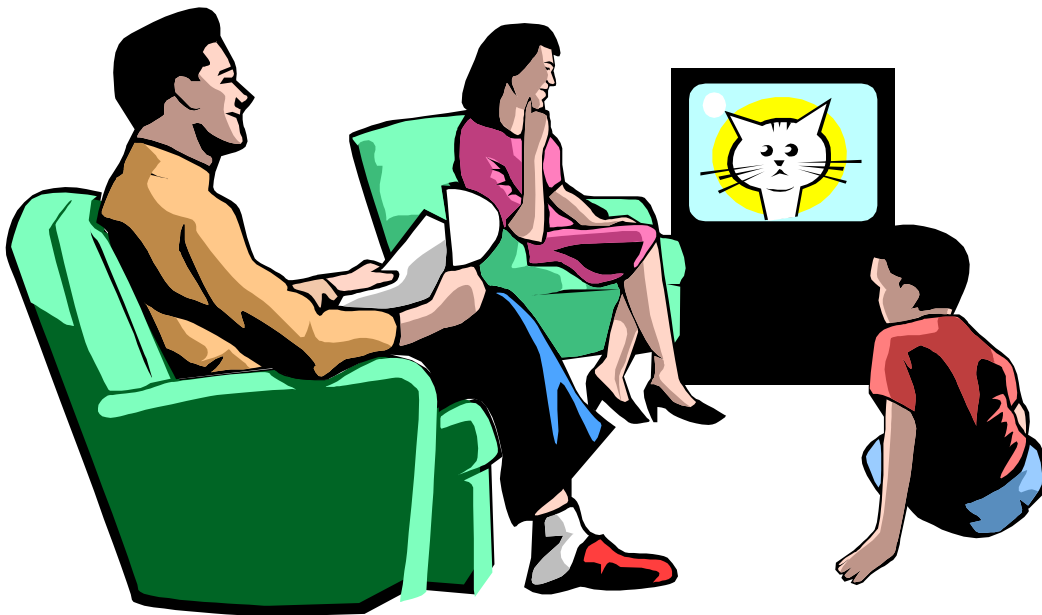


SEX AND THE FAMILY HOUR:

A content analysis of sexual content aired during the “Family Hour.”



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Abstract

This content analysis study will measure sexual content during America's "Family Hour" by replicating studies conducted in 1979 and 1989. This need for a study such as this one does not stem from the tiresome, regurgitated cry that television is ruining America's children, thus leading to the poisoning and doom of its youth, who in turn represent future of the this country. This content analysis study aims to evaluate and examine television programming, and compare the data of the two earlier studies of similar areas, specifically in the area of sexual content; to try and draw conclusions regarding the path television programming has taken over the last few decades.

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Introduction

For two years during the 1970s, the Family hour was a self-declared “family viewing” time the networks set aside as a time for parents and children to watch programs that weren’t loaded with sexual themes and innuendos. It was originally formally agreed upon by the networks and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in 1975, but was struck down in 1976. (Johnson, 1996). However, even after the “family hour” was struck down, it was still unofficially acknowledged, and abided by networks. This led to this time slot being generally acknowledged as a time for family-oriented television programming, even though there is no actual law, rule, or policy forcing networks to abide by it.

In the last decade the networks have taken a political bashing in such instances as former vice-president Dan Quale attacking “Murphy Brown”, Bob Doles “nightmares of depravity” speech, the controversial V-Chip, and the political pressure to adopt a self-imposed TV Ratings System. (Marin & Turque, 1996). Austin (1993) addresses the belief that parents have lost their ability to control children’s viewing and shape their morals, due to technology such as television and the internet, which are more difficult to censor or control than books or oral storytelling.

Arguably one of the most important aspects of television programming is the impact of supposed inappropriate content on children (Johnson, 2001). Johnson (2001) explains that television's power to inform, guide, persuade, and incite reaction from audiences, particularly children, indicates its strong impact on society. Researchers are also interested in the influences of content on children (Dorr, 1990). The data and results attain from such studies cannot prove any direct connection between human behavior and potentially harmful content, but these studies can offer comparisons and supply hypothesis which help reveal trends and tendencies which may or may not represent coincidences.

In 1989, one week of primetime network television content was analyzed in order to examine and compare the amount of sex on television with an earlier study conducted in 1979. This study will take those two content analyses one step further. This content analysis study will attempt to measure the amount of sex aired on television during televisions "Family Hour" in early 2003.

This need for a study such as this one does not stem from the tiresome, regurgitated cry that television is ruining America's children, thus leading to the poisoning and doom of it's youth, who in turn represent future of the this country. This study aims to evaluate and examine television programming, and compare the data to two earlier studies of similar areas, specifically in the area of sexual content; to try and draw conclusions regarding the path television programming has taken over the last few decades.

Literature Review

In the past, studies regarding sex on television have chosen to take on various sub topics and approaches when examining sexuality on television during the family hour. Those closely related to this study differ slightly in topic and approach, but they all deal with some combination of sex, television, and children. The main reason for any existence of a “family hour” is to attempt to protect and shield children away from material that could prove to be harmful to their mental, emotion, and psychological development.

Some scholars examine and question the parent and child interaction displayed during television viewing (Gross, 1992; Nathanson, 2001), as well as overall Parental Involvement in the television viewing of their children. (Austin, 1992, 1993; Warren, 2002). Nathanson (2001) examines the mediation of television programming as reported through parents and children. Her study addresses parental involvement in their children’s television viewing habits and the way children view their parent’s involvement and mediation of television programming.

All of these studies attempt to report the significance that interaction plays in the viewing of different programming content, which might be considered by some as inappropriate for children. Data such as televisions per household, ratio of parents or guardians to children and available television sets, and overall parental interest in the television program viewing of children are often examined in these studies as well.

Other studies examine the Networks themselves, their programming strategies (Lin, 1995), or even push for broadcast regulation (Docter, 1992). Lin investigates the network prime-time programming strategies and attempts to show that the programs

selected for airing are based on a programming strategy theory, which further points out the fact that networks are not in business for the good of the public, but rather for money and profit.

There are also studies which examine the programming viewing tendencies of children, as well as, the types of programming children generally like to watch (Abelman & Atkin, 2000), and the time slots that generally draw the most child viewers (Children Now & The Kaise Foundation, 1996). Children Now & The Kaise Foundation understand the “family hour” to be important because not only is it the first hour of broadcast prime-time television programming, it is also a time slot that reaches more child viewers than any other, including Saturday morning and weekday afternoons.

This present study, which for the most part replicates the methodologies of previous conducted content analysis (Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991), will serve as a comparison to the results of similar analyses conducted in 1979 and 1989, and hopefully build upon the previous studies in an effective manner.

Sapolsky & Tabarlet (1991) take the results of the 1979 study and compared them to the results of the 1989 study to try and determine the relationship of sexual content displayed on television during the end of the two decades. The study found that sexual behavior and language had not diminished during the period. The results revealed that suggestive sexual displays and noncriminal sex acts were down, while sexual touching increased. Explicit intercourse or simulations of explicit intercourse were present in 1989, while they were not even coded in 1979. Issues of safe sex, sexually transmitted disease, and contraception were almost never even addressed

in the sample programming conducted in 1979. It was also noted that sex in primetime programming occurred predominantly among unmarried persons, and white males usually initiated any sexual acts and words. (Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991).

Sapolsky & Tabarlet (1991) do an excellent job of setting up the study and presenting the results, but I feel that the study is limited in its validity. I believe that there may be a validity issue because of the fact that the study only takes a sample of one week of television programming from both 1979 and 1989. One week seems too small a time frame to try and develop a conclusion in which to compare two separate years. Many different variables could influence one week, which could in turn skew the data and inadvertently cause a researcher to attempt to compare “apples” to “oranges”. The coding methods used in these studies are adequate for assessing the results and data, and the content categories created by the researchers are well thought out and provide sufficient amounts of information about the coded content. I simply feel that a study such as the ones conducting in 1979 and 1989 warrant a larger sample.

This is mainly where my study will differ from those of Sapolsky & Tabarlet (1991). My study will take advantage of a larger sample, which will hopefully allow me the opportunity to eliminate any possible validity issues, which could cause this study to lose creditability. Also, as mentioned before, this study will not cover the entire primetime time slot, which the 1979 and 1989 studies examine, but rather pinpoint its focus on the unofficial “family hour”.

Methodology

Sample

Sapolsky & Tabarlet (1991) analyzed all primetime (8-11p.m. EST) programs broadcast by ABC, CBS, and NBC during the week of February 2-8, 1989, were videotaped for analysis. A total of sixty-four (64) shows were included, yielding 57.5 hours of programming. News magazine shows and sports were excluded from the analysis. Data for 1979's sample were obtained during the week of April 23-29. All programs aired during sixty-three (63) hours of primetime were included. (Sapolsky & Tabarlet, 1991).

The study sample will be randomly selected programming aired on American Broadcasting Company (ABC), Columbia Broadcasting Station (CBS), National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the Fox Network during the "Family Hour", which represents 8:00-9:00 p.m. (Eastern Standard Time). However, any news magazine shows and televised sports will be excluded from this content analysis study. The sample will be conducted over a period of six weeks from February 3, 2003, until March 14, 2003, and include programming aired Monday through Friday. Each day two programs will be randomly videotaped for analysis, ultimately leading to each program on these four networks having three videotaped samples included for analysis. This will result in approximately 60 hours of "Family Hour" programming being included. However, the final accumulation of hours included will depend on the number of hours deducted, if any, for previous stated exclusion purposes.

Content Categories

In the two aforementioned studies, sexual behaviors and language were coded using a particular scheme. In order to recreate the content categories used in the 1979 and 1989 study, the same coding scheme will be used. "An incident will be considered sexual if it contained a depiction of sexual behavior, seductive display of the body, or an explicit or implied reference to intimate sexual behavior, sexual organs, or sex-related activities" (Sapolsky, 1991, p. 507).

The programs content will be recorded, viewed, coded, and broken down into individual categories. The content categories will consist of a combination of categories used in the 1979 and 1989 content analysis studies. The content categories that will be included in this study are:

- (a) Noncriminal sex acts. Noncriminal sex acts will include touching, kissing, hugging, and intercourse. Sexual touching, kissing, and hugging involve the expression of sexual desire or affection. They include passionate embraces but exclude casual, accidental, or ritualistic touching. Intercourse will be defined as either implied, it has occurred or is about to occur off-camera, or explicit, partners are shown in the act with their bodies partially hidden from view.
- (b) Criminal sex acts. Criminal sex acts involve prostitution or rape.
- (c) Sexual language. Sexual language contains explicit, overt references to noncriminal or criminal sexual behavior, sexual organs and typical sex-related activities.

- (d) Innuendo. Innuendo involves implicit, covert reference to sexual behavior or sexual organs.
- (e) Atypical sexual practices. Atypical sexual practices consist of homosexuality and unusual sex practices.
- (f) Sexually transmitted diseases. Sexually transmitted diseases include references to the prevention or contraction of diseases such as AIDS.
- (g) Pregnancy and birth control. Pregnancy and birth control include incidents involving contraception and pregnancy.
- (h) Sex education. Sex education involves a character explaining some aspect of sexual behavior.

The content categories are closely defined as far as the requirements of which an instance must meet, in order to be placed in a particular category.

As with both the 1979 and 1989, there will be three demographic characteristics recorded of both the initiator and receiver of a verbal sexual reference or visual sexual act. These characteristics will be:

- (a) gender
- (b) marital status
- (c) race

Program characteristics associated with each incident will also be recorded, and they will be:

- (a) program category (comedy/variety, drama, crime/adventure, and other)
- (b) time period
- (c) network

Coding

The 1979 content analysis consisted of two coders who viewed and coded each program independently. Intercoder agreement was reported to be 87% (Sapolsky, 1991). The 1989 content analysis consisted of one male and one female coder who worked independently classifying and recording all sexual incidents. The coders obtained a high level of agreement. This study will be coded by the author.

The author will calculate intracoder reliability by coding each program on two different occasions. After the fourth weeks' programs have been coded, the author will recode weeks one through three will be recoded in order to address the intracoder reliability of this study. After the sixth weeks; programs have been coded, the author will recode weeks four and five. After the recoding of weeks four and five are completed, the author will wait exactly one week, then recode week six.

Results

Depictions and instances of sex during televisions "Family Hour" have increased drastically since 1989, according to the results exhibited in this study. Table 1 shows that the frequency and rate per hour of almost every content category measured in this study has significantly gone increased since the 1979 and 1989 studies. The only significant drops in sexual instances seen in this study occurred in prostitution/rape, which saw a maximum rate per hour drop of 1.11 instances per hour., and verbal innuendo, which saw a maximum rate per hour drop of 3.01 instances per hour.

Unlike the previous two studies in 1979 and 1989, the predominant form of sex on television in 2003 is noncriminal sex acts, which account for 63% of all incidents. In both the 1979 and 1989 studies, innuendo was the predominant form of sex on television. However, similar to the previous two studies in 1979 and 1989, noncriminal sex acts are dominated by less sensuous form of kissing. Also under noncriminal sex acts, both implied intercourse and explicit intercourse were overwhelmingly present, when compared to the studies conducted in 1979 and 1989. There was not one single instance of a criminal sex act in this study, which continues the steady decline since the 1979 study which contained 20 instances of criminal sex, and the 1989 study which contained 3 instances of criminal sex.

Atypical sex practices, which include depictions of and references to homosexuality, were rare in this study, just as they were in the previous studies. One such instance occurred during Fox's drama *Boston Public*, in which a young woman displays lesbianism, when she expresses her love and sexual desire for another woman, and attempts to kiss her on the lips.

As found in the prior two conducted studies, the results of the study indicate that sex is most commonly presented in humorous formats. In every content category measured in this study, with the exception of sexual responsibility, sitcoms and variety shows exhibited the most sexual instances. When you combine this humorous format, with the fact that instances of sex education were extremely low, this portrays sex without any consequences, which is not indicative of the real world and could potentially be damaging to the mindsets of younger viewers.

A comparison of sexual content across the networks reveals that CBS, which had the least amount of sexual instances among the major networks in both the 1979 and 1989 study, slightly led the four major networks in this study with 26.2% of all instances of sex during the family hour. ABC was second with 25.1%, Fox was third with 24.7%, and NBC was last with 24% of all instances of sex.

Table 1
Frequency of Sexual Acts and References during the “Family Hour”

Type of Content	1979		1989		2003	
	Frequency	Rate Per Hour	Frequency	Rate Per Hour	Frequency	Rate Per Hour
Noncriminal sex acts						
Touching	89	1.41	126	2.19	87	2.64
Hugging	48	0.76	46	0.8	98	2.97
Kissing	106	1.68	101	1.76	129	3.91
Implied intercourse	4	0.06	9	0.16	47	1.42
Explicit intercourse			4	0.07	14	0.42
Acts combined	247	3.92	266	4.97	375	11.36
Criminal sex acts	20	0.32	3	0.05	0	0.00
Sexual language						
Sexual anatomy			42	0.73	76	2.30
Touch-hug-kiss			31	0.54	3	0.09
Intercourse			91	1.58	44	1.33
Prostitution-rape			67	1.17	2	0.06
Sexual language combined			231	4.02	125	3.79
Sexual innuendo						
Verbal innuendo	244	3.87	269	4.68	55	1.67
Suggestive displays	87	1.38	57	0.99	6	0.18
Innuendo combined	331	5.25	326	5.67	61	1.85
All acts coded in both years	806	12.79	846	14.71	561	17.00
Atypical sex practices			20	0.35	11	0.33
Sexual responsibility						
Safe sex - - STDs			18	0.31	3	0.09
Contraception - - pregnancy			11	0.19	12	0.36
Sex education			11	0.19	6	0.18
Responsibility combined			40	0.7		

**Table 2
Program Type**

Type of Content	1989			2003			
	Serial/Drama	Sitcom/Variety	Crime/Adventure	Serial/Drama	Sitcom/Variety	Crime/Adventure	Reality
Noncriminal sex acts	94	82	64	45	260	72	0
Touching	41	36	29	13	61	13	0
Hugging	15	16	5	10	76	12	0
Kissing	32	29	30	22	94	13	0
Implied intercourse	5	1	0	0	29	20	0
Explicit intercourse	1	0	0	0	0	14	0
Criminal sex acts	3	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sexual language	47	68	43	31	81	12	1
Sexual anatomy	4	10	25	10	58	7	1
Touch-hug-kiss	3	12	13	3	0	0	0
Intercourse	34	34	5	18	21	5	0
Prostitution-rape	6	2	0	0	2	0	0
Sexual innuendo	61	184	43	19	39	3	0
Atypical sex practices	2	6	2	10	0	1	0
Sexual responsibility	20	20	0	2	15	0	4
Categories combined	227	350	152	107	395	88	5
Rate per hour, 2003				8.92	30.38	29.33	1.00
Rate per hour, 1989	16.21	21.21	10.13				
Rate per hour, 1979	12.42	26.14	7.38				

**Table 3
Network**

Type of Content	1989			2003			
	ABC	CBS	NBC	ABC	CBS	NBC	FOX
Noncriminal sex acts	122	83	81	80	110	80	107
Touching	59	37	30	23	32	10	22
Hugging	13	18	15	17	33	30	18
Kissing	44	24	33	34	30	32	33
Implied intercourse	4	3	2	6	15	8	20
Explicit intercourse	2	1	1	0	0	0	14
Criminal sex acts	0	0	3	0	0	0	0
Sexual language	55	88	88	38	12	9	17
Sexual anatomy	24	3	15	0	0	0	3
Touch-hug-kiss	14	3	14	0	8	8	28
Intercourse	17	39	35	0	0	2	0
Prostitution-rape	0	43	24	0	0	2	0
Sexual innuendo	97	34	195	12	18	24	1
Atypical sex practices	1	2	17	3	0	0	3
Sexual responsibility	17	7	16	1	0	16	4
Categories combined	292	214	400	134	140	129	132
Rate per hour, 2003				14.89	15.56	14.33	22.00
Rate per hour, 1989	13.9	10.19	19.05				
Rate per hour, 1979	15.71	12.9	9.76				

Discussion

The results of this content analysis show that television networks have steadily moved from implicit references of sexual behavior and sexual organs on television to displays of sexual acts. The shift somewhat implies that the television viewing audiences of today want to visually see more sex during programming than hear reference to it, so this is exactly what the networks are providing them with.

This is important because it adds fuel to the fire of those who claim that without regulation of media, the networks will constantly push the limits of television comments, which could prove damaging to children viewers. Regulation also plays an important role, because “critics of television contend that sex is used as bait to lure audiences, which mean higher ratings and ultimately, more advertising revenue.

This study aimed to code sixty (60) hours of television during the family hour, however, it was not successful in this attempt. Due to circumstances beyond the control of the author of the study, the study was only able to code 33 hours of television during the family hour. This means that about twenty-seven (27) hours of planned programming was not included in the results. This is completely due to the exclusion of several hours of programming, due to the exclusion criteria that was mentioned in the Methodology section.

There were no sports shows or news magazine shows aired during the family hour that conflicted with this study’s programming schedule, but there were several specialty shows that heavily impacted the total number of programs excluded from the study. Most notable among these were a series of specials concerning the life, history, and current events surrounding pop music star and legend Michael Jackson.

There were two specialty shows shown on ABC, and two on Fox, that were all one hour specials, which essentially removes two program slots from each of these networks regular programming schedule.

One of the most notable findings during this study was that one show can in fact greatly impact the amount of sex on a single network. On NBC, the television show “Friends” almost single handedly pushed NBC to the head of the four major networks, in regards to sexual displays on television. Even though NBC was last among the major networks, the majority of its programs had very little or no coded instances of sexual displays. NBC shows such as “Ed” and “Mister Sterling” each had one week in which the each did not register a single sexual display, and “Mister Sterling” had a two episode total of only one sexual display. This can possibly be interpreted as a factor that is possibly skewing the results for NBC and the study in general, because without “Friends”, the results of both would definitely be significantly different. However, “Friends” is extremely popular among television viewers and therefore possibly has a much greater effect on a larger audience than any other television show aired during the family hour.

While this content analysis main focus was to replicate the before mentioned 1979 and 1989 studies, and compare results, there were a few additions made to this study that were not present in the previous studies. This study measured sexual displays of reality television during the family hour, because reality television is insanely popular amongst viewers today, and there is currently a great abundance of them currently on television, and the number is constantly growing. The reality shows that were coded, where “Survivor: The Amazon” and “Fear Factor”. Two reality shows

were excluded from this content analysis because they were deemed not indicative of a normal calendar television season, because they represented reality shows that were not given regular scheduled time slots. These two reality shows were American idol on Fox and Star Search on CBS.

The limitations of this study were the short time available to code programming and the networks decision to constantly divert their programming schedule away from the norm. As mentioned before, this was an unforeseeable and uncontrollable circumstance that appears without notice to the author. If this study were attempted again by the author or someone else, the major adjustment that would have to be made would be to include ample additional time for additional program coding in the event that another large amount of programs would have to be excluded from the coding and results. The inclusion of an additional programming schedule would probably help accomplish this task.

Although this study was not completely successful in its attempt to perfectly replicate the studies conducted in 1979 and 1989, it does in fact lay a great foundation for another study to pick up where this one left off. This is a very important subject that goes far deeper than the issue of children watching sex on television. The results of this study, or past and future studies similar to it, can be used to present valid arguments for broadcast media regulation, government intervention in programming, and investigations into programming strategies of the major networks, but only time will tell.

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