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## TRENDS

# Sex finds a home on television

■ Broadcasters try to outdo cable, one expert says

By **KRISTIN FINAN**  
and **GRANT SCHULTE**  
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

It could be the women of Wisteria Lane, Tony Soprano or the Gilmore girls.

No matter what your pleasure, if you tune in regularly you already know: On TV, sex is everywhere.

"It's the easiest way to go about trying to get an audience, that idea that sex sells," said Keith Houk, a clinical professor who teaches a course on media and society at the University of Houston.

According to a biennial study released Wednesday by the non-profit Kaiser Family Foundation called "Sex on TV 4," 70 percent of shows included some sexual content, averaging about five sex scenes per hour.

The study was based on a sample of a week's worth of programming on ABC, CBS, NBC,

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# tv: Sexual content may push the limits

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Fox, the WB, PBS, Lifetime, TNT, USA Network and HBO. "Sexual content" includes talking about sex and sexual behavior such as kissing, touching and intercourse.

George L. Hall, director of the Houston chapter of the Parents Television Council, dedicated to restoring responsibility and decency to the entertainment industry, said the findings didn't surprise him.

"There's almost pure, real sex (on TV)," he said. "It's just so bad. It's obvious that there are producers that want to see how far they can go over the line. They get a little way and they go further."

In a speech following the study's release, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., said networks should have "a higher calling than simply peddling sex and indecency to the public."

"We didn't teach our children to have drunken naked sex parties in hot tubs, but that's what they see on *The Real World*," Obama said.

According to the study, shows with sexual content are especially common during prime time, with 77 percent including some form of it. Houk said that's due in part to the networks' desire to compete with popular cable shows such as *Sex and the City* and *Deadwood*.

"You've got younger viewers who are more tuned in to the cable networks and less in to broadcast television," he said. "It's a way to try to get people over to broadcast networks again."

Of shows including sexual content, 14 percent referenced sexual risks or responsibilities, up from 9 percent in 1998. More than one in four shows with intercourse-related content referenced risks and responsibilities, up from 14 percent in 1998.

Dr. Ruth Sherman, a certified sex therapist, said responsible openness about sexu-

## BY THE NUMBERS

Highlights from "Sex on TV 4," a biennial study by the Kaiser Family Foundation:

■ Of the shows studied, 70 percent included some sexual content, and those shows averaged five sexual scenes per hour, up from 56 percent and 3.2 scenes per hour in 1998. Sexual content can include everything from talking about sex to kissing scenes to intercourse.

■ The number of shows depicting or strongly implying sexual intercourse decreased from 14 percent in 2002 to 11 percent in 2005.

■ Of shows including sexual content, 14 percent referenced sexual risks or responsibilities, up from 9 percent in 1998. More than one in four shows with intercourse-related content referenced risks and responsibilities, up from 14 percent in 1998.

■ Sexual content is even more common during prime time, with 77 percent of shows including sexual content.

■ Movies had the most sexual content, with 92 percent including it, followed by sitcoms at 87 percent, drama series at 87 percent and soap operas at 85 percent. In contrast, only 28 percent of reality shows included sexual content.

ality on TV can be a good thing.

"Never mentioning sex at all is not a realistic portrayal of life," she said. "If more messages of responsibility are occurring, I think that's helpful."

Hall said that allowing too much sexual

content on TV is unfair to young viewers.

"It does affect the behavior of children," Hall said. "We're mostly concerned with children and the times the children might be watching TV. I don't want to live in a country where the kids become jaded and coarse."

Houk said if the public is unsatisfied with TV content, networks will respond, as evidenced by the Janet Jackson "wardrobe malfunction."

"The following year they put Paul McCartney out there and had kids dancing around. There was outrage over what happened, and the 180 at the next year's show was a direct response," he said. "If they push the boundaries too far and the audience stops responding to it, it will trend backwards."

Public reaction aside, Obama called for more parental help — a white square box in the screen's corner, with a content-based rating — to a full-screen image with more program details. He said they industry should better control commercial placement and not stick ads for steamy dramas like Las Vegas in family sitcoms.

TV executives countered that the V-chip, and a \$250 million public service campaign teaching parents how to use existing safeguards, already helps filter out unwanted programming.

So has programming gotten to the point that the American public will fight back?

"It's really hard to say," he said. "You will have certain segments saying, 'Yeah, this is the end,' and the side that says, 'It's just a greater expression of free speech.' Really, time will tell what's happening."

■ For information visit [www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).

[kristin.finan@chron.com](mailto:kristin.finan@chron.com)