

# *"We're Not in Kansas Anymore"*

Fantasy-Themed Prime-Time Broadcast  
Programming Unsafe for Children



*The wholesome television shows we watched as children...*



Volume

Power



...versus what kids are watching today.



## Executive Summary

It is hard to imagine an entertainment franchise more child-friendly than *The Wizard of Oz*. Yet on NBC's reimagined prime-time broadcast version, entitled *Emerald City* and based on the Oz characters, a Dorothy character sexually stimulated the Tin Man using an oily lubricant.

This example and many others has led the Parents Television Council (PTC) to identify a troubling trend in recent TV programming: child-friendly fantasy franchises and characters are now depicted in a dark, "adult" manner utilizing graphic violence, sex, and profanity.

In this research report, the PTC examined fantasy-themed prime-time programming on the major broadcast networks during November, February, and May "sweeps" periods from 2011- 2017. Programs examined were *Grimm*, and *Once Upon a Time* (based on fairy tales), *Emerald City* (*The Wizard of Oz*), *Sleepy Hollow* ("The Legend of Sleepy Hollow"), *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland* (*Alice in Wonderland*), and *The Muppets*. Research data suggest that these once-family franchises are increasingly inappropriate and/or unsafe for young viewers.

As Dorothy so aptly observed, "***We're not in Kansas anymore.***"

In its research, the PTC found the following during the study period:

- In fantasy-based programming with particular appeal to children, young viewers were exposed to 625 profanities, 300 deaths, and over 1,000 incidents of violence.

- The most violent program was NBC's *Grimm*. Young viewers witnessed 485 acts of violence, including 165 deaths, 22 instances of dismemberment, and 12 decapitations. Also featured were instances of evisceration, cannibalism, dissection, crucifixion, impalement, and torture. They also heard 316 profanities.
- Fox's *Sleepy Hollow* featured frequent, explicit, and gory beheadings in slow-motion, eviscerations, immolations, and mutilated and dismembered corpses, with 15 instances of decapitation, 80 deaths, and nearly 300 acts of violence.
- NBC's series *Emerald City* featured 49 total instances of violence, including instances of crucifixion and torture; and an explicit scene in which a female character sexually pleased the Tin Man character with her hand, using an oily lubricant.
- Violence on the Disney-owned ABC network programs *Once Upon a Time* and *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland* included a combined 306 instances of violence and 41 deaths. Also heard were 178 profanities – especially disturbing since these series were based on popular Disney fairytale movies like *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Brave*, and *Frozen*. Both ABC series were rated TV-PG.
- While violence was not an issue on ABC/Disney's *The Muppets*, the program did feature profanity, depictions and references to alcohol and drug use, and multiple references to sex. This show was rated TV-PG.

With decades of scientific research demonstrating the harm to children from their consumption of graphic sex, violence and profanity in entertainment, it is of great concern that the broadcast networks have chosen to “reinterpret” iconic children’s properties, like *The Muppets*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Wizard of Oz*, by using extreme adult content. All of the content examples referenced above were rated by the television networks as appropriate for children aged fourteen or younger.

The PTC is calling on the Hollywood creative community to reverse this disturbing trend. Greater separation should be created between inherently family-friendly and child-friendly franchises and explicit “reimagined” versions. Particularly where child-friendly franchises are involved, parents should reasonably expect derivative works also to be child-friendly. Unfortunately the age-based content ratings assigned by the broadcast networks for these programs only reinforce the notion to parents that these programs are appropriate for their children.

TV network executives must act with greater responsibility by more carefully considering their unique ability to reach large audiences comprised of families and children. The broadcast networks should rededicate themselves to providing more family-friendly entertainment for all viewers, and to act “in the public interest” as required under the terms of their broadcast licenses.







## Introduction

Fantasy – stories incorporating fantastic, unreal elements, whether “fairy tales” or heroic adventure incorporating battles with monsters -- have been popular with readers of all ages for generations...but especially with children.

Many ancient legends and fairy tales with fantasy elements contained explicit violence and even sexual themes and descriptions, to the point that the Brothers Grimm were criticized for the adult content of their 19th century collection, *Children’s and Household Tales*, even in their own day. However, over time, these tales were softened and bowdlerized in subsequent retellings, with the result that such stories today are understood as being acceptable for, and having a particular appeal to, children. This is true to such an extent that reading fairy tales to children is a common and time-honored activity of parents; and such stories have received literally hundreds of television, film, and audio adaptations, such that the versions suitable for children today are often better known than the originals. Of these, Disney’s animated retellings may be the most famous: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Princess and the Frog*, and *Rapunzel* (as *Tangled*).

Similarly, other works – even those not necessarily created to be “family-friendly” – are also better-known today via Disney’s retellings, such as Washington Irving’s story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” Carlo Collodi’s *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, Johann David Wyss’ *Swiss Family Robinson*, J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*, and Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen* (as the 2013 hit animated film *Frozen*).

There are also works that were created as family-friendly entertainment, but which are better-known today from various film representations like Lewis Carroll’s novels *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, elements of which are often combined into a single version of “Alice in Wonderland,” or L. Frank Baum’s series of books centering around the Land of Oz, represented in most minds today by the 1939 musical film *The Wizard of Oz*. Finally, there are works of more recent provenance, like the late puppeteer Jim Henson’s original creation the Muppets, which first became famous via the educational television series *Sesame Street*, then achieved even wider popularity with their own series *The Muppet Show* and full-length motion pictures.

Thus, for decades, these fantasy and fairytale-themed creations have been safe for children – to the point that, in most adults’ minds, they are considered especially suitable as children’s entertainment. Children are attracted to programs featuring these fantasy characters; and parents understandably allow and even encourage children to partake of them.

But in the last two decades, it has been the popularity and financial success of film series based on more recent fantasy literature, like J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* book series, or J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, that has inspired a greater interest in fantasy-based properties being adapted for use by the wider entertainment industry. This has resulted in fantasy-inspired programming becoming popular on television, as well – the most obvious (and influential) example being HBO’s adaptation of author George R.R. Martin’s epic adult fantasy book series, *Game of Thrones*.

Like the novels which inspired it, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* contained copious adult content, including frequent nudity, explicit sex scenes, and graphic violence. The program drew substantial public criticism for its depictions of rape; but along with the controversy, *Game of Thrones* has also generated a substantial

viewership, which has grown from approximately two million viewers in its first season to over 12 million in its seventh (and that is without factoring in streaming viewership, which boosts overall viewer numbers even more).

Given the popularity and lucrative potential of fantasy, it is understandable that broadcast network television -- always eager to capitalize on ideas and properties popular elsewhere in popular culture -- would seek to capitalize on the trend, by creating derivative programming based on similar fantasy concepts.

However, while recent, prestigious fantasy film and television series have been based on book series created by individual authors (thus necessitating negotiation with authors or their estates, requiring substantial financial backing), America's broadcast television networks, lacking a similar financial base, have often been content to create "original" programming "inspired by" (and closely imitative of) a wildly popular product, but which differs just enough to avoid litigation.

Another means often adopted by the broadcast networks has been to utilize concepts similar to the popular one being imitated which are in the public domain; private or estate ownership of the work in question having lapsed, such programming is vastly less expensive than optioning rights to copyrighted intellectual property.

Naturally, then, when the broadcast networks desired to capitalize on both the trends toward fantasy-themed programming, and the widespread trend -- exemplified by *Game of Thrones*, but hardly limited to it -- of making previously family-friendly properties "dark," "gritty," and allegedly more "adult," it was to public-domain or older and less-expensive properties to which they turned. However, most of the fantasy-themed storytelling in the public domain either was created for children, or over time has been altered through adaptation to become appropriate for them.

This proved problematic for parents, for while these concepts have long been considered appropriate primarily for children, the derivative works created by and for the networks decidedly were not. Children are intrinsically interested in and attracted to fantasy-based storytelling; but the networks made little or no accommodation for a prime-time audience including a sizeable percentage of children.

The broadcast networks' desire to appeal to adults rather than the mass, multi-age audience to which these properties were suited, resulted in "grim" "edgy," programming often inappropriate for children. This is problematic for two reasons: firstly, children will still be attracted to these properties. The networks and showrunners may protest that theirs is a "more adult" take on the material, and "isn't for kids;" but the kids watching don't know that. Realistically, what kid isn't going to want to watch a show about Snow White, Kermit the Frog, or the Wizard of Oz?

And secondly, when a property is culturally reputed as being child-friendly, it is entirely reasonable for parents to presume that a show based on the concept is, in fact, safe for children. Most parents are busy with their lives, and cannot be expected to research every single program on television before allowing their children to watch -- particularly when a given program carries the name and uses the concept of a property familiar as children's entertainment for several generations?

Yet, with multiple fantasy-based programs on broadcast TV, this has not been the case. Since 2012, the broadcast networks have aired multiple prime-time series based on children's stories which were replete with content inappropriate for, and even potentially harmful to, children and teens.





It is indisputable that children are influenced by media—they learn by observing, imitating, and adopting behaviors, including those seen in entertainment. So well-established and self-evident is this fact that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently proposed that movies containing tobacco use be rated R, stating that, “there is a causal relationship between depictions of smoking in the movies and the initiation of smoking among young persons. The more youths see smoking on screen, the more likely they are to start smoking.”

But the influence of media on children has harmful effects beyond those of tobacco use. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “clear and convincing” evidence demonstrates, and over 98% of pediatricians agree, that media violence is a causal factor of real-life violence and aggression – and that prolonged exposure to media violence results in increased acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of solving problems and achieving one’s goals. The American Psychological Association agrees, stating that children who watch many hours of violence on television in elementary school tend to show higher levels of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers. Further, research shows that exposure to media violence is correlated with a variety of physical and mental health problems in children, including aggressive behavior and bullying, fear, depression, nightmares, and sleep disturbances.

Similarly, scholars have recognized that teens may be particularly vulnerable to being influenced by media depictions of sex. Young teens ranked entertainment media as their top source for information regarding sexuality and sexual health, and findings across numerous studies report the negative impact of frequent exposure to sexualized media images, which are a powerful force in shaping the sexual decisions and behaviors of developing youth. Findings across several studies report the negative impact that frequent exposure to sexualized media images and models of passivity can cause. They include risks to a female’s cognitive, emotional, and physical development, as well as her self-image. Further, research shows that girls and young women who consume more mainstream media content demonstrate greater acceptance of stereotypes that depict women as sexual objects.

There is growing research demonstrating that children and teens are relying more and more on media for social norms and values. One concluded that television use appeared to be linked with adolescent sexuality in many ways, both shaping and being guided by their early sexual experiences. For example, past research has shown girls develop their identities as teenagers and women, and learn how to engage in intimate relationships in two ways: by modeling behaviors of older girls and young women, and by imitating the behaviors of female characters in the media. Media is not only a social influencer of sexist attitudes, societal tolerance, and the exploitation of girls and women; it also may contribute to these phenomena.

These facts are of particular relevance as regards fantasy-based programming – not only because children are innately attracted to fantasy and fairytale-based stories (and therefore, are more likely to view and be influenced by them), but also because children younger than eight years cannot discriminate between fantasy and reality. As a result, they may be especially vulnerable to and more influenced by the violence and language used in such programming.

While any extreme content on prime-time broadcast TV is of concern when airing on the publicly-owned airwaves at a time, place, and manner when vulnerable children are likely to be in the audience, it is even more worrisome when such extreme content is placed in programming with special appeal to children.

The current study examines the content in fantasy-based television series with “kid appeal,” and documents the extreme, graphic content to which child and teen viewers were exposed. Nearly every such program featured frequent, intense, and graphic violence. Teen and pre-teen viewers were exposed to instances of decapitation, evisceration, dismemberment, cannibalism, dissection, crucifixion, impalement, and torture,



along with hundreds of deaths and over a thousand incidents of violence. They were also exposed to hundreds of instances of profane language, as well as limited but often explicit sexual content...all on series featuring graphic, “adult” versions of otherwise innocent fairy tales and children’s fantasy.

## Methodology

PTC entertainment analysts recorded and documented every instance of violence, sexual dialogue, sexual actions, drug and/or alcohol references, and foul language during the 2011-2017 “sweeps” periods on programs with child-based interest. Typically, anywhere from eight through 12 episodes of a program air during a show’s November, February, and May “sweeps” period. Documented and examined was content from the following programs with ties to child-friendly entertainment franchises: ABC’s *Once Upon a Time*, *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, and *The Muppets*; NBC’s *Grimm* and *Emerald City*; and Fox’s *Sleepy Hollow*. This resulted in a total of 141.5 hours of programming analyzed.

Of those programs, episodes of *Grimm*, *Emerald City*, and *Sleepy Hollow* were overwhelmingly rated TV-14, appropriate for 14-year-old children (though, of course, being broadcast in prime time, they were able to be viewed by children of any age). The Disney-owned ABC network’s programs *Once Upon a Time*, *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, and *The Muppets*, were uniformly rated TV-PG, suggesting that the programming was appropriate for much younger pre-teen children.

## Findings

Each program (except for *The Muppets*) featured frequent, intense, and often graphic violence, and frequent use of profanity. Sexual content on each program was less frequent, and was usually mild, but could be surprisingly explicit on occasion. Sexual content was generally limited to references to sex (“You slept with him”), or scenes of individuals shown naked from behind. Scenes involving sexual actions or contact were relatively rare.

### Grimm (NBC)

Based on the premise that the Brothers Grimm were “monster hunters,” and their fairy tales actually disguised warnings about monsters living amidst normal humanity, *Grimm* followed one such “Grimm” and his friends in stalking and eliminating monsters based on such fairy-tale stories as Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, and Rumpelstiltskin now living in contemporary times.

*Grimm* aired at 10:00 p.m. in the 2011-2012 and 2012-2013 seasons, but switched to 9:00 p.m. in the fall of 2013 and remained there until fall 2016, when the network moved it to 8:00 p.m. Eastern (7:00 p.m. Central/Mountain). With rare exceptions, the program was rated TV-14 throughout its run.

During the “sweeps” periods on NBC’s *Grimm*, teen and pre-teen viewers were exposed to violence including instances of evisceration, cannibalism, dissection, crucifixion, impalement, and torture, along with 12 decapitations, 22 instances of dismemberment, and 165 deaths, for a total of 485 acts of violence.

They also heard 54 uses of “damn,” 179 uses of “hell,” 27 uses of “ass,” 4 uses of “bitch,” and 32 other assorted profanities, including “bastard,” “balls,” and euphemisms for the f-word for a total of 316 instances of profanity.

### Examples:

- Nick and Hank investigate an attack on a woman. A bloody, dismembered limb is shown. Insects crawl on it and flies buzz around it. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, October 28, 2011)
- A pair of men beat, kick, and punch Monroe. Monroe transforms into a werewolf. He lifts and throws one man. The other man pulls a gun, but Monroe rips his arm off. Blood sprays out as the man shrieks in pain. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, November 4, 2011)
- Barry chases his mother, who has transformed into a bear. She falls into a pit trap, with sharp wooden stakes set to pierce whatever falls in. The bear’s body is impaled and turns back into a naked woman. She



withes and moans in pain as a stake pierces her shoulder. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, November 4, 2011)

- The team breaks into a trailer home. Hank reacts to the smell.

Hank: "What the hell?"

Dried human bodily organs have been stored throughout the room. Some hang on hooks, while others lie on shelves.

Renard: "These are human organs. Hearts, gallbladders, kidneys." (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, February 3, 2012)

- Monroe is captured and imprisoned. He speaks to another prisoner.

Monroe: "We should be working together, planning on how to get the hell out of here."

The other prisoner's hand has been pierced with a nail. Monroe removes it. A jailer gives raw meat to the prisoners. Monroe sees a tattoo on the meat, thus showing the meat is human flesh and the prisoners are cannibals. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 LV, February 24, 2012)

- A pair of reapers attack Nick with scythes. One decapitates his partner. The severed head is shown separating from its body. Nick uses his crossbow to kill the remaining reaper. Monroe arrives and agrees with Nick that they must "send a message" to their enemies. Monroe uses a scythe to decapitate the other reaper. They box up the severed heads and mail them to the reapers' leader with a note reading, "Next time, send your best." (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, April 27, 2012)
- Tom follows a trail of blood, then finds a tennis shoe. When he picks it up, a severed foot is seen, still inside the shoe.

Tom: "It's a damn foot!"

He finds two corpses, one with a wooden stake through its chest, the other with its bloody chest ripped open. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, May 11, 2012)

- Murderer John Kreski is in his kitchen. He stirs a large pot, revealing a severed human foot in the soup. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, November 9, 2012)
- Rancher John finds a dead cow on his ranch. A close-up shows the cow's mutilated stomach ripped open, with bloody entrails and intestines exposed.

John: "Damn! What the hell?"

An alien creature appears. John tries to shoot it, but the alien grabs him and impales him on a fence post. The alien turns into a human being and hands a bag containing the cow's ovaries to Jocelyn. She hungrily feeds on the gory organs. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, April 30, 2013)

- Eric seduces the shape-shifting Adalind.

Eric: "My only regret is that I didn't get to sleep with you when you still had your powers. Can't help but wonder what that might've been like."

Adalind: "Well, perhaps one day you'll find out. But until then, I still have some powers you haven't seen."

Adalind unzips her dress. It drops to the floor, revealing her black lingerie. She begins unbuttoning Eric's shirt. They are interrupted by a phone call. Eric talks on the phone to his father.

Eric: "Father, please. You sleep with hexenbiests, too." (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 LV, May 14, 2013)

- Stefania and Adalind perform an occult ritual using Frau Pech's corpse. Adalind places dead flowers inside Pech's gaping chest wound. Adalind sews the wound shut, cutting the thread with her teeth. The wound starts to smoke. Stefania uses a dagger to cut open the stitches, revealing bubbling, blood-like red fluid. Adalind fills a container with the fluid. At home, she disrobes, her nude legs and back visible as she spreads the red substance on her stomach. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, November 1, 2013)
- The grisly corpse of a man lying on a tree branch is shown. A close-up is shown of his viscera lying on the ground. His stomach has exploded outward. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, November 8, 2013)
- A gunman turns into a werewolf. Trubel grabs a machete and decapitates him. The severed head bounces



down the stairs, and turns back into a human head. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 LV, May 16, 2014)

- A monster crucifies the bloody, mutilated corpse. He stabs the corpse and sprinkles more blood in a circle around it. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, February 12, 2016)
- William turns into a monster and hits the woman he met at the bar, knocking her out. He battles Nick, Hank, and Wu. Suddenly, the woman wakes, turns into a monster herself, and bites William's head off, then spits it out. (*Grimm*, NBC, TV-14 V, February 3, 2017)

## Emerald City (NBC)

A “dark, gritty” reimagining of the classic children’s story *The Wizard of Oz* and its various sequels by original author L. Frank Baum, *Emerald City* premiered in the fall of 2016, after an unusually long two-year period of development. The show ran at 9:00 p.m. Eastern (only 8:00 p.m. in the Central and Mountain time zones) until its cancellation in spring of 2017. *Emerald City* was rated TV-14.

During the “sweeps” period in February 2017 (the only “sweeps” period during which *Emerald City* aired), viewers saw 49 total instances of violence, including instances of crucifixion and torture, and 14 deaths. Due to the brevity of the series, instances of profanity were negligible; however, *Emerald City* did feature a powerful instance of the most graphic sexual scene on any fantasy-based child-interest series, in which the Tin Man was sexually stimulated with oil applied by a Dorothy surrogate.

### Examples:

- The masked Lady Ev (a Dorothy surrogate) rubs oil over teenage Jack’s rusted tin body.

Ev: “Top done. Bottom time.”

Her hands move toward his crotch.

Jack: “Give me your word not to go anywhere you shouldn’t.”

A long-distance shot shows her caressing Jack’s crotch.

Ev: “I give my word as a lady.”

Ev begins rubbing oil below Jack’s waist. Jack gasps and his face contorts in pleasure.

Jack: “Oh, God!”

Ev’s masked face smiles up at Jack.

Jack: “You gave your word.”

Ev: “As a lady. But I am queen now.”

Ev’s body rocks back and forth as she strokes Jack. He moans in pleasure, becoming sexually aroused and gasping, his mouth gaping open. He gasps in relief. Ev grins and bounces to her feet.

Ev: “There. Done.”

Jack sighs in satisfaction.

(*Emerald City*, NBC, TV-14 SLV, February 10, 2017)

- Dorothy finds Lucas tied up and captive. West enters.

West: “Nobody told me it would be a threesome.” (*Emerald City*, NBC, TV-14 V, February 3, 2017)

- A soldier talks to Tip in the brothel.

Soldier: “Give me a whore with an attitude.”



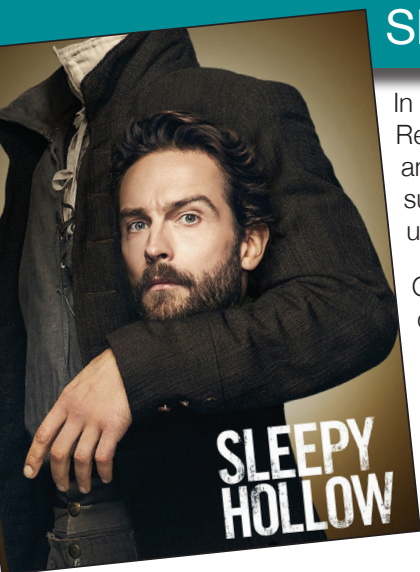
Tip shoves her knife into his nostril to force him back. (*Emerald City*, NBC, TV-14 SLV, February 10, 2017)

- As Glinda talks to Lucas she disrobes, dropping her dress on the floor. Her nude body faces away from the camera. Lucas and Glinda have sex in her bed. They lie under the sheets and hold one another. (*Emerald City*, NBC, TV-14 SV, February 17, 2017)

- West watches Tip urinate.

West: "So, your parents will go unavenged just so you can take a piss standing up?" (*Emerald City*, NBC, TV-14 V, February 24, 2017)

- Ev's corpse lies on a slab. Jane uses a scalpel to cut around Ev's face, then peels the skin off her face. (*Emerald City*, NBC, TV-14 V, February 24, 2017)



## Sleepy Hollow (Fox)

In this reinterpretation of Washington Irving's story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," Revolutionary War soldier and occult expert Ichabod Crane awakens in the 21st century and helps a policewoman battle the Headless Horseman, who is the harbinger of a supernatural conspiracy. *Sleepy Hollow* premiered in 2013 and ran at 9:00 p.m. Eastern until its cancellation in 2017. The program was consistently rated TV-14.

Graphic violence was a particular concern on *Sleepy Hollow*. Explicit, gory scenes of decapitation were seen frequently on the show. Violence shown included beheadings in slow-motion, hangings, eviscerations, immolations, and mutilated and dismembered corpses. During *Sleepy Hollow*'s November, February, and May "sweeps" periods from 2013-2017, teen and pre-teen viewers were subjected to 15 decapitations, 80 deaths, and a total of 298 scenes of violence. Profanity used included 36 "damns," 55 "hells," and 25 other examples of foul language, for a total of 116 profanities.

### Examples:

- The Headless Horseman chases Paul Revere and his men during their famous ride. The Horseman slashes two of the men with an axe. Blood sprays out as he leaves deep gashes on their arms. They fall from their horses. He beheads the third man, striking him from behind. In slow-motion, the viewer sees the man's neck split open. Blood sprays out as his severed head falls backward. His headless corpse remains on horseback. (*Sleepy Hollow*, Fox, TV-14 DLV, November 11, 2013)
- Crane sees four lights glowing in the upper story of a carport. Entering, he finds that the lanterns are severed human heads hanging from chains. The heads have been hollowed out and candles shoved inside, so that they glow like jack o' lanterns. A close-up shows the severed necks and empty eye sockets, with candlelight glowing through them. Abby takes down one head and removes the screw driven into the top of it. A close-up shows the bloody hole in the top of the head. (*Sleepy Hollow*, Fox, TV-14 DLV, November 11, 2013)
- A museum guard orders a thief to put up his hands. The thief draws a knife and slits his own wrists. Blood pours out onto the floor. The thief recites a spell and the guard doubles over in pain, blood pouring out of his eyes. (*Sleepy Hollow*, Fox, TV-14 LV, February 2, 2015)
- A zombie pulls a trio of workmen into a hole in the ground. Zombies feast on the entrails of one workman, and the other two look on in terror. (*Sleepy Hollow*, Fox, TV-14 LV, February 9, 2015)
- A werewolf attacks and butchers a woman in a cemetery. Her blood sprays out, splattering over a nearby tombstone. (*Sleepy Hollow*, Fox, TV-14 LV, February 17, 2017)

## Once Upon a Time (ABC)

The Disney-owned ABC network's *Once Upon a Time* premiered in 2011 and continues to the present. *Once Upon a Time* has consistently aired at 8:00 p.m. Eastern on Sunday nights, and has been rated TV-PG – suitable for pre-teen children – throughout its run. Based on characters and situations from numerous





fairy tale-inspired Disney films, from Snow White and Robin Hood to Frozen and Brave, *Once Upon a Time* is set in the fictional seaside town of Storybrooke, Maine. The town's residents are actually characters from various fairy tales and other stories, who were transported to the "real world" town and robbed of their original memories by the Evil Queen and Rumpelstiltskin.

Though violence on *Once Upon a Time* was less graphic and gory than on other series in this study, it was no less frequent, and did feature grisly depictions such as Snow White surrounded by corpses, crushing human hearts in her own hands. Supernaturally-themed violence (such as people being magically tortured) occurred regularly on the program. Viewers saw four instances of dismemberment, 37 deaths, and a total of 261 acts of violence during "sweeps" periods alone from 2011-present.

Foul language included 24 uses of "damn," 109 uses of "hell," 5 instances of "ass," 7 uses of "bitch," and 10 other uses of foul language, for a total of 155 profanities. Sexual content was negligible.

### Examples:

- Mr. Gold holds Mr. French captive. Mr. Gold presses his cane into French's throat, closing his airway and choking him. Gold demands French reveal where his property is hidden. French refuses. Mr. Gold repeatedly beats French with his cane. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, February 12, 2012)
- Mulan, Snow White, Emma, and Aurora find the village in shambles. Corpses are strewn about the ground, some with bloody wounds to their chests. Snow White realizes the victims' hearts have been ripped out of their chests. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 28, 2012)
- The Evil Queen finds a dismembered arm lying on the table. Dr. Whale lies on the floor next to the table, alive but gravely injured from his arm being severed. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 28, 2012)
- The Evil Queen plunges her hand into a young woman's chest and rips out her still-beating heart. She squeezes the heart into ash. The woman collapses and dies. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 28, 2012)
- Granny, David, and Red find Billy's corpse. His torso lies next to his truck, with blood covering the ground. His dismembered legs hang out of a dumpster. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, November 11, 2012)
- The Evil Queen magically murders one of her men. She waves and twists her hand in midair. His neck twists and breaks. He falls to the ground, dead. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, November 3, 2013)
- The Evil Queen plunges her hand into David's chest and pulls out his still-beating heart. She gives the heart to Snow White. Snow squeezes the heart until it turns to dust. David collapses on the ground and dies. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG V, April 27, 2014)
- Lily: "I thought you'd be this scary dragon bitch, and we'd go get our revenge. But you're just this real person, and you're so freaking open." (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG LV, May 3, 2015)
- An enemy knight comes up behind Merida's father. She tries to shoot him with an arrow, but misses. The knight stabs Merida's father in the back. The sword, covered with his blood, erupts from his chest. The knight pulls the sword back and Merida's father collapses to the floor, dead. (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG LV, November 15, 2015)
- Evil Queen: "Mirror, mirror, on the wall / Please save me from this hell."

The Queen uses magic to snap the necks of her soldiers.

Evil Queen: "That little bitch will wish she never knew me." (*Once Upon a Time*, ABC, TV-PG L, May 7, 2017)

## Once Upon a Time in Wonderland (ABC)

Based on Lewis Carroll's 19th-century fantasy novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass*, *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland* followed Alice's new adventures encountering various Carroll and Disney-themed characters such as Jafar and the Jabberwocky, battling the Red Queen, and seeking her lost love. The program was a



one-season companion piece to ABC's *Once Upon a Time*, and ran at 8:00 p.m. Eastern on Thursdays from 2013-2014. The series was rated TV-PG.

While content was lighter than that on *Once Upon a Time*, there were occasional references to prostitution and depictions of magical torture. During the November 2013 "sweeps" (the only "sweeps" period during the show's one season), young viewers saw four deaths, two scenes of dismemberment, and a total of 45 incidents of violence. Foul language consisted of 19 uses of "hell," and 23 profanities altogether.

### Examples:

- Alice and Will awaken in the kitchen of the monstrous Grendel. Their hands and feet are bound. Grendel sharpens his knife. Will sees a human skeleton nearby.

Will: "The only way out seems to be through his digestive track." (*Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 24, 2013)

- In Maleficent's castle, Will examines a jar filled with liquid. Human eyes float in the liquid. One stares at Will. (*Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 24, 2013)
- Jafar enters a bar. The bartender tells him the bar is closed.

Barkeep: "If it's women you seek, that's upstairs."

Jafar takes out a knife and demands the bottle with the genie in it. The bartender refuses. Jafar stabs the bartender's hand, then removes the knife and stabs his other hand.

Jafar: "I can inflict so much pain that no wish would ever seem worth it."

The bartender hands Jafar the bottle.

Barkeep: "Go back to the gutter, you bastard." (*Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 24, 2013)

- Jafar magically tortures Alice. He uses magic to suspend her in the air, and spread her limbs apart as if she is on a rack. Alice groans in agony. (*Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, ABC, TV-PG V, October 24, 2013)
- Jafar hits the White Rabbit with his staff, knocking him to the ground. Jafar picks up the White Rabbit's severed foot, and holds it up for the Rabbit to see. (*Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, ABC, TV-PG V, November 14, 2013)
- Will enters the Boro Groves. Perfume sprays out of the flowers and entrances people, causing them to become mindless.

Will: "What the hell? What the hell is that? What the bloody hell is going on here?"

Guard: "When you find him, remember, that bastard killed one of our own."

Will realizes the trees used to be people.

Will: "Bloody hell!" (*Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, ABC, TV-PG LV, November 21, 2013)



## The Muppets (ABC)

Famed for their appearances in the 1970s on *Sesame Street* and *The Muppet Show*, Jim Henson's Muppets became one of the most popular character franchises of the latter 20th century, with its characters especially beloved by children. After the passing of Jim Henson in 1990, the Muppet franchise was acquired by Disney; and in 2015, Disney created a new prime-time television series featuring the beloved characters. But unlike the family-friendly programming of the past, Disney's "updating" of the Muppet franchise was entrusted to producers whose previous experience was on adult shows like the FX network's TV-MA rated comedy *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*.

Conceived as a parody of "mockumentary"-style programming like *The Office*, the new series *The Muppets* was roundly condemned by critics and viewers



alike for abandoning the sweet innocence of the classic Muppets, and replacing it with a cynical take on the characters, in which the Muppet were portrayed as shallow, vain Hollywood celebrities. *The Muppets* aired for one season from 2015 to 2016, at 8:00 p.m. and was consistently rated PG.

While violence was not an issue on Disney's *The Muppets*, the program featured frequent references to sex, both subtle and overt. *The Muppets* were depicted as using alcohol (one bar scene consumed almost one-quarter of one episode's screen time, and showed the Muppet characters getting drunk on beer, wine, and hard liquor), and frequently used profanity in their speech, none of which had never been done in any previous Muppet production.

*The Muppets* audience had always included even the youngest TV viewers, a legacy of the characters' origins on the children's series *Sesame Street*. The audience for Disney's *The Muppets* was no different; and PTC research showed that the over four million children aged 2-11 who watched were exposed to adult-themed content every three minutes during the first four episodes of ABC's *The Muppets*.

In the November 2015 and February 2016 "sweeps" period alone, there were eight uses of profanity, 11 depictions and references to drinking and drug use, and 18 references to sex.

## Examples:

- Scooter: "Sometimes after Mom goes to bed, I switch the TV up to the naughty language channels. Yeah, and that's where I found Chelsea Handler...She really filled in some of the gaps from that talk we had back in health class." (*The Muppets*, ABC, TV-PG, November 17, 2015)
- Chelsea Handler and Scooter go on a date. Scooter is shown with a full drink on the table in front of him. Chelsea kisses Scooter. He becomes nervous and rushes off. The next day, Rizzo and Pepe ask Scooter about the date.

Rizzo: "So, how'd it go with Chelsea, huh? And don't skip the dirty stuff. I was born in a sewer. You are not gonna shock me."

Scooter: "Well, uh, Chelsea was fun, but, uh, I I don't think I'm going to see her again...You weren't there, Pepe."

Pepe: "Si, I know. But if I was there, I would still be there."

Scooter: "Well, I'm not a randy little sea bug like you." (*The Muppets*, ABC, TV-PG, November 17, 2015)

- Chelsea Handler phones Scooter after their date.

Chelsea: "I thought maybe I had done something to freak you out. Or had sent an inappropriate picture of myself."

Scooter: "Uh, yeah, you did. Thank God my Mom didn't see it." (*The Muppets*, ABC, TV-PG, November 17, 2015)

- Uncle Deadly: "I am not happy about spending the night with you, Gloria Estefan. And that's not the first time I've said that."

Deadly drinks a martini.

Deadly: "There's the old, familiar burn." (*The Muppets*, ABC, TV-PG, February 2, 2016)

- Miss Piggy arrives dressed like Miley Cyrus. She begins twerking. (*The Muppets*, TV-PG, February 2, 2016)
- Pepe and Rizzo discuss women.

Pepe: "My favorite was the sexy financial aid officer at my junior college."

Rizzo: "It may not get her on Team Love, but it may get her on Team Friendship With Benefits." (*The Muppets*, ABC, TV-PG L, March 1, 2016)

## TOTALS:

Thus, in fantasy-based programming with particular appeal to youth, children and teenagers were exposed to 625 profanities, 300 deaths, and over 1,000 incidents of violence – and this was ONLY during the

“sweeps” periods of November, February, and May.

## Conclusion

When ABC’s *The Muppets* premiered in 2015, series producer Bob Kushell said of the show, “There will be jokes that are pitched that are a little too risqué. Part of the excitement of doing this show is to see where we can push the envelope.” But Kushell’s “excitement” didn’t work out well for viewers, for the program, or for ABC. By midseason, ABC President Paul Lee declared that *The Muppets* “didn’t quite feel it had the joy and the laughter and the heart that it should have.”

Frank Oz, former Muppeteer and original portrayer of the characters Miss Piggy, Fozzie Bear, and Animal, agreed. Asked whether he had watched the new Muppets series, Oz replied, “I did—the first 15 minutes...I felt the show wasn’t true to the characters. There was a purity in each character that was vital. I felt that purity was being moved around to areas that didn’t feel right.”

It is significant that *The Muppets*, *Emerald City* (based on the family-friendly Wizard of Oz), and *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland* were each cancelled after only one year. While *Grimm*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and *Once Upon a Time* endured longer, the question remains: why did the makers of *The Muppets* – or those of *Emerald City*, *Grimm*, and the other series detailed in this report -- feel they had to “push the envelope” at all?

Whose idea of fairy-tale entertainment is watching the Headless Horseman graphically decapitate victims, blood spraying copiously, then use their hollowed-out heads as jack o’ lanterns? What parent wants to explain to their little girl what Miss Piggy means when she gestures at her breasts and rear and says, “I’ve had these hiked, and I’m getting this thing hiked?” How did anyone think that showing a dark, gritty version of the Tin Man of Oz being sexually pleased by a Dorothy surrogate is a good idea?

These program’s producers, writers, and other creative personnel, not to mention broadcast network executives, surely knew that fairytale-themed properties appeal to children. Indeed, that’s the entire reason such programs had “name recognition” to begin with: because most people had heard of, and became enchanted with, them in childhood.

The broadcast networks have chosen to “reinterpret” iconic children’s properties with extreme adult content. It is difficult to imagine television programming more likely to attract an audience of parents and children than shows based around *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Muppets*, and *The Wizard of Oz*; yet the networks filled these programs sexual references, drug and alcohol use, explicit profanity, and unbelievably graphic violence to an extent that these programs became toxic for children. Yet children are inherently attracted to these programs’ concepts – and millions watched them every week.

It should be self-evident that when a creation – be it fairy tale, novel, or film -- originally intended for children, or for a family audience, is altered in order to appeal to a “broader” [read: more adult] demographic by including more explicit sex, graphic violence, and profane language, not only are children negatively affected, child and family audiences are alienated, and the series performs poorly for the networks.

The broadcast networks possess a tremendous advantage not shared by cable, satellite, or streaming services: access to the publicly-owned airwaves. Broadcast network programs reach every home in America, at no extra cost to the viewer – or to the broadcaster. Thus, they receive an audience unsurpassed in size, for free. Yet broadcasters consistently complain about and “push the envelope” against broadcast standards.

The broadcast networks are pursuing their own demise by complaining about cable and streaming’s ability to create and distribute more “edgy” and “adult” programming, but then emulating them. They are driving away family audiences by producing “adult” versions of childhood fairy-tale stories, and rating them appropriate for 14-year-olds...all the while fully aware that children five years old, or even younger, are watching them.

As it did by taking these concepts with child appeal and reinterpreting them in a “dark,” “adult,” more violent and sexually explicit manner, one can easily anticipate that the entertainment industry will in the future create more “adult” programming based on children’s properties. Going forward, the PTC urges the networks to consider the best interests of young viewers and families in the entertainment they choose to program, when relying on child-safe franchises.

When the public’s own airwaves are used to show children Snow White surrounded by corpses, and Muppets swilling martinis while talking about sex, and Dorothy turning the Land of Oz into a forum for lewd sex acts, we truly are not in Kansas anymore.



## ENDNOTES

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Christopher Gildemeister, Ph.D., is the Parents Television Council's Head of Research Operations. Beginning as an entertainment analyst with the PTC in 2005, he was responsible for documenting the content on the UPN and ABC broadcast, and later the FX, MTV, VH1, Comedy Central, and Spike cable networks. Promoted to PTC Senior Writer/Editor in 2008, he created the *PTC Watchdog blog*; wrote the *Culture Watch*, *TV Trends*, *Best*, *Worst*, *Cable Worst*, and *Misrated TV Show of the Week* columns; the PTC's Annual Reports; the monthly *PTC Insider* newsletter; and the weekly email newsletter, the *Weekly Wrap*, as well as administering the PTC Seal of Approval program, awarding family-friendly media content. He has written four major research studies for the PTC: *Faith in a Box: Religion on Entertainment Television, 2005-2006*; *Habitat for Profanity: Broadcast TV's Sharp Increase in Foul Language, 2005-2010*; and *Protecting Children or Protecting Hollywood? A Twenty-Year Examination of the Effectiveness of the TV Content Ratings System* (2015); and *Trash-Talking Teens: Underage Characters' Use of Sex Talk and Profanity on Broadcast Network TV* (2016). Dr. Gildemeister received his Ph.D. in 2013 from The Catholic University of America.

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