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October 13, 1995

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The Honorable Reed Hundt
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
1919 M Street NW
Washington, DC 20554

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Dear Mr. Chairman:

It is my understanding that the FCC is seeking public input on its Notice of Proposed Rule Making for children's television standards (Docket No. 95-143). I would like to take this opportunity to comment on the changes the Commission is considering. I would appreciate it if my comments would be made part of the public record in this proceeding, and accessible to any interested party.

Let me start by applauding the FCC for stirring a much-needed debate about the effectiveness of the Children's Television Act, and, on a broader scale, raising serious questions about the way television treats children today.

In my view, and the view of many of the parents I represent, television's failure to serve children well is clear. Far too much of what is on TV today is laced with sex and violence, sends inappropriate and potentially harmful messages to young viewers, and undermines the efforts of many parents who are struggling to instill their values in their children. The Commission is well aware of the threat posed to children by continual exposure to violent programming. A growing body of evidence indicates that we should also be concerned about the threat posed by the sexual messages with which television bombards young viewers. At a forum held on this subject recently by the American Enterprise Institute, Professor Jane Brown of the University of North Carolina presented an analysis of this evidence, which strongly suggested that the quantity and quality of the messages conveyed by the media do influence the values, attitudes and behavior of our children -- behaviors that are fueling this country's teen pregnancy epidemic and the breakdown of the family. I am enclosing a copy of the report she presented, and ask that it be made part of the public record on this proceeding.

In terms of the programming targeted specifically at young children, far too many of these shows are nothing more than marketing vehicles for the latest, greatest toy. And far too little of what is on TV seeks to educate, inform, or stimulate

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the young minds we need to lead this country into the 21st Century.

As you well know, Congress tried to address the dearth of quality children's programming with the Children's Television Act of 1990. In passing this legislation with overwhelming majorities, we made a strong, unambiguous statement about the responsibility of the broadcasters as public fiduciaries to meet the educational needs of children. The stated goal of the CTA was also clear: to increase the number of hours of quality educational programming for children on the air.

Five years later, the legacy of the Children's Television Act seems to me equally unambiguous: there has been no noticeable increase in the amount of educational programming on the air. I recognize that this is a conclusion the industry contests, and that the Commission, in an effort to be evenhanded, is waiting to compile more evidence before making a final determination. But I believe the evidence we have already seen is compelling. One obvious test is to simply review the TV listings, which is something millions of parents do on a regular basis, including myself. Based on the comments I've heard from constituents, I doubt whether the Commission could find parents in Connecticut who can or will attest to a conspicuous rise in the number of education programs being offered in their area.

A study released this month provides more evidence of the industry's failure to comply with the CTA's goals. In a review of the actions of 48 randomly-selected stations, Dale Kunkel of the University of California-Santa Barbara found that these broadcasters reported an average of 3.4 hours per week of "educational" programming, the same amount as reported at the time the law went into effect in 1992. What's more, Kunkel found that those numbers were inflated by the inclusion of many programs of questionable educational value, including "Yogi Bear" cartoons and "America's Funniest Home Videos" [Washington Post, 10/11/95].

Kunkel's findings are in line with an earlier study done by the Center for Media Education, which documented numerous examples of local stations trying to pass off programs like "The Gauziness" and "Super Mario Brothers" as educational programming in their children's television reports [NPRM, p. 11]. Indeed, one station in Cincinnati went so far as to claim they were complying with the CTA by showing two "Donahue" shows: "Teen-Age Strippers and Their Moms" and "Parents Who Allow Teen-Agers to Have Sex at Home" [Gannett News Service report, 4/13/95]. Simply put, not only is the industry failing to meet the CTA's primary goal, but many of its members are trampling on the Act's spirit, which is deeply disturbing.

How do we get beyond this failure and uphold the commitment we made to our children's future by passing the Children's Television Act five years ago? The proposal before the

Commission tries to answer that question by recommending dramatic changes in the way the act is administered, and clarifying what is expected of broadcasters in the way of compliance. I believe the solutions contained in the proposed rule making will go a long way toward correcting the market's failure to serve America's children, without putting an undue burden on the broadcast industry. Taken as a whole, the proposed rule making shows that this is not an either-or, all-or-nothing equation, that we can be sensitive to both the educational needs of children and the economic needs of the broadcast industry. The Chairman should be commended for taking such a balanced approach, and I want to express my full support for his efforts.

In particular, I agree with the contention that we should do whatever we can to enable the market to work more efficiently. The informational requirements the Commission is considering ask little of the broadcasters, but will do much to help stir demand for more and better children's programming and to help parents hold broadcasters accountable for meeting the goals of the CTA. As a parent, I can tell you I would greatly appreciate knowing specifically which programs are designed to inform and educate my seven-year-old daughter.

The Commission also deserves credit for recognizing that the government deserves some blame for the ineffectiveness of the CTA. The FCC's initial implementing regulations were in some cases so vague as to render them meaningless; as the proposed rule making notes, "[t]he current definition of [educational programming] is ambiguous and fails to give licensees clear guidance." [NPRM, p. 4] The recommendation to establish a precise definition of what constitutes "educational programming" will help correct this problem, erase any room for confusion on the part of broadcasters about the public's expectations, and preclude programs like "The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" from being cited in children's television reports.

In the end, though, I share the Chairman's judgement that, regardless of these changes, the market will continue to underserve children unless the Commission steps in and explicitly requires a commitment from the broadcast industry. We would all prefer that government stay out of programming decisions. But the industry has shown that left to its own devices, it will not serve the needs of children. The competitive pressures are so great that one broadcast outlet will not unilaterally arm itself with educational programming and risk giving ground to a rival. So the only real solution seems to be to guarantee a level playing field and ensure that no broadcaster is put at a disadvantage by offering quality children's programming.

The solution the Commission is considering -- a minimum requirement of three hours a week, to rise in the future to five hours -- is quite fair. It should put no economic hardship on local stations. As longtime children's television advocate Peggy Charren recently pointed out, the broadcasters claim they are

already airing on average more than three hours a week, so assuming that is true, they should have no problem whatsoever meeting the three-hour obligation the Commission is now proposing [Children's television press conference, 10/11/95]. On the other hand, a minimum standard would present families -- especially those without access to cable -- with a real, positive alternative to the preponderance of offensive and intellectually barren programming currently on the air.

In taking this step, I think it is critically important that the minimum standard is buttressed by a requirement that the programs be aired when children are watching. As the Commission has noted, the broadcast industry has shown a tendency to bury what little educational programming is currently on the air in time slots when most children are sleeping. I would urge the Commission to go beyond the 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. window it is considering, and require that programs being cited to show CTA compliance be aired between 7 a.m. and 10 p.m. I fail to understand why five-, six-, and seven-year-olds should be forced to wake at 6 a.m. to have their minds enriched.

In closing, let me point out that the American public depends on the FCC to uphold its interest and the trust it places in the broadcasters in exchange for the access to our airwaves that we grant them. The public clearly recognizes that its interest, and that especially of our children, is not being served today. In a recent poll, 82 percent of those surveyed said there is not enough good educational programming on the air today [Center for Media Education survey, 10/5/95]. They also recognize, as did Congress in passing the CTA, that television offers an educational tool of immense potential, a potential that is largely being squandered today.

Therefore, I believe the Commission has an undeniable obligation as a steward of the public interest to protect that interest, to stand up for our children, and to give them something better than a choice between "Dumb and Dumber". The proposal you are now considering makes good on that obligation, and I strongly urge the Commission to adopt it. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Joe Lieberman

cc: Commissioner James Quello
Commissioner Andrew Barrett
Commissioner Rochelle Chong
Commissioner Susan Ness

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Sex and the Mass Media

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June, 1995

A report prepared for the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Parts of this paper appeared originally in a commissioned paper for the Institute of Medicine's: "The Best Intentions: Unintended Pregnancy and the Well-Being of Children and Families."
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Sarah S. Brown and Leon Eisenberg (Eds.).

S-E-X. Not many three letter words, save perhaps "God" and "yes," are as good at capturing our attention and triggering the imagination. Sex sells, and mass media producers know it. Thomas Edison understood the magnetism of sex when he projected "The Kiss" (originally shot for the Kinetoscope in 1896) on the large screen, exciting the "first wave" of moralistic outrage at movie romance (Mast, 1981). Warner Brothers knew the power of sexual attraction when they paired Bogey with Bacall. Ed Sullivan and Elvis knew, too, and so do the creators of MTV.

What these media figures didn't know, however, and what social scientists still haven't definitively figured out, is what effect, beyond attracting audiences or selling products, the media's love affair with sex and romance has on the people who watch and listen. Does the talk about and the images of love, sex and relationships promote irresponsible sexual behavior? Do they encourage unplanned and unwanted pregnancy? Are the media responsible for teenagers having sex earlier, more frequently and outside of marriage?

The answer to all these questions is a qualified "yes." Qualified, because even though we know a fair amount about the ubiquity and explicitness of sexual content in the media, we still have only sparse research on the effects of sexual media content per se. The perceived sensitivity of sex as a research topic and a focus on adolescents and television to the exclusion of other age groups and other media have restricted the kind of research that has been done. Still, **what we do know about the effects of sexual media content, as well as the larger body of media effects research on such topics as violence and anti-social behavior, suggests that the media do play an important part in shaping Americans' sexual beliefs, attitudes and behavior.**

Although they are not the only source of sexual information available to Americans, the mass media are a compelling one. Mass media channels are already numerous and expanding rapidly, thanks to cable, satellite, the Internet, laser and CD-ROM technologies. The media menu is varied, accessible, and affordable. Television, movies, music and music videos, and magazines capitalize on topics considered taboo in other social situations, thus often making sexual media fare more attractive, especially for younger consumers. On the other hand, professionals associated with other institutions such as churches, schools, and the work place rarely discuss sexual intimacy except to counsel people of all ages to abstain unless married. Although a majority of teens rank parents and friends as their most important sex educators, almost one in five say they have learned the most about sex from "entertainment" (Gibbs, 1993).

Here we argue that the media should be considered an intrinsic part of the sexual development of Americans. The media serve as windows on mainstream cultural norms, values and mores. In most media, sexual behavior is frequent, often with unmarried partners, and rarely with any concern for consequences or use of contraceptives. Women in the media rarely get pregnant, and when they do they either have the baby or a convenient miscarriage, but almost never an abortion. Although it is tempting to cast the media as villains and focus solely on the negative effects such portrayals of sexuality may have, we argue that the media, if they so choose, could be allies in the cause of responsible sexuality. In fact, there are already encouraging signs that some members of the media are taking on that role. Television writers and producers who attended a "Soap Opera Summit" held last fall in Los Angeles came away with their eyes opened. Most agreed that day-time soap operas do not tell a realistic story about unwanted pregnancy, many vowed to do something about it, and some shows like "General Hospital" and 'One Life to

Live" already have incorporated episodes that directly address the issue of birth control, and more specifically condom use (Hinsey, 1995).

In this paper, we review studies focusing on sexual media content and the relatively sparse research focusing explicitly on its effect on sexual attitudes and/or behavior, and briefly examine more general media effects studies that may add to our understanding. We pay particular attention to research on the media's role in agenda-setting, cultivation and cognitive social learning. These three theoretical approaches have been particularly productive in explaining how:

- the media affect what issues people believe are important (agenda-setting) and what aspects of those issues are most salient (framing);
- the media's portrayal of the world becomes reality, particularly for heavy television users (cultivation);
- attractive media role models and engaging story lines provide scripts for individual behavior depending on a variety of developmental and socio-cultural factors (cognitive social learning).

We highlight some successful and not-so-successful public health campaigns, discussing what does and does not work when using the media to promote healthy practices. We conclude with a discussion of implications and possibilities for future research, policy and media initiatives.

Sex in the media

"TV, movies and magazines made it seem so simple. Everyone was having sex, and all sex had a happy ending." This is what one young woman remembered thinking about sex before she "lost her virginity" (Trafford, 1994).

Regardless of age or gender, all but the rarest of Americans are exposed to sexual images, allusions and talk in the media on an almost daily basis. Bumper stickers command "just do it," sexually attractive models beckon from billboards, and radio and television talk shows showcase sexual anomalies and perversions.

Television soap operas, prime time series, movies, music lyrics and men's, women's and teen magazines draw heavily on sexual themes.

Television

Americans watch a lot of television:

- More American homes have working television sets than telephones, and the television is on about seven hours per day in the average home (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994).
- About one-third of Americans' free time is spent watching television, more than the next 10 most popular leisure activities combined (Gerbner, 1993).
- Most children spend more time with TV than they do in school (Workman, 1989). Teenagers spend about two hours per day watching television (Wartella, 1994), even though they show a growing preference for music as they get older (Arnett, 1992; Larson, Kubey & Colletti, 1989).
- More than three-fourths of households in America now have video cassette recorders (VCRs) and more than two-thirds have cable TV; teens in homes with VCRs and/or cable spend more hours per day watching television than teens from homes without VCRs or cable (Lin, 1993).
- African-Americans watch 50% more television than other groups (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1991), and children and teenagers from low-income households watch more TV than other children (American Psychological Association, 1993).

Exposure or "time with" measures tell only a fraction of the story, however. The more important questions are: What do Americans see on the screen? Do they believe what they see? How do they interpret what they see? These questions are getting harder to answer given the growing array of programming from which savvy viewers can choose. The double whammy of new and "emerging" networks

(CNN, WB, UNB) and television technologies already have taken a sizable chunk out of the major networks' share of the television market, and other players are eager to enter the competition for audience attention. In Fall 1992, 71% of U.S. households were tuned to a network program during prime time (7 to 10 p.m. central time Monday through Saturday, and 6 to 10 p.m. on Sunday); two years later ABC, CBS and NBC's hold had slipped to a 57% share, according to the Nielsen Media Index. Meanwhile, upstart Fox, programming only 15 of 22 prime-time hours, had grabbed a 12% audience share during the 1994-95 ratings season; UPN had a 7 share; and the WB network had a 3 share (Williams, 1995). The message, for those interested in media effects, is that even the television audience is increasingly fragmented. It will be increasingly important to tie possible effects to particular kinds of media diets that may vary significantly by age, gender, race and ethnicity.

Nevertheless, it is important to consider what kind of content is available. Content analyses suggest a remarkable consistency across television programming. Anecdotally, we know that televised media sex today is far more explicit than it was in the days of Ozzie and Harriett's twin beds (Childers & Brown, 1989). Recent content analyses confirm expectations.

Prime-Time

The most recent comparative study of specific sexual behaviors during prime time on the major broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox) found an average of 10 instances of sexual behavior per hour (Lowry & Shidler, 1993), a slight decrease in the overall 'sex rate' since a similar study was conducted four years earlier (Lowry & Towles, 1989). The drop, however, occurred primarily in the least explicit sexual category—physical suggestiveness—and was offset by a 50% increase in the rate of heterosexual intercourse, defined as talk about, implied, or actual physical portrayals of intercourse.

When the sex behavior in promos for upcoming shows was added, the rate of sexual behaviors per hour increased from about 10 to more than 15, painting a picture more in line with public perceptions and supporting the authors' conviction that the networks frequently use "sex as bait" to increase their ratings (Lowry & Shidler, 1993, p. 635).

More alarming, given current rates of STDs and unplanned pregnancy, analysis showed that few programs ever mentioned the adverse consequences that may result from having sex — references to pregnancy prevention and STD prevention both showed declines from the already low rates in the earlier study. Thus, a typical viewer would see about 25 instances of sexual behavior for every one instance of preventive behavior or comment. And, even then, the message may not be the most desirable — all the references to STDs or pregnancy prevention coded by Lowry and Shidler were in a joking context.

Other studies of television have focused on more specific kinds of sexual behavior. One found that 40 percent of the sexual behaviors observed in prime-time comedies fit the legal definition of sexual harassment, often to the accompaniment of a laugh track. Although the sexual harassment rarely led to a successful sexual encounter, it didn't lead to social sanctions either. Typically, the recipient —female or male — simply ignored or quietly rejected the unwelcome sexual advances (Skill, Robinson & Kinsella, 1994)

Another study looked at the content of 'sex talk' in shows most watched by children and adolescents. Working with Nielsen's top ten rankings for children (2-11) and adolescents (12-17) during the 1992-93 broadcast season, Ward (in press) found that one in four of the interactions coded per episode conveyed some sort of sexual message. Some shows like "Blossom" and "Martin" talked about sex 50 percent of the time. The most frequently occurring types of messages equated masculinity with being sexual or commented on women's bodies as sexual objects.

The picture of sexuality presented was one of sex as recreation, where competition and game-playing are givens and the prize is physically attractive. In the three weeks of programming studied, only two of the ten shows, "Beverly Hills, 90210" and "Blossom," included messages about sexual responsibility.

Soap Operas

Traditionally even steamier than prime-time programming, daytime soap operas have received substantial research attention because of their strong appeal for women and adolescents. The most recent analysis of sex on the soaps found that the top-rated soap operas average 6.6 sexual incidents per hour compared to about half that number 10 years earlier. Talk about safe sex and contraception is still relatively rare—6 references in 50 episodes, against a backdrop of 15 different storylines about pregnancy over a two month period. In addition, unmarried intercourse remained the staple on the five shows studied (Greenberg & Busselle, 1994). Extramarital sex outnumbered married sex acts 120 to 36, and although there was lots of talk about pregnancy, there weren't many babies —only 22 appearances by toddlers 4 and under (Greenberg & Busselle, 1994). Still, the references to taking sexual precautions suggest a trend in the right direction in this day of AIDS and sexually-transmitted diseases (Olson, 1994).

Talk Shows

No matter who's involved with whom, sex on the soaps looks almost tame compared to the topics discussed on day-time talk shows. With Nielsen ratings that range from Oprah Winfrey's high of 8.5 to America's Black Forum at point-6[1], hosts like Ricki Lake, Sally Jessy Raphael, Jenny Jones, Montel Williams and Geraldo Rivera are luring hundreds of thousands of viewers away from the soaps.

[1]Each rating point equals 954,000 households, or 1 percent of the estimated 95.4 million TV homes in the U.S. (Williams, 1995).

Following in the footsteps of Phil Donahue, the dean of day-time talk, this new breed competes for guests willing to make public confessions about their intimate sex lives and feelings. Incest, child molestation, homosexuality, marital infidelity and other formerly taboo topics are made all the more palatable because of the apparent "normality" of non-celebrity guests who look and talk just like the audience's friends, family and neighbors (Lupton, 1994). "Catfights and rowdy showdowns" keep viewers tuned in, so producers shop for controversy and on-air confrontations (Champagne, 1995). Sometimes they get out of hand: Jonathan Schmitz is charged with murder in the death of Scott Amedure, a young man who declared his attraction to Schmitz during the taping of a "Jenny Jones" show on secret admirers (Small, 1995).

Few studies have addressed the related questions of how motherhood and pregnancy are portrayed on television even though several popular shows suggest that motherhood is "the" valued attribute for television women. On the hit show "thirtysomething," one of the central female characters, Hope, was portrayed as resolving her conflict between work and family by deciding that she could find fulfillment only by having another child and not returning to work. In contrast, Hope's friends, Ellyn and Melissa, were presented as ruthless and neurotic single career women (Faludi, 1991; Heide, 1992).

Other top-rated shows have elevated child-bearing to audience-stealing heights. "Murphy Brown" influenced a presidential election campaign by deciding to become a single mother. "Roseanne" tried to get pregnant with her fourth child, while her unmarried sister had a baby. Unrealistic portrayals of motherhood—where new mothers get their figures back the day after giving birth and there is always someone to take care of the baby—may cultivate the idea that women are happiest at home raising children (Morgan, 1987). The typically large families of relatively young parents on TV also may help to establish norms of when it is

appropriate to form a family, and how many children to have (Morgan & Harr-Mazar, 1980). This emphasis on family may serve to idealize motherhood, imbuing it with cultural benefits that outweigh the negative consequences of unplanned pregnancy.

Cable TV/ Videocassettes/ Movies

"Adult programming," i.e., X-rated content designed specifically to portray explicit sexual behavior, is cable television's fastest growing segment (Kaplan, 1992). With the advent of a fiber optic infrastructure, a projected 500 channels are expected to include even more such content. The videocassette player (VCR) also provides greater access to sexually explicit material. In 1993 two of the most frequently purchased videos featured Playboy centerfold Jessica Hahn and the "Playmate of the Year" ("Top Video Sales," 1994).

According to recent content analyses, sex is more frequent and more explicit in movies than in any other medium. Virtually every R-rated film contains at least one nude scene, and some favorites, such as "Fast Times at Ridgemont High" and "Porky's" contain as many as 15 instances of sexual intercourse in less than two hours (Greenberg, Siemicki, Dorfman, et al., 1993). Despite the R-rating that supposedly restricts viewing to people over 18 unless accompanied by an adult, two-thirds of a sample of high school students in Michigan reported that they were allowed to rent or watch any VCR movie they wanted, and the movies they most frequently viewed were R-rated (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Strouse, Pettey, & Shatzer, 1993).

Music/ Music videos/ Radio

In 1994 the radio industry introduced the "12-24 Radio Network," a confederation of radio stations that program primarily for teens. The industry thus hopes to compete with other media for the lucrative teen market and the advertisers who want to sell them clothes, snacks, and cosmetics. The network offers no programming, only the claim that they'll be able to reach 50 percent more

12- to 24-year-olds than the five-and-a-half-million young people MTV currently reaches (Wilke, 1994).

Even before Elvis was prohibited from shaking his hips on the "Ed Sullivan Show," popular music has been almost synonymous with sex. Especially appealing to youth (Brown, Childers, Bauman, & Koch, 1990), popular music and now music videos contain frequent references to relationships, romance and sexual behavior — the very stuff young people are most interested in as they work on constructing a sense of who they are and what they value (Steele & Brown, in press). Music videos, now available on at least five major cable networks, may be especially influential sources of sexual information for adolescents because they combine visuals of adolescents' favorite musicians with the music. Many of the visual elements are sexual (Hansen & Hansen, 1989). Adolescent girls, in particular, use music lyrics to come to terms with their own sexuality (Garratt, 1990). Increasingly sexually explicit, music lyrics have drawn criticism from groups such as the Parents Music Resource Center (Gore, 1987), leading to some voluntary labeling of recorded music. For some teens, however, such warnings may represent a stamp of approval rather than a deterrent to buy. Roe (in press) proposes a theory of "media delinquency" that suggests some teens may gravitate toward socially-devalued or outlawed media content for the same reasons they resist other aspects of the mainstream culture.

Rap music is particularly explicit about both sex and violence. Perry (1995) argues that the explicit "sexual speak" of Black women rappers follows in the liberating tradition of the "blues," which gave voice to Black women's sexual and cultural politics during the years of Black migration to northern states. This striving for empowerment may explain why some rap musicians have responded to concerns about unsafe sex and have included alternative messages. Some rap music includes talk of "jimmy hats," or condoms. In a song called, "Safe Sex," rapper Erick Sermon chants, "Let's get high as a kite and have safe sex. " An album by the female

rap group Salt 'n' Pepa is about the pleasures and responsibilities of sex: it ends with a dramatic vignette, "I've got AIDS," by Weatoc, a Boston teen outreach group.

Frank discussions about sex—ranging from Dr. Ruth's on-air psychological counseling to the sexual banter of disc jockeys hired to capture the teen/young adult audience as they drive to school or work—are common on radio. Content analyses are rare, however, given the diversity of local radio programming and the speed with which local radio personalities rise and fall in popularity.

Magazines

Magazines are another important source of relationship and sexual information, especially for women and adolescent girls. In a survey conducted last fall, more than one-fourth (26%) of women aged 30-49 reported that magazines are the source they most typically rely on (second only to health care professionals) for information about birth control (Louis Harris, 1994). In 1994, the 12 largest women's magazines (including "Better Homes and Gardens," "Family Circle," Woman's Day," Good Housekeeping" and the "Ladies' Home Journal ") had a combined circulation of more than 40-million, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations. Other magazines like "Parents" (circ. 1,837,868) or "Soap Opera Digest" (circ. 1,456,633) also are read by a largely female audience.

Although publishers' statements reveal subtle differences in the market niche each is trying to attract, women's magazines until recently have focused on two broad topics: what a woman should do to get a man (e.g. "Cosmo") and what she should do once she has the man and his children (e.g., "Redbook"). For instance, "Cosmopolitan," claims to deal with the "emotional side" of women's lives, while "Redbook," is edited for "young working mothers with children. . . women who face the challenge of balancing family, home and career." Since the resurgence of feminism in the 1970s, other magazines have attempted to include other aspects of women's lives: "Working Woman" (circ. 764,594) and "Savvy" are

targeted at women who work outside the home; "Gourmet" and "Bon Appetit" are for women (and men) who cook; "Health" (Circ. 939,638) is for "active women who have made the pursuit of good health an integral part of their daily lives." (Consumer Magazines and Agri-Media Source, 1995). But even in these magazines the emphasis remains primarily on women's lives as they revolve around making themselves attractive enough to catch and keep a man.

Despite their focus on women's lives, these magazines rarely cover reproductive issues such as abortion that might alienate readers and, thus, indirectly, advertisers who are looking for large or tightly-segmented circulations. Over the past two decades (1972-1991), as the controversy surrounding abortion escalated, the largest women's magazines published only a few articles about abortion (Ballenger, 1992). "Glamour" and "Mademoiselle" carried more articles (although still only about one a year) than the others. "Family Circle," "Ladies Home Journal," and "Woman's Day" each carried five or fewer articles during the period.

Advertisers exert a great deal of control over magazines—both over editorial content and whether they should/could exist at all—because advertising revenue accounts for at least half of the income of most magazines. According to its editor-in-chief, "Glamour" was able to include more articles about abortion than the other magazines because reader surveys showed that readers were pro-choice and thus, advertisers were less concerned that such content would alienate readers (Ballenger, 1992).

"Ms." magazine, the only women's magazine explicitly dedicated to feminism and responsible coverage of women's sexuality, struggled for 20 years to attract enough advertising. Traditional advertisers, such as cosmetics companies, made such heavy demands on editorial content in "Ms." (e.g. no cover photos of women without make-up; no stories about lesbians) that the magazine has given up

advertising and today relies solely on a hefty subscription price ($30 for six issues) for revenue (Steinem, 1990). Although now editorially freer, "Ms." has dropped from a circulation of 500,000 to about 170,000 due to the price increase (Braden, 1992).

Teen girl magazines

The teen magazine, "Sassy," initially suffered from an advertiser boycott organized by the religious right after early issues included articles such as "Losing Your Virginity," "Getting Turned On," and "My Girlfriend Got Pregnant." Despite the editors' dedication to providing young girls with "responsible, direct information about sex," and readers' (as well as many parents') overwhelmingly appreciative response, the magazine was forced to remove the "controversial" content in order to stay in business (Larsen, 1990, pp. 96-97).

Today, however, advertisers seem less concerned about adult scruples as they compete to capture their piece of the growing (both in size and spending power) youth market (Cox, 1994). Capitalizing on a sexier, cheekier image, "YM" has more than doubled its circulation over the past four years, putting it within 100,000 copies of "Seventeen," the previously unchallenged leader in the teen girls category. "YM's" name changes over the years — from "Calling All Girls" to "Polly Pigtails" to "Young Miss" to "YM," which stands for "Young and Modern"—underscore its change in philosophy (Carmody, 1994). Content has followed in line. One recent issue beckoned readers with the lure of a "special sealed section," a play on the brown paper wrapper typically associated with pornography. Titled "Getting Intimate," the section featured eight straight-talking pages of factual and anecdotal information about sex. One page was devoted to sexually transmitted diseases—who gets them, how they are spread, what the symptoms are, and how they are treated. Another page relied on a mix of first-person accounts, professional advice, and "surprising sex stats" to help readers answer the question: "Sex: Ready or Not?"

Among the statistics cited:

- The U. S. has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy, teenage birth and teenage abortion of any industrialized nation.
- More than a million teenagers—one in four girls under the age of 18—become pregnant each year.
- Eighty percent of teenage pregnancies are unplanned.
- One out of every six teenagers contracts a sexually transmitted disease.

This combination of peer-talk and solid data about sexual issues in a girls' magazine signals a positive trend.

On the other hand, other studies have found that exposure to sexually explicit material that may promote anti-social behavior occurs at an early age. By the age of 15, 92 percent of males and 84 percent of females have seen or read "Playboy" or "Playgirl". Brown and Bryant (1989) have found that exposure to hard-core magazines begins at the average age of 13.5 years. Boys may find such magazines an important source of sexual and relationship information since so few non-pornographic magazines are directed at them as potential emotional or sexual partners.

Advertising

Paradoxically, many of the same advertisers who have exerted pressure to keep responsible sex information out of the media often use sexual appeals to sell their products. A study of 4,294 network television commercials found that one of every 3.8 commercials include some type of attractiveness-based message (Downs & Harrison, 1985). Although most ads don't directly model sexual intercourse, they help set the stage for sexual behavior by promoting the importance of beautiful bodies and products that enhance attractiveness to the opposite sex. Advertisers like Calvin Klein, Guess jeans, and Benetton have pushed the limits of sexual

suggestiveness with their use of bared flesh, childlike models and intertwined limbs.

The frequent portrayal of women as interested only in attracting men or as prizes to be won, may lead indirectly to the disempowerment of women in sexual relationships. If a woman does all she can to attract a man, can she say no when he wants the sex she supposedly has been offering? And if she does say no, should a man believe her? Such mixed messages may also indirectly lead to increased sexual violence and date rape.

News

Although rarely thought of as sex educators, the news media at the least help keep sexual behavior salient. The American public and policy makers frequently are faced with news stories about abandoned babies, abortion clinic violence, and controversies over the distribution of condoms. Sometimes referred to as agenda setters, the media are in a unique position to get people thinking and talking about specific issues, while keeping other issues from the public eye.

The media sometimes are reluctant to cover issues that do not meet traditional criteria for newsworthiness, including being relevant to middle-class, mainstream Americans (Klaidman, 1990). Because newspapers and news magazines compete for the same kinds of readers, they publish stories that have remained remarkably consistent in subject matter and point of view across the last three or four decades, despite more women in the newsroom (Bleske, 1991). The same has been true for women's magazines which, despite more women (although still few) in high editorial positions from 1975-1985, continued to treat their women audiences in the same "stereotypical ways that men editors had in the 1960s" (Jolliffe & Catlett, 1994).

HIV/AIDS provides an excellent example of the power of media to keep a sexually-related topic off the agendas of both the public and policy makers. Because

the disease was thought to affect only homosexuals and intravenous drug users, groups deemed to be outside of the "mainstream" by many editors and reporters, very few stories on HIV/AIDS appeared until mid-1985, four years after the Centers for Disease Control had reported more than 350 deaths. Editors finally were jolted to attention when movie actor Rock Hudson died of AIDS, and the parents of schoolboy Ryan White, who tested positive for the HIV virus, fought to keep him in school despite other parents' fears that their children might catch the disease simply by being in the same room with someone who had HIV. "The New York Times," an influential agenda setter for both other media and policy makers, was especially slow in covering the topic (Dearing & Rogers, 1992).

During the Republican party's recent "100 Days," we saw agenda setting work in the opposite direction. To a backdrop of rhetoric about cuts in government spending, "teen pregnancy" and "unwed mothers" were put on the policy agenda—ready targets for legislators schooled in the public's concern over "babies having babies." Ironically, the threat of teen pregnancy reaching "epidemic" proportions may have resulted from a lack of care on the part of both social scientists and the news media in reporting valid statistics. No one thought much about teenagers getting married and having children prior to the mid-1970s, but following the release of Guttmacher Institute figures of 1 million pregnant teenagers a year in the U.S. and subsequent meetings and Congressional hearings on the issue of adolescent fertility, references to an epidemic became increasingly common. In fact, the 1 million figure used by Guttmacher in 1976 included married teens who accounted for about 40 percent of then-pregnant 18- and 19-year-olds (Luker, 1991). The framing of the issue as an "epidemic," in combination with growing anxieties about teen sex and rising divorce rates, helped assure teen pregnancy's place on the public agenda.

In sum, all forms of mass media, from prime-time television, to music, music videos, magazines, advertising and the news media include information

about sexual behavior. The media provide a window on a world preoccupied with sex. In this media world heterosexual activity is frequent, recreational, and most often engaged in by unmarried partners. These partners rarely discuss what they are doing or use contraception, yet they rarely get pregnant. If a woman does get pregnant, she rarely considers abortion as an alternative, and even more rarely has one (Roessner, 1994). The financial and psychological problems associated with large, parent-less or single-parent families sometimes are portrayed, but generally are resolved harmoniously and quickly. Thus, we might expect that exposure to such content contributes to the patterns of sexual behavior we see in society: early and unprotected sexual intercourse with multiple partners, and high rates of unintended pregnancies.

Is sexual behavior affected?

At this point, we know more — although still not enough — about what's in the media and how much people are exposed to it, than we know about how media content is interpreted or how it affects sexual behavior. According to classic social scientific methods, an ideal test of the effect of sexual media content would involve either randomized assignment to different media diets, or longitudinal surveys. Such studies would establish whether media exposure or behavior came first, and would allow for generalizations about what kinds of media content cause what kinds of behaviors.

Unfortunately, the perceived sensitivity of sex as a topic has restricted this kind of research. Only a handful of studies have attempted to link exposure to content with audience beliefs, attitudes or subsequent behavior. Research on sexual behavior, particularly with younger people, is difficult. Parents, school boards and health departments are reluctant to let researchers even talk with their children about sexual issues for fear of political fallout. In addition, researchers are bound by

ethical restraints that limit the kinds of experiments that can be conducted to establish that exposure to sexual content in the media causes a specific kind of sexual behavior.

Nevertheless, the few existing studies consistently point to a relationship between exposure to sexual content and sexual beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Ultimately, which comes first may not be the most important question. Of greater significance is the cumulative effect of media saturated with the sounds, images and politics of sex. Traditional communication research and a growing body of interdisciplinary work by psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and cultural theorists point to a process of cultivation, agenda-setting and social learning that affects every aspect of our lives, both as individuals and as members of society.

Cultivation Theory

According to one influential perspective in mass communication research, television is the most powerful storyteller in the culture, one that continually repeats the myths and ideologies, the "facts" and patterns of relationships that define our world and "legitimize the social order" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994, p. 18). TV tells its stories through prime-time sitcoms and serials, day-time soap operas and talk shows, news and sports, and the steady stream of commercials that fuel the entire television industry. And it does so from cradle to coffin. According to this "cultivation hypothesis," a steady dose of television, over time, acts like the pull of gravity toward an imagined center. Called "mainstreaming," this pull results in a shared set of conceptions and expectations about reality among otherwise diverse viewers. Tests of the hypothesis have found, for example, that "heavy" television viewers are more likely to believe the world is a "mean and dangerous place," apparently because they are exposed to a high frequency of violence on TV (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1994).

Researchers have found that college students who are soap opera fans are more likely than their non-viewing counterparts to overestimate the occurrence of divorce and illegitimate children. Interestingly, given the paucity of portrayals of such topics on the soaps, viewers also overestimated the number of abortions (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Mayes, 1981), and the incidence of sexually transmitted disease (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Strouse, 1993) in the real world. Other studies have looked at the cultivation of sex-role stereotypes and have found evidence that television nurtures their continuing presence in American society (Morgan, 1982; Rothschild, 1984). Studies of adolescents also have found that heavy television viewing is predictive of negative attitudes toward remaining a virgin (Courtright & Baran, 1980). A variety of other factors also enter the picture—ethnicity, class, and gender affect both program preferences and the meanings that are drawn from media content. But, in general, our culture sells sex without consequences.

Agenda-setting

Other researchers see the mass media as agenda-setters that not only tell people what is important in the world around them, but also how to think about the events and people who inhabit that world (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Kosicki, 1993). Using words and images as their palette, news anchors, reporters and photographers paint pictures of a world peopled by villains and victims, good guys and bad guys. Over time, the many little dramas that make up the day's news events take on a life of their own — the news media's pictures of the world actually become the world in the minds of thousands of viewers and readers. Singular events—say, the shooting death of a black toddler left in a car after midnight while her teenage mother reportedly went inside a "drug house" to make a purchase—become bigger than life when shown on TV or blown up on the front page of a newspaper. People use such stories as reference points against which to

compare what they already know, or think they know, in this case about teenage mothers. The result often reinforces stereotypes, racial and otherwise (Entman, 1994).

As professional storytellers, the news media not only control which stories get told, they also decide how they get told. Called "framing," this aspect of newsmaking helps shape our understanding of events and may affect behavior (Iyengar, 1991; Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992). For instance, a headline that reads "College Student Disposes of Newborn in Dumpster: Says Baby Would Interfere with Career Plans" predisposes readers to think of the girl as a monster, an "anti-mother" who should be charged with murder. A different reaction would probably result from this headline: "Fetus Found in Dumpster: Distraught Student Has No Recollection of Birth." Reading this, a person might feel sympathy for the mother, and think that psychological counseling rather than a jail sentence was called for. An analysis of this real-life incident and other "monster stories" (Tsing, 1990) illustrates how the media can shape people's interpretations of events. Although the headlines used here are fictitious, they could be real and they underscore the power of the words and images that, in effect, bring us the world.

The example also demonstrates how gender- and sex-charged topics take on new dimensions when presented as "news" rather than "entertainment." Highly-charged issues such as abortion or teen pregnancy require careful treatment by newsmakers. Rather than framing them as juicy controversies — the stuff on which ratings are built, editors and reporters would do well to examine their motives and methods before fueling the deep rifts that divide society on these issues.

A story recently distributed by the Knight Ridder News Service provides a good example of how the press can responsibly approach controversial issues. During the height of debate over how many abortions surgeon general nominee Henry Foster Jr. had performed, the wire service moved a story that focused on two