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Editorial Introduction: Entertainment Media's Evolving Role in Sex Education

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This special issue offers a new approach to research into the entertainment media's role in sex education and how entertainment can contribute to learning about sex. The collection features articles from authors around the world. They occupy a range of institutional, disciplinary and professional positions, adopt a variety of methodological approaches and range from well-established academics to those appearing in an academic journal for the first time. As we discuss below, such diversity was necessary in order to address our theme.

In putting together this special issue we aimed to move beyond superficial, one-dimensional research that oversimplifies how (and why) users consume entertainment media. For too long research into the role of entertainment media in sex education has been dominated by psychological research which assumes that 'learning' is virtually interchangeable with media 'effects' (see for example Brown & Bobkowski, 2011; Collins et al., 2004; Eyal & Kunkel, 2008; Kunkel, Cope, & Biely, 1999). This research tradition correlates media consumption and primarily negative impacts on behaviours and attitudes. These researchers, like many other critics of entertainment media, are concerned with media influence and agenda-setting. Entertainment media - particularly popular, formulaic, commercialized or fantasy genres - are often described in metaphors that suggest they are not so much cultural expression, but a form of (damaging) social action, a homogenous, negative and coercive force that 'bombards', 'saturates' and 'dominates' their audiences – particularly children and youth (see, for example, Strasburger, 2012).

Another problem with this tradition of research is that entertainment media are treated as carrying singular, simplistic messages, that are held to be identifiable in isolation from their generic, narrative or viewing contexts, and are seen as efficacious in and of themselves; that is, they alone are able to produce sets of behaviours and attitudes in their audiences. Entertainment media are homogenised, with every text treated as communicating much the same message (see for example Brown & Bobkowski, 2011, p. 100). Texts as diverse as *Gossip Girl* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - to choose just two examples in which young female characters

have casual sex with radically different outcomes – are treated as being the same.

Perhaps surprisingly this research approach, although sitting in the social sciences, includes implicit aesthetic biases. Pleasures are viewed with suspicion; although a prime target is often the supposedly ‘unrealistic’ nature of media representations, a charge that implies there exists an external reality against which media can be assessed for their degree of correspondence. In turn, this holds up realism as an aesthetic ideal, suggesting that texts should ideally follow coherent, linear and ‘probable’ narratives, showing character development and moral consequences (particularly of the ‘casual sex’ the media are accused of promoting; one might note that in this model ‘reality’ is what researchers think audiences *ought* to believe about the world, because they will act on that basis).

Audiences, particularly young people, are conceived as products of this environment, powerless victims who cannot resist the false ways of being and thinking offered by the media. The dominant metaphor of passive ‘exposure’ to the media, and truisms about children spending more time with screens than in schools, suggest that young people are unable to make critical sense of what they encounter. The concept of media ‘role models’ also assumes that audiences absorb and imitate media content, responding in a literalist way to surface features. These studies ignore the multiple ways in which media texts can be read and used by different consumers in different situations (see for example Bragg, 2006).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of experimental psychology’s approach to entertainment media and sex education has been its heteronormativity. Running through study after study has been a vision of desirable sexual development in which young people accept conservative sexual ideals of committed lifelong monogamy. The concept of ‘risk’ is used in these studies in order to condemn the media for sending ‘permissive’ (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008, p. 162) messages to young people, such as the acceptability of sex outside of monogamous relationships (Brown & Bobkowski, 2011, p. 102). Researchers taking these approaches assume that respect for ‘remaining a virgin’ before marriage is a positive sexual ideal (Kunkel et al., 1999, p. 230). They condemn ‘casual sex’ and ‘sexual behaviors with two or more partners in the past 12 months’ (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008, p. 161). At its most extreme, this conservative approach to sexuality assumes that sex should only occur within marriage, naming ‘engagement in premarital sexual intercourse’ as a negative

practice, and even explicitly stating that the entertainment media are dangerous because they affect young people's 'moral attitudes' towards sex (Eyal & Kunkel, 2008, p. 165). Some articles in this psychological tradition even imply that the ideal situation for young people is complete ignorance about sex – judging even 'talk' about sex as having dangerous negative effects for young people (Kunkel et al., 1999, p. 231). Reading this material we might think that we were still in the 1950s: far from engaging with a new digital age, this work has barely begun to comprehend the first sexual revolution.

The theories of culture, learning and individual agency embedded in these research approaches also restrict and limit strategies for change as a response, whether these be increased media regulation, new forms of media content (portraying positive role models) or programmes of 'media literacy' (teaching audiences to be more critical viewers). Psychological approaches tend to assume that parents (Collins et al., 2004, p. e288) and schools provide a positive 'corrective' (Fisher & Barak, 1989) to the assumed negative teachings of the entertainment media about sex – an assumption that much research into those sources of information finds to be unwarranted (see for example McKee, Dore, & Watson, 2014).

By asking about the media's evolving role in sex education, this Special Issue runs counter to these theories of media power and meaning and takes a different view of pedagogy. As a whole the articles collected here acknowledge the ambiguity, complexity and pleasures of popular cultural texts and view audiences as active meaning-makers. They do not assume that the 'messages' of entertainment media about sex are necessarily negative, nor that ignorance about sex or commitment to premarital abstinence are ideals to which young people should aspire. They do not begin with a belief that parents or schools are a reliable 'corrective' when it comes to matters of sex education. Rather these articles uphold a version of healthy sexual development that includes information, discussion and open communication; and are committed to an open-ended, critical empirical approach that is genuinely concerned to understand what might be the most important contributions of different forms of entertainment to the process of sexual learning.

These articles also respond to developments in the nature and scope of contemporary media. The entertainment landscape has changed remarkably over the last few decades (Flew, 2008). In particular, the boundaries between forms of cultural production are being reconfigured as they all, increasingly, flow through the realm of the digital. Digital media potentially fragment the entertainment products available to consumers, and have given rise to prod-user cultures whereby the line between producer and consumer is increasingly blurred (Bruns, 2009). These technologies create the capacity for new kinds of sexualities and sexual practices, with interactivity and reciprocity at their core. They have underpinned the regeneration of feminism and gay and lesbian and queer activisms, which have created the speaking conditions and repertoires through which previously excluded voices now generate their own entertainment media (Taormino, Shimizu, Penley, & Miller-Young, 2013). Online spaces such as blogs, forums and Twitter are invaluable resources for these communities. New technologies are being used in multiple ways by young people in their sexual practices and cultures, even if the Internet expands the space available for misogynistic, sex-negative and homophobic discourses to spread and be heard as well.

Entertainment media include a vast, and increasing, range of texts that teach about sex – both explicitly and implicitly – in a range of very different ways. Newspapers and magazines offer sex advice columns, social media platforms invite users to create their own shared entertainment about sex, television programmes tell stories about character's sex lives, the Internet offers possibilities for everything from fun entertainment sites provided by formal educational institutions to pornography with an educational message. The relationship between the entertainment media and sex education has never been so multifaceted, so contradictory, or so vibrant.

Indeed, one of the most interesting parts of the process of editing this special issue has been the requirement to rethink what we mean by 'education'. It is notable that under traditional approaches to research in this area, if young people learn about sex in a formal school setting this process is referred to as "education"; but if they learn about sex from entertainment media, the process is referred to as 'ideology' (Fisher & Barak, 1989, p. 302) or as acquiring 'attitudes and beliefs' that might affect their 'behaviour'. In this sense 'education' is a moral concept rather than a descriptive one: to describe a learning experience as 'education' is to signal

approval of what is being learned. As we note above, what is approved is commonly a heteronormative model of sexuality where pleasure is less important than committed relationships and the avoidance of STIs. To learn anything about casual sex or physical pleasure is not to be educated, in this paradigm: it is to be exposed to ideology or erroneous beliefs.

Such a radically changing object of study demands new analytical approaches. Accordingly this special issue presents a collection of articles that engage with this new entertainment environment, embracing the challenge of innovation and in many cases responding in kind. It includes previously unheard voices in research about sex education. The shifting boundaries between formal education and informal learning are embodied for instance in the article on ‘Sense about sex’, authored by a group including academics, therapists and sex educators, or the article on sexuality-focused entertainment media in sex education, written by a team including academics, producers of sexually explicit entertainment media, and researchers who are both. Responding to the variety and complexity of current entertainment media and its role in sex education, the articles discuss the role of newspapers, television, films, magazines, books, websites and social media. They also engage in innovative ways with methodologies that reflect and capture these changing landscapes, from traditional quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews and focus groups, to participant observation, practice-led research, action research and textual analysis.

The special issue opens with Joni Meenagh’s article ‘Flirting, dating, and breaking up within new media environments’. Addressing the concern of educators about the role that social media play in young people’s learning about sex, Meenagh uses an online discussion board and offline face-to-face interviews in order to explore what young people are learning both from and about digitally-mediated intimate relationships. Meenagh’s approach is respectful to her subjects – she lets them set the terms and language in which their practices will be discussed, and is generous in listening to their own judgements of their practices. She does not see ‘flirting’ as a dangerous slippery slope leading to underage pregnancy; rather she accepts that young people must learn to manage intimate relationships and that flirting online can be a useful part of that learning process. The concept of ‘risk’ – which runs so strongly through so much sex education – takes on a different role in

Meenagh's analysis, as she recognizes that young people have to learn somehow about intimate relationships, that risk is a necessary part of learning – and that in this context mediated relationships in online entertainment spaces might offer a relatively safe place for young people to do this vital learning.

Silja Nielsen, Susanna Paasonen and Sanna Spišák's contribution "Pervy role-play and such": Girls' experiences of sexual messaging online' is likewise concerned not to feed moral panics. The article does not pathologise young people's sexual activities online, but is rather interested in understanding how young people experience and interpret them. The researchers write about Finland, a context in which there is already more acceptance of the need for comprehensive sex education, even if in practice questions of pleasure are somewhat marginalized and young people are critical of schools' provision. Their research yields new insights into 11-18 year old girls' online sexual practices and has many parallels with Meenagh's research. Like Meenagh, they respect their contributors and quote them extensively. The voices that emerge suggest that girls can be reflexive, agentic and skilled navigators of online worlds, who make nuanced distinctions between types of sexual contact, resist risk discourses and articulate the pleasures of (peer) sexual messaging. The authors' arguments that 'sexual messaging can be a reflexive site of learning', that online talk offers 'alternative pathways for making sense of sexuality' and their description of the internet as a 'sexual playground' all evoke some very different starting points than the 'fear-based' ones that ground much research into young people's use of online media.

Maria-Jose Masanet and David Buckingham's article 'Advice on life? Online fan forums as a space for peer-to-peer sex and relationships education' addresses both entertainment media and online fan forums. It offers insight into institutions and texts as well as audiences, contextualising the successful youth drama series 'Skins', made for the cable/ satellite channel of British broadcaster Channel 4, and analyzing how audiences used its accompanying online forum for peer advice and exchange. The authors raise the question of how sex education drawing on entertainment media might require a form of media education as well. This would go beyond simplistically extracting and evaluating media 'messages', as in the psychological tradition described above, and would involve developing an analytical vocabulary for understanding media conventions, representations, institutional

constraints and strategies as well as diverse audience interpretations and responses.

Liza Tsaliki's article 'Popular culture and moral panics about "children at risk": Revisiting the sexualization-of-young-girls debate' draws on data from focus groups with girls aged 10-12 in order to argue that the entertainment media, rather than being understood as risk-laden, 'self-directed' leisure, can be used by young consumers to learn the management of an ethical self in the realms of sexuality and relationships. Tsaliki begins by providing a useful historical context, demonstrating that worries about young people's learning about sex emerge at a distinct cultural and historical juncture – particularly associated with middle-class discourses of childhood development in developed nations in the nineteenth century. The dangers of 'unstructured leisure' became of pressing concern for middle-class reformers – precisely the kind of pleasure without purpose that continues to inform researchers' worries about casual sex. Tsaliki invited girls to comment on pre-existing photographs of Rihanna, and in analysing their responses she notes that the girls' capacity for critical self-reflection is a long way from a passive and uncritical acceptance of any messages about sex to which they are 'exposed' that has so concerned previous research on entertainment and sex education. Tsaliki refers to the 'sophisticated' arguments made by the girls in relation to entertainment's representations of sexuality. As we noted above, previous research has too often drawn a clear line between on the one hand the consumers of formal schooling, who are seen to be educated by their exposure to teachers; and on the other hand the consumers of entertainment media who are seen to fall victim to ideology. The sophisticated forms of argument demonstrated by the girls in Tsaliki's article provide empirical evidence that this distinction is not in fact correct. These girls are able to distinguish between professional performers' presentations of self on stage and what one might realistically wear in everyday life and they demonstrate a clear understanding of context and genre in their engagement with the entertainment media they consume.

Cyndi Darnell writes about 'Using Sexually Explicit Material in a Therapeutic Context'. She explains how sex therapy works and that it is far more than a 'quick fix'. She then discusses why and how sexually explicit material can in some circumstances support clients' search for a more satisfying relationship to their own

and others' eroticism. In particular she notes that such material may enable clients to address deep-seated shame and help them critique dominant narratives about how sex 'should' be, thereby allowing them to accept and sustain desires and pleasures outside the 'norm'. She goes on to give examples of individual clients' journeys through sex therapy, making clear that she seeks out a wide range of sexually explicit material to help them. This is Cyndi's first publication in an academic journal, and we feel privileged to be given insights into the therapeutic process in this way.

In 'Sense about Sex: Media, Sex Advice, Education and Learning', Feona Attwood, Meg Barker, Petra Boynton and Justin Hancock write collectively under the name 'Sense about sex', an informal group of therapists, researchers, sex educators, academics and activists. Their innovative actions have included the online Sexualization Report and, and they draw therapists, activists and academics into dialogue to improve the accessibility of good quality information about sex and relationships, sexual health and sexual learning. As with Buckingham and Masanet, they have a keen eye for the institutional, economic and social influences that shape existing sex-advice publications and media, their (heteronormative) conventions and representations of sex, and the class-ridden value judgements about 'good' and 'bad' texts that pervade public debates about them. They also highlight more diverse, less mainstream sources of advice for young people in particular. They describe their own attempts to intervene in provision, for instance by creating 'Bad Sex Media Bingo' as a light-hearted approach to challenging stereotypical assumptions in programmes such as the UK's *Sex Box*.

Ruth Neufister, Markie Blumer, Jessica O'Reilly and Francisco Ramirez write about 'Use of sexuality-focused media in sex education'. Each author has a section in which they discuss their different their backgrounds, reflect on their work in academia, sexual entertainment industries and therapeutic contexts, and share their views on the melding of these domains. As in the case of Sense About Sex, this range of contributors – particularly by including people who give sex advice and/or create sexually explicit material - is innovative and unusual, identifying potentially positive contributions of media to sexual learning that is worlds away from what they term 'pathology-concentrated research literature'. Here – as the authors themselves note in the conclusion - the reader can make connections and draw contrasts for

themselves between, for instance, Blumer's critical engagement with different modes of production of pornography and her students' criticism of contemporary *Playboy* models, and O'Reilly's account from 'on-set' at *Playboy* TV itself.

Finally in this collection Lauren Rosewarne's article is entitled 'School of Shock: Film, Television and Anal Education'. As Rosewarne notes, anal sex retains its status as taboo – even as it is now (begrudgingly?) accepted as a suitable part of gay men's sexual repertoire, heterosexual anal sex is still presented in much public discussion as irrefutable evidence of sexual violence being done to women. Rosewarne's suggestion that anal sex can be an intimate and even pleasurable part of a heterosexual sexual repertoire is perhaps the most revolutionary argument presented in this collection: it is certainly not a position one associates with moral panics about sexual learning from the entertainment media, nor with the dominant tradition of psychological research into entertainment and sex education, which would see such a non-procreative act as both too risky, and too 'permissive' in its focus on pleasure. Nevertheless, Rosewarne makes the point that formal schooling has little to say about anal sex, and that in this context entertainment media play a particularly important educative role. Once again, Rosewarne does not dismiss the educative role of entertainment media as mere ideology. Rather she attends to the complexity of entertainment's function, exploring the range of genres present in entertainment media, the variety of modalities in which they function, and the range of different consumers who engage with it. She notes that anal sex is represented in entertainment through three dominant frames – pleasure, pain and power. Using textual analysis she demonstrates that a viewer of entertainment media can encounter representations of heterosexual anal sex as pleasure, as painful, and as an expression of power – suggesting that entertainment does not simplistically insist that any sexual act is necessarily good or bad, but that rather the consumer of entertainment learns about complex and contradictory ways in which sexual acts can be experienced depending on a variety of contextual factors.

We believe that taken together this collection presents an exciting new way to think about what we want young people to learn about sex, what role the entertainment media might play in that process, and how researchers might study and write about the process. We hope that you agree.

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