

# Sex and the Media

*The media, in the form of newspapers, the Internet and TV play a huge role in shaping young peoples views on sex.*

## ***How much TV do we watch, and how much time do we spend on the Internet?***

- More Americans have television sets than phones, and the television is on about seven hours per day in the average home. In addition, about a third of Americans' free time is spent watching television, more than the next ten most popular leisure activities combined

Sources: G. Gerbner, L. Gross, M. Morgan and N. Signorielli, "Growing Up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective," in J. Bryant and D. Zillman, eds., *mediaeffects: advances in theory and research* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), 17-41.; G. Gerbner, "Women and Minorities, A Study in Casting and Fate" (A report to the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists, June 1993), 3.

- Young people in the United States today spend 6-7 hours each day, on average, with some form of media. A majority have a television in their bedroom; all have access to music and movies. Computer and Internet use is diffusing rapidly. By 2010, it is expected that most homes with children in the United States will have access to the Internet. It is not clear, however, when and if the current "digital divide" between lower and higher income families and between those who are less literate or non-English-speaking and those who are literate or English-speaking will disappear

Source: Roberts D, Media and youth: access, exposure, and privatization, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2000, 27(2):8-14; and Taylor H, Online population growth surges to 56% of all adults, *The Harris Poll #76*, Dec. 22, 1999, [www.harrisinteractive.com](http://www.harrisinteractive.com), accessed June 29, 2000.

## ***How much sex is in the media anyway?***

- On prime-time television. The most recent comparative study of specific sexual behaviors during prime time on the major broadcast networks found an average of 10 instances of sexual behavior per hour

Source:D.T. Lowry and J.A. Shidler, "Prime Time TV Portrayals of Sex, 'Safe Sex' and AIDS: A Longitudinal Analysis," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 70, no. 3 (1993): 628-37.

- When sexual behavior in promotions for upcoming shows was added, the rate per hour increased from about 10 to more than 15, painting a picture more in line with public perceptions and supporting the idea that networks frequently use "sex as bait" to increase their ratings

Source: D.T. Lowry and J.A. Shidler, "Prime Time TV," 635.

- Current content analyses suggest a remarkable consistency across programming--with sexuality far more explicit today than it was in the days of Ozzie and Harriet's twin beds.

Source: K. Childers and J.D. Brown, "No Blank Slate: Teen Media Awareness Mirrors Upbringing," MEDIA AND VALUES, 46 (1989): 8-10.

- On a study of soap operas, sexual intercourse between unmarried individuals remained the staple of the five shows studied

Source: B.S. Greenberg and R.W. Busselle, "Soap Operas and Sexual Activity" (A report submitted to the Kaiser Family Foundation, October 1994).

- Adult programming that portrays explicit sexual behavior is cable television's fastest growing segment.

Source: M. Kaplan, "You Get What You Pay For: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Cable Sex," US, August 1992, p. 79.m

- According to recent content analyses, sexual relations are 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 of those most popular with adolescents contain as many as 15 instances of sexual intercourse in less than two hours. Despite the R rating that supposedly restricts viewing to people over 18 years of age 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 movie they wanted, and the movies they most frequently viewed were R-rated.

Sources: B.S. Greenberg, M. Siemicki, S. Dorfman, et al., "Sex Content in R-Rated Films Viewed by Adolescents," in B.S. Greenberg, J.D. Brown and N.L. Buerkel-Rothfuss, eds., MEDIA, SEXAND THE ADOLESCENT (Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993), 29-44. ;N.L. Buerkel-Rothfuss, J.S. Strouse, G. Pettey and M. Shatzer, "Adolescents' and Young Adults' Exposure to Sexually Oriented and Sexually Explicit Media," in B.S. Greenberg, J.D. Brown and N.L. Buerkel-Rothfuss, eds., MEDIA, SEXAND THE ADOLESCENT (Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1993), 99-114.

### ***The wrong kind of sex is mentioned***

- Despite increasing public concern about the potential health risks of early, unprotected sexual activity, only about one in 11 of the programs on television that include sexual content mention possible risks or responsibilities. Sexually transmitted diseases other than HIV and AIDS are almost never discussed, and unintended pregnancies are rarely shown as outcomes.

Source: Cope K and Kunkel D, Sexual messages in teens' favorite prime-time programs, in: Brown J, Steele J and Walsh-Childers K, eds., Sexual Teens, Sexual Media, Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum (in press).

## *Sex in magazines*

- Magazines are another important source of relationship and sexual information, especially for women and adolescent girls. In a survey, more than a quarter (26 percent) of women aged 30 to 49 reported that magazines are the source they most typically rely on (second only to health care professionals) for information about birth control.

Source: unplanned pregnancy: table 142 (New York: Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., 1994).

- Despite their focus on women's lives, these magazines rarely cover reproductive issues such as abortion that might alienate some readers, and, thus, indirectly, advertisers who are looking for large or tightly segmented circulations. As the controversy surrounding abortion has escalated, the largest women's magazines have published only a few articles.

Source: J. Ballenger, "Uncovering Abortion: Sisterhood Is Cautious," *columbia journalism review* (March, April 1992): 16.

## *Other media and sex information*

- 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 policymakers. Because the disease initially was thought to affect only homosexuals and intravenous drug users, groups deemed to be outside 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. THE NEW YORK TIMES, an influential agenda setter for both other media and policymakers, was especially slow in covering the topic.

Source: J.W. Dearing and E.M. Rogers, "AIDS and the Media Agenda," in T. Edgar, M.A. Fitzpatrick, and V.S. Freimuth, eds., *AIDS: a communication perspective* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1992), 173-94.

- Few studies have directly considered the question of most fundamental concern: Does exposure to sexuality issues in the media cause those who see it to engage in sexual behavior earlier and in riskier ways? Two studies have found correlations between watching higher doses of "sexy" television and early initiation of sexual intercourse.

Source: J.D. Brown and S.E. Newcomer, "Television Viewing and Adolescents' Sexual Behavior," *journal of homosexuality*, 21, nos. 1 and 2 (1991): 77-91.

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