

Locked down apps vs the social media ecology: why do young people and educators disagree on the best delivery platform for digital sexual health entertainment education?

Abstract

This article reports on focus groups exploring the best way to reach young men with vulgar comedy videos that provide sexual health information. Young people reported that they found the means by which the material was presented – as a locked down app – to be problematic, and that it would better be delivered through social media platform such as YouTube. This would make it more ‘spreadable’. By contrast, adult sex education stakeholders thought the material should be contained within a locked own, stand-alone app - otherwise it might be seen by children who are too young, and/or young people might misunderstand the messages. We argue that the difference in approach represented by these two sets of opinions represents a fundamental stumbling block for attempts to reach young people with digital sexual health materials, which can be understood through the prism of different cultural forms – education versus entertainment.

Key words: sexual health, digital health, entertainment-education

Introduction

This article reports on focus groups conducted with young people and adult stakeholders on the best way to reach young men with sexual health information by digitally distributing vulgar comedy videos. Our analysis shows that these groups had different perspectives on the best ways to distribute this material. We propose that these differences suggest that adult stakeholders remain reluctant to cede control in education to young people. More generally, we propose that this can be explained through the ways that different cultural categories function – education and entertainment. As we explain in this article, the social media ecology’s logics of connectivity and spreadability across multiple digital platforms challenge the practices of traditional health education but works well in the system of entertainment. In order to reach young people with sexual health information we might risk embracing the practices of entertainment as part of the project of education.

When we talk about ‘social media ecology’, we are thinking in terms of van Dijck’s (2013) framework of ‘platformed sociality’ or ‘cultures of connectivity’, by which social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram are interconnected in terms of both economics and user practices. Academic and industry research into what makes media content ‘spreadable’ (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013) has identified a number of characteristics that make content more likely to be shared on social media. As van Dijck and Poell (2013) observe, cultures of connectivity within these ecosystems are not simply driven by individuals, or groups of end-users, but involve ‘mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers, and, more generally, online performative environments’ (8). Our data suggests that adult stakeholders in sexuality education are uncomfortable with the very forms of social media as educational tools.

In this project we set out to produce resources that would reach young men, in a language and form they would embrace, with sexual health information. A previous project had demonstrated that young women and men draw on different sets of cultural resources as they learn about sex (McKee and Watson, 2014). In order to reach young women we worked with the editors of Australian teen magazine *Girlfriend* in order to produce a resource that addressed young women's concerns about sex and relationships in a form and in language that was accessible for them (McKee 2017). We now also set out to develop a set of resources that would reach young men.

Methods

True Relationships and Reproductive Health (True), an organisation operating throughout the state of Queensland in Australia, and a team of academic researchers had previously worked together to produce a series of vulgar comedy videos featuring male comedians telling jokes about sexual health topics, such as the use of condoms, masturbation and how to give your partner sexual pleasure (McKee, Walsh & Watson 2014). To produce these videos True recruited eleven male comedians ranging in age from their teens to late 50s. They were asked, on camera, a series of questions designed to prompt jokes across a range of sexual health topics. The questions were developed by an Advisory Group of education and health experts to elicit discussion of topics across the range of factors identified by McKee et al as relevant to healthy sexual development (McKee et al. 2010). These include a range of skills and competencies, including: 'Education about biological aspects of sex'; 'An understanding of consent'; 'Relationship skills'; 'Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable'; and 'Competence in mediated sexuality'. An iterative process was used, whereby possible questions were

developed relating to the domains of healthy sexual development and then the Advisory Group gave feedback.

The Seven Funny Guys App

This material was then developed into an iPad App called *Seven Funny Guys* that included the comedy videos, as well as a section called 'Funny guys get serious' where the comedians spoke directly to camera providing formal sexual health information, a series of 'interesting facts', and 'Frequently asked questions'.

The app allowed the comedy material to be shown to young men in a highly-controlled form. This approach aimed to ensure that young men would encounter the videos in a context that made clear their pedagogical intent, with the aim of limiting unexpected uses or interpretations of the material. It was designed for youth workers who support young men, aged fifteen to twenty. The app was also released publicly on the iOS platform for iPad only, in a bid to reach teachers and other adult stakeholders who might work with young people. It was not designed to be used by, and was not promoted to, young men. Internal materials stated that the app's main purpose was 'to stimulate conversation and it is NOT a comprehensive relationships and sexuality education resource', and that it was 'designed to be used in a one-to-one or small group setting but it can be used with larger groups. In a session using the app, True recommends at least 30-60 minutes per topic, addressing 1-3 topics in a single session.' Therefore, in this article we characterise the app as a 'locked down', provider-centred app with a relatively closed relationship to the surrounding digital or social media ecology – that is, a 'walled-garden' app.

The app's home screen features seven topics, each featuring a different comedian. Two of the topics fall under the domain of education about biological aspects of sex – 'Sexual health' and 'Condoms' – such topics are inescapable in any project supported by a formal sexual health organisation. However, what makes the project more unusual is that it also covers domains of Healthy Sexual Development that have been identified in previous research as being less likely to be covered by sex education by parents and schools (McKee et al, 2014):

- Good Lovin' (this included material that was aligned with the Healthy Sexual Development domain 'Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable')
- Dating Scene ('Relationship skills', 'An understanding of consent')
- The First Time ('Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable', 'An understanding of consent' and 'Relationship skills')
- Breaking Up ('Relationship skills')
- Masturbation ('Awareness and acceptance that sex can be pleasurable')

A user clicks on the topic they would like to know more about and is taken to a menu screen for that topic, which incorporates both the vulgar comedy content (under the relevant heading – for example, 'Funny guys talk about their first time', the 'Funny guys get serious' video content featuring the comedians discussing a topic related to sex and relationships, 'interesting facts' and traditional relationship and sex education information related to the topic under the heading 'frequently asked questions':



Figure 1. Topic homescreen in the app – ‘The First Time’

Before settling on the app format the team had originally envisaged distributing the material through social media. As part of our focus group testing of the project we explored the benefits and advantages of the app compared to social media for reaching the target audience with the material.

Focus groups

A series of seven focus groups was run for this project. Six were with young people both under the age of eighteen (the youngest was fourteen) and over eighteen (the oldest was twenty). The groups included both male (the target audience) and female participants. Female participants were included as peers and potential partners of the target audience; research has shown that friendship relationships are an important variable in understanding the reception of and engagement with sexual health information (see Byron, 2017). The young people were recruited from sources

including a local flexible school that educates 'hard to reach' young people, and from among first year undergraduate students at the university where the research was conducted. A total of fifteen young men and five young women participated in these groups. In addition, a seventh focus group was run with ten adult stakeholders in sexual health education and promotion. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and then reviewed by the authors using a poststructuralist textual analysis method.

Poststructuralist textual analysis sees texts as 'the material traces that are left of the practice of sense-making – the only empirical evidence we have of how other people make sense of the world' (McKee, 2003, p. 18) . Under this approach to interpreting texts, the researcher seeks to understand how the speaker is making sense of the world. They do not take a naïve realist approach to this data: they do not attempt to measure the 'authenticity' or 'truth' of the speaking positions (McKee, 2003); and they do not look for hidden deep meanings of which the interviewees themselves would be unaware. Rather, they treated the interview data as a text to be subjected to poststructural textual analysis, making 'an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text' (McKee 2003, p. 1). The researcher does this by paying attention to the context, genre, available discourses and language systems, bearing in mind the audiences for a text. In analysing the transcriptions of these focus groups this meant that we were interested in the discourses that were employed by the speakers and what they told us about the way they make sense of the workings of social media and sexual health.

Results

The value of comedy

Several speakers in the focus groups confirmed that the target audience of young men found the videos 'so funny' (under 18, males group). They also confirmed that the young people found them to be 'informative' and 'helpful', and that they thought the use of such videos could make a valuable contribution to sex and relationships education (SRE) for young men. A consistent message in the focus groups was that these comedy videos were better than either parents or schools as a way of delivering information about sex to this target audience. Focus group members commented that 'It's probably better detail here than school' (under 18, males group) and 'in a way that you understand it as well' (over 18, males group). They noted that in their social and cultural context there are limitations to the information that they can expect to get from parents and from teachers. Two participants in a focus group agreed about the problems of relying on parents to provide sex education:

Really informative I guess. Like it's really hard to get that from your parents as well. Like your parents don't explain it very well. As opposed to hearing it from comedians and it's funny. And they put it in like a not so serious sense.

Because I didn't get the birds and the bees talks from my parents. And then sexual ed in high school was pretty shitty. They just didn't explain it very well.

Putting a condom on a banana. It's like, 'What? I don't want to do this'

(over 18, males group)

Another participant explained that the 'level of embarrassment' involved in talking to parents about sex limits their ability to provide frank and detailed sex education:

...like you don't want to talk about it because it's a no no. You don't go up to Mum and Dad, you don't want to have the talk with them, because that's beyond

embarrassing. That's like leave home and never come back, if you know, Dad sits you down and talks about the birds and the bees

(over 18, males group)

One speaker made a similar point about the difficulty of teachers delivering sex education, where the 'professional relationship' interferes with the need for open and honest discussions:

...you don't want your actual teacher having a chat with you. Because then you have, you're meant to have a professional relationship with them, or you know, 'You mark my work, I go to you to learn things. I don't want to be talking about, you know, sex issues with you'

(over 18, males group)

In short, the participants noted that there were no existing relationships or sources of information where they could get this kind of information about sex in such a frank, funny, and unembarrassed way. In such a context the participants noted that (mobile) social media, available on personal devices, was the ideal way to deliver such information:

Social media is of course easier, because you can do it at any stage, you can do it at home, on the bus, anything like that. You don't have to, you know, interact with another person, if you will, if you're embarrassed about it

(over 18, male s group)

This remark hints at a profound but subtle distinction between the affordances of locked down, provider-centred, walled-garden apps such as 7 Funny Guys, and the affordances of the social media ecology.

Locked down, provider-centred apps vs social media

There was less enthusiasm from the young people for the app itself than for the comedy content it contained. Some of them noted that they generally 'never ever' download apps 'unless they go viral' 'like unless they kind of like, yeah, given out through something' (over 18, females group). In terms of this app in particular, they particularly liked the comedy, rather than the serious elements:

In terms of the app design, the stand-up routines should be separated and the talking after.

Do you all prefer the stand up?

Yes

(under 18, males group)

Perhaps the most powerful insight into how such an app appears to young people is the response of one participant who when asked 'Who do you think would have an app like this on their iPad?' replied 'Perverts or teachers' (under 18, males group).

It was clear to the young people in the focus groups that the best way for this material to be distributed to young people is through social media. In response to the facilitator's prompt 'Imagine if you saw this on a YouTube video. Somebody shared it in the first place', respondents agreed that they would share this material:

Especially if I was younger. I mean especially with the comedians. I think if I saw something on YouTube that was just those comedians. That whole stand up thing. That would be really like, funny. But also very, what's the word? Helpful I guess

(over 18, males group)

YouTube playlists, they agreed, 'are always great' because 'They just autoplay one video after the next' – and then – if 'it's short and funny and good content', then 'You just keep watching' (over 18, females group).

Spreadability and connectivity

We were interested in whether these young people would choose to share this material with their networks via the social media ecology of platforms and apps that they use in everyday life. As we noted above, we understand this ecology in terms of van Dijck's (2013) framework of 'platformed sociality' or 'cultures of connectivity' that involve 'mutual shaping of users, platforms, advertisers, and, more generally, online performative environments' (8). Acknowledging, then, that social media ecosystems are shaped by political economies, structural issues and elements of the individual personality of consumers, there remain some common traits that are likely to make such content more spreadable. These include a focus on 'true stories about real people' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 257; Shifman, 2014), 'sexual content and profanity' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 257; O'Leary, 2013) and – perhaps most vitally - promoting an emotional response (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011, p. 257; Jack Stuef, cited in Read, 2012; Shifman, 2014; Teixeira, Wedel & Pieters, 2012, p. 144). Content that has been found to meet these criteria well includes humour (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. np; Kaplan & Haenlein 2011, p. 257; O'Leary, 2013; Matt Stopera, cited in Read, 2012; Schulze, Schöler & Skiera, 2014, p. 3; Shifman, 2014; Tuten & Solomon, 2015, pp. 146-147) and material that represents 'flawed masculinity' (Shifman, 2014). Additionally, successful social media content has formal characteristics that make it amenable to high levels of engagement, including but going beyond

shareability. For example, Burgess & Green's (2009) research on the most popular YouTube content showed that, from the first years of YouTube, while clips from mainstream media might have been more frequently *viewed*, the stand-out genre of videos that were most frequently *commented on* or *responded to* were the videoblogs (vlogs) – straight-to-camera personal videos ranging from the confessional to the zany and comedic, often drawing directly on the personal experiences and life-changing events in the vloggers' everyday lives (Burgess & Green, 2009: 53-4). Today, this genre has evolved into a highly commercial, wildly popular sub-sector of the digital media industry and is a highly significant part of the social media ecology, or what Cunningham and Craig call 'social media entertainment' (Cunningham & Craig, 2017) – a field of professionalised media production drawing on vernacular or amateur codes of representation, where authenticity is important but playfully contested. Gender and sexuality stories – often told by young people going through their process of learning and discovery, and (within important limits) subject to a lower level of content control and censorship – are not only a particularly dominant form of content for YouTube, but are increasingly shared by young people across social media ecosystems as a source of alternative sex education (Saner 2018).

The young people in our focus groups agreed with this analysis: 'I'm like, if it's not funny in the first minute, I'm done'. (over 18, females group). Participants noted that 'people respond better to humour' (over 18, males group), and said that comic material is actually better for educational purposes because when videos are making you laugh 'they're informing you at the same time' (over 18, males group). Funny personal stories are 'more interesting and engaging', because you think 'it's another human being who does the same things as you, if you will' (over 18, males group). Humorous material is more likely to be shared:

What sort of stuff would your friends share?

Just like naked women, and butts and stuff.

What about funny clips like on *South Park*, if it were really crass?

I mean everything is a sex show if you think long and hard about it.

Would you remember stuff in *South Park* as a meme or something?

Collective: Yep.

Where would you share something like that.

Everywhere (under 18, males group)

It is therefore not surprising that the young people in our focus groups saw our content as being highly spreadable. It includes real people talking about themselves, using profanity to give practical advice about something that matters to young people – which is also sexual content. It promotes emotional content – particularly humour and shock. And the men in the videos are cheerfully admitting to flawed masculinity – these are not the cyborg penises of mainstream porn, staying hard for hours and fucking women like machines. These are stories of hilarious failure, presented without rancour, for educational purposes. The focus group participants agreed that they would share the kind of self-deprecating humor in these comedy videos: ‘Something like that would spread so fast on Facebook, any good stand up would. Especially as it’s so informal’ (under 18, males group). They would ‘definitely’ drop links to them (over 18, females group), and tell their mates about it (over 18, males group). As one participant said ‘I can definitely see me tagging a couple of friends on Good Loving. Just for shits and gigs [giggles]. That'd be pretty funny’ (over 18, males group).

Young people see this material as both funny and engaging, providing helpful information about sex, and they are keen to spread it to their social networks. This

finding echoes previous research in which Australian young people responded positively to the possibility of sharing humorous and irreverent sexual health messaging via social media (Byron et al., 2013). Such valuing of content, to the extent of it being seen as appropriate to share, also feeds into broader narratives regarding the role of the digital in enabling peer support and education in health contexts (see for example: Tolli 2012,; Harris & Farrington 2014; Hendry et al. 2017).

Adult stakeholders' perspectives

Our adult stakeholders focus group included ten participants who work in sex education and sexual health promotion, including clinical nurses in the youth sexual health area, teachers, youth support workers, and health promoters. Their thoughts on the material were different from those of the young people. Ems and Gonzales note that digital media can be used in health promotion 'to bridge the culturally disconnected social worlds inhabited by [target audiences] and public health practitioners' (Ems & Gonzales 2015, p. 1759). However our research suggested that sometimes those different social worlds include very different assumptions about how sexual health education should take place.

One key issue raised was the age of people for whom this would be appropriate. Young men under 18 responded well to it, and one of the over 18 respondents said it would have been particularly 'helpful' when he was 'younger'. By contrast, in the stakeholders focus groups participants suggested it was appropriate for much older people than the target audience. One stakeholder noted that 'As I watched it I imagined it appealing to late teens'; another commented that, 'I do still think some of the content is a bit old',

while another suggested that 'One of my kids who is twenty two, he would love this'. Yet another commented that:

I've showed it to the P & C group [Parents and Citizens, Australian advisory groups for schools] and they liked it, but they thought some of the content was a bit too old for them, re the first time you have sex, that was a parent rep and the P & C representative

Interestingly, the stakeholders also thought a problem with the material was the lack of teenage comedians: suggesting that 'I think it would have been great if they could have had younger presenters, rather than the older guys so that it would appeal more' and that 'the lack of younger men's voices is an issue'. None of the young people mentioned this as an issue, and they responded positively to the material. In this context we also note that the other forms of entertainment that the young men mentioned as their favourites - *South Park*, *Futurama*, *The Simpsons* and *Bob's Burgers* - aren't created by, or star, people their own age. They see themselves as part of a larger community of masculinity - they don't see a clear division between people their age and older adults in the way that the stakeholders do.

Unlike the young people's preference for a social media platform like YouTube the stakeholders liked the app format. The P & C group mentioned above: 'liked the content (a lot). Especially the fact that the comedians continued with the serious talk after the comedy section'. Another adult stakeholder 'liked the way that it had funny videos but then the guys got serious'. In their explanations of why they particularly liked the app format the adult stakeholders focused on control of meaning - how to make sure that consumers interpreted the videos in the 'right' way (that is, in the way that the adult

stakeholders think they should be interpreting it, focusing on the serious material and not being distracted by the comedy), and took the correct actions after viewing it:

[But w]ill young people get as much out of it by just watching this clip?

You would need to find out more, you need a call to action once you have watched it

...

Yes, I think it is a good resource, used in context but you don't know how young people will take the messages. Some things may be challenging, some people may take the jokes as gospel, you just don't know

The comments of the stakeholders accord with the positions taken in previous research by sexual health promoters, who ask, for example, 'How can we determine whether participants are "just stopping by" a site or actually engaging with content as intended?' (Korda & Itani 2013, p. 22). Educators seek control of their message not only in terms of how it is accessed, but also in terms of the forms of understanding it generates.

Competing discourses of young people and adult stakeholders

The focus group data highlights a clear division between the responses of young people and adult stakeholders to the videos, particularly in relation to how they should best be distributed – via social media platforms or contained within the 'walled garden' of a locked down stand-alone mobile app. Young people engaged enthusiastically with the idea of seeing such content on social media, and responded positively to the idea of sharing this material with their peers. Given that the material presents sexual health information in ways that young men are enthusiastically engaging with and positively

responding to it might be expected that sex education professionals and teachers would be delighted at the idea of it spreading among peers. But the danger – perceived by this group – that ‘some people may take the jokes as gospel’ – prevents sex education professionals and teachers from sharing the young people’s excitement about the material. These divisions are consistent with the existing research on the challenges of sex education. In privileging control and credibility, young people can become disengaged (Eysenback 2008). Louisa Allen has noted that some sex educators acknowledge that they know what young people want, but then insist that they will not give it to them.

Teachers’ reactions to the first place ranking [in a student survey about what they want from sex education] of ‘how to make sexual activity more enjoyable for both partners’ conveyed their perceptions of student sexuality. A common response was ‘I’m sure they do want to know more about that’, in a tone implying this request could not be taken seriously (Allen 2008, p. 581)

Similarly, while young people see the content of these vulgar comedy videos as being funny and helpful, and something they would spread across their networks, stakeholders are concerned that it is too old for them, and that ‘you don’t know how young people will take the messages’.

This disjuncture is particularly relevant to digital media. One of the key points to making your content spreadable says Scott is to ‘lose control’:

Here’s a component that scares most people silly. You’ve got to lose control of your messages [for them to go viral], you need to make your valuable online content totally free (and freely sharable)’ (Scott 2015, p. 118)

Writing about how to make media spreadable, Jenkins et al similarly emphasise that a vital component of doing this involves giving up (fantasies of) control over how your material is used and distributed:

Brands and entertainment properties cannot return to the one-directional communication flows of the broadcast era, when they had the perception of control, so companies must listen to and learn from their audiences if they want to enjoy long-term success (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013, p. np)

For researchers who specialise in spreadable media the fact that that producers cannot have absolute control over how people interpret or distribute content – what they learn from it and how they teach from it – is unavoidable. More than this, these researchers argue that it can be seen as a positive thing:

the collective control over meaning making and content circulation we all now have may provide powerful new ways to participate as citizens and society members (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013, p. np)

In the creation of digital health resources it is useful to bear in mind that the ways in which producers and consumers conceptualise online health information can differ quite dramatically (Mager 2009). In creating online health resources for immigrants with low literacy skills, Guttman et al. (2017) found that the consumers used the website in ways they didn't expect:

An unexpected finding was that participants noted several important potential social and cultural benefits of the website, especially cross-generation communication, communication between spouses on sensitive health issues, and a community resource (Guttman et al. 2017, p. 12)

They embraced this unexpected data and built it into the evaluation of their project. By contrast, Albury has noted that sexuality educators and health promotion professionals have a fondness for digital ‘walled gardens’ (Albury 2017) - sealed ecosystems where the producer has a large amount of control – and the 7 Funny Guys app is a prime example of this approach. If social media sites represent the loss of control that might engage young people to participate as educators, apps represent a fantasy of educational control, where we can ensure that young people only learn the right things, in the right way, leading to the right actions. Our research confirms the view from the literature that formal sex education and health promotion content often do not match up with what young people want to learn. It also demonstrates that there can be a mismatch in terms of *how* young people want to learn. While stakeholders often acknowledge the fact that they’re not giving young people what they want, many are uncomfortable discussing sexual pleasure, or feel the institutional and policy frameworks in which they work require them to avoid ‘hot button’ topics (Albury & Byron in press; Leahy & McCuaig 2013). In the case of distribution of material by social media there is the added concern of context – that when social media distributors such as YouTube rely on algorithms to program material, there is a risk that the video that follows a sex education clip could be extreme or offensive (Lewis, 2018).

Entertainment versus education

We propose that this disjunction between what young people seek and what educators and promoters approve of can also be understood as part of a wider division between different models of culture – entertainment vs education. Many researchers have noted that the most spreadable social media content is entertaining: ‘people ... like to be

entertained' (Scott, p. 118) and 'consumers use Facebook and many other social network platforms primarily for entertainment' (Schulze, Schöler & Skiera 2014, p. 1). The top three 'reasons people share content' include 'they find it ... entertaining' (Tutin & Solomon, pp. 146-147). McKee has proposed three broad cultural modes, each with its own specific orientation towards its audiences:

- The **educational** model of culture: you *must* consume this text or you will fail the course;
- the **arts** model of culture: you *should* consume this text because it is good for you;
- and finally, the **entertainment** model of culture: What texts would you like to consume? (McKee 2016, p. 33)

The research – including our focus groups – shows young people discussing social media through the entertainment mode of culture. McKee suggests that the aesthetic qualities of good entertainment are vulgarity, emotion, fun, speed and loudness, spectacle, story, seriality, adaptation, happy endings and interactivity (McKee 2012). There is substantial overlap between what makes good entertainment and what makes for spreadable content. And these forms of culture share a starting point – understand the audience and give them what they want. This is the discourse the young people employ to think about the value of our content. They think it is useful, helpful, informative – but more than this, it is entertaining, and thus has the potential to recruit them as peer sex educators by sharing the spreadable media.

By contrast the discourses employed by sex education professionals and teachers are the discourses of education. Their desire is not to give young people what they want, but what sex education professionals and teachers believe young people, at that age,

should want, and can have. It is not a coincidence that previous researchers on the use of social media for sexual health promotion have asked focus groups of young people to review content and then answer whether 'all teens *should* watch this video' (emphasis added) (Bottorff et al. 2014, p. 164) – rather than whether they *would want to* watch the video. By contrast, both entertainment and spreadable media start with the audience (McKee 2012, p. 18). It is interesting that, as noted above, 'credibility' is not a key component of spreadability: 'One possible explanation is that users may not be concerned with credibility when they share in social media' (Ma, Lee & Goh 2014, p. 611). It has also been argued that 'consumers use Facebook with the intention of having fun and being entertained rather than doing something useful' (Schulze, Schöler & Skiera 2014, p. 13) and so fun can be positioned as more important than credibility for spreadability. That said, in the right context, media may be spreadable precisely because it is credible, in order to counter false narratives. In the context we refer to here, even though fun and humour may be important, as producers of entertainment sex education, we should not abandon credibility. However, we must recognize that while credibility is important for us, it is less important for the audiences we seek to reach as peer educators. We must wear our credibility lightly and not let it get in the way of how material is shared:

Among the central lessons of producing entertainment is that at all costs an entertainment product must avoid being 'worthy' - a cardinal sin of entertainment (McKee 2012, p. 17)

If young people are to become sharing peer educators, the material they are given to share must avoid being preachy or lecturing. It must be open to the possibility that the young people themselves might do unexpected things with it, or use it in ways that

educators haven't predicted. This is challenging sex education professionals and teachers, of course – what if young people learn the wrong things? But such a shift is perhaps simply a case of acknowledging what is already a reality: for despite the desires of educators to control what young people learn, the reality is young people are already, and always have been, active agents in their own learning. They make uses of material in ways that we might not predict – this is currently the case and has always been. The fantasy whereby if we could only have sufficient control over material, contexts and learning practices we could control exactly what young people take away from every educational experience has only ever been that – a fantasy. Further, as van Dick and Poell observe, practices of connectivity within social media ecosystems intrinsically rely on the interplay between media producers' and platform advertisers' drive to create audiences and markets (or communities of 'good learners' in the case of sexuality education), and individual users' desires to create and strengthen networks of affinity (2013, p.8). To acknowledge – as spreadable media shows us – that audiences are always active in making sense of texts (including educational texts) is not to give up the reality of control, but rather to acknowledge the reality that such control has never existed.

Conclusion

Jen Gilbert has written about the 'desire for transparency and accessibility of meaning in sex education' (Gilbert, 2004: 233), noting that this is problematic, as relationships and sex are not transparent, and their meanings are not always easily accessible. She argues for the use of novels in sex education as a way to make space for ambiguity, and to reconceive sex education as 'a place of questions rather than answers' (234). We

suggest that a similar point can be made about the use of social media in sex education. Young people like our material, think it would be useful, and think it should be set loose in the world, to become shareable, 'spreadable' media. They are excited about the idea of becoming peer educators by sharing this content (although they don't name it in such a way). As social media researchers insist, producers giving up control is a vital part of content becoming spreadable. By contrast, the adult stakeholders in our focus group worry about the loss of control involved in setting material loose in this way. Their concerns are understandable. Given that audiences are active, and that they can do unpredictable things with content, there is a risk in educators and promoters letting their material go free into the world. Indeed, what would education even look like if we accepted that we can't predict exactly what people will learn from our course materials and how they will use and distribute them?

This may require a profound epistemological shift in our thinking. John Hartley offers a possible model for this new mode of what we might call *unpredictable pedagogy* in his book *The Uses of Television*, where he discusses television as a massive pedagogical machine that has educated populations in unforeseeable but exciting and positive ways. He gives the example of nature documentaries.

Coming out of the 1950s ... television showed a domestic audience something of 'nature' ... Hans and Lotte Hass, Armand and Michaela Denis ... now we have environmentalism, eco-warriors and the million-member ... Royal Society for the Protection of Birds ... 'nature' with political teeth ... (Hartley, 1999, p. 180)

Relevant to this article is Hartley's theory of how this form of education might work. Like Gilbert, he rejects the desire for a linear, predictable model of information

exchange, but retains a belief that people might learn from culture – in unexpected, unpredictable, complex ways, but learning nonetheless:

Of course David Attenborough didn't 'cause' all this, but it is my belief that year after year of Anglia's *Survival*, Oxford Scientific Films, the Nature Unit productions of BBC Bristol ... have done just what Hoggart said they would ... persuading millions of the need to tread more lightly on the natural environment (Hartley 1999, p. 180)

We know that these nature documentarians were passionate about nature, that they wanted to show their citizenries how nature functioned and to communicate to their viewers their passion for its importance and protection. But the entertainment content they produced was not aligned with a rigorous curriculum or lesson plans. They could not have predicted just how their education of populations would lead to social and political changes. In making a television nature documentary in the 1950s they could not have foreseen – as Hartley suggests – the growth of a massive and powerful organisation like the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. And yet their entertainment did educate. Outside of their control, with the full risk that viewers might not take the right message from their content, they educated a population and changed the world. Like our stakeholders, they knew that 'you don't know how ... people will take the messages ... you just don't know' – but this did not stop them from creating and distributing their content. The young people in our focus groups strongly agreed that this material was helpful and informative, that it did tell them about healthy sexual development, that it told them what they needed to know, and it did so in ways that engaged them. They told us that they were keen to become peer educators, to share this material. They want to escape from the walled garden – and although it is challenging

for educators to think philosophically about what education might mean in that context, we can at least begin to think through these challenges.

Social media ecologies and their logics of connectivity and spreadability present even greater challenges to institution-led education of all kinds, but especially on sensitive or intimate topics (see Light 2014, Chapter 7). Young people's content sharing and discursive communities are quite deliberately shielded from adult surveillance and from the control of content producers. Much sharing and almost all discussion tends to happen in shielded or private instant messaging applications like Snapchat or Facebook messenger (boyd 2014), or is culturally encrypted in public via practices that danah boyd calls 'social steganography' (boyd 2014, pp. 65-66) – and our participants echoed this, saying they would share the more sensitive content 'in a group chat in Facebook, so it's more enclosed'. On one hand, social media ecologies present opportunities for sexuality educators and health promotion professionals to capitalise on what van Dijck and Poell have termed 'the tactics of automated group formation', deploying the algorithmic capacities of social media platforms to 'push' educational content to target audiences (2013, p.8). That said, greater involvement by educators in such spaces, however well-intentioned, might drive young people's publics further underground. Secondly, our adult stakeholders noted some risks of releasing content into the wild rather than young people co-watching it with a responsible adult on an iPad in a classroom setting – namely, that you can't control the age of the audience or ensure the material won't be 'misinterpreted'. This concern reflects another dimension of automated social media logics. On popular social media entertainment platforms like YouTube and Facebook, as noted above, content is curated algorithmically – and there is no guarantee that a vulgar comedy video just on the edge of acceptability to our

stakeholders won't be followed by a recommended video that is perceived to cross the line, containing unhelpful or unhealthy advice, or misogynistic and racist content.

The challenge, then, goes far beyond letting go of the didactic model of education, and touches on more profound issues of the philosophy of risk. In letting material such as the vulgar comedy videos in our study into the wild, the challenge for sexual health and education organisations is to see these risks as learning opportunities that young people are taking up as part of their everyday lives, which are already integrated into the social media ecology; and to find ways to amplify the opportunities for healthy sexual development that these learning experiences (including exposure to challenging content) might represent (see Livingstone & Helsper 2010). Just as the big entertainment producers have had to learn the hard way that they can't directly participate in the fandoms that emerge out of an affective engagement with their content if they want it to be 'spreadable' (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013), so too sex educators who want to engage with the social media ecology and its cultures of connectivity and spreadability will need to accept a profound loss of control if they want to contribute ideas and content around healthy sexual development to the social media ecology. Further experiments in this project will test these ideas as we release some of the 7 Funny Guys content into the wild, where we will be able to observe the limits of control and surveillance over peer learning, and both the opportunities and challenges of sexual health organisations reframing themselves as spreadable media producers and curators.

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by the Australian Research Council Linkage project number LP140100226.

References

- Albury K (2017) 'Recognition of competition' vs the Will To App. paper In: *Australasian 2017 Sexual Health Conference*, Canberra, Australia, 7-9 November 2017.
<https://az659834.vo.msecnd.net/eventsairaeuprod/production-ashm-public/bb0617e9713f40d9802d1f9d371ef1cd> (accessed 14 March, 2018).
- Albury, K and Byron, P (in press) Taking off the risk goggles: exploring the intersection of young people's sexual and digital citizenship in sexual health promotion. In P. Aggleton, R. Cover, & D. Marshall (Eds.), *Youth and Sexual Citizenship*. London & New York: Routledge (accepted October 2017)
- Allen L (2008) They Think You Shouldn't be Having Sex Anyway: Young People's Suggestions for Improving Sexuality Education Content. *Sexualities* 11(5): 573-594.
- Bottorff JL, Struik LL, Bissell L, Graham R, Stevens J and Richardson, CG (2014) A social media approach to inform youth about breast cancer and smoking: An exploratory descriptive study. *Collegian* 21(2): 159-168.
- boyd d (2014) *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Byron, P (2017) Friendship, sexual intimacy and young people's negotiations of sexual health. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 19(4): 486-500.
- Ems L and Gonzales, A L (2015) Subculture-centred public health communication: A social media strategy, *New Media & Society*, 18(8): 1750-1767.

- Evans DL and Tripp JH (2006) Sex education: The case for primary prevention and peer education, *Current Paediatrics* 16(2): 95-99.
- Eysenback G (2008) Credibility of health information and digital media: New perspectives and implications for youth. In: Metzger MJ and Flanagin AJ (eds) *Digital Media, Youth and Credibility*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.123-154.
- Gilbert, J (2004) Literature as sex education. *Changing English* 11(2): 233-241
- Guttman N, Lev E, Segev E, Ayecheh S, Ziv L, Gadamo F, Dayan N and Yavetz G (2017) I never thought I could get health information from the Internet!: Unexpected uses of an Internet website designed to enable Ethiopian immigrants with low/no literacy skills to browse health information. *New Media & Society*. OnlineFirst: 1-24.
- Harris A and Farrington D (2014) 'It gets narrower': Creative strategies for re-broadening queer peer education. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning* 14(2): 144-158.
- Hartley J (1999) *Uses of Television*. London: Routledge.
- Hendry, NA, Brown, G, Dowsett, GW and Carman M (2017) Association between sexually transmissible infection testing, numbers of partners and talking to partners and friends about sexual health: survey of young adults. *Sexual Health* 14: 378-382.
- Jenkins H Ford S and Green J (2013) *Spreadable Media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. Digital edition edn, New York: New York University Press.
- Korda H and Itani Z (2013) Harnessing social media for health promotion and behavior change. *Health Promotion Practice* 14(1): 15-23.

- Leahy D and McCuaig L (2013) *Supporting Teachers to Teach Relationships and Sexuality Education*. Report. Brisbane: Family Planning Queensland.
- Lewis, P (2018) 'Fiction is outperforming reality': how YouTube's algorithm distorts truth. *The Guardian*, 2 February 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth>, accessed 20 March 2018
- Light, B. (2014) *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Livingstone S and Helsper E (2010) 'Balancing opportunities and risks in teenagers' use of the internet: The role of online skills and internet self-efficacy'. *New Media & Society* 12(2): 309-329.
- Ma L, Lee CS and Goh DH-L (2014) Understanding news sharing in social media: An explanation from the diffusion of innovations theory. *Online Information Review*. (38)5: 598-615.
- Mager A (2009) Mediated health: Sociotechnical practices of providing and using online health information. *New Media & Society* 11(7) 1123-1142.
- McKee A (2003) *Textual Analysis: A beginner's guide*. London: Sage.
- McKee A (2012) The aesthetic system of entertainment. In: McKee A, Collis C and Hamley B (eds), *Entertainment Industries: Entertainment as a cultural system*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, pp. 9-19.
- McKee A (2016) *FUN! What entertainment tells us about living a good life*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McKee, A (2017) Learning from commercial entertainment producers in order to create entertainment sex education. *Sex Education* 17(1): 26-40.

- McKee A, Albury K, Dunne M, Grieshaber S, Hartley J, Lumby, C and Mathews B (2010) Healthy Sexual Development: A Multidisciplinary Framework for Research. *International Journal of Sexual Health* 22(1): 14-19.
- McKee, A, Watson A-F and Dore, J (2014) 'It's all scientific to me': focus group insights into why young people don't apply safe sex knowledge. *Sex Education* 14(6): 652-665.
- McKee A, Walsh A and Watson A-F (2014) Using digitally distributed vulgar comedy to reach young men with information about healthy sexual development. *Media International Australia* 153(1): 128-137.
- Saner, E (2018) Masturbation hacks and consent advice: how YouTubers took over sex education. *The Guardian* 13 March.
https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/mar/12/sex-education-consent-advice-youtube-hannah-witton-laci-green?CMP=share_btn_tw (accessed 14 March 2018).
- Schulze C, Schöler L and Skiera, B (2014) Not all fun and games: Viral marketing for utilitarian products. *Journal of Marketing* 78(1): 1-19.
- Scott DM (2015) *The New Rules of Marketing and PR: How to use social media, online, video, mobile applications, blogs, news releases and viral marketing to reach buyers directly*. 5th ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Tolli MV (2012). Effectiveness of peer education interventions for HIV prevention, adolescent pregnancy prevention and sexual health promotion for young people: A systematic review of European studies. *Health Education Research* 27(5): 904-913.
- Tutin TL and Solomon, MR (2015) *Social Media Marketing*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles and London: Sage.

van Dijck J (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity: a Critical History of Social Media*. New York: Oxford University Press.

van Dijck J and Poell, T (2013) Understanding Social Media Logic. *Media and Communication* 1(1): 2-14.