Sexual Cultures, Entertainment Media and Communications Technologies

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In this section we take sexuality education out of the classroom and explore the ways in which communications technologies enable informal learning about sex in everyday spaces.

Much sexuality education research has privileged the schoolroom as the most important place for young people to learn about sex, and the work of teachers as the most important communication technology. But we know that young people learn about sex from a range of sources – including their parents, peers and entertainment media as well as formal schooling (McKee, 2012) . It is our position that research into how young people learn about sex must take account of this learning ecology, asking how and what young people learn from each of these sources, and how the sources interact, support or contradict each other. Traditionally this has not been how sexuality education research has approached the issue.

Sexuality educators have tended to assign different values to each of these sources without necessarily drawing on empirical evidence about how the various forms might operate in the context of everyday practices. For example parents and schools are typically viewed as unproblematically positive sources of information about sex(Fisher and Barak, 1989). This is despite the fact that mounting evidence suggests that both of these sources have important limitations as sex educators. In particular, both schools and

parents often present a negative view of sex – as a focus group respondent in one research project puts it, young people are still getting the message,'Just don't have sex. You'll get pregnant and die' (McKee et al., 2014, p. 6).

Conversely, entertainment media are assumed by researchers of sex education – again often without empirical evidence – to be a delivery mechanism for 'myths' and misinformation about sex, sexuality and gender (Brown and Bobkowski, 2011). This view of popular media implicitly draws on traditions of communication theory sometimes referred to as sitting within the *media effects model* (Gauntlett, 2005) which seek to determine the 'impact' of media consumption in the same way scientists might determine physiological reactions to a drug, or a foreign substance within the body. Viewed through this lens, young people's media practices are understood as a problem of consumption (similar to smoking, drinking alcohol, or eating junk food). In this context, the educative response has traditionally been to explain the 'impact' of their media consumption to young people, and encourage them to consume more wholesome fare. Implicit here is the notion that media contains 'distorted' representations of sex and sexuality, and therefore serves as false or misleading pedagogical material.

This model assumes that the majority of media content relating to sex and sexuality contains a universally identifiable meaning or message, and with correct literacy skills, young people will learn to decipher (and reject) media texts. However, from the 1970s onwards, many researchers in the fields of media and cultural studies have rejected the notion that media texts (and indeed media genres) have singular meanings (Hall, 1993).

Moreover, these disciplines tend to view media representations of gender, power, race, sexuality, and other aspects of identity, as contextual. For example, Stuart Hall (2013), a key figure in the fields of media and cultural studies has argued that media representations not as 'distortions' of an objective reality, but are one aspect of our broader 'meaning making' practice.

As Hall puts it

> there is no single of 'correct' answer to the question, 'What does this image mean?' or 'What is this ad saying?' Since there is no law which can guarantee that things will have one, true meaning, or that meanings won't change over time, work in this area is bound to be interpretive – a debate … between equally plausible, though sometimes contesting and competing interpretations (Hall 2013: xxv)

This doesn't mean that media and cultural studies scholars are relativistic in relation to media texts, arguing that they can mean *anything*. On the contrary, Hall and others have contributed volumes of work examining the ways that dominant cultural ideologies are played out within media (Stoddart, 2007). Increasingly, however, the key question within media and cultural studies is not what media does *to* young people, but what young people do *with* media. In this context media literacy within the context of sexuality education is not simply a matter of learning to deconstruct and resist media texts, or replacing 'sex myths' with 'sex facts'. Increasingly, too, the popularisation of social media platforms and portable devices such as smart-phones requires educators to adapt to new learning environments, in which literacy is an active process that requires skills

including not only textual analysis, but digital media production, and ethical decision-making (Albury 2013).

While there is a sizable literature addressing entertainment media as a 'risk factor' in relation to sexual learning (see for example Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009) , and an expanding literature on entertainment media as a delivery mechanism for positive/legitimate sexual messaging regarding sex and sexuality (for example Ward et al 2006), the articles in this section seek to explore another aspect of the intersection between young people's media practices, and their formal and informal processes of sexual learning. As Sandlin, Schultz and Burdick observe, while there is a tradition of debate within the fields of both education and cultural studies as to the nature of 'public pedagogy', there is a consensus within educational scholarship that "schools are not the sole sites of teaching, learning and curricula, and perhaps … they are not the most influential" (Sandlin, Schultz and Burdick 1999: 2). It is for this reason that the focus of the chapters in this section is less on 'education' and more on 'learning'. Although these two concepts are inextricably linked, the term 'education' is more focused on the intention of the teacher. 'Education' suggests an intent to pass on particular information to a student, a structured program, delivered within a formal space where students know that they have come to be taught and improved. By contrast, 'learning' as a concept is focused on the person who receives information and ideas, which can happen anywhere, with or without the intent of the producer or consumer. Communications technologies – and entertainment media – play a vital part in learning, particularly outside of the classroom. For this reason, only two of these chapters address formal education within

schools (Abidin and Albury, Hasinoff and Senft); all of them consider how different entertainment media might contribute to learning about sex.

This section considers media and media practices (such as selfies, and sharing on social media) that address what Allen (2001) has termed sexuality education's 'knowledge/practice gap'. The chapters move from older media to newer, starting with a consideration of how even the most traditional media like newspapers can contribute to learning about sex, through the work of television and mobile phones, through discussions of material distributed on the Internet to end up with a consideration of user-generated content and its role in disturbing the traditional producer-consumer binary that still informs so much thinking about the entertainment media and sexual learning.
. Read together, the articles can be seen to explore media as a source of popular pedagogy via what du Gay and colleagues (1997) have termed the 'circuit of culture' model, which considers not only media representations as a source of meaning, but also reflects on questions of political economy, and the everyday contexts in which media is consumed, shared and made.

Despina Chronaki's chapter takes an innovative approach to the news media, considering their role in young people's sexual learning. There exists a long tradition of communications research considering the role of journalism in political debate and the workings of the public sphere. However little research has considered the ways in which news stories provide young people with a perspective on sex. Chronaki's analysis points

out that the most common ways in which sex appears in new stories about young people is as a dangerous force from which they must be protected. Particularly in stories about pornography and sexualisation young people are repeatedly told that sex is dangerous and they should – ideally – be ignorant about it. What are the implications for young people, Chronaki asks, when one of the most respected sources of information about sex tells them that they should be scared of and ignorant about sex?

Kyra Clarke discusses the ways in which young people might learn about sex from the entertainment television program *Glee*. Rather than limiting her analysis to counting the number of times that young people have – or don't have – sex in the program, Clarke argues that *Glee* presents an understanding of sexuality, intimacy and identity which is profoundly progressive. Not only does the program embrace queer identities – including gay, lesbian and trans* identities – it also embraces a fluid version of sexuality that shows young people that identity need not be stable and fixed for a lifetime. In this, Kyra argues, the very format of entertainment television is better suited to communicating the reality of sexual experience than more formal versions of education with their fixed curricula.

Rob Cover's work is interested in the role of mobile phones in the formation of queer identities and communities. Like Clarke he argues that entertainment television is better positioned to understand and communicate queer possibilities than formal classroom teaching about sex. While many school curricula about mobile devices are framed in terms of threat to stable identities, Cover argues that the British version of the television

program *Queer as Folk* embraces the possibilities of communication technologies to support the formation of fluid forms of identity and sexuality.

Evelyn Aldaz, Sandra Fosado and Ana Amuchástegui's chapter discusses a series of sixty educational animations produced by the Mexican organisation *Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir* (CDD - Catholics for Free Choice). As Aldaz, Fosado and Amuchástegui explain, school-based sexuality education is a vexed topic in Mexico, due to conflict between the secular basis of the Mexican State, and the influence of the Catholic Church within Mexican society. As a social justice and human rights-focused Catholic organisation, the CCD draws on popular pedagogical strategies to provide sexuality education that is not overtly opposed to the church, but illustrates the differences between conservative and progressive Catholic approaches to sexuality. Aldaz and colleagues contextualise the series within an emerging genre of 'entertainment education', in which popular entertainment genres are deployed for overtly pedagogical ends – in this case a promotion of young people's rights to sexual safety and pleasure are positioned within a faith-based framework of sexuality.

Crystal Abidin's chapter also addresses the role popular sexual pedagogies can play in otherwise conservative environments, by exploring the ways that young Singaporean lifestyle bloggers both challenge and complement formal sexuality education curricula. Drawing on her ethographic fieldwork, Abidin outines the cases of three popular Singporean commercial bloggers (or 'influencers'), who have overtly challenged formal

sexuality education's messaging regarding sex before marriage, same-sex relationships, and condom use.

Natalie Hendry's chapter draws on her experience of teaching in young people's mental health facilities, where 'sex education' does not form a discrete part of the curriculum. Hendry explores innovative pedagogical formats for exploring with young people how social media experiences relate to sexuality, gender and embodiment. Her teaching once again sits outside of traditional classrooms, and is not based on a one-way transmission model of information from teacher to student. She does not accept paradigms that see social media as a threat that must be resisted: rather she outlines exercises whereby she works with young people to critically explore the affordances and limitations of different social media forms and how they relate to learning about sexuality and relationships.

Finally Kath Albury, Amy Hasinoff and Theresa Senft draw on a range of research conducted with young people and adults in Australia and North America to recommend new approaches to 'sexting' (or the digital production and sharing of naked or semi-naked images) within education and policy. Moving away from 'just say no' approaches to sexting education, this chapter draws on the theoretical and practical from the Selfie Researchers network's Creative Commons course on selfies to suggest exercises that engage with young people's everyday media practices. In doing so they draw attention to the challenges and opportunities presented to educators who seek to draw connections between young people's rights to safe, respectful participation in digital cultures of

friendship, flirtation and intimacy, and broader social and political debates regarding the boundaries of privacy and consent in digital spaces.

Together we believe that these seven chapters represent an innovative approach to the contribution of entertainment media to learning about sex, both inside and outside of the formal sexuality classroom. They demonstrate that entertainment media are not simply a bad object that can be corrected by more formal schooling or input from parents. They take a critical approach to the learning processes facilitated by communication technologies, in some cases demonstrating their limitations, in others demonstrating possibilities that go beyond what is possible in classrooms. We hope that they provide a useful model for how future sex education research and pedagogy might proceed.

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