

INTRODUCTION

One of the critical challenges facing young people today is developing a healthy understanding of their sexuality. The U.S. Surgeon General has underscored the importance of this task as one of the nation's leading public health concerns (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Such knowledge developed in the formative years builds the foundation for beliefs and attitudes about sex that can influence each individual's life-long pattern of sexual behavior.

Parents, peers, and schools play a central role in the process of sexual socialization today, just as they have long in the past. Yet in contemporary society, young people also encounter another important element likely to contribute to their sexual socialization: the mass media, and in particular, television (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001). Indeed, some have labeled the media a "sexual super peer" because of its role in establishing norms and expectations for young people in this area (Brown, Halper, & L'Engle, 2005).

Television's treatment of sexual content in recent years has grown increasingly frequent and prominent, raising important societal concerns in an era when decisions about sexual behavior inevitably involve public health issues. Each year in the U.S., one of every four sexually active teens is diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease (Institute of Medicine, 1997). From a broader perspective, approximately 19 million STD infections are diagnosed annually, with nearly half of them afflicting teens and young adults between 15-24 years of age (Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004). In addition, the rate of unplanned teen pregnancy in the U.S. remains among the highest of all industrialized countries despite recent declines (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2004; Singh & Darroch, 1999), driven by the fact that one-third (34%) of young women become pregnant at least once before reaching their 20th birthday (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004).

Given these statistics, and the fact that young people spend more time with television than any other type of media (Roberts & Foehr, 2004; Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005), it is hardly surprising that television's influence on sexual socialization is an important topic of interest and discussion among researchers and policy-makers. Until recent years, however, that topic had received significantly less empirical examination as compared to such concerns as the effects of televised violence or gender and racial stereotyping of TV characters. Before 1990, the nature and extent of television's influence on sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, had only been examined sporadically, perhaps due in part to social sensitivities regarding the collection of data on such topics from young people.

That situation began to shift in the early 1990s, when a number of empirical studies began to surface indicating that portrayals involving sex on television were linked in some way with viewers' sexual cognitions and behaviors. For example, Brown and Newcomer (1991) reported correlations between watching television programming high in sexual content and the early initiation of sexual intercourse by adolescents. Buerkel-Rothfuss and Strouse (1993) demonstrated that heavier viewers of sexual television content had increased perceptions of the frequency with which sexual behaviors occur in the real world. And using an experimental design, Bryant and Rockwell (1994) showed that teens who had just viewed television dramas laden with sexual content tended to rate descriptions of casual sexual encounters less negatively than teens who had not viewed any sexual content. At this point, however, the accumulation of evidence regarding the effects of sexual media messages remained somewhat modest and tentative.

In 1998, the Kaiser Family Foundation convened a working conference of leading media effects scholars whose charge was to draw conclusions about the overall state of knowledge on media sex effects, and to map an agenda for future research. Their report was consistent with the prevailing evidence at the time, which was suggestive but not dispositive in establishing the strength of media influence in this realm.

There are good theoretical reasons to believe that television and other media can play an important role in educating children and adolescents about sexuality... The few experimental studies show that television has the potential to change viewers' attitudes and knowledge. Correlational designs provide weak evidence that television viewing is linked with sexual

behavior and beliefs... Much more empirical work is needed to substantiate the claim that naturally occurring sexual content in the media actually does cause changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. (Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998, p. 16)

That call for study, coupled with increased investment in research funding for this topic area from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), has recently led to a significant surge in important empirical evidence regarding the effects of sexual media content on young people. These new studies, several of which have appeared within just the past year, dramatically enhance the level of knowledge about the effects of sexual content presented in mainstream entertainment television programming.

The brief summaries below provide highlights from some of the key studies:

- * A longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of 12-17 year old adolescents found that heavier viewing of sexual content on television accelerates the initiation of sexual intercourse and other advanced sexual activities. Exposure to content that included talk about sex was associated with the same risks as exposure to depictions of sexual behavior. In applied terms, youths who watched one standard deviation more of sexual content than average behaved sexually like peers who were 9 to 17 months older but watched typical amounts of sex on television. The longitudinal nature of the study design allowed the researchers to identify television exposure as a causal factor. (Collins et al., 2004)
- * Researchers analyzed the extent to which more than 3,000 seventh and eighth graders were exposed to sexual content in the media, creating for each subject an index known as their Sexual Media Diet (SMD). Adolescents' SMD was significantly related to their levels of sexual activity and future intentions to be sexually active. The study found that the overall amount of exposure to sexual content was the strongest indicator of these relationships. (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005)
- * In an experiment with college students, subjects viewed a television program that included talk about sex or sexual behavior described as "permissive" (i.e., portraying casual sex as acceptable) from such series as *Ally McBeal*, *Dawson's Creek*, and *Friends*. For subjects who perceived that the program content was realistic, significant effects from viewing were observed on their perceptions of normative sexual behavior. In addition, their attitudes toward casual sex became more permissive, consistent with the program portrayals. Significant effects were observed for viewing both sexual talk and behavior. (Taylor, 2005)
- * In a survey study examining college students, researchers found that increased exposure to sexual TV content was positively correlated with expectations about sex for males and females. Among the findings were that males with more exposure to sexual content expected a broader range of sexual activities with their partners, whereas females with more exposure expected sex to occur earlier within a relationship. (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003)

This first group of studies helps to confirm the long-standing hypothesis that exposure to sexual media content is a significant factor in shaping young people's views and behaviors involving sex. Moreover, a persistent finding among these studies is that cumulative exposure to sexual content on television is a strong predictor of the identified effects.

In addition, a number of recent studies focus specifically on the effects of exposure to television content that includes sexual risk or responsibility messages, addressing such topics as sexual patience, sexual precautions, and the risk of negative outcomes from unsafe sexual intercourse:

- * When an episode of *Friends* focused on the issue of condom failure, researchers found increases in knowledge about condoms for as much as 17% of a nationally representative sample of 12-17 year old adolescents who saw the show. A telephone survey was conducted after the show aired, so respondents were naturally exposed to the television content. The study also found that 10% of adolescent viewers reported talking with an adult about condom efficacy as a result of watching the episode. (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003)

- * In an experiment with college students, each subject viewed three episodes of one-hour prime-time dramas within one week. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions: “typical sex” in which sexual intercourse was portrayed among characters in each of the programs but no safe sex messages were included; “responsible sex” in which sexual intercourse in each program was portrayed accompanied by prominent sexual risk or responsibility messages in the same show; and a control condition in which programs included no sexual content. Females in the “responsible sex” condition had significantly more positive attitudes toward condom use after viewing the programs than subjects in the other two treatment conditions. (Farrer, 2001)
- * CDC researchers examined the effects of a four-episode story arc in the situation comedy *Girlfriends* that included a sympathetic portrayal of an HIV-infected character. In a web-based survey, respondents who reported watching *Girlfriends* were less likely to stigmatize HIV victims and more likely to consider getting an HIV test for themselves. (Kennedy, O’Leary, Wright-Fofanah, Dean, Chen, & Baxter, 2005)
- * In an experiment with college freshmen (mean age=18.07 years), researchers found that viewing television drama programs that portray negative consequences such as guilt and remorse resulting from sexual intercourse performed by young adult characters with new partners led to significantly more negative attitudes toward premarital sex and significantly more negative moral judgments of the program characters who engaged in the intercourse. (Eyal & Kunkel, 2005)

In sum, there is currently a sharply accelerating curve in the growth of scientific knowledge about the effects of exposure to sexual media content. The studies that comprise this new wave of evidence consistently demonstrate significant impacts on viewers, particularly among teens and young adults. This second group of studies provides consistent evidence that incorporating risk or responsibility messages into television programs with sexual themes and topics can significantly increase viewer sensitivity to critical sexual health concerns.

Thus, this is a particularly timely moment for the delivery of our most recent assessment of the sexual content on television, as well as our examination of the frequency with which risk or responsibility concerns accompany television’s treatment of sexual themes and topics.

In general, television’s influence on social beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors tends to occur by a gradual, cumulative process that is most likely to develop with repeated exposure over time to common patterns of portrayals. Therefore, it is the goal of this study to identify the common patterns or approaches that are employed in the realm of sexual messages on television. If television is an important source of information and influence about sex for young people, then obviously it is critical to understand the nature and extent of the sexual messages it conveys. Identifying patterns in the portrayal of sex on television has been a goal of researchers for many years. Yet while numerous studies have examined the topic in the past, the accumulation of knowledge from these various efforts has been constrained because of two key factors.

First, most previous studies have limited their analysis to just a fraction of the overall television landscape. For example, studies have examined soap operas (Greenberg & Buselle, 1996; Heintz-Knowles, 1996; Lowry & Towles, 1989), talk shows (Greenberg & Smith, 1995; Greenberg, Sherry, Buselle, Hnilo, & Smith, 1997), teens’ favorite programs (Aubrey, 2004; Cope & Kunkel, 2002; Greenberg et al., 1993; Ward, 1995), and “Family Hour” programming (Kunkel, Cope, & Colvin, 1996), with the broadest analysis encompassing all prime-time broadcast network shows (Franzblau, Sprafkin, & Rubinstein, 1977; Lowry & Shidler, 1993; Sapolsky & Taberlet, 1991; Silverman, Sprafkin, & Rubinstein, 1979). This left many aspects of the television environment, such as cable channels for example, largely unexamined. Although these studies delivered important pockets of knowledge, they failed to provide any clear and comprehensive picture of the patterns of sexual content across the overall television landscape.

The second factor limiting the utility of previous research is the lack of any consistency across studies in defining and measuring sexually-related content in television programming. Idiosyncrasies across the research strategies employed render comparisons from one project to another difficult, as some examine sexual behavior but not talk, while others have done just the opposite. Certainly, some patterns at a very basic level have been established, including the repeated finding that sexual portrayals are common throughout television, and that

negative consequences resulting from sex are relatively infrequent (Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998). Still, more precise comparisons are often problematic because of the lack of any common definitions and research measures.

The research presented here represents the fourth in an ongoing series of studies designed to overcome these two limitations, and thereby to significantly enhance the level of knowledge that exists about the nature and extent of sexual messages conveyed on American television. In our initial report issued six years ago (Kunkel, Cope, Farinola, Biely, Rollin, & Donnerstein, 1999), we provided the first comprehensive examination of sexual messages across the overall television environment, encompassing the full range of different channel types as well as the broad scope of times of day when most people are watching. That study was based upon a large, representative sample of programs from the 1997-98 television season, which established a benchmark of the pattern of sexual messages presented across the overall television environment. Thus, that first report produced an important step forward by elevating our understanding about sexual messages on television beyond individual pockets to a comprehensive view.

Since then, we have replicated that initial research several times, applying the identical content analysis measures to a complementary sample of programming gathered in 1999-2000 (Kunkel, Cope-Farrer, Biely, Farinola, & Donnerstein, 2001), 2001-02 (Kunkel, Biely, Eyal, Cope-Farrer, Donnerstein, & Fandrich, 2003) and in the current report we add the 2004-05 television season to our ongoing catalog. Our primary research questions remain the same:

- (1) Is the frequency of sexual messages on television increasing?
- (2) Is the way in which sex is presented on television changing over time?
- (3) Is the television industry increasing its emphasis on sexual risk or responsibility concerns in its stories that deal with sex?

At this point, given that we have accumulated four comprehensive reports that provide data spanning a period dating back to the fall of 1997, we are well situated to provide increasingly definitive answers to these questions. Across our four studies, we have collectively analyzed a total of 4,742 television programs.

The structure for this report of findings is organized into the following sections summarized here. First, we examine the *Frequency of Sexual Content* throughout the overall television landscape, assessing the nature and amount of talk about sex and sexual behavior. These analyses are followed by sections that characterize the findings regarding *Talk about Sex* and *Sexual Behaviors*, while also providing examples that illustrate each of the categories of sexual talk and behavior examined in the study. Next we turn our attention to the issue of *Safer Sex Messages*, where we assess how such issues are incorporated into scenes and overall program themes with sexual content. That is followed by a further examination of *Scenes with Sexual Intercourse* that helps us to understand the messages television conveys when it presents such behavior. Differences that are associated with particular types of shows are addressed in the section *Comparing Patterns of Sexual Content Across Program Genres*. Separate analyses are performed on *Sexual Messages in Prime-time Network Programming*. And finally, because adolescent audiences are uniquely important when considering sexual socialization, we also report on the *Sexual Messages in Programs Most Popular with Teenagers*.

Within each of these topic areas, we first present findings focusing solely upon the patterns of sexual content that emerged in the 2004-05 sample of television programming. Then, at the end of our examination of each topic, we turn to a comparative framework, identifying the important changes over time that were observed in that area. Here an important caveat should be noted regarding our approach to the over-time comparisons. While we have gathered data at three points in time previous to the current findings (1997-98, 1999-2000, and 2001-02 seasons), methodologists will appreciate that the large number of statistical tests that would be produced by examining every possible comparison would inevitably inflate the likelihood of spurious or “chance” findings that appear to be significant. To reduce this risk, while balancing the need to gain as much insight as possible from this rich data set, we have decided to compare and contrast the current findings from the 2004-05 television season for each variable or analysis with only our most distant (1997-98) and most recent (2001-02)

evidence. Thus, we will not consider the findings produced from the 1999-2000 season for comparative purposes in the current study. We would anticipate continuing this same analytic strategy in the future for any subsequent iterations of this research as a prudent means of enhancing its methodological rigor.

While details such as these are certainly important, it is the broader issues that underlie this research that best frame our approach to the study. As teens are grappling with questions such as “When should I start having sex?” and “What will my friends think of me if I do or don’t?,” they inevitably encounter stories on television that speak to these issues, and may influence their thinking about them. This study helps us understand the consistent patterns that are associated with television’s treatment of the full range of sexual themes and topics. By doing so, it helps to illuminate the extent to which television may be contributing to perceptions about peer norms regarding both sexual behavior (e.g., “everybody is doing it”) and safer sex practices, among other possible effects. Given the fact that teens in the U.S. watch an average of 3 hours of television every day (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005), the potential cumulative influence of these messages is quite substantial and clearly worthy of careful scrutiny.