

CONCLUSION

As we indicated at the outset of this study, there is increasing evidence that exposure to sexual content on television is a significant contributor to many aspects of young people's sexual knowledge, beliefs, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors. In other words, television plays a meaningful role in sexual socialization (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Gunter, 2002). Sexual socialization consists of learning the answers to such questions as who it is appropriate to have sex with, when to have sex with someone, and what precautions, if any, are appropriate. There are many sources from which young people gain their understanding of sexual norms, including parents, peers, and schools. Yet television, as the predominant mass medium, also plays an important role in the sexual socialization of America's youth, providing stories that sometimes inspire, often inform, and consistently contribute to the sexual views and behaviors of adolescents and young adults.

Important research evidence in recent years has confirmed and extended our understanding about the influence of media sex. Observing talk about sex has been shown to influence adolescent viewers' beliefs about normative sexual patterns and practices (Davis & Mares, 1998; Ward, 2002), expectations about how sexual relationships evolve (Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; Taylor, 2005), and attitudes toward casual sex (Taylor, 2005). New data have strengthened the previous finding that exposure to sexual content on television is significantly correlated with teenagers' sexual behavior, while extending the association to other media (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005). And in arguably the most compelling study to date, a longitudinal panel study with a nationally representative sample demonstrated a causal relationship between adolescent exposure to sexual talk and behavior on television and the acceleration of sexual activity including intercourse (Collins et al, 2004).

The addition of these recent studies affords more confidence than ever before in reaching the conclusion that sexual content on television exerts significant influence on the nation's young people. Collectively as an institution, television is one of the many critical social forces shaping patterns of sexual behavior in the U.S. This body of evidence is the foundation that underscores the meaning and implications of the findings from our content analysis investigation.

Because media influence tends to be gradual and cumulative in nature, it is the overall pattern of messages across programs to which viewers are exposed that is of primary interest for explaining such effects. Herein lies the particular value of our research. This study, which represents the fourth in a series of investigations of the sexual content in entertainment television, offers a unique opportunity to identify and track changes over time in the pattern of such portrayals. By employing the identical measures in each replication of this research, our data allow us to answer such questions as: (1) is the frequency of sexual messages on television increasing; (2) is the way in which sex is presented on television changing over time; and (3) is the television industry increasing its emphasis on sexual risk or responsibility concerns in its stories that deal with sex? No previous program of research on sexual content has attempted to track such changes by applying the identical measures to samples of programming gathered across multiple points in time.

Thus, this report offers two distinct types of evidence. At one level, it identifies the pattern of sexual messages delivered in 2004-05 across all types of television channels as well as at most times throughout the day. This comprehensive analysis reflects a broader picture than that associated with any single type of programming format or any particular network. In addition, this study also presents an expanding series of comparisons that allow us to track important changes in the presentation of sexual messages on television. We turn now to a summary and review of the most important findings in the content patterns we have observed in our study from each of these two perspectives.

In our initial investigation of sex on television in 1997-98, we reported that sexual messages were a "highly frequent element" because they were found in 56% of the programming examined in this study, which excludes news, sports, and children's shows. We characterized the average of 3.2 scenes per hour that contained sexual content at that time as a "substantial base of sexual learning experiences." Given the significant increases we have identified since then in these and many of our other key measures of sexual content on television, one would have to add the adjective "very" to our prior claims to accurately describe the consistent and impressive increases we have observed over time in this study.

In 2004-05, 70% of the composite week sample of nearly 1,000 programs included some sexual content, either talk about sex or portrayals of sexual behavior. The programs that contained sexual content averaged 5.0 scenes per hour that involved sexual themes or topics. In purely statistical terms, this means that the base of programs that convey sexual messages has increased by exactly 25%, while at the same time the amount of scenes with sexual topics in those shows has risen 56% since 1997-98. These factors are multiplicative. Indeed, the total number of sexual scenes identified in our sample has nearly doubled (96% increase) since the study began, while the number of programs examined has remained virtually identical over time (N=942 in 1997-98, N=959 in 2004-05). Thus, the clear conclusion is that television's treatment of sex has expanded dramatically in recent years.

More of the details help to explain the case. Scenes that contain talk about sex remain the most common means by which television engages sexual topics. In 2004-05, roughly two-thirds of all programs sampled (68%) included some talk about sex, at a rate of 4.6 scenes per hour. This compares to the base of 56% of shows that included talk about sex, at a rate of 3.0 scenes, in 1997-98. Although not as frequent, sexual behavior appeared in 35% of all programs in 2004-05, at a rate of 2.0 scenes per hour, as compared to 23% of programs, at a rate of 1.4 scenes per hour, in 1997-98. All of these increases over time proved statistically significant. In sum, sexual messages are much more common today than when this research project began in 1997-98, and the trend of increases is reflected across both of the different ways of presenting sexual messages, talk and behavior. If the topic of sex on television was frequent in the past, it is now nearly ubiquitous.

Among the most meaningful types of messages for young people's sexual socialization would certainly be portrayals of sexual intercourse. In 2004-05, roughly one in every nine programs (11%) included a scene in which intercourse is depicted or strongly implied. Consistent with the broader trend of increasing sex on television, this frequency is significantly greater than the 7% level observed in 1997-98, although the current rate is down slightly since 2001-02.

One notable shift related to intercourse portrayals is that the characters involved are increasingly older. The proportion of characters shown on television engaging in sexual intercourse that are teens has held constant at just 3% since 1997-98, but meanwhile there has been a significant reduction in young adults (aged 18-24) presented as intercourse participants (from 23% of characters in 1997-98 to 7% in 2004-05) and a corresponding increase in the older adults (ages 25 and up) who are involved (from 73% of characters in 1997-98 to 89% in 2004-05). Thus, viewers today are significantly more likely to see portrayals of sexual intercourse on television than in 1997-98, but the characters involved are more likely to be mature adults of at least age 25, rather than teens or young adults, both of which tend to be more potent role models for young viewers.

A critical emphasis in this study is the examination of television's treatment of sexual risk or responsibility concerns. We have already conveyed the significant stakes and sobering statistics regarding sexual health concerns. Given the extent to which television incorporates sex in its programming, many observers are suggesting that the industry has some obligation to present positive portrayals of safer sex practices.

This study offers multiple perspectives regarding the frequency with which television addresses sexual risk or responsibility concerns. In terms of scenes that include some aspect of sexual risk or responsibility, such topics appear in only a small fraction of all scenes that involve sexual topics. In 2004-05, 4% of all scenes with sexual content included some mention or depiction of a risk or responsibility concern, the identical rate that was observed in 1997-98. A modest increase up to 6% was identified in 2001-02 but the frequency has diminished since then.

A complementary finding involves analysis of the proportion of programs that include sexual content and which also incorporate risk or responsibility messages somewhere within the show, perhaps in a different scene. This analysis naturally yields a higher figure overall, and also reveals a modest, though statistically significant, increase over time. In 2004-05, 14% of all programs with sexual content included some aspect of risk or responsibility within the same episode, compared to 9% in 1997-98. However, the increase first seen in 2001-02 has stalled.

If the frequency with which sexual risk or responsibility concerns are addressed on television seems relatively modest, the degree of attention devoted to them when they do appear is even less pronounced. Our data indicate that only about one-third (31%) of all scenes that engage risk or responsibility issues place substantial or primary emphasis on the topic; the large majority of such scenes (69%) involve strictly minor or inconsequential treatment of the issue. This might consist, for example, of a brief visual shot of a box of condoms on the bedstand that goes unmentioned in the plot. Similarly, it is extremely rare for programs with sexual content to place primary emphasis throughout the show on risk or responsibility concerns. One of our most stable findings is that just 1% of all programs with sexual content employ this approach, a statistic that has held constant since the outset of our research. Thus, the visibility of sexual risk or responsibility issues on television suffers from two distinct challenges: a lack of frequency and a lack of prominence.

There is one context in which television's treatment of risk or responsibility concerns appears more promising. That involves the set of programs that present more advanced sexual situations, such as when shows include scenes with talk about sexual intercourse that has already occurred, or depict intercourse behavior between characters in the show. In this more narrow category where these issues are arguably most salient, the rate at which sexual risk or responsibility topics are addressed is markedly higher, at 27% of applicable programs in 2004-05. This rate has essentially doubled since 1997-98, when the frequency was 14%, with that increase over time proving statistically significant. But again, that increase first occurred in the 2001-02 season and has since leveled off.

A similar finding was obtained when analyzing the sample of shows most frequently watched by teenagers, where 25% of all intercourse-related programs included some sexual risk or responsibility message in 2004-05. Furthermore, programs in the teen sample that included intercourse-related content represent the sole category in which overall emphasis throughout the program on a sexual risk or responsibility theme occurred with any degree of frequency, at 17% of such shows in 2004-05. In general, shows most heavily viewed by teenagers place greater emphasis on risk or responsibility issues than does television overall.

Given the larger number of viewers that are typically attracted to prime-time network programming, a closer look at that environment is also warranted. Somewhat surprisingly, however, prime-time programs now trail the norm for television overall on our key risk or responsibility measure, whereas they were previously the leader. In 2004-05, only 11% of network prime-time shows with sexual content included some aspect of risk or responsibility, as compared to 14% for television overall. While the 11% rate for network prime-time shows remains the same as was observed in 1997-98, the industry-wide average has increased significantly from 9% to 14% during the same period. In sum, it appears that network programmers have fallen a step behind the pace with which sexual risk or responsibility issues are being increasingly addressed by the television industry as a whole.

The importance of those efforts is underscored by several recent studies that document the beneficial outcomes of viewers' exposure to messages regarding the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, as we established in the introduction of this report. There is a growing body of evidence to confirm that including safer sex messages in television programming can play a meaningful role in sensitizing viewers about important sexual health issues and concerns. Yet at a time when sexual content on television is widespread and increasing significantly, the most important conclusion from this iteration of our research is that risk or responsibility messages seem to have reached a plateau, and remain stalled on a relatively low plain of quite modest visibility.

Sex is plentiful on television. Consequently, television's treatment of sex is ripe with opportunity to convey critical messages about sexual health that may literally save lives. The odds are high that viewers will find sexual themes and topics in most of the programs that they watch; indeed, many viewers will encounter advanced sexual content including portrayals of sexual intercourse on an almost daily basis. Presently, however, average viewers would see six shows containing sexual content without the slightest mention of sexual risk issues for every one that includes any reference to such topics. They would see 20 shows with sexual scenes that include either no mention or only minor treatment of a sexual risk or responsibility concern before they encounter one that offers a scene with a substantial or primary emphasis devoted to it. And average viewers would see roughly one hundred programs with sexual content before they encounter a single one that places strong emphasis

throughout the show on sexual risk or responsibility concerns. These odds tell the story of many missed opportunities to increase the visibility of such issues as sexual patience, sexual precautions, and the risks of negative consequences from sexual activity, all of which are critical public health concerns.

Given television's devotion to the topic of sex, there is no more salient context in which to convey sexual risk or responsibility messages. The lack of attention afforded such issues at best reduces the relevance of these concerns for viewers, and misses an opportunity to provide a potentially beneficial perspective on television's treatment of sexual themes and topics.

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