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YOUNG PEOPLE AND SEXUAL CONTENT ON TELEVISION

A Review of the Research

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Introduction

This Working Paper presents a review of the research literature relating to young people and sexual content on television, undertaken in the early stages of a more extensive empirical project sponsored by the BSC and other partners. The outcomes of this broader project, 'Young People, Media and Personal Relationships: Young People's Responses to Media Portrayals of Love, Sex and Relationships', will be published at a later stage.

We have endeavoured to be as comprehensive as possible in addressing the 'primary' literature on this topic. This paper therefore contains thorough critical reviews of the literature on: public attitudes towards sexual content on television; the changing frequency and nature of sexual content; the effects of sexual content on young people; and the role of the media in sex education. These are presented in Sections 1-4 of the paper. We have also drawn upon a range of 'secondary' literature relevant to the topic, much of it from rather different research traditions. This literature covers two main areas: textual analyses of sexual representation in pornography and mainstream media; and more qualitative analyses of young people's uses and interpretations of sexual content. These reviews, which are contained in Sections 5 and 6 of the paper, are necessarily more speculative; but we believe they may also provide a more productive approach to the issues.

Young people's responses to sexual content on television are self-evidently of great interest for media regulators and advisory bodies. There seems to be a general concern that there is more sex – and more 'explicit' sex – on television than there used to be; and the proliferation of channels and the rise of multi-set households mean that young people are now more likely to have access to it than they were in the past. In fact, as we shall indicate, the findings of research on these issues are somewhat equivocal, at least in respect of British television; and surveys of public attitudes suggest there has been a gradual move among adults towards more liberal or permissive attitudes on these issues. Perhaps in response to this, regulatory bodies have also recently begun to move towards a 'consumer advice' model and to relax some of the constraints on presenting sexual content.

Nevertheless, there appears to have been very little primary research on these issues, particularly in respect of younger audiences. Compared with research on media violence, for example, work in this field is extremely limited in scope, and less theoretically and methodologically sophisticated. Furthermore, nearly all the research has been undertaken in the United States, where the nature both of television and of public attitudes is arguably very different from the UK. As we shall indicate in our review, the research in this field is beset with many of the problems that characterise the violence research. Content analyses in the US show fairly clearly that the frequency and 'explicitness' of sexual content on television have increased; but they tend to measure content in superficial and mechanical (and occasionally misleading) ways. Meanwhile, research into the effects of such content is generally acknowledged – even by some of its leading exponents – to be inconclusive and problematic; and this applies

both to research on potentially 'negative' effects (for example, on behaviour or attitudes) and to research on potentially 'positive' or educational ones.

In this context, there is clearly a need for fundamental research that seeks to develop new theories and hypotheses. In our view, this research should be primarily qualitative; and it should seek to maximise the opportunities for exploring young people's own perspectives on the issues. Some of our proposals here are drawn together in the conclusion to this paper.

1. Attitudes

Newspaper reports often suggest that there is an increasing amount of explicit sexual material on television screens and a rising tide of public concern about it. Whilst the next section explores the evidence for the first claim, here we discuss the findings of recent surveys of public attitudes, mainly conducted by the regulatory bodies. They suggest overall that people consider there is more talk about sex, and more open attitudes towards it on television and in 'real' life; and that public attitudes towards sex on television have become more permissive over the years. Surveys also express puzzlement over why this is so - whether it is caused or reflected by the media; whether it is because of chat shows, soap operas, or teenage magazines; because of pressures towards commercialisation that enforce a search for ratings, or because of real-life events such as the Clinton-Lewinsky affair. These are issues to which we return in Section 5 of this paper.

Concerns about sex

The Broadcasting Standards Commission Annual Monitoring Report 1999 (BSC 1999) found that in 1998, when asked whether violence, bad language, or sex on television caused them most concern, 58% of respondents cited violence, 24% bad language and 12% sex, whilst 38% thought there was 'too much' sex on television. In the period covered, 693 complaints concerning sex were received: these constituted 23% of the total, and of these, 31% were upheld. In comparison, between January and September 1999, the BBC Complaints Unit dealt with 19 complaints under the heading 'sexual conduct' – 2.0% of the total number processed. From January to October, the Independent Television Commission received 327 complaints relating to 'sexual portrayal' – 9.7% of the total (Petley 2000). Moreover, when asked a more open question about whether anything on TV gave them concern, only a third of BSC respondents considered that there was; of those, 22% spontaneously mentioned sex (up from 12% in 1997), 32% violence and 20% bad language.

In 1998, the BSC carried out a survey, *Sex and Sensibility*, that followed up a 1992 publication (Millwood Hargrave 1992; Millwood Hargrave 1999). Its methodology included qualitative group discussions, multi-media interviews that included comment on screened extracts and a quantitative telephone survey. It found that only 36% of respondents, when asked specifically about sex, said that there was 'too much' of it on television, part of a general downward trend, despite a perception that what was available was more explicit. Ironically, higher percentages thought that there was too much sex in print media, television's chief accuser. Far fewer – 24% rather than 39% in 1992 - claimed to find sex scenes 'offensive'. Meanwhile, 68% said they did not find watching sex embarrassing, 71% said they did not mind watching 'occasional' scenes of sexual activity on television, and 78% thought that sexual activity should be depicted if part of a storyline. 93% expressed a preference for self-regulation - that viewers could turn off or over if they were offended by what they saw – and many felt that subscription services gave greater control over content and should be regulated less strictly as a

result. However, there was considerable cynicism about the use of sex to sell products in advertising, and 72% agreed that sex was used to increase ratings. (Although it is worth noting that the most popular programmes are not the most explicit: Hill and Thomson 2000: 75, citing TV analyst William Phillips). Yet although in principle people objected to nudity for 'entertainment' only, two screened extracts about strippers were also most highly rated for their eroticism (59). Meanwhile, the proportion who thought that the portrayal of gay relations on television was acceptable had grown by 12% from 46% in 1992 to 58%; over 70% thought same-sex kissing (particularly two women) or gay sex after 10pm was acceptable. Whilst 47% thought that there was 'too much' sex in daytime talk shows, 54% agreed nonetheless that it was an acceptable part of pre-watershed programming: that is, they distinguished between talk about sex and visual depictions, generally holding that depictions should be more highly restricted. Moreover, a majority of those who viewed a clip from the talk show *Vanessa* found it realistic, entertaining or acceptable. On the basis of its findings, the study argued that attitudes had changed considerably since its previous research six years earlier, and in a broadly more permissive direction.

The most recent British Social Attitudes Survey, comparing results from 1995 and 1999, would also reinforce this perception. It argued not only that 'there has been a shift towards more permissive attitudes' but that 'this shift has been larger in respect of the portrayal of homosexual sex than of heterosexual sex' (Hill and Thomson 2000: 79). Public attitudes supported fewer restrictions on showing 'frank' heterosexual sex in any outlet, and a smaller proportion than before favoured an outright ban on gay male sex, falling from 54% to 48% in the case of regular television and from 42% to 32% in the case of video. Moreover, when asked about the acceptability of such scenes if they were in context, for example as 'part of a developing relationship', respondents were considerably more permissive. A majority also thought pornography should be available to adults. Respondents in this survey also distinguished between different channels, taking account of the social context of viewing the 'family' entertainment associated with terrestrial and general subscription channels, and were less restrictive in relation to adult subscription TV channels. The study also suggested that there may be a 'period effect' or 'culture change' in relation to gay sex on screen, since all age groups have become more permissive on this issue.

In 2000, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) published new guidelines for regulation of sex, violence and bad language on film and video. It drew in part on a research report, *Sense and Sensibilities* (Hanley 2000), based on: a postal and Internet survey which were both self-selecting, a demographically-representative nationwide poll of 1249 people, and two four-day citizens' juries. The public supported a relaxation of sex guidelines at the 15 and 18 certificate categories, arguing that young people are already well informed about sex. 46% of the national sample thought that 'people over 18 have a right to see graphic portrayals of real sex in films and videos' (4). There was more concern about drugs and bad language, especially for the younger age categories: 43% of their national sample thought that the BBFC guidelines were not strict enough on language, as opposed to 32% on sex and 42% on violence. Drug portrayal caused the most offence, nudity the least.

Age and gender

All four of the above studies argue that gender and age differences are key factors associated with degrees of permissiveness. (One should, however, be cautious about reading these as causal). Men and young people are less likely to say that sex is an issue of concern. Women are more likely than men to say that they dislike sex on screen, and older people are more restrictive, particularly in relation to gay sex. Both women and older people are also more likely to say they think there is 'too much' sex on television and that they find it 'offensive'. Women in the BSC survey were more likely to say they felt 'uncomfortable' watching sex scenes with other people and sometimes on their own, although adults in general are likely to feel uncomfortable watching with children. Notably, however, men said they would feel uncomfortable viewing a clip from *Vanessa* with younger women or children, whilst women felt happier with a nude scene that was part of the historical drama *Tom Jones* (Millwood Hargrave 1999: 34). The BSC included adolescents in its sample, and although the results were not analysed separately in any detail, it did note that in general younger viewers were less likely to express discomfort about watching sex on television except in an intergenerational context. Moreover, some interview extracts included appear to indicate more permissive views generally. For example, some younger viewers in the qualitative research challenged the idea that gay sex should only be shown in the context of a 'meaningful relationship', arguing that this hinted at hypocritical double standards.

Many respondents in the BSC sex survey – particularly women - expressed concerns (as in 1992) that television might 'legitimise' early sexual activity (experimentation or 'immoral' behaviour) for children. However, they also agreed that by the age of 15 young people were able to make up their own minds about what they should watch, a point on which adolescents and many parents also agree (Buckingham 1996; Millwood Hargrave *et al.* 1996). Opinion was almost evenly split on the desirability of sex education programmes – such as *Love Bites*, aimed at teenagers - with parents tending to be more positive than non-parents, and presenting themselves in general as tolerant of greater explicitness and prepared to talk about it.

The BSA study did not ask adolescents aged under 18 for their views. However, it found that young adults, particularly those with cable/satellite or Internet access, were more permissive about adult subscription channels, suggesting a 'cohort effect' – that is, that attitudes are likely to become more permissive in the future. However, they also noted that the 26-33 age range appeared to be more permissive than the 18-25 group. They hypothesise that this might be a 'lifestyle effect' in that as people move into their late twenties and gain more life experience they also become more relaxed about issues of sexual orientation and representation. Others have speculated that this differential might be the result of HIV/AIDS leading to more censorious attitudes amongst the young. Unfortunately, BSA surveys with younger people have not addressed these issues in any detail, although they have found that young people are generally supportive of sex education – at least for older children (Roberts and Sachdev 1996). In general, it seems that the values of the young as expressed in such attitude surveys generally mirror those of their parents - although their sexual behaviour (see Section 4) would suggest that they espouse very different values to young people of fifty years ago.

The BBFC study notes significant differences between the nationwide sample and self-selected Internet respondents. The latter were more likely to be young, male and either in employment or studying, and were also heavier users of the media generally. They were more hostile to regulation, more likely to say that the guidelines were too strict and to disagree strongly on issues such as the dangers of copycat violence or bad language, and less likely to be offended. In general, too, those who used the media more tended to be less likely to find particular elements offensive. To the extent that media play an increasing role in the lives of younger people, one might expect to find a cohort effect here as well, moving in the direction of greater resistance to regulation.

The limitations of attitude surveys

Attempts to treat 'the nation' as a thinking, feeling entity via surveys of social attitudes are relatively recent (the BSA surveys only began in 1983). They may be seen as a means by which modern democracies attempt to govern by consent, enabling harmonisation of 'the relations between human subjectivity and administrative objectives' (Rose 1999: 15). While such surveys can provide a useful means of calibrating broader social changes, there are several difficulties both in the methodology and in the interpretation of the results.

Thus, the nature of the responses clearly depends upon how participants are addressed. Barnett and Thomson (1996), in the earlier BSA study, remark on the importance of wording in this respect. Asking if anything on TV 'disgusted' rather than 'offended' viewers, for example, makes them more likely to cite sexual material. More broadly, such questions tend to position respondents as 'responsible citizens' and thus their answers may well be predictable (what kind of citizen complains that there is 'too little' sex on TV, for example?). It is also barely surprising that cultural forms despised by critics such as daytime talk shows or 'gratuitous nudity' are particularly criticised in these contexts, whilst also being enjoyed when screened. There is a strong hint in both the statistical responses and qualitative extracts presented in such reports that people *perform* responses deemed appropriate for their age and gender in the specific context of an interview.

The question of how surveys are constructed and conducted is particularly sensitive in relation to issues of sexuality, as the furore around the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles indicated (Wellings *et al.* 1994). (This report had its original funding withdrawn and was due to be scrapped by the Conservative government, allegedly because of its revelations about the extent of non-normative sexual practices such as anal sex amongst the heterosexual population. When it was rescued by the Wellcome Foundation and released, it was then criticised by some lesbian and gay organisations for seeming to under-report gay experiences.) Clearly, respondents may conceal their own orientation and misreport their sexual experience or attitudes in order to bring them closer to alleged norms or what seems socially acceptable or desirable (Wadsworth *et al.* 1996). In relation to sexual content in the media, Barnett and Thomson (1996) comment on inconsistencies between responses given to interviewers and in anonymous questionnaires, where the latter were more liberal.

Ethical constraints may also result in some problematic interview strategies. For example, the BSA draws its conclusions about public censoriousness from asking respondents to think, first ‘about a frank scene showing a man and a woman character having sex…’. Interviewers then posed questions about acceptable context and scheduling for such a scene, and followed it with a question about ‘two adult male characters’ and finally (but only in 1999) about two women. Putting the questions in this order clearly implies the normativity of the heterosexual scene. The analysts assume that their subjects understand that scheduling a scene ‘after 10 p.m.’ is ‘roughly equivalent’ to an 18 certificate in the cinema; and the question evokes a curious complicity on the part of the interviewees, who are given no guidelines as to what ‘frank’ might mean. Interviewees are thus invited to imagine a scene and subsequently to censor it; but it is not clear whether those who are most restrictive are so because of abstract moral conviction or in response to the excesses of the scene they themselves conjure up.

Finally, there are broader questions about what statements of 'attitudes' actually signify, and the extent to which they can then be used as a form of guidance for policy-makers. Social psychologists increasingly accept that 'attitudes' can be inconsistent: they are not so much fixed possessions on the part of individuals as social claims made for social purposes (Potter and Wetherell 1987). Surveys invite respondents to attribute attitudes to themselves, and frequently allow little space for ambivalence or uncertainty. The experience of ‘citizens’ juries’, where select smaller samples of the public hear expert evidence, suggest that there may be a value in studying how people's attitudes are changed over time, and in the light of new information and debate, rather than via 'snapshot' responses to questionnaires. Furthermore, there is a tendency when reporting the results of such surveys to 'flatten out' the differences between responses, and thereby to imply that all responses should be treated as equivalent. This is a hazardous assumption for policy makers, who are bound to take account of the diverse sensibilities of minorities, and not just of the 'average' member of the public. In the case of responses to sexual content, the fact that 3% of people find a particular type of material offensive may under certain circumstances be more significant than the fact that 97% of people do not. As the responses of self-selected groups (such as the Internet and postal respondents in the BBFC survey) suggest, there may well be increasingly divergent ‘taste communities’ in contemporary society; and the difficulty of adjudicating between them cannot easily be resolved by appealing to the evidence of public attitudes.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, then, surveys in the UK suggest that there has been a gradual move towards more permissive and less censorious attitudes towards sexual content on television among the population at large. Disappointingly, however, very little of this research has looked at the attitudes of children and young people – who are, of course, the group commonly seen to be most at risk from exposure to such material. Despite their limitations, such surveys do provide some insights into general public perceptions about sex and sexuality. However, they need to be complemented by qualitative

research, which should enable us to explore more fully how individuals interpret and engage with media representations within their own lives.

2. Content Analysis

Laments about moral decline in society have persistently recurred among successive generations for at least the last two centuries (Pearson 1983). In more recent decades, there has been growing concern about the 'death of childhood' – or at least the demise of traditional notions of childhood innocence. According to many commentators, part of the reason for this can be found in the increasing frequency and explicitness of sexual portrayals on television. Television has been seen to give children access to sexual 'secrets' at an age where they are incapable of fully understanding or dealing with them; and hence to precipitate the development of 'precocious' or 'premature' sexuality (e.g. Postman 1983).

In recent decades, social scientists have attempted to test out and give substance to such perceptions through content analyses, which are seen to provide an objective, systematic and quantitative documentation of patterns of media (mis-)representation. This section will start by exploring the body of studies of sexual content in the media generated in North American research, in order partly to provide a point of comparison with British findings, and partly to subject these claims to considered scrutiny.

Content analyses in the US

The methodology of such analyses is relatively straightforward. In the case of television, researchers begin by developing a list of sexual or intimate behaviours such as kissing, hugging, affectionate sexual contact, aggressive touching, and so on. They then take a limited sample of television programmes and count the number of incidents in them that match these pre-determined definitions. Analyses tend to cover verbal references to sexual activity, innuendo, and implied (off-screen) sexual activity as well as explicit visual presentation. Further variables may be identified, such as the marital status of the participants and whether alcohol, tobacco, drugs etc are involved. When ‘context’ is included, this may be defined as place (bar, bedroom, etc), or whether the behaviour is serious or humorous, presented as positive or negative, and so on. As concern about teenage pregnancy, STDs and AIDS has grown in the 1980s and 1990s, researchers have increasingly included references to contraception, safe sex, abstinence or sexual precautions. Less frequently, they measure ‘sexiness’, such as displays of nudity, cleavage, etc. In addition, there is an extensive related literature on gender role stereotypes in the media (see e.g.Signorielli 1997), although this is not considered in any detail here.

Whilst some studies cover a range of programmes (Kunkel *et al.* 1999b; Kunkel *et al.* 2001), most concentrate on prime time television (Franzblau *et al.* 1977; Greenberg *et al.* 1980; Lowry and Towles 1989; Lowry and Shidler 1993; Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991; Silverman *et al.* 1979), soap opera (Greenberg and Busselle 1996; Heintz-Knowles 1996; Lowry 1989; Olson 1994), programmes most popular with adolescents (Cope-Farrar and Kunkel 2002; Greenberg *et al.* 1993e; Ward 1995) or 'family hour'

television (Kunkel *et al.* 1996). These areas are selected because they are popular with 'problem' audiences – whether children or adolescents (seen by some as 'particularly susceptible' to sexual messages by definition (Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991: 506; see also Strasburger 1989)), or those who by virtue of being 'less educated', poorer, non-white and/or female are considered vulnerable to influence (Greenberg and Busselle 1996: 156). Other genres and media have also been examined – films (Greenberg *et al.* 1993d; Pardun 2002), music (Arnett 2002; Baxter *et al.* 1985; Friesen and Helfrich 1998; Pardun and McKee 1995; Seidman 1992; Sherman and Dominick 1986; Sommers-Flanagan *et al.* 1993; Tapper *et al.* 1994), talk shows (Greenberg *et al.* 1997; Greenberg and Smith 2002) and advertising (Furnham and Mak 1999). Some studies are longitudinal and claim to chart changes across time (Greenberg 1994; Greenberg and Busselle 1996; Kunkel *et al.* 2001; Lowry and Shidler 1993; Sapolsky 1982; Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991), or compare similar studies (Kunkel *et al.* 1999a). Most analyse both aural and visual elements, but some focus on words only (Friesen and Helfrich 1998; Ward 1995). However, they all tend to address only one medium at a time, when most audiences (and especially adolescents) interact with multiple media daily.

Although one study showed a decrease in sexual activity between 1987 and 1991 (Lowry and Shidler 1993), in general, most argue that the occurrence of portrayals of sex on television has increased over the years. However, researchers rarely use a consistent set of definitions, categories or procedures. For example, in some surveys, a kiss would be coded twice – once for each partner – but in others would count only once (discussed in Lowry 1989; 1989). References may be coded as sexual even if they occur in a rejection such as 'I don't want to have sex with you' (Greenberg and Busselle 1996). Moreover, by taking such a limited sample – often only one episode of a series – results can be skewed according to the theme of a particular show. Consequently, assessments of the amount of sexual activity can vary considerably – from 7.4 acts per hour (Lowry 1989; Lowry and Towles 1989) to 27 (Strasburger 1989, citing a 1986 study for the Planned Parenthood Federation), to 37 an hour (Ward 1995, discussing verbal statements related to sexuality or relationships in programmes popular with adolescents).

Recently, Kunkel et al. commenced a biennial study for the Kaiser Family Foundation, which by being repeated regularly using the same methodology hoped to be less susceptible to criticism on these grounds. They charted sexual content across a comprehensive range of output on both national broadcast and cable channels, excluding news, sport and children's programming. A total of 1,114 programmes was studied for the 1999-2000 season, which was then compared directly with findings from the 1997-8 season's analysis (Kunkel *et al.* 1999b; Kunkel *et al.* 2001). They attempted to include some contextual measures in analysing single scenes, avoided double coding (i.e. counted sexual talk and acts in the same scene as one occurrence, not two), and did not include 'background' sexual behaviour (such as a couple kissing in a café who were not the main focus of a scene). As a result, their claims are in some cases more modest than other studies cited.

As one of the most recent and more authoritative studies in this field, the report is worth summarising in some detail. Among the key findings were the following:

- More than two thirds of programmes (68%) contained either talk about sex or actual sexual behaviour, an increase from about half (56%) of all shows during the 97-98 period.
- Within those programmes that contained any sexual material, there was an average of 4.1 scenes per hour, up from 3.2 in 1997-8 (although of course this number would be lower still if it was averaged across all TV programmes, not just those containing sexual material).
- The most widely viewed shows - primetime programmes on the major broadcast networks – were more likely to contain sexual content: 75% included it, up from 67% in 97-8.
- The majority of programmes (65%, up from 56%) showed characters talking about sex.
- There was sexual content in a range of programme genres. The lowest was 'reality shows' (27%), the highest movies (89%). There was an increase in the percentage of sitcoms and dramas that included sexual content (from 56% to 84% and from 58% to 69% respectively). 67% of talk shows included it.
- Only about one quarter (27%) showed actual sexual behaviours. Sexual intercourse was depicted or 'strongly implied' in one out of every ten shows, but the most common visual behaviours were 'precursory' - long kisses or intimate touching, rather than actual intercourse.
- Most of the characters involved in the intercourse-related scenes were adults who appeared to be aged 25 or older, 23% appeared to be aged between 18 and 24, and 9% appeared to be under 18. (The figures do not specify whether they appeared to be under 16).

The finding that talk about sex is more common than actual portrayals, and that visual depictions are relatively rare, has been echoed by other US studies. In daytime soaps popular with young people, for example, visual portrayals accounted for only 30% of the coded acts and were nearly all of long kisses (Greenberg *et al.* 1993e). Pardun's survey of fifteen films popular with teenagers in 1995 found that 'very few' encounters between opposite sex pairs 'contained any kind of direct reference to sexual intercourse', that about a third involved talk about relationships and that most romantic encounters took place off screen (Pardun 2002: 217-8). Verbal references and allusions generally involve innuendo (particularly in comedy genres (Kunkel *et al.* 2001; Sapolsky 1982; Ward 1995)) or discussion with only one of the participants present (that is, where characters talk about their own or other people's sexual activity with a third party). However, some have argued that such talk creates tolerance and a climate of acceptance for the more explicit films adolescents can access on video (Greenberg 1994: 180; Greenberg *et al.* 1993d).

On the other hand, the range of sexual behaviours depicted or referred to has become more varied in recent years, for instance including references to gay relationships, prostitution, date rape, assisted reproduction and so on, but this depends on particular series. In one survey of prime-time programmes preferred by adolescents, *Dynasty* was described as 'the runaway leader in sexual activity', but other popular shows such as *The A-Team* or *Diff'rent Strokes* contained no sexual references (Greenberg and Busselle 1996; Greenberg *et al.* 1993e). Talk shows often take a range of relationship types as their subject matter, although family relations (parent-child and marital) are

more commonly discussed than sexual activity in general (Greenberg *et al.* 1997; Greenberg and Smith 2002).

Many critics attempt to identify 'messages' and themes carried by sexual content, although results here are more equivocal and problematic. For instance, early studies demonstrated that the majority of sexual acts took place between partners who are not married to each other (Lowry and Shidler 1993; Sapolsky 1982; Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991). However, a later study of daytime soap operas suggested that the more explicitly depicted acts are 'almost always' between partners in a committed relationship and promote the idea that sexual activity is 'appropriate and beneficial' in such contexts (Heintz-Knowles 1996: 26). Kunkel et al. (2001) found that in general over 50% of characters involved in sexual acts are known to be in an established relationship, while 25% knew each other but had no prior romantic relationship and 16% had just met (with 14% indeterminate).

As Ward points out, merely quantifying sexual acts does not indicate what meaning is attached to them within the context in which they occur (Ward 1995). Greenberg et al. found that in youth-oriented soaps there was nearly as often a negative as a positive attitude expressed towards the sexual activity, from either participants or non-participants (Greenberg *et al.* 1993e). They argue that in general, 'sex is by no means consistently presented in a positive manner on television… the vast majority of those expressing an attitude about other people's sexual exploits are negative… barely half of those participating themselves are positive' (Greenberg 1994: 179). Whilst Greenberg et al. identified increasing visual depictions of sex in a comparison of 1994 and 1985 soaps, they also found that it was often frowned upon, whilst important contemporary issues (safe sex, date rape) were included in the more recent programmes. They call this pattern of positive and negative (lust / disgust) portrayals 'schizophrenic' and conclude that 'Regular viewers are provided with a more balanced presentation of the benefits and the consequences of sexual activity than reported in earlier studies' (Greenberg and Busselle 1996: 160). Nevertheless, many studies have argued that there is little reference to sexual responsibility (contraception, safe sex, STDs etc) and the potential negative consequences of sexual activity: Kunkel (1999b; 2001) claims that only 9-10% of programmes with sexual content contained any mention of risks and responsibilities (see also Cope-Farrar and Kunkel 2002; Greenberg *et al.* 1993e; Kunkel *et al.* 1999a; Lowry and Shidler 1993; Sapolsky 1982; Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991). However, along with other surveys (Heintz-Knowles 1996; Lowry 1989), the Kunkel study does observe a 'modest increase' in such references in recent shows and even terms this 'impressive' in those aimed at younger audiences (Kunkel *et al.* 2001: 35, 50). Among shows with any sexual content involving teenage characters, 17% included discussions of sexual risks or responsibilities; while this figure was 32% for shows with teens talking about or engaging in sexual intercourse. The programmes that either depicted or strongly implied sexual intercourse were much more likely than other shows to include such references (one in four did so, up from one in ten in 1997-8). On the other hand, however, Pardun claims that the depiction of marriage in films is 'less than compelling' since it focuses on its 'mundane functions' rather than 'the excitement and joy of commitment' (Pardun 2002: 221).

Ward's (1995) analysis of twelve prime-time series most popular with American youth audiences attempted to assess what they conveyed about the functioning of sexuality

and relationships. She found that more than one in four of the interactions in primetime TV programmes young people were likely to watch contained statements related to sexuality and that the content of discussions was often stereotyped, emphasising the importance of physical appearance for women and of 'scoring' for men. (Most of these shows were comedies, and some of the examples she gives suggest that such stereotypes were being lampooned or subverted, a point she does not consider in detail). Many shows emphasised the more 'superficial' aspects of sexual relationships, such as sex as sport and as fun. However she also noted a high number of themes to do with relationships, a stress on women as strong and assertive rather than as sexually passive, and a few programmes in which sexual responsibility (for contraception and protection from STDs) was explicitly highlighted. She concludes that the programmes might be important and valuable sources of information about relationships for young people, although she admits that it is not altogether clear whether young audiences prefer the programmes because of their sexual content or because of other factors.

Analyses of sexual messages in music and specialised channels, particularly MTV, produce similarly ambiguous results. One survey of MTV videos, for example, found that men appeared nearly twice as often as women and engaged in significantly more aggressive and dominant behaviour, while women engaged in significantly more implicitly sexual and subservient behaviour and were more frequently the object of explicit, implicit, and aggressive sexual advances (Sommers-Flanagan *et al.* 1993). Sherman and Dominick found that in the 166 concept videos they analysed, ‘kissing, hugging and suggestive behavior occurred at twice the rate that they occurred on conventional TV’ (Sherman and Dominick 1986). Another study, however, found that although female characters wore revealing clothes more often than did males, they were also more likely to be portrayed as sexually active, both initiating and receiving sexual advances (Seidman 1992). Meanwhile, an exploration of the occurrence of religious as well as sexual imagery in rock music videos found that not only was religious imagery common, but that it typically appeared in conjunction with sexual imagery (Pardun and McKee 1995). Arnett (2002: 254) cites a 1994 study of chart-topping song lyrics between 1980 and 1989, which found (perhaps unsurprisingly) that sexuality was a dominant theme in 72%. Of these, 67% contained one or more ‘optimistic’ phrases and 77% one or more ‘pessimistic’ phrases, evenly balanced between physical and emotional aspects of sexuality; and they tended to portray casual sex as leading to unhappiness (Edwards 1994). Some studies suggest that women have been portrayed more often as powerful over the years, although also as threatening and dangerous (Arnett 2002: 255). Friesen and Helfrich note that themes concerning gender and endorsing traditional gender roles are common in heavy metal lyrics. However, a comparison of lyrics from 1987 and 1991 showed an increasing number of songs dealing with social justice, oppression and to a certain extent criticising traditional gender roles (Friesen and Helfrich 1998). Themes and lyrics also vary depending on their genre, whether defined broadly as rap, pop and so on (Tapper *et al.* 1994), or categories within genres (death, thrash, pop metal etc) that may be more apparent to fans than outsiders (Friesen and Helfrich 1998). Moreover both the Sherman and Baxter articles suggest that music video sexual content is relatively understated, relying on innuendo rather than overt behaviours, which they see as suited to its adolescent audience whose ‘fantasy exceeds experience’ (Baxter *et al.* 1985: 336).

Walsh-Childers et al conducted a survey of American magazines for women and girls, focusing on their coverage of sex and sexual-health related issues between 1986 and 1996 (Walsh-Childers *et al.* 2002). They found a large increase (80%) in the space teenage magazines gave to general sexual content not focused on health topics, compared to a 26% increase for women's magazines; they call this 'bad news' (167). Sexual health-focused items declined in both over the period, although specific information on sexual health was often included in general sexual content. Although they condemn youth magazines for missing 'many opportunities' to educate their readers about sexual health issues, they acknowledge that they are more likely than women's magazines to consider pregnancy and STD prevention. There was more information on contraception (especially condoms and other specific methods) in teenage magazines than in women's magazines - one in six items mentioned this, and one in five mentioned HIV – and useful information about STDs was published in special supplements. They also note that some AIDS educators have argued that condom use might be more effectively eroticised through including references to it in the context of articles about sexual pleasure than in relation to health issues alone (168). Finally, it is interesting to note that they found there was no statistically significant change over the decade in the 'typical' topics teenage magazines considered – apart from sexual activity in general, these remained: sexual decision-making, virginity and female responsibility in relation to sex.

The limitations of content analysis

Objections to this form of content analysis are fairly self-evident. Despite the above attempts to infer 'messages' in television content, content analysis has only a very limited capacity to address questions of *meaning.* Broadly speaking, it seems to assume that meaning that is simply 'on' the screen and visible to all. Assessing innuendo (the form in which most sexual references are couched in comedies (Sapolsky 1982; Ward 1995)) or coding a dance movement or a gesture with a guitar as 'sexually suggestive' are particularly obvious instances of how problematic this assumption can be. Even Greenberg suggests (1994) that such work might best be understood by those with a 'dirty mind', from which in turn one might infer that attempts to ascertain how far young audiences concur with the researcher's conclusions would encounter practical and ethical dilemmas.

More broadly, these studies offer a rather superficial analysis of the material they survey. Their accounts of media texts largely ignore context, meaning, representation, register and mode of address. In their literal approach to meaning there is little space for the notion that issues of sexual risk and responsibility might be approached metaphorically or symbolically (for instance, through the vampire genre, as many have argued e.g. Redman 1991). Researchers seem to have little interest in the complexities of representations and indeed to lack understanding of or respect for the media texts they study. We might contrast Arnett's dismissal of Madonna's music as 'cliché-laden', 'predictable' and 'undemanding' – 'like a tasty confection, easy to consume and quickly forgotten' (Arnett 2002: 260) - with the more nuanced approaches taken by cultural theorists (see Section 5), which draw out the social significance of the Madonna phenomenon.

It is worth noting, however, that these researchers are primarily concerned with *conduct* in the 'real' world, not *representations* in the media. Some have obvious moral agendas, revealed (for example) in the categorisation of all sex other than heterosexual as 'unnatural' (Lowry 1989; Lowry and Towles 1989) or the attention drawn to the prevalence of unmarried sex (Greenberg and Busselle 1996; Greenberg *et al.* 1993e; Lowry 1989; Sapolsky 1982; Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991). The Kaiser Family Foundation, which has funded a large number of the studies discussed here, is not a media-oriented organisation, but is primarily concerned with public health and welfare: its fundamental preoccupation is with sex as a potentially harmful health phenomenon. This helps explain why researchers are more likely to refer to health surveys than to cultural criticism, often in somewhat melodramatic terms. Brown et al. open an article by declaring that 'Adolescents in the United States are involved in health-threatening sexual activity that ranges from obsessive preoccupation with making the body sexually attractive to early unprotected sexual intercourse'. They go on to present statistics ranging from teen spending on cosmetics, cosmetic surgery and dieting, to rates of contraception use, STD infection, rape and sexual assault (Brown *et al.* 1990: 62). Researchers often have a clear sense of the intervention they wish to see; Kunkel et al. state explicitly that 'abstinence or waiting for sex… constitutes arguably the most effective strategy for reducing one's risk for negative outcomes from sex' (Kunkel *et al.* 2001: 8). Strasburger entitles an article 'Getting teenagers to say NO to sex, drugs and violence in the new millennium' (Strasburger 2000). In this context, content analysis offers a way of making cultural texts available for calculation and regulation. The generation of statistics on the sheer amount of sex viewed (for example, '1900 to 2400 incidents a year', depending on the young viewer's orientation (Brown *et al.* 1990; Greenberg *et al.* 1993c)) acts as a potential campaigning tool rather than an illuminating statement about media representations.

However, their claims about both the antecedents and consequences of portrayals are open to what Winston terms 'the problem of inference' (Winston 1990). They offer little account or explanation for increasing sexual explicitness, other than assertions about the link between 'sexual titillation' and ratings success (e.g.: Sapolsky and Taberlet 1991: 514). Content analysis in itself tells us nothing about audience interpretations, yet researchers in this field frequently make contradictory assumptions about audiences' knowledge and understanding, particularly when it comes to children. On the one hand, children are credited with quite a complex grasp of narrative and of elisions or allusions. For instance, it is assumed that they will understand that showing a couple in bed suggests that intercourse has taken or will take place, or that 'bare shoulders emerging from a swimming pool' signify full nudity (Heintz-Knowles 1996). Some research would challenge these kinds of assumptions (e.g.: Collins 1979; Hodge and Tripp 1986); even where children can draw some inferences from such material (as discussed in the following section), what precisely they might imagine occurring between characters is likely to be highly variable.

On the other hand, viewers are often conceived as powerless to resist the 'messages' to which they are 'exposed'. Content analysis feeds into studies of media effects by assuming that representations will have particular impact on their audience; Cope-Ferrar and Kunkel describe adolescents as 'learning a potentially dangerous sexual script from their favorite television shows' (Cope-Farrar and Kunkel 2002: 75). Buerkel-Rothfuss argues that 'exposure to these media does create *socially inappropriate*

perceptions for young consumers... *unrealistic* depictions of human sexuality are being consumed' (Buerkel-Rothfuss *et al.* 1993: 113, our emphasis). Such statements generally rely on versions of social learning theory or cultivation analysis, both of which have been challenged on conceptual, methodological and theoretical grounds (as the next section shows).

Analysts generally ignore the *genre* of programmes, assuming that audiences do not understand the generic conventions governing representation and so respond in the same way to a sexual act or reference whether it is in a drama, a sitcom or a soap opera (for a more enlightening discussion, compare Smith 1991). Nor do they take account of the specialised knowledges developed by fans of particular genres, which vary according to the frames of reference they bring to bear on a text (Barker and Brooks 1998; Bennett 1983). Friesen and Helfrich give an example of this when discussing the coding of lyrics to Motley Crue's 'She's Got the Looks That Kill'. Whilst the majority of general listeners unfamiliar with heavy metal music understood the song to be about a woman, most hardcore fans insisted that it referred instead to a car. Similarly, Ward (1995) draws on psychologically-oriented literature on gender and sex roles in order to develop lists of expected sexual themes in TV shows. Using a wider range of literature (such as that discussed in section 5) might have produced a quite different set of categories and drawn her attention to other aspects of the programmes – although in neither case could it be assumed that members of the audience would interpret the content in the same way as would the researcher. Such work thus raises questions about how far researchers' coding categories match audience interpretations, and whose readings are taken as the point of departure.

Researchers' attempts to correlate TV viewing with poverty or low self-esteem (Greenberg *et al.* 1993a) suggest a deficit model of media consumption – that TV is only chosen when better options are unavailable. Yet as Buerkel-Rothfuss et al. found (seemingly to their surprise) it constitutes an important part of leisure practice amongst privileged, middle-class young people, and is positively chosen by them (Buerkel-Rothfuss *et al.* 1993). Such studies tend to view television in an overly rationalistic way, as an 'information source' alone, and further assume that young audiences believe what they see. Condemning the 'unrealistic and irresponsible portrayals of sexual relationships in much popular programming' (Strouse and Buerkel-Rothfuss 1993: 292) implies that it should be used instrumentally as a means to induce 'correct' (morally or pragmatically desirable) behaviours – favouring a curious mix of documentary realism and moral warning. Television content, it is implied, should portray what audiences *ought* to think, not how things are, because they will act on the basis of what they believe things to be (cf. Hodge and Tripp 1986: 101). Such studies therefore have little interest in exploring how media texts might resonate for their audiences at quite other levels - in terms of their own feelings, pleasures, and fantasies, for instance.

In sum, such researchers frequently make assumptions about audience *sensibility* but rarely discuss their *competence* at dealing with the material they encounter, or the *circumstances* in which they do so. It is hardly surprising that many articles conclude by calling for further research into what young people think of the representations they view - whether they see them as realistic, ideal, or as a joke, since 'exposure is not tantamount to liking or acceptance' (Greenberg *et al.* 1993c: 97).

Further, these studies transform television output into a series of graphs and statistical notations, which sustain a rhetoric of scientific neutrality, objectivity and systematic analysis, but bear little relation to audience experience. Many combine this with supposedly neutral descriptions of the material they have viewed. The Kunkel report, for example, is particularly liberal with these; its summary document presents 'Key Findings' across the top two thirds of the page, displayed in the form of summary statements, bar charts, percentages, etc. Meanwhile the bottom of the page is taken up with descriptions of foreplay, kissing, oral sex and implied copulation, such as this outline of a scene from *The Sopranos*:

> *A scene opens with a tight close-up shot of the blissful face of Victor, a middle-aged mobster, sitting in a chair. As the camera view pulls back, the reason for his ecstasy becomes apparent. His pants are pulled down to the floor while a naked woman kneels in front of him, her face buried in his crotch. He grunts and releases a sigh as he climaxes from the oral sex he is receiving…. A second woman wearing nothing but a G-string stands behind him caressing his shoulder...* (Kunkel *et al.* 2001)

The impact of this presentation is twofold. On the one hand, the descriptions seem to illustrate a surprising diversity of sexual messages and portrayals, despite what the research results tend to claim. But secondly, it runs the risk of partaking of the pornography it sets out to critique – and makes the experience of reading a peculiarly ambivalent one. As such, the report exemplifies Foucault's argument that discourse about sex in modern Western society displays the inseparability of knowledge and pleasure, 'examination and excitation' (Foucault 1984 (1976); Hunter *et al.* 1993) – an issue to which we return in the penultimate section of this paper.

British content analyses

By comparison with the situation in the US, there have been many fewer analyses of sexual content on British television. The only substantial studies we have located are those conducted for the BSC by the Communications Research Group of Aston University and Network Research and Marketing Limited (here we will discuss the most recent: BSC 1999). Unlike many American studies, which are funded by bodies with an existing anti-media agenda, the BSC research has a more neutral remit, to ensure that its judgements about specific instances of media content are supported both by evidence about public attitudes and by an understanding of the nature of broadcast content as a whole.

The content analysis in the BSC report uses a similar methodology to the US studies and involves the coding of 879 terrestrial and 226 satellite TV programmes. However, by paying attention to different aspects of the programmes, it produces a far less sensationalist account. For instance, it covers terrestrial and satellite channels separately and clearly distinguishes sexual acts and verbal references rather than eliding them. It specifies the genre of programmes in which they appear, their context (including whether they could be expected by the audience), their tone (for example 'quirky' or 'gritty'), their relevance to the storyline (whether they drive the narrative

forward or 'indicate the quality of a relationship' (78)). The report also lists the number of scenes and their duration, and categorises them by their country of production and scheduling (before or after the 9 p.m. watershed).

The following are among the report's key findings for 1999:

- Less than one in five terrestrial TV programmes showed sexual behaviour (18%, 160 programmes, 400 scenes), mostly in fiction and films. Seven in ten of these scenes showed kissing (46% 'brief' kissing, 24% 'kissing with arousal'). Pre- and post-coital activity accounted for 16% of all scenes. Whilst there was an increase in depiction of simulated sexual acts to 9%, up from 6% in 1997, figures for 1994 indicated a proportion of 11%, and such scenes were 13 times more likely after the watershed. Over half were in the context of established relationships; extra-marital sex or 'pick-ups' accounted for 7% each of the total, 11% showed a previous relationship which became sexual and 24% were uncoded or other.
- On satellite TV, the proportion of programmes containing depictions of sexual activity decreased – to 46% in 1998 from 55% in 1995, for instance. Again, 70% depicted kissing (26% 'kissing with arousal'). Pre and post-coital activity accounted for 20%. Simulated sexual intercourse was noted in 5% of scenes, all post-watershed. 40% occurred in the context of married or established non-married relationships, 6% were extra-marital, 5% 'pick-ups', 2% abusive, 17% a previous relationship that became sexual, with the rest uncoded or other.
- On terrestrial TV, 91% of scenes were of heterosexual sex, 2% of lesbians and 1% of gay men, with the remaining 6% including nine scenes showing a single participant and fourteen scenes with more than two participants, or separate couples. On satellite TV, 96% of scenes showed heterosexual activity.
- On terrestrial TV, 3% of the 'television population' were shown as 'sex participants'. Just under half (47%) were aged between 16 and 29 years, 46% between 30-49, 4% over 50 and 3% under 16. On satellite, 49% were 16-29, 42% 30-49, 6% over 50 and 2% under 16.
- On both terrestrial and satellite TV, 40% of sexual acts were before the watershed and tended to be mild in nature and between couples in established relationships.
- On terrestrial TV, 0.5% pre-watershed and 0.6% post-watershed of overall broadcast time contained sexual activity – 0.3% and 1.0% on satellite.
- On terrestrial TV, 39% of Australian programmes contained sexual scenes, compared with 12% for UK programmes and 45% of US programmes – although it is pointed out that the first statistic refers to just 27 scenes. On satellite TV 46% of US and 34% of UK productions contained sexual scenes – and only 1% of all USA scenes showed simulated sexual intercourse compared with 9% of UK scenes.
- Scenes of nudity increased but were still 'infrequent', appearing in only 8% of satellite TV shows, with the highest rate in factual programmes on terrestrial TV. Female nudes outnumbered male by a ratio of 2:1 on terrestrial TV and 4:1 on satellite.
- On terrestrial TV, 35% of programmes contained verbal references to sex or nudity: 69% were references to sex, especially in sitcoms or light entertainment, with more after the watershed; on satellite 56% included references to sex or nudity, mainly to sex and mainly in humorous contexts. It is stressed that these were mild. Innuendo

(indirect and humorous references) accounted for a quarter of all such references in both cases.

On the basis of these figures, the report concludes that there is ‘no actual evidence to support public perception of increased sexual activity’ on British television (BSC 1999: 4). However, it is important to note that the study only covers programmes screened between 17.30 and midnight. As a result, it excludes all daytime talk shows, which have attracted considerable attention for their coverage of sex and relationships, and are one of the most striking developments in programme content over the last decade. Moreover, when the report was published it attracted headlines such as ‘Sex in Soaps Trebles in Three Years’ (*The Times*), on the basis of a comparison with specific statistics from the previous year that the report itself had not included.

Nevertheless, the contrast between these findings and those of recent US studies is quite striking. While there probably are differences between British and US television in this respect (as the BSC study itself would imply), the contrasting conclusions may well be due to the different methods of analysis, and not simply to the exclusion of daytime talk shows from the British sample. As we have noted, the British research seems to make finer distinctions, and to take account of a wider range of contextual features, than many of the US studies. As this implies, different studies implicitly adopt rather different definitions of what they *mean* by 'sex', or at least what aspects of sexual content they deem to be significant. This makes it difficult to compare research studies; but it also points to some of the broader limitations of content analysis as a method for understanding the meanings of television.

Conclusion

While content analyses of US television do appear to point to an increase both in the frequency and the explicitness of sexual portrayals, this has not been found to be true of British television. Even in the US context, however, it would seem that television is much less explicit than other media to which young people routinely have access. Because of its nature as a mass medium, television is not highly *visually* explicit, particularly in day- and prime-time. Young audiences are unlikely to find direct instruction in the 'mechanics' of sexual technique on television. To some degree, television also appears to be aware of its historical role to ‘educate and inform’ by including references to contemporary debates around safer sex and personal responsibility. Nevertheless, what television does contain is a good deal of *talk* about relationships and sex, and hence also meanings about sexual norms, practices, motives and so on. These may well provide resources that become part of audiences’ repertoires for talking, thinking about and making sense of themselves and their own experiences. Whether and how these resources are actually used by young people, however, is a matter that content analysis itself cannot resolve.

3. Effects Studies

However limited and partial they may be, content analyses do provide some account of the kind of material that is appearing on television, and how it may be changing. Yet these findings do not, of course, necessarily tell us anything about the consequences of this situation for viewers, or about how viewers interpret or respond to what they watch. As with the violence research, we need to avoid making unwarranted assertions about the effects of television merely on the basis of analysing its content. In fact, research on these latter questions is much more inconclusive and problematic. Before considering some of the findings of the research, therefore, it is important to consider some of the reasons why this might be the case.

Theory and methodology

Research on audiences in this field has been overwhelmingly dominated by the search for *effects*. While there has been some research on 'positive' effects – which will be discussed in Section 4 of this paper, on sex education – most of the effects that have preoccupied researchers have been broadly 'negative'. Does watching sex on television lead young people to develop 'unrealistic' expectations or 'distorted' views about sexual behaviour and relationships? Does it encourage 'premature' or 'promiscuous' sexual activity? Does it lead to 'unsafe' or 'unhealthy' sexual practices?

As our inverted commas imply, questions of this nature are implicitly normative. While some of the research is driven by relatively objective concerns about public health, many of the questions here are essentially *moral* ones. They imply shared assumptions, both about what constitutes 'mature' or 'healthy' sexual behaviour, and about what constitutes 'realistic' or 'accurate' beliefs. They seek to define the norm with reference to the deviant – without which, of course, it would not be possible to define it at all. As we have implied, there is frequently an underlying contradiction – not to mention a degree of hypocrisy – here. On the one hand, there is the demand for documentary accuracy, and on the other, the call to uphold particular standards of morality. Yet to state the obvious, sexuality is not merely a matter of rational choice: it is an area where one might expect there to be some tensions between what people might *like* to be the case and what actually *is* the case. We may want young people to behave in 'healthy' or 'mature' ways, but this may conflict with their (and our) perceptions of what really happens. 'Responsibility' and 'realism' are not necessarily compatible or coterminous. At the very least, therefore, we should expect there to be some debate and disagreement about what is 'healthy' or 'unhealthy', or 'realistic' or 'unrealistic'.

Furthermore, these questions implicitly presume that the relationship between television and its audience can best be defined in terms of 'influences' or 'effects'. Effects researchers now frequently profess to reject the view that audiences are simply passive victims of the media; but in practice, the theories and hypotheses they employ still largely presume that this is a one-way relationship. Effects may be 'mediated' by a range of intervening influences, but the relationship between television and its audience

is still predominantly perceived here in terms of stimulus-and-response. Thus, researchers measure subjects' inclination to 'model' (that is, copy) behaviours they have witnessed on screen, or the ways in which screen images can 'trigger' particular behavioural reactions. This essentially behaviourist approach seems ill-suited to addressing questions about meanings and identities, particularly in a complex area such as sexuality.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some of the methodological limitations and problems of this kind of research. These problems have been well rehearsed elsewhere, not just by critics of effects studies (e.g. Gauntlett 1995), but also by some of their leading exponents (Huston *et al.* 1998). Briefly, effects studies have tended to rely on two principal methods: surveys and experiments.

Surveys (or opinion polls) have the advantage of using large, representative samples. They therefore permit researchers to make fairly confident statistical predictions about the influence of particular variables. However, surveys generally rely on respondents' reports about their own behaviour or attitudes, which may not be reliable (perhaps particularly in the case of sensitive topics such as sexuality). More significantly, surveys cannot in themselves tell us anything about causal relationships – and hence about 'effects'. In order to establish causal relationships between two variables, researchers must (a) show that one variable precedes another one in time, and (b) show that they have controlled for any other (so-called 'third') variables that might potentially influence both of them. Although carefully-conducted longitudinal studies claim to be able to address the first of these difficulties, the second is more awkward, simply because one can never be sure that all the possible variables have been controlled. In practice, therefore, the most that surveys can hope to achieve is to demonstrate *correlation* rather than *causality*.

By contrast, experiments allow researchers to control the process and context of exposure to media, and the potential influence of other variables. They are best suited to addressing short-term rather than long-term or cumulative effects. However, the major problem with experiments is that of external validity. Laboratories are clearly unlike everyday viewing situations, and subjects (who in practice are often college students seeking course credits for participation) may be inclined to produce the responses they believe are required of them. Many experiments use specially-produced programmes – or extracts - rather than 'real' programmes; and most of the constraints that apply to real life behaviour do not apply in the laboratory. Some researchers have attempted to overcome these problems by means of field experiments, which test out responses to real programmes in real-life situations: for example, subjects may view television programmes via closed-circuit channels prior to broadcast, and their responses are then compared with those of non-viewers. Nevertheless, even in this situation, subjects will know they are involved in an experiment, and may be inclined to behave accordingly. The most that experiments can hope to achieve is to demonstrate what *could* possibly happen, rather than what actually *does* happen.

Research on young people's responses to sexual content has not employed the most potentially powerful of these methods – namely, longitudinal surveys and field experiments. This may be partly for reasons of cost, although field experiments also raise ethical dilemmas. However, if we add these methodological limitations to the

theoretical difficulties raised above, it should be clear why research in this field has been so problematic and so inconclusive. With these general caveats in mind, we will now move on to a summary of the available research studies.

Television as an information source

The fact that television can serve as a source of sexual information for children is self-evident. Right from the early days of television (Abrams 1956), children have always watched (and indeed preferred to watch) programmes aimed at adults. If the content analyses described in the previous chapter are correct, it therefore seems logical to conclude that children are almost certainly watching a significant amount of sexual content on television – and perhaps more than they used to do. Furthermore, the majority of young people (or adolescents) are likely to be intensely curious about sex. They want to know, not just about the 'mechanics' of sexual activity, but also about how to behave in (potentially) sexual or romantic situations. They are at a stage in life where they are discovering – and actively forming – their sexual identities. In this situation, television and other media provide a readily available source of information and guidance about sex that raises few of the difficulties or embarrassments that might be encountered in using other sources such as teachers or parents (Greenberg et al. 1993a).

Any discussion of the effects of exposure to sexual content on television needs to take account of the different preferences and viewing patterns of different audience groups. In general, despite the advent of new technologies, television is still very much the dominant medium for young people (Livingstone and Bovill 1999; Roberts *et al.* 1999). However, there are differences in the amount and type of television watched by different social groups. Teenagers in fact watch less television than younger children, and may do so with less commitment (Larson 1995). Teenage girls tend to favour genres such as soap operas, while teenage boys prefer music videos; and these genres tend to represent sexuality and relationships in rather different ways. Meanwhile, teenage girls are more likely than boys to have access to other media – particularly magazines – which deal with sexual matters.

These different patterns of use clearly have implications in terms of exposure to sexual content; but as yet, there seem to be no systematic measures which take full account of these kinds of differences and how they interact with each other. A couple of American studies from the early 1990s (Buerkel-Rothfuss *et al.* 1993; Greenberg *et al.* 1993b; 1993c) indicate some of the difficulties here. Although both studies found that young people were exposed to 'sexually oriented' and 'sexually explicit' content in other media – such as R-rated movies and magazines – they found that adolescents’ preferred TV shows did not contain 'heavy' amounts of sexual content. Some demographic and family variables did correlate with exposure to sexual content - there was less exposure in more traditional families, and more in Black and Hispanic families, for example – although most personality variables (such as 'self-esteem') did not. However, the range of interacting variables here tends to lead towards rather equivocal findings; and (as the authors acknowledge) they provide no evidence as regards causality. One of the self-evident dangers here is to assume that it is in fact the sexual content (as opposed to

some other factor) that determines young people's preferences for particular programmes or media. These studies tend to conclude (correctly, in our view) by arguing that researchers need to be looking more closely at how information about sex circulates within the peer group (Greenberg *et al.* 1993c: 97); and that there needs to be further, more detailed study of the ways in which adolescents interpret what they watch (Walsh-Childers and Brown 1993: 132).

The potential role of the media as a source of sexual information began to emerge on the research agenda in the late 1970s. It was argued that, given the relative absence or ineffectiveness of formal sex education in schools, the media were effectively serving as a source of 'informal' sex education (Courtright and Baran 1980; Roberts 1982; Strasburger 1989; Strouse and Fabes 1985). Indeed, it was suggested that other sources of sexual information and guidance, such as parents or peers, were declining in importance relative to the media (Darling and Hicks 1982). These studies also used correlational surveys to suggest that high exposure to sexual content in the media led to lower levels of satisfaction with their sexual experiences (or lack of them) among young people (Baran 1976; Courtright and Baran 1980) – although the measures of exposure used here were somewhat crude.

These and subsequent studies implicitly regard this reliance on media as problematic, for a variety of reasons. As we have seen in our discussion of content analyses (Section 2), there is a general agreement here that television 'distorts' or 'misrepresents' the reality of adult sexual relationships. Strouse and Fabes (1985: 255, 258), for example, assert that '(f)or the most part, television presents sexuality as a distorted, recreation-oriented, exploitive (sic), casual activity, without dealing with the consequences'; and they express disquiet at the 'extreme gestures and provocative sexual gyrations' of characters on MTV. These authors predict that research will ultimately prove that young people are influenced (negatively) by the sexual behaviour of their favourite television characters; although, as we shall see below, this prediction has not proven to be consistently correct.

One of the difficulties with this 'sexual socialisation' model (as it is sometimes termed) is that it seems to assume that young people simply mistake television for reality (Strouse and Fabes 1985: 255). Television 'realism' is seen as highly persuasive, particularly in the absence of contrasting views (Roberts 1982). Courtright and Baran (1980: 114), however, do suggest that viewers' experience will affect their perceptions of sex in the media; and that as their own level of sexual activity increases, they may well come to question the realism of media sex. Nevertheless, they imply that young people's 'sexual socialisation' may already be complete and 'irreversible' by the time they reach this stage; and that they may come to interpret real-life experience in terms of media information, rather than vice-versa. As we have implied, however, it is precisely these kinds of questions about meaning and interpretation that effects research is so ill-equipped to address.

Effects on behaviour

In any discussion of media effects, it is vital to distinguish between different *types* of effects. The media may potentially have effects on attitudes or beliefs, on emotions, or on behaviour; and while these may be related, they should not be confused. In this case, most of the research has focused on behavioural and attitudinal effects. These will be considered in turn in this and the following section.

The research on behavioural effects typically begins by noting correlations between changes in the amount and nature of sexual content in the media and changes in young people's sexual behaviour. Broadly speaking, over the past two decades, the age of initiation of sexual intercourse has decreased, while the number of teenage pregnancies has increased (or at least remained high). Meanwhile, as we have noted, the amount and 'explicitness' of sex on television is alleged to have increased, at least in the USA (where nearly all this research has been conducted). To establish a causal relationship between these phenomena, we would need to prove that the frequency of viewing sexual content on television is related to the age of initiation of sexual intercourse. More specifically, we would need to establish whether exposure to sexually-oriented television content causes young people to have sex *earlier than they might have done otherwise*.

Two studies published in a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 1991 (and reprinted in Wolf and Kielwasser 1991), point to some of the difficulties here. Both are based on cross-sectional survey data. Brown and Newcomer (1991) undertook a survey of 391 adolescents in an urban middle school. They found that those whose television viewing contained a higher proportion of 'sexy' programmes were more likely to have had sexual intercourse than those who watched a lower proportion of such material. (It is important to note that this finding only holds true in respect of the *proportion* of overall viewing, rather than the *amount* of 'sexy viewing' *per se*.) This relationship was still apparent while controlling for other variables such as 'race', gender, and peer group encouragement to engage in sex. By contrast, Peterson, Moore and Furstenburg (1991) used a significantly larger sample, drawn from the US National Survey of Children. They found no consistent evidence for a link between television viewing and the early initiation of intercourse, either in terms of the amount or content of viewing. In many areas, however, the findings of this latter study are weak and inconsistent; and the measure of viewing (which required children to nominate favourite programmes) was potentially misleading.

However, the problems with both studies are symptomatic of the broader limitations of correlational surveys. Both rely on self-reports of viewing and of sexual activity (and both use a crude binary distinction here between virgins and non-virgins). Both attempt to control for a range of variables, although both recognise that there are further variables that might play a part. More significantly, both acknowledge that they have limited evidence as regards *causality*. The Peterson et al. (1991) study has a longitudinal dimension, although there are inconsistencies in the data collection which somewhat undermine the potential value of this. As Brown and Newcomer (1991) conclude, evidence of a correlation may just as easily be taken as proof of the fact that viewers who are interested in sex (or disposed to engage in it) are likely to seek out

sexual content on television. (And of course, it is not unreasonable to assume that the causal relationship may operate in both directions at once.)

While these studies ultimately fail to confirm their hypotheses about the effects of television viewing, they do raise some interesting questions which are in need of further investigation. Both point to the need to address broader contextual aspects of viewing (such as the role of parental mediation), questions of personal relevance (such as how sexual activity relates to other factors in young people's lives), and the interaction between television and other sources of sexual information. As Peterson et al. (1991) suggest, we should be examining what young people learn about the ways in which men and women relate to each other in *all* spheres of behaviour, not just in relation to sex. These are issues that might be more appropriately addressed through more qualitative methods (see Section 6 of this paper).

Finally, it should be noted that one of the most frequent complaints about the influence of the media in this area – that is, the extent to which it might encourage 'risky' sexual activity – has hardly been addressed by researchers. As we have seen in the previous section, content analyses suggest that issues such as contraception and sexually transmitted disease are rarely raised in fictionalised portrayals of sexual relationships on television. The media are often accused of presenting sex as a risk-free 'recreational' activity. Yet little is known about whether this actually encourages young people to engage in unprotected sexual intercourse (Brown *et al.* 1990). A recent study by Wingood et al. (2001) does find a correlation between young Black women's viewing of 'X-rated' movies and their chances of engaging in 'risky' sexual behaviour, but this fails to establish any causal relationship. On the other hand, as we shall see in the following section, attempts to use the media positively to encourage safer sexual behaviour have not been conspicuously successful.

Effects on attitudes and beliefs

One difficulty in drawing together the conclusions of effects research is the fact that different studies are often informed by rather different theoretical models. In the case of the studies summarised above, for example, it might be possible to explain the relationship between viewing and behaviour in terms of social learning theory (Bandura 1977). Simply put, this would suggest that young people will engage in sexual activity because of a desire to imitate the behaviour of glamorous or otherwise admirable 'role models' whom they see on television. Alternatively, it could be argued that watching such material on television might enable them to overcome 'inhibitions' regarding sexual behaviour, or encourage a generalised form of psychological 'arousal' that then leads on to sexual activity. These are all essentially behaviourist theories, and they would seem to apply primarily to short-term effects; but they all offer different accounts of the psychological *mechanism* through which effects are assumed to occur.

Other theories are more concerned with gradual, longer-term shifts in enculturation. The most notable example of this approach is the 'cultivation theory' of George Gerbner and his colleagues (Signorielli and Morgan 1990). Here, it would be argued that young people see (for example) unmarried couples frequently engaging in sex on television,

and come to believe that this is the norm; and this belief in turn makes them more likely to adopt such behaviour themselves. This latter perspective thus effectively inserts attitudes or beliefs as an 'intervening variable' in the relationship between cause and effect; and it suggests that the media generate a process of 'mainstreaming', whereby divergent views and representations are marginalised. In some respects, this approach would seem no more than common sense. Kunkel et al. (1999b), for example, report that 76% of teenagers themselves indicate that one reason why young people have sex is because television and other media make it seem 'normal' for teenagers (although whether they might have given this answer if they had not been asked directly remains to be seen). Nevertheless, cultivation analysis has been widely criticised by other researchers, both theoretically and methodologically (e.g. Wober 1990; 1988); and the notion of 'mainstreaming' would seem to belie the increasing diversification both of media and of their audiences.

Research on the effects of sexual content on young people's attitudes and beliefs has focused primarily on the question of pre- or extra-marital sex, and to a lesser extent on questions of body image and sexual desirability. Here again, empirical studies are few and far between. (A review of early studies in this area can be found in Brown *et al.* 1990).

Two experimental studies provide contrasting evidence on these kinds of issues. Greenberg, Lingsangan and Soderman (1993b) found that television could potentially teach young people about the meanings of terms relating to sexual activity that they did not previously know. However, it did not affect either what they knew or what they believed about unmarried intercourse; nor did it affect their beliefs about areas such as prostitution and homosexuality. Bryant and Rockwell (1994) seem to offer contrary findings. They ‘exposed’ adolescents to 15 hours of 'sexually oriented' prime-time programming, featuring sex between unmarried partners, and then tested their moral judgements of a series of brief video vignettes including 'sexual indiscretions or improprieties'. As compared with control groups, those who were exposed judged the 'indiscretions' less negatively than those who were not. These authors went on to test for factors that might mitigate the effects of exposure: they found that 'active viewing', a more open style of family communication and a clear and well-defined family value system effectively insulated young people from such effects. The authors conclude by suggesting that the following warning label could be attached to prime-time television shows: 'Teenagers beware. Watching too much television programming featuring premarital, extramarital, or nonmarital sex can be hazardous to your moral health' (193).

Signorielli (1991) investigated similar issues using a 'classic' cultivation analysis approach. Noting that sexual activity on television is most likely to occur between unmarried partners or in the context of adultery, she set out to test the impact of these representations on adolescents' attitudes towards marriage by means of a rigorous correlational survey. The findings are, at least in our view, somewhat paradoxical. Television viewing (in general) is positively related to young people saying they want to get married, to stay married to the same person for life, and to have children. However, it is also positively related (although rather less strongly) to young people saying that they see so few good or happy marriages that they question it as a way of life. There are also positive relationships between viewing and agreement that it is a good idea to live with someone before marriage; although only one quarter of respondents felt that

monogamy was too restrictive. The author attempts to reconcile these findings by claiming that *both* views are compatible with television imagery: it is 'ambivalence' itself that television apparently cultivates. However, she concludes by warning parents that 'television may have a negative influence in regards to attitudes about sex and intimate personal relationships' – even though it is not entirely clear *which* of the attitudes she identifies is to be seen as 'negative'.

Buerkel-Rothfuss and Strouse (1993) used similar methods to investigate the role of the media in young people's perceptions of sexual behaviour more generally. In general, high exposure to televised portrayals of sexual behaviours is found to be associated with increased estimates of the frequency of such behaviours in the real world. Viewers of soap operas, for example, tend to over-estimate the frequency of sexual activity, and of sexual problems in the ‘real’ world relative to other viewers; while viewing of MTV correlates with a view that both males and females often tend to brag about their sexual activity. Whether or not these estimates are accurate, of course, is a matter that this study cannot resolve; and, as with the Signorielli study, there is no firm evidence here of any causal relationships. Furthermore, as with the large majority of the studies reported here, the study uses a very generalised measure of viewing and of sexual content.

Two further cross-sectional surveys have investigated the effects of specific television genres. Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss and Long (1995) surveyed adolescents about their use of music videos, and their attitudes towards (and involvement in) pre-marital sex. The males were more likely to have had sexual experience than the females, and were also more inclined to adopt 'permissive' attitudes. However, their experience (or the lack of it) was not related to their use of the media in question, although this did prove to be the case for the females. Females who were more exposed to music video were also likely to espouse permissive attitudes; and this association was much stronger for females in 'unsatisfactory' home environments.

Finally, Larson (1996) offers a similar analysis of the effects of television soap operas on young people's beliefs about single motherhood. She finds that heavy viewers believe that single mothers have good jobs, are relatively well educated, and do not live in poverty. They also perceive that their babies are as healthy as other babies, and that their babies will get love and attention from adult men who are friends of their mothers. These are all beliefs which the author clearly condemns as 'contrary to reality'. Although this study takes us a little further away from the specific influence of sexual content, it does make reference to the prominence of sexual activity on soap operas, and the failure to show its consequences, as a potential influence.

In terms of assessing the effects of the media, these studies might be criticised on methodological grounds, of the kind identified above. They usefully draw attention to a range of variables that might be assumed to mediate the effects of television, such as gender and family background; but even at best, they merely provide evidence of correlation, rather than causality. More significantly, these studies seem to imply a remarkably rationalistic view of the ways in which young people make choices about their sexual behaviours and identities. They all rely on a set of moral assumptions about the desirability of marriage: they implicitly presume that sex outside marriage is always wrong, that single parenthood is always undesirable, and that it is bad for young people to be 'ambivalent' about marriage or 'permissive' in their attitudes towards sex. They

also fail to distinguish adequately between pre-marital (or non-marital) sex and adultery, which some people would argue have a very different moral status. Insofar as television encourages such beliefs and activities, it is simply a 'negative influence' that is injurious to young people's 'moral health'. Here again, we find a characteristic tension between the world as it is and the world as we might like it to be: on the one hand, television is condemned for presenting a distorted, unrealistic picture of the world; yet on the other, producers are urged to provide 'positive images' – in this case, of the institution of marriage – in order that young people will learn to overcome their apparent ambivalence towards it.

Occasionally, however, such studies may be used to critique rather than sustain claims about media effects. Davis and Mares (1998) explored the effects of talk show viewing on adolescents and found that many of the criticisms directed at talk shows – for instance, that they desensitise viewers or cause them to trivialise moral / social issues (including those to do with sexual mores) – were not borne out. ‘Heavy’ talk show viewers overestimated the frequency of teen sex, teen pregnancy and running away from home, but this did not make them more pessimistic about the world or more likely to tolerate antisocial behaviour. In fact, they were more likely to be concerned about such issues and to believe that individuals have the power to solve them. The authors conclude that sweeping condemnation of the shows is extreme and that they may act as a conservative force, reinforcing traditional moral codes, rather than undermining them.

Finally, it is worth noting a small group of studies on the question of 'body image'. While this takes us away from our main focus – in that most of these studies are not concerned with explicitly sexual content – they do nevertheless relate to the question of how young people develop sexual identities. The fundamental argument here is one that is regularly rehearsed in the press: that is, the view that the images of women circulated in media such as television and advertising impose a narrow and ultimately dangerous view of what it means to be sexually desirable. The few published studies in this field largely seem to relate to adult women or college students. Heinberg and Thompson (1995) found that women who viewed a videotape of 'societally-endorsed images of thinness and attractiveness' were more likely to become depressed and dissatisfied with their own appearance after viewing, although this was only the case if they were already dissatisfied to begin with. Henderson-King and Henderson-King (1997) likewise found that individual personality differences were important mediators of such judgements; and Kalodner (1997) found that women who viewed pictures of thin models became more anxious and self-conscious about their own body image immediately afterwards, although the same did not apply to men. Harrison (2000b) discovered a correlation between adolescents' exposure to 'thin-ideal' media and a propensity to eating disorders, which was sustained even when controlled for selective exposure to body-improvement content; although age and sex were also significant variables here (see also Harrison and Cantor 1997). Myers and Biocca (1992) argue that the media can alter a woman’s perception of the shape of her body, but that this varies over time and can include a ‘euphoric’ identification with an ideal (thinner) body immediately after viewing. Hofschire and Greenberg (2002) studied the media’s impact on body dissatisfaction. Although they found high levels of dissatisfaction, there was no exact relation to the media; general total viewing was not relevant and particular programmes correlated only unequally. At best, one would have to conclude that these

studies provide only a very weak confirmation of popular views about the effects of the media in this field, particularly in respect of young people.

Emotional responses and pornography

These latter studies implicitly raise the question of *emotional* responses to sexual imagery. Of all the areas considered here, this has been the least researched, particularly among young people. It is hardly surprising to discover that young people seem to enjoy watching sexual content, for example in music videos (Hansen and Hansen 1990). Yet the nature of that enjoyment – and of emotional responses more broadly - often seem to have been neglected or taken for granted by researchers. In a recent study, Ward and Rivadaneyra (1999) draw attention to the potential role of 'viewer involvement' in mediating the influence of television on young people's attitudes and expectations about sex. 'Involvement' was defined here as including viewing motivation, active viewing, perceived realism, perceived relevance, and identification (as measured via questionnaires). Greater involvement with sexual content was correlated with stronger endorsement of 'recreational' attitudes towards sex, higher expectations about the sexual activity of one's peers, and more extensive sexual experience; and these associations were stronger among females than among males. Here again, the study does not provide evidence of any causal relationship; and its notion of 'involvement' and its conception of the outcomes of viewing still seem highly rationalistic. The types and degrees of 'involvement' in sexual content – or the range of emotional responses it might potentially evoke – are bound to be diverse. Viewers may respond with excitement and arousal; but they may also experience embarrassment, shock and even disgust. Several of the studies reviewed here – and some of those discussed elsewhere in this paper – implicitly recognise this, but few seem prepared to investigate it in any detail.

Perhaps the only area where this has been a significant issue for researchers is in relation to pornography; although here again, the primary emphasis has been on effects on attitudes. There is an extensive and much-debated body of experimental studies concerned with the effects of pornography (e.g. Donnerstein *et al.* 1987) (and for critiques, see Segal 1993; Thompson 1994). In general, this research seems to conclude that viewing pornography can result in men adopting more 'callous' attitudes towards women, but only if it also contains violence. 'Non-violent erotica' generally seems to be exonerated from blame in this respect – although these conclusions have been hotly disputed by other researchers, both by those who argue that the effects are more far-reaching (e.g. Itzin 1992) and those who suggest that they have been overstated (e.g. Howitt and Cumberbatch 1990).

Despite public concerns about the issue, none of this work has focused on children, for obvious ethical reasons. A recent report conducted for the British Board of Film Classification (Cragg Ross Dawson 2000) considered whether 'experts' (such as psychologists, social workers and teachers) were able to say that children are harmed by viewing videos rated as 'R18'. A majority felt that pornography was likely to provoke strong emotional responses among children, both of shock and excitement; and that children would find it difficult to deal with these feelings, because they might not

understand what they had seen, or might feel inhibited from talking about it. However, a substantial minority doubted whether pornography would in fact be shocking or harmful; and in general, it was agreed that it was most likely to be harmful if children were already being harmed in other ways, through neglect or abuse. Nevertheless, respondents appeared to have different conceptions of 'harm' and of how it might be caused; and they agreed that they had little or no evidence – either from research or from their own case histories – to support their beliefs.

We will return briefly to the issue of pornography in Section 5 of this paper. However, it should be noted that – by any standards – there is very little material on British television (outside of subscription-only channels) that could reasonably be categorised as 'pornography'. In the case of the report for the BBFC, for example, the interviewees often appeared to be thinking of the kind of pornography that would not be granted classification in the UK in any case (even at R18), let alone appear on television. As such, this issue remains somewhat beyond our remit here.

Social and developmental differences

One final difficulty in summarising the research in this field is to do with what one means by 'children' or 'young people'. 'Children' are clearly not an homogenous category. For example, one might expect there to be developmental differences in children's responses to sexual content, although here again there has been relatively little research that has addressed these. Silverman-Watkins and Sprafkin (1983) found that 12-year-olds were less able to understand sexual innuendoes in TV situation comedies than 14- and 16-year-olds. However, this lack of understanding was less apparent in relation to what the researchers call 'discouraged' sexual practices (principally homosexuality) – where the references were apparently more explicit (and hence, it would seem, less amusing) - than in relation to references to heterosexual intercourse. In a more recent study (KFF and Children Now 1996), 10-12-year-olds were able to comprehend such jokes and innuendoes, although younger children (aged 8-10) were more uncomfortable with the clips they were shown. However, as Chapin (2000) suggests, research in this field needs to take fuller account of the various factors at play in young people's development: chronological age may not in itself be the most useful indicator. Furthermore, as Roberts (1989, cited in Chapin 2000) argues, research needs to remain sensitive to adolescents' realities as opposed to adults' concerns and expectations: just because adults worry about the effects of television portrayals of sexual activity does not mean that adolescents themselves necessarily perceive such content as primarily sexual in nature in the first place.

Again, gender differences might also be expected to play a role here. Several studies suggest that girls may be more interested in, and inclined to discuss, sexual content than boys (Greenberg et al. 1993b; Thompson et al. 1993); while others suggest that females may be more susceptible to influence than males (e.g. Strouse et al. 1995). Even in these studies, however, the influence of gender is frequently mediated by differences in family communication patterns; and when researchers control for subjects' prior sexual experience, gender differences become even less significant. Furthermore, viewers' responses also need to be seen in terms of their judgements of

particular portrayals, for example in terms of how enjoyable or realistic they are perceived to be, judgements which may in turn derive from their broader experience of the medium (Greenberg et al. 1993b). Taken together, these variables point to the need for a much more complex, contextual understanding of how particular young people interpret particular types of sexual content in particular programmes. In this respect, global assertions about the effects of sexual content on young people would seem to be at least premature.

Conclusion

It is not unreasonable to assume that sexual content on television might influence young people's beliefs and behaviour. Yet the evidence for this is, to say the least, somewhat limited. This is partly because relatively few studies have yet been undertaken in this field – particularly as compared with the plethora of research on the effects of television violence. However, it is also the case that this research suffers from many of the same problems as the violence studies: the methodological procedures do not provide the degree of proof that researchers appear to seek, while the research itself is frequently based on moral and theoretical assumptions that are highly questionable. When the findings of these studies are compared and combined, it becomes clear that a much more nuanced approach is required. We need to pay much closer attention to the ways in which young people interpret and respond to particular television portrayals, and how they use television as a resource in forming their own sexual identities. Developing such an approach will necessarily mean moving away from an emphasis on *effects* and *influences* towards an emphasis on *interpretations* and *uses* of television. Some indications of the form such research might take are provided in Section 6 of this paper.

4. The Media and Sex Education

Young people in Britain today experience earlier puberty, longer adolescence and later, less materially secure, independence than they did forty years ago (Griffin 1993; Measor *et al.* 2000; Thomson 1997). They also have their first sexual experiences at an earlier age (Ford and Morgan 1989; Wellings *et al.* 1994), though less strikingly so than many believe (Lees 1994). Britain has the highest rate of teenage and unplanned pregnancies in Europe (Winn *et al.* 1995), which despite a fall in the early 1990s was increasing again by the mid-90s. So too were sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and particularly amongst the heterosexual population (Nicoll *et al.* 1999). Some have cautioned that such statistics feed into constructed moral panics (which have racist undertones, particularly in the US where teenage pregnancy rates are highest amongst non-white populations (Lawson and Rhode 1993)). They have pointed out that these social shifts began in the 1950s rather than, as is often thought, in the 'permissive' 1960s (Measor *et al.* 2000). Further, they have argued that the negative consequences associated with early pregnancy, such as poverty, are socially produced and thus changeable (Phoenix 1991; 1993), and – noting that Romeo's Juliet was twelve years old - have called for a greater sense of historical context in concerns about teenage sexual relationships. Nonetheless, it is clear that Britain is failing to meet sexual health targets set in 1992 (HMSO 1992) for reductions in the rates of teenage pregnancy and STDs (Adler 1997; Wyness 2000).

This situation is often attributed to a deficit in young people; they are seen as having the 'wrong' information about sex (Phelps *et al.* 1992) and as lacking factual knowledge (Winn *et al.* 1995) or 'real' understanding of their own bodies and sexual issues (Sex Education Forum 1994). For example, the then Public Health Minister Tessa Jowell referred in 1998 to girls' 'sheer ignorance' about such matters (cited in Measor *et al.* 2000: 33). Health professionals tend to see sex education, along with increased access to facilities and advice, as a self-evidently beneficial part of the solution to these problems (see e.g.: Donovan 1990; Kirby 1995; Mellanby *et al.* 1995; Nicoll *et al.* 1999). However, this pragmatic approach has encountered obstacles in the form of New Right 'moral rhetoric' (Thomson 1994). School sex education has been surrounded by controversy particularly since the 1980s, often for reasons that have little to do with debates about values (Thomson 1993). The current legal situation is that there is no reference to sexuality (or to HIV/AIDS) in the National Curriculum apart from the basic facts of reproduction. Sex education is a separate but compulsory subject from which parents can withdraw their children. Governors in primary schools can make their own decisions. (See Harris 1996; Harrison 2000a; Measor *et al.* 1996). These regulations, Thomson claims, are a response to the demands of pressure groups rather than to the practicalities of teaching (Thomson 1997). Meanwhile, it might also be suggested that a focus on education diverts attention away from other issues such as the striking correlation between teenage pregnancy and social and economic exclusion.

The effects and effectiveness of sex education

So what is known about the effectiveness of contemporary approaches to sex education? Reviews of existing sex and HIV/AIDS education evaluations have repeatedly remarked on their methodological flaws (Grunseit *et al.* 1997; Kirby 1989; Kirby 1994; Oakley *et al.* 1995). Nonetheless, most studies conclude - albeit cautiously - that sex education is associated with later initiation into sex and greater likelihood of contraception use, rather than encouraging promiscuity or experimentation as the critics of sex education frequently allege (Grunseit *et al.* 1997; Kirby 1989; Mellanby *et al.* 1995; Oakley *et al.* 1995; Wellings *et al.* 1995). Early and comprehensive sex education is correlated with lower rates of teenage pregnancy in countries such as the Netherlands and Scandinavia, although other cultural factors may well account for this (Scott *et al.* 1995). Surveys over decades have shown consistently high levels of support from parents for school sex education (Allen 1987; Health Education Authority / National Foundation For Educational Research 1994; cf. Hoff 2000), although Sarwar claims this to be less true of Muslim parents (Sarwar 1996). Rates of withdrawal from sex education classes are low. In general, there seems to be a considerable faith in what school sex education can achieve; and indeed, participants in the BBFC *Sense and Sensibilities* survey considered in Section 1 cited it as a reason for relaxing regulations on sexual content in the media (Hanley 2000).

However, sex education remains under-resourced (Sex Education Forum 1992) and has been subjected to much criticism in recent years, even from those who support its provision in principle. Research has painted a picture of 'patchy' provision (Scott and Thomson 1992) and under-confident and poorly trained teachers, particularly in relation to HIV (Clift and Stears 1989). Students are often dissatisfied with the teaching they receive and some do not feel they have sufficiently good relationships with teachers to benefit from the process (Lupton and Tulloch 1996; Measor *et al.* 2000). Documentation of classroom realities, too, has been dispiriting, showing high levels of disruption and embarrassment, offering an unfavourable contrast between boys' behaviour and the more constructive approach of girls, and so pointing to the difficulties of conducting mixed classes (Measor *et al.* 1996). Surveys of syllabi or course material similarly remark that aims are often not specified and indeed unclear (Reiss 1993).

At stake in part here are conceptions of childhood – whether young people are asexual beings whose innocence must be preserved or sexual beings who may need protection and support (Monk 1998; Moore and Rosenthal 1993). Feminists have subjected sex education to particularly stringent critique, exposing what it presents as 'facts' as imbued with conservative moral attitudes (Diorio 1985; Jackson 1978; Jackson 1982: chapter 8). Its presentation within a 'plumbing and prevention' framework (Lenskyj 1990), focusing on stopping girls getting pregnant, reducing STDs or 'coping' with sex (Davidson 1997; Diorio and Munro 2000: 353; Holland *et al.* 1998), may reinforce gender inequalities (Holly 1989; Wolpe 1987). According to these critics, dominant approaches to sex education see adolescent sexuality as a risk for young women that brings the possibility of victimisation and danger (Lees 1994), with menstruation (for example) constructed as a problem in ways that convey negativity and disgust (Diorio and Munro 2000). By contrast, young men's physical changes are presented as opportunities for 'fun, pleasure, agency' (ibid.). The failure of published materials to

mention the clitoris, female orgasm or masturbation has been taken to show that that school sex education represses women's sexuality in particular, and its focus on reproduction marginalises all non-normative sexualities and practices. Michelle Fine remarks that it 'obscures the sources of pleasure and meaning in sex' and gives 'no access to a legitimate position of sexual subjectivity' (Fine 1988: 37); and Jackson, that it involves a middle class ethic of deferred gratification (Jackson 1978). By privileging heterosexuality and failing to address lesbian and gay sexuality and institutionalised homophobia, it perpetuates rather than challenges heterosexism (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Harrison 2000c). It is condemned for not connecting with the changing and different social worlds young men and women inhabit (Lees 1994) or with what students want to learn about – that is, emotions and relationships (Measor *et al.* 2000; Wolpe 1987). Students rarely have a say in its contents and methods, although there is growing support for peer-led initiatives (Measor *et al.* 2000; Milburn 1995; Riley and Glasier 2000). Others have pointed to the problems of rationalist solutions which assume that simply giving students 'correct' information will lead to desirable behaviour (Ingham *et al.* 1992). Although often liberationist in their rhetoric, these more critical perspectives also seem to regard school sex education as a means to regulate the sexual conduct and feelings of individuals and populations (Hunter 1984): their aim is not so much to 'liberate' young people as to displace the forms of expertise currently dominating schools, in favour of their own.

Sex education via the media

Given these failings, it is not surprising that when Strouse and Fabes (1985) compare the media to schools as a source of sexual learning, they conclude that the former may outweigh the latter. Various American surveys conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that many young people stated that they had learnt 'a lot' about issues such as pregnancy, HIV/AIDS etc. from the media (summarised in KFF 2000). However, it should be noted that these surveys provided lists of potential sources of information; an open-ended question in Allen's admittedly earlier study found that teenagers (and to a lesser extent, their parents) were unlikely spontaneously to propose the media as a source of influence (Allen 1987). Sutton et al. report that there has been a shift away from parents towards peers, school and the media as information sources, although this varies according to age, gender and class (Sutton *et al.* 2002). Holland et al.'s research also showed that young people use a range of media for gathering information and ideas (Holland *et al.* 1998), and Millwood Hargrave's research showed that young people value media sources for providing opportunities for discussion and insight in this area (1996). Television (or radio: see Barton 2002) as 'teacher' offers the benefit of anonymity as well as a range of engaging formats such as phone-ins, soap operas, and talk shows. In the US, content analysis suggests that teenage magazines are more likely to provide sexual health information than women's magazines (Walsh-Childers *et al.* 2002: see section 2). Whilst many writers are condemnatory of teenage magazines (Wray and Steele 2002), some have found evidence that they have embraced aspects of feminism in a progressive way (e.g. McRobbie 1999). Further, media and consumer culture contrast strikingly with formal schooling in that they privilege rather than suppress 'discourses of desire' and explicitly address women as active, desiring individuals.

So how can the media be put to constructive use for the purposes of sex education? There would seem to be three main possibilities here. Firstly, the media have been used in advertising campaigns to convey information and norms of behaviour – particularly around HIV/AIDS. Moore and Rosenthal cite some studies (1993: 141-3) that suggest that advertising campaigns can be effective in raising awareness of health issues such as smoking, drinking and driving as well as HIV. Wyness remarks that safer sex information campaigns may have extended the discussion of sexual practices, so that this can no longer exclude children; and in this respect, they represent part of broader 'cultural trends that free up information and knowledge outside of the institution of schooling, namely a burgeoning public discourse about sex that cannot easily be contained within morally acceptable boundaries' (Wyness 2000: 353). This public discourse then contrasts even more strongly with school sex education, where legislation and the fear of media exposure or parental disapproval have restricted what can be discussed (Measor *et al.* 2000).

However, Abrams et al. found that the media were not regarded by adolescents as a highly credible source (Abrams *et al.* 1990). Holland et al. offer a critical analysis of British government-backed AIDS advertising campaigns for colluding with notions of active male sexuality lacking self-control and implying that women must take the major responsibility for persuading men to wear condoms. They argue that such campaigns do not acknowledge the impact of gendered power differentials, especially in adolescent cultures, and will fail to induce changes in behaviour unless they also empower young women (Holland *et al.* 1990; Holland *et al.* 1992). Safer sex campaigns have had more success in gay communities, where less unbalanced power relationships allow for greater reciprocity and negotiation.

Secondly, media texts may be used to convey information in a more or less didactic way. For instance, Greenberg et al. showed videos containing basic sex information to students and found (rather unsurprisingly) that they subsequently knew more factual information than those who did not see them (Greenberg *et al.* 1983). Likewise, there is some limited evidence that the media can be used to encourage young people to adopt counter-stereotyped attitudes about gender (Durkin 1985) and about sexuality (Levina *et al.* 2000; Riggle *et al.* 1996). In Britain, the series *Love Bites* tried to cover sexual issues in a way accessible to adolescents, and the long-running story of *EastEnders'* character Mark Fowler and the death of his wife Jill from AIDS-related illness was compiled into a video, *The Jill and Mark Story*, for use in schools (BBC 1993). It is also interesting to note that the government has held meetings with the editors of teenage girls' magazines such as *Sugar* and *Bliss* with a view to working with them on such campaigns.

However, there is little research that evaluates how audiences respond to being addressed in this pedagogic way by television. Some evidence suggests that young people have little patience with overtly didactic material and actively prefer material targeted at older audiences (Block 1998). The success of soap operas may lie less in their realism or the direct information they provide than in the opportunity that ongoing storylines offer for consideration of issues from multiple points of view and emotional engagement with situations (Ang 1985; Buckingham 1987; Geraghty 1991). As much research has shown, TV programmes (particularly soap opera) can often be used within

households to initiate discussions about issues that might otherwise be hard to raise (Millwood Hargrave 1992). Crow, similarly, suggests that the scripts offered by host Dr. Ruth on the American TV talk show *Good Sex* might offer guidance for audience members on how to bring up such issues with others, although he admits that this requires investigation (Crow 1986).

A third approach is to use mainstream media material in the classroom as the basis for developing critical awareness and discussion. Many proposals in this area adopt what might be termed a prophylactic model. Strouse and Fabes, for instance, propose that sex educators 'incorporate TV programming into their classroom discussions and highlight their unreal and exploitive (sic) features' (Strouse and Fabes 1985: 259). This approach implicitly positions audiences as gullible – as unaware of television's status as fantasy – and suggests that popular cultural texts are to be primarily used as objects of ridicule, dismissing what young people might find pleasurable or important about them. Similar pedagogies in relation to media violence have been criticised as paternalistic and unworkable (Bragg 2001), liable to produce resistance to what students perceive as teacherly critique of 'their' culture, or teacher-pleasing responses that do not develop into understanding and interpretation. Moreover, they are oblivious to students' likely familiarity with received public messages about media effects: as Buckingham found, in interviews even young children readily trumpet their contempt for 'silly', unrealistic programmes, or express concerns about their bad influence (on other people), without any teaching at all (Buckingham 1993b). Inviting young people to condemn sexual representations might seem to work in the context of the classroom, but is unlikely to transfer to the playground where talk about the media is used for quite different purposes.

Some educators argue that contemporary popular culture favoured by young people may have a more positive potential as resource for sex education (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Kehily 1996; Measor *et al.* 2000). Mary Kehily's article ((1999), discussed in detail in Section 6) outlines a sex education class in which young people adopted the format of the magazine 'problem page' to construct both letters and advice. Although the girls entered into it more fully than the boys, the exercise may have been successful because it enabled them to raise issues of concern to them at a remove, mobilising their existing knowledge of and pleasures in teenage magazines, but without prescribing responses or outcomes. 'In such moments, teen magazines can be embraced or repelled, believed or doubted, incorporated or othered' (83). Similarly, an account of drugs education showed that working through and with popular conventions by inviting students to create their own advertising campaigns allowed them to learn critically, whilst also parodying the address and form of much drugs information targeted at young people (Kelly 1997). In these cases, education works with, rather than against, young people's values, practices and cultural resources. Although it is probable that other work of this type is going on in schools, there is little empirical evidence or documentation about it, let alone any evaluation (Sex Education Forum, personal communication).

One trend that emerges from this work, however, is that using the media for informal sexual learning seems to result in gender differentiation. Researchers have noted that young women and men talk differently about sex and relationships and that the former appear to be more confident and mature in doing so than the latter (Haywood 1996; Holland *et al.* 1998; Lees 1994; Wood 1984). *Pace* Tessa Jowell, young women have

been praised for 'knowing' more than young men (that is, scoring higher marks and showing greater learning in questionnaire responses) (Winn *et al.* 1995). This has been attributed in part to talk in families, on which boys are seen to miss out (Allen 1987; Frankham 1993; Sutton *et al.* 2002) and in part to girls' use of media, especially teenage magazines. Young men have recently become the focus of more intense sex education efforts (Blake and Laxton 1998; Davidson 1997; Lenderyou and Ray 1997; Sex Education Forum 1997). According to some research, however, boys do not so much lack information as use different sources: satellite TV, the Internet, videos, pornography, etc. Measor et al. (1996) found that boys declared school sex education to be 'tame' by comparison with these more explicit sources, and were accordingly dissatisfied with it. Holland et al. (1998) also identify gender polarisation in their interviews conducted in the early 1990s. It is questionable whether this might diminish with the growth of women as a key market for pornography (Ross 1989), the greater explicitness of girls' magazines or the changing nature of the men's magazine market (Nixon 1996). It should also be noted that Treise and Gotthofer (2002) found that magazines aimed at females had a high secondary readership amongst their young male research participants, a result borne out by much anecdotal evidence.

Conclusion

Media such as television clearly do serve as 'informal' sources of sex education for young people, particularly given the apparent limitations and ineffectiveness of formal sex education programmes in schools. As yet, however, there is limited evidence about the extent of their influence in this respect, or about the effectiveness of attempts to use them in more explicitly didactic ways. Furthermore, while the media can serve as a valuable resource for teachers in this field, the basic principles of such teaching and the methods that might be employed are in need of much fuller discussion and investigation.

One of the recurrent problems in this area – and in the research we have considered in previous sections of this paper - is the narrow view of media as sources of *information*. It seems to be assumed that the media can be judged simply as more or less distorted representations of exterior realities, and that their effects on audiences can be derived from this. Providing young people with 'inaccurate' information will result in behaviour that is deemed to be inappropriate, unsafe or undesirable; providing them with 'accurate' information will result in the elimination or reduction of such behaviour. If we are to adopt a more effective approach to the issues, we will need to develop a much more sophisticated understanding of the media's role in forming sexual identities. This will entail a recognition of the complex relationships between young people's beliefs about the world and the forms of behaviour they adopt. We will need to pay much closer attention to the pleasures (and displeasures) afforded by the media, and the ways in which media are used and interpreted in the context of everyday life. Clearly, this should not be seen as an inexorable or monolithic process: indeed, it could be argued that the contemporary media offer an increasing range of possibilities for identity formation that go well beyond those provided by the school and the family. The empirical questions that arise, therefore, are to do with how young people negotiate their way through these

contradictory choices, the competencies they develop in doing so, and their implications for their developing sexual identities.

5. Sexual Representation and Cultural Theory

> *We are not dealing with an issue of information – at least, not of information alone; it is not so much a matter of* ***what*** *we think about the sexual as it is a matter of* ***how*** *we think about the sexual, not a matter of explanation, but one of understanding.*
>
> William Simon (1996) *Postmodern Sexualities*, p. 26

This section selectively outlines some alternative approaches to issues of media and sexuality, drawn mainly from the disciplines of cultural and social theory. Where the 'effects' position discredits the role of the non-observable and emphasises the visual, empirical and measurable, these approaches allow a place for fantasy (and, as we will see in the next section, for the variety of subjective meanings that users of media texts are capable of generating). They reject the notion that images have a coercive, 'assaultive' immediacy, as well as the literalism that, by taking images to be reality rather than representations or symbolic statements, translates media issues directly into moral ones. They share a nuanced view of culture as complex, differentiated and hence requiring interpretation. They may thus prove fruitful for qualitative research in this field.

The nature of cultural judgements

Several critics have challenged the cultural elitism that often underpins evaluations of popular texts and their audiences, particularly in relation to 'low' genres such as pornography that are associated with the body rather than the more highly valued mind. Histories of pornography show that in the nineteenth century it was a specialised interest addressing an elite group of aristocratic and upper middle class men with sophisticated literate sensibilities. Fears that written pornography might corrupt only arose once print technology and educational reform made it available to a mass public; and now that writing may be returning once more to the status of a minority medium, concerns have turned instead to the visual images of mass culture. (The 1977 Williams Report, for example, specifically exempts sexually explicit written material from consideration: see Hunter *et al.* 1993). Andrew Ross argues that pornography is the 'site of attempts to regulate, contain and control the shape of popular consumption and taste' (Ross 1989: 177) and shows how it has been subject to moralistic assumptions about the correctness of representations, fantasies and patterns of sexual behaviour. Discourses hostile to sexually explicit material, whether from the moral right or radical feminism, frequently evoke images of a monolithic and brutalising mass culture and lead to a rhetoric of protection and reform, which, he argues, sustains intellectuals' privileged claim to know what is good for others.

Similarly, Valerie Walkerdine's work explores longstanding discourses about the relation of working class audiences to popular culture. She remarks that in relation to violence, concerns tend to focus on boys, while in relation to sex, they more often circulate

around girls. She identifies conflicting discourses of femininity within popular culture, which are ethnically and class specific. In one, the little girl is 'naturally' innocent and modest; in the other, she is precociously sexual and alluring. The figure of 'little working class girls', especially those who construct their identities and play from eroticised cultural forms such as popular music, is the troubling 'other' of white, bourgeois femininity (Walkerdine 1997). Examining the construction of subjectivity within such discourses has also led Walkerdine to explore how sexual meanings saturate the apparently non-sexual discourses of social theory and to challenge the voyeurism that informs the 'objective' stance of the empirical researcher or the suppression of difference in 'hard' quantitative scientific method (Walkerdine 1986). Others have also addressed such questions (see Hunt 1989; Usher 1996) and point to the need for researchers to be critically reflexive about their own projections in their work, especially in relation to issues such as sexuality.

Textual analyses and identifications

As we have argued, most mainstream content analyses privilege their own readings of texts and tend not to differentiate between programmes on the basis of textual features such as genre, tone, mode of address and so on. Meanwhile, effects studies that look for evidence of increased aggression, misogyny or sexual activity as a result of media consumption generally assume that characters in popular cultural texts act as 'role models' whose attributes audiences will incorporate wholesale, but only where they share similarities with them. Thus, men are assumed to identify with male characters, women with female characters, young audiences with youthful stars, and so on. Cultural analysts have challenged all these assumptions.

As the next section of this paper shows, critics have argued that there are no universal standards for interpreting cultural representations, and have begun to address the diversity of judgments and uses developed within specific communities and subcultures. Moreover, those who have analysed degraded cultural forms such as pornography have re-evaluated them, arguing both that they are differentiated in textual range, and that they can be read as touchstones for far broader debates – particularly the changes in gender relations occurring since the 1970s. Linda Williams's study of hard core pornography, for example, argues that it is never 'just' about sex, but always also about gender. She further suggests that there is a 'usefulness in explicitness… that can teach us many things about power and pleasure that once seemed mystified and obscure' (Williams 1990: 265-6); whilst Carol Clover's work on horror films refers to their 'bizarre and brilliant themes' and the ways in which they provide powerful (rather than merely passive and masochistic) images of women (Clover 1992: 236). Such approaches are usefully able to reconsider 'gross' genres, which are often condemned for their circular and repetitive narratives, improbability, lack of psychological depth, infantile emotions and spectacular excesses. As Williams remarks, these characteristics are 'moot as evaluation points if such features are intrinsic to their engagement with fantasy' (Williams 1991: 9).

It is largely by means of the popular notion of 'identification' that such media are deemed to exercise their harmful effects. Yet as Barker (1989) convincingly

demonstrates, this idea is frequently used in contradictory and incoherent ways; and there is little evidence that viewers 'identify' with characters in a singular, once-and-for-all manner. Theorists who draw on psychoanalytic perspectives have explored the cross-gendered fluidity of audience identifications with fictional scenarios, presenting an image of a conflicted rather than a one-dimensionally rational spectator (see Burgin *et al.* 1986; Cowie 1990; Fuss 1995; Thornham 1997). Clover, for instance, bases her argument not on empirical research with audiences, but study of textual specifics of camerawork, narration and mise-en-scène, to suggest that horror is far more victim-identified than has previously been thought (Clover 1989; Clover 1992). She ends by calling the notion of a sadistic male spectator identifying with a star of the same gender a 'status-quo supportive cliché of modern cultural criticism' that has not served 'real life women and feminist politics' well (1992: 226). Hardy's empirical work with young male readers of pornography, although it sets out from a notion that readers align themselves with the active male character, eventually acknowledges that they must engage emotionally and imaginatively with the woman character also (Hardy 1998). Such work effectively undermines certainties about who the audience is in relation to popular texts, and opens up questions of audience investments and pleasures.

The social construction of sexuality

Recent work in discursive and social psychology (Durkin 1995; Henriques *et al.* 1984; Hollway 1989) has pointed to the limitations of behaviourist models of sex role socialisation and of theories of cognitive development. This approach suggests that the acquisition of gendered identity is a complex, multifactorial process, which depends very much on the social context in which it is accomplished. Sociologists such as William Simon have also radically questioned the biologism and essentialism of much scientific sexology and insisted on the historical, social and contingent nature of sex. Simon argues that sex is 'the ultimate dependent variable' that requires more than it provides explanation: 'all discourses about sexuality are ultimately discourses about something else' (Simon 1996: xvii). Sex cannot then be seen as the locus of some inherent or irreducible 'truth' about individual identity.

The work of Michel Foucault has proved crucial in reconsidering both sexuality and modern power formations (Foucault 1984 (1976)). Critics have built on his work in arguing that all aspects of sex and gender must be seen as socially constructed rather than innate and natural - even 'biological' sexual difference (Butler 1990; Butler 1993). Foucault's arguments disrupt familiar narratives of a 'free' sexuality prior to Victorian repression that twentieth century liberation movements are now returning to a less distorted form. Instead he proposes that sexuality is not expressed or discovered, but *produced* as the artefact of institutional and discursive arrangements that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). Thus, what seem to be our most intimate experiences and relationships are in fact intensively socially organised and managed. A prime example is the confessional form, for which sex has always been a privileged theme. In modern times the confession has moved from religious to secular contexts, from an account of sexual acts given to an exterior judge to a more introspective search for the private feelings that surround them. Such practices play a constitutive role in how we think about and act on ourselves; however, they are not

experienced as coercive but as liberating. Social control, in this view, is achieved through invisible strategies of normalisation as individuals become self-policing subjects, striving to attain internalised social norms. A Foucauldian approach thus attends to the power effects of particular knowledges and discourses, including those of the human sciences. It questions how, as a consequence of what is considered 'true' at particular historical moments, certain people or behaviours come to be seen as problematic, in relation to what norms, and what kind of interventions thereby become imaginable (medical treatment, censorship, and so on).

Hunter et al. (1993) analyse pornography from a Foucauldian perspective as the product of historical conditions, including the emergence of a number of 'technologies' (religious confession, the printing press, obscenity regulation and 'governmental' policing - medical, pedagogic and welfarist). They argue that, just as there is no one single unified truth of sexuality, pornography cannot be captured within a single definition, such as the familiar formula 'explicit representation intended to arouse'. In different material circumstances it assumes a variety of forms: an eroticising instrument, a saleable commodity, a crime, an object of governmental concern and medical regulation, an ethical occasion, a problem of conscience, an aesthetic phenomenon, and so on. Moreover, the networks of agencies that surround sex (psychologists, doctors, police, social workers, regulatory and welfare bodies) are not external to this process. They bring new forms into being – whether texts (which are shaped by regulatory strategies (cf Kuhn 1988)) or subjects, by specifying types of vulnerable or susceptible persons such as children. Sexual images are thus not so much representations of sex as 'practices of sexuality', transmitting norms of sexual conduct and installing interests and capacities for actual forms of sex.

Leong gives a Foucauldian account of campaigns by the Parents' Music Resource Centre in the US (led by Tipper Gore) against 'porno-rock' and 'sexist role models' in the music industry (Leong 1991). Such movements target the sexual explicitness of rock music and focus on protecting teenage girls; but in so doing, they reproduce dominant conceptions of gender, stressing that girls should be sexually modest, and that sex is for adults, the private sphere and for procreation. These arguments serve to silence public discussions and representations of sexuality, and 'discipline' young women by trying to return them to the privacy of the home, beyond the influence of the public media.

Sex in consumer culture

Many critics have argued that sexuality cannot be discussed without a sense of its shaping social context in late capitalist consumer society (Evans 1993; Hennessy 2000; McNair 1996). Traditional Marxist accounts frequently suggest that sex is simply 'objectified' by being transformed into a commodity – effectively ignoring the extent to which all sexual desire could be seen to involve a form of objectification. Meanwhile, recent economic shifts such as deindustrialisation, globalisation, the growth of a 'knowledge economy' and so on have reverberated at the level of culture in ways that have often been classified as ‘postmodern’. These developments have resulted in a more ambivalent account of the relationships between sexual representations and consumer culture. Several critics suggest that the general ideology of consumption has moved from ascetic ‘production-based’ values of thrift, frugality and restraint, to more 'consumption-based', playful and hedonistic ones (Lury 1996). In the process, established critical authorities have been challenged and traditional cultural hierarchies (of high and low, mind and body, authentic and fake, etc.) have become blurred (Collins 1995; Frow 1995). In this context, it is argued that identities, including sexual identities, have become more self-conscious and reflective; more differentiated and variable; more dependent on borrowings from the mass media or even social science; pastiched, indeterminate and different in form (e.g. phone sex, virtual sex) (Plummer 1995; Simon 1996). Madonna is frequently considered emblematic of these shifts, as she is a mainstream artist who references specialised 'perversities' in her musical and visual performances and addresses minority and subordinate groups, including lesbians and gay men. Her work has sparked wide-ranging discussions about issues of morality, sexuality, gender relations, queer politics, feminism, racism and capitalism (see Frank and Smith 1993; Lloyd 1993; Schwichtenberg 1993).

The effects of this situation in terms of social power are ambiguous. On the one hand, contemporary capitalism appears to allow a broader repertoire of ethical behaviours, to the extent that it enables the legitimisation of a wider range of sexual identities, forms and subjects as potential target markets. Examples here might be the growth of pornography for women, TV shows catering for lesbians and gay men, the invention of the marketing category of the ‘tweenie’ (8-12 year olds), and so on. Moreover, the market arguably discriminates on the basis of profit rather (or more) than morality. This move towards 'niche marketing' has therefore received some endorsement from anti-censorship groups, who hold that change is likely to come about through greater availability of sexual images rather than their suppression; and in this sense, the market is seen to promote an expansive rather than a restrictive public culture. By contrast, it is argued, state censorship impacts particularly on sexual minorities, for whom sexual representations figure as an important cultural expression of their interests, and also on those who most need information, such as women and young people.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the market simultaneously makes these new identities and desires available for management and regulation by visibly categorising them. Redefining citizenship as access to consumption excludes those who are economically ‘unprofitable’. Rose traces how the celebration of values of choice, autonomy and self-realisation in contemporary western society have produced individuals who are ‘capable of bearing the burdens of liberty’ in advanced democracies

(Rose 1999). Yet it also creates a new normativity, based less around perversions than 'failures of the will' (220) evidenced for instance in 'addiction'-treating industries devoted to our lack of self-control, or hysteria around the non-consensual, as in the case of paedophilia. This new psychological emphasis effectively limits discussion of structural constraints on our actions and creates new anxieties, as individuals become 'entrepreneurs of themselves' and subject every area of life (work, leisure, love) to constant scrutiny. Further, according to Rose, it generates the 'commitment of selves to the values and forms of life supported by authorities', particularly those of consumption. 'It is through the promotion of 'lifestyle' by the mass media, by advertising and by experts, through the obligation to shape a life through choices in a world of self-referenced objects and images, that the modern subject is governed' (261).

Conclusion

In our view, the approaches discussed here offer new ways of *understanding* shifts in sexual discourse, rather than simply cataloguing or describing them. Television talk shows, with their emphasis on sexual issues, for example, might be understood as part of the compulsion to 'speak our truth', a truth conceived within the terms of psychology as primarily sexual. The presence of a greater diversity of sexual behaviours and representations in the media may reveal not so much liberation as the presence of new regimes that prize 'lifestyle' as defined by material consumption above fixed moral codes. What may appear to be a greater 'explicitness' or 'permissiveness' – for example in the case of music videos - may in fact represent a new form of regulation or constraint, which actively produces new forms of 'compulsory sexuality'. At the same time, we should be wary of falling back on commonsense assumptions about 'identification' or 'sexual objectification' – or indeed on a postmodernist celebration of the multiplicity of identities - without considering how these processes might actually be working for real audiences.

In this context, we need to engage much more profoundly with questions about how sexual representations in the media connect with the disparate cultural competencies of young people. How does sex on television invite young viewers to relate to themselves – to imagine or construct themselves as particular kinds of selves, or particular kinds of sexual beings? What kinds of resources for shaping and managing personal life does television offer in this respect? And how do young people themselves use and interpret these representations in their efforts to forge their own sexual identities, and to make sense of their own experiences and relationships?

6. Uses, Interpretations and Identities

As we indicated in Section 3, studies of the *effects* of sexual content on young people's behaviour and beliefs have generally been problematic and unproductive. In addition to the relative paucity of the research itself, there have been several theoretical and methodological reasons for this. In our view, the fundamental problem here is the way in which the relation between television and its audience is conceptualised – that is, in terms of 'cause-and-effect' or one-way 'influence'. As in the violence research, this conceptualisation tends to result in a highly reductive view of the ways in which viewers produce both meaning and pleasure from media texts. As we indicated in the previous section of this paper, textually-based analyses (as opposed to *content* analyses) have begun to suggest some more interesting and complex hypotheses about these issues. However, significant questions remain about the ways in which these textual forms and structures are actually interpreted and used by audiences.

In recent years, there has been a significant shift of emphasis in research on media audiences. Both within psychology and within Media/Cultural Studies, researchers have increasingly come to regard audiences as 'active' creators of meaning, rather than 'passive' recipients of media messages. Thus, many psychological researchers have moved away from a behaviourist to a constructivist (or cognitive) perspective - from the study of stimulus and response to the study of how children understand, process and evaluate what they watch. In making sense of television, children are seen to use 'schemas' or 'scripts', sets of plans and expectations which they have built up from their previous experience both of media and of the world in general. The meaning of media texts, from this perspective, is not simply delivered *to* the audience, but constructed *by* it (e.g. Arnett *et al.* 1995). Likewise, within Media and Cultural Studies, there has been a significant – and quite controversial - move towards the 'active audience'. Here too, there has been a general shift away from questions about *effects* – for example, in relation to the ideological role of the media - to questions about *meanings* and *uses*; although there has also been a much stronger emphasis on locating media use within the broader context of social and interpersonal relationships (for a fuller account, see Buckingham 2000).

Psychological studies

To date, relatively few studies have adopted this approach in studying young people's interpretations of sexual content. Two studies, both concerned with late adolescents' responses to sexual content in Madonna's music videos, adopt the broadly *social-psychological* approach to studying audience 'activity' (Brown and Schulze 1993; Thompson *et al.* 1993). These studies seek to quantify key variables, both those relating to 'sexual schemata' or 'scripts' (in other words, the knowledge, experiences and values that viewers bring to the medium: see Brown *et al.* 1990) and those relating to social context (such as family communication patterns, 'race', gender and fandom).

In both cases, viewers were asked relatively open-ended questions about the videos, but their responses were then statistically coded, which tends to result in a 'flattening' of the responses. One consequence of this is that the conclusions of both studies are somewhat tentative and contradictory. Briefly, Thompson, Walsh-Childers and Brown (1993) find that the impact of different styles of communication within families varies across 'race' and gender sub-groups, and in several instances appears to make no difference. In essence, they suggest that (at least in some social groups), young people are more likely to 'process' sexual content at a deeper level if they are used to debating such issues in their families, and if they have personal experience of sex. This is hardly a surprising conclusion. Brown and Schulze (1993) found differences in terms of the readings of their chosen video among black and white students, and in terms of social class; although it is notable that when they move on to discuss these, their analysis becomes much more speculative, and relies on a more qualitative account of the data.

Ward et al (2002) examined how ‘adolescents’ (in fact, 18-20 year old undergraduates) viewed what they term the media’s ‘often misleading portrayals of sexuality’ (96). They aimed to assess their subjects’ interpretations of sexual content, to identify some of the factors that might determine different readings and to explore whether these varied according to the specific content of TV programmes. Groups of students filled in questionnaires, watched programme extracts and answered some open-ended questions and more specific ones about their perception of realism, of the likelihood of similar events happening in their own life, their approval of the behaviours shown, and whether they identified with the characters. These responses were then coded, as above in a manner that tended to work against contextualised readings of the interview material. Although they note that young people offered multiple interpretations of scenes, only some factors - particularly gender and existing sexual attitudes - proved reliable predictors of responses, and these were perhaps relatively obvious. Their conclusion that ‘media portrayals are complex, and so are the viewers watching them’ (121) will perhaps surprise few.

Cultural Studies

A more fruitful approach to these issues can be found in a handful of more qualitative studies, which we discuss in turn below. These studies use a broadly 'Cultural Studies' approach, although they arrive at it from somewhat different directions.

Brown, White and Nickopoulou (1993) conducted a small 'ethnographic' study of the uses of sexual media content among nineteen 11- to 15-year-old middle-class white girls in two different locations in the United States. Interestingly, the study arose partly as an attempt to put some 'flesh' on the 'bones' of a more extensive survey (reported in Walsh-Childers and Brown 1993). The researchers asked the girls to compile a scrapbook or journal noting anything in their everyday uses of media that related to 'sex and relationships'. At the end of a month, the girls were then interviewed in their bedrooms, giving the researchers an opportunity to look at how they had decorated and organised their personal space – an approach later developed more fully by one of the authors in a study of adolescents' 'bedroom culture' (Brown *et al.* 1994; Steele and Brown 1995).

These authors identify three broad orientations among their sample. Girls whom they label 'disinterested' were the least physically mature and the least sexually experienced. They were generally less interested in sexual content than in other aspects of media, sometimes rejecting it as 'gross'. Both in the media and in real life, sex was perceived by these girls as dangerous or frightening. By contrast, the second group were 'intrigued' by sexual content, and actively sought it out. They were more physically mature and more sexually experienced than the first group, but they had not yet had intercourse. For this group, more than any of the others, the media were seen as an important (and fascinating) source of information about sex and relationships. However, these girls also looked to the media for fantasy images of boys and men; and they spent time debating whether media representations were accurate or trustworthy. The third group are labelled the 'resisters'. This group was the most physically mature and the most sexually experienced of the three. Their experience of real relationships had led them to question much of what they saw about sexuality in the media, partly on the grounds of sexism but also on the grounds of its moral hypocrisy. They also drew on information from alternative media sources, in an attempt to look beyond what they perceived as the romantic fantasies of mainstream media.

This study thus produces ambivalent findings. It suggests that some girls continue to believe in what the researchers term 'a romantic myth of heterosexual love that trivialises personal achievement and satisfaction by any means other than through a man'. On the other hand, it shows that at least some girls do develop strategies 'that allow them to conceive of themselves as powerful participants in sexual relationships' (194). The most obvious explanation here is a developmental one: as girls become more experienced, they are also more likely to question media images.

Steele (1999) develops this kind of approach in a further qualitative study of the relationships between teen sexuality and media uses conducted with a more socially diverse group in North Carolina, USA. This study makes productive use of multiple methods, including focus group discussions, teenagers' tours of their bedrooms, one-to-one interviews and written or tape-recorded journals. Building on the 'Adolescents' Media Practice Model' developed in earlier research (Steele, 1995: see also Brown *et al.* 2002), this study focuses on how young people use media to perform a kind of 'identity work' – that is, to develop a sense of who they are and who they wish to become. Young people are seen to actively select media that relate to their current preoccupations, and to judge the credibility of those media in the light of their direct experience. For this reason, young people from different social groups (particularly in terms of gender and ethnicity) may well interpret and judge the same media in quite different ways; and some young people are seen to positively 'resist' the meanings they perceive in media texts, particularly if they feel marginalised in their everyday lives. As the author points out, some young people may not often see 'people like them' or hear 'stories like theirs' in the mainstream media; and they may respond very strongly when they do so.

The contrast between this kind of approach and that of the effects studies is thus not merely methodological, but also theoretical. The 'Adolescents' Media Practice Model' is designed to illustrate the fluid relationships between young people's selection, interpretation and appropriation of media and their everyday experiences. Family,

friends and school are all seen as additional (and potentially contradictory) sources of information about sexuality that may lead young people to question or challenge what they encounter via the media: the 'influence' of the media therefore cannot be separated from the texture of young people's daily lives. The author thus directly challenges simplistic notions of 'effects' and 'exposure', arguing that they fail to capture the dynamic, contextual nature of media use.

A more pessimistic analysis is provided by Durham's (1999) broadly 'ethnographic' study of adolescent girls' interactions with media, conducted in the south-western USA. This study is not so directly concerned with responses to sexual content, although it does focus on the role of 'sexualised' images in the media, and the extent to which they enforce what that author terms 'compulsory heterosexuality' (cf. Epstein and Johnson 1998). Using participant observation, the author considers how girls use media references in their everyday conversations in order to debate and reinforce established norms relating to physical appearance (make-up, clothes, body image); to marriage and motherhood; to heterosexuality; and to 'iconic' images of femininity. While there are important differences here in terms of social class, and between 'popular' and more marginal girls, the overall picture is one in which particular definitions of heterosexual femininity are fairly relentlessly reinforced through the conservative agency of the peer group.

Similar findings are apparent from Buckingham's (1993a) study of boys' talk about popular television. This study was part of a larger project conducted in the UK, using focus group discussions. In this paper, Buckingham focuses on the ways in which boys 'police' dominant definitions of masculinity within the dynamics of peer group discussion. Thus, in one analysis, the author identifies how the discussion of romantic plots in soap operas, and even the admission that characters (or actors) are in some way sexually attractive, is seen as taboo for boys, and is used as an opportunity to mock and undermine each other. A subsequent analysis considers the awkward negotiations that occur in a discussion of such issues among a group of 12-year-old boys. In the case of *Baywatch*, the boys are perfectly capable of challenging 'macho' norms as 'unrealistic'; although there is clearly something troubling for them about the programme's overt display of male bodies. This anxiety is even more apparent when it comes to discussing Madonna; and here the boys attempt to displace this by engaging in a form of moralistic condemnation.

As with the 'Adolescents' Media Practice Model' discussed above, the relationship between television and its audience is conceptualised here as dynamic and reciprocal. Television offers models of gender identity, but boys negotiate these in terms of their own concerns and preoccupations. Furthermore, masculinity (or sexual identity) is seen as something that is produced and achieved through performance – and in this instance, specifically through talk or 'male banter'. 'Doing masculinity' depends upon a complex and provisional recognition *and* disavowal of sexuality. Far from providing an opportunity to engage in voyeurism or bravado, the discussion of sexuality seems to hold more dangers than pleasures, at least for these early adolescents.

Some of these issues are developed in later research (Kelley *et al.* 1999), again drawn from a larger project. Here, groups of children aged 6-7 and 10-11 were given an activity where they were asked to identify what makes a programme appropriate ‘for

children'. Programmes featuring sex, violence and 'swearing' were singled out by both age groups as being particularly 'grown-up'. In analysing the discussions, the authors consider how children interpret and respond to representations of sexual behaviour they encounter on television. 'Adult' material on television seemed to function – particularly for the older children here - as a kind of 'forbidden fruit'. In discussing this kind of material, the children displayed a complex mixture of embarrassment, bravado and moral disapproval. Discussions of sex and romance in genres such as dating game shows, soap operas and sitcoms often served as a rehearsal of projected future (hetero-)sexual identities, particularly among girls. Boys were less comfortable here, with the younger ones more inclined to display disgust than fascination; although the older ones were more voyeuristic. Discussion of sexuality was often the vehicle for interpersonal policing, in which girls seemed to enjoy the upper hand.

These children were very familiar with adult definitions of appropriateness, although they were inclined to displace any negative 'effects' of television onto those younger than themselves, or to 'children' in general. While some of the youngest children expressed a more censorious rejection of 'adult' material, this was much less common among the older children, who aspired to the freedom they associated with the category of the 'teenager'. Here again, these discussions could serve as a form of mutual policing, particularly among boys. Overall, this analysis suggests that in discussing their responses to sexual content on television, the children are performing a kind of 'identity work', particularly via claims about their own 'maturity'. In the process, these discussions largely serve to reinforce normative definitions both of 'childhood' and of gender identity.

Similar issues are raised in Mary Kehily's (1999) study of young people's readings of the sexual content of teenage magazines like *More!* and *Sugar*, which have caused considerable controversy in the UK. Although this study barely touches on television, the general approach is relevant here. Kehily conducted observations and interviews in relation to both formal sex education classes and informal discussions about issues of sexuality – in which, she suggests, popular culture provides potentially valuable 'resources' for teaching and learning. She argues that, far from being duped into an acceptance of normative gender roles (as earlier critics of such magazines have suggested), young people read these magazines critically. They are aware of the conventions of the magazine format, and read the texts with a complex mixture of empathy, scepticism and humour. At least for girls, the reading of the magazines is very much a collective process, which is bound up with the enactment or performance of gendered identities in the context of friendship groups.

Kehily presents the young people in her study as 'discerning' and 'self-regulating'. Thus, for example, the girls were embarrassed by – and inclined to reject – the more explicit sexual advice and features in *More!* This material clearly violated their sense of appropriate feminine behaviour – at least for girls of their age (14-15). Meanwhile, for boys, this whole terrain was even more fraught and problematic. Like the younger boys in Buckingham's 1993 study, the boys here sought to avoid or distance themselves from the discussion of sexual matters, both informally and in the context of sex education classes. Perhaps paradoxically, this stance is partly informed by homophobia – that is, a wish to disclaim any implicit relationship with homosexuality, and hence to purvey a

coherent masculinity. Reading magazines of this nature, or even talking about sex and relationships, was simply 'not the thing boys do'.

Analytically, a relevant approach to magazine readership is taken by Joke Hermes in her study of women's relationship to magazines (Hermes 1995). She explores the multiple 'discursive repertoires', or the systems of terms women use in making sense of, legitimating and evaluating their reading, and shows how these contribute to the construction of various fantasised 'ideal selves'. Later research into men's magazines has also drawn on the concept of discursive repertoires (Jackson *et al.* 1999). Although neither study worked with under-eighteens or on sexual content specifically, the interpretive approach explores how magazines become meaningful for readers in the context of their everyday lives, and relates readings not to all-powerful texts but to the funds of knowledge (both contradictory and connected) readers bring to them.

Conclusion

Taken together, these studies provide at least the outline of a productive alternative to mainstream 'effects' research. There seem to be three key emphases here. Firstly, these studies point to the active role of audiences in making sense of the media and assimilating them into their lives. Audiences are not seen here as passive dupes of media messages. The media provide 'symbolic resources' that are structured in particular ways; but audiences interpret them actively and variably, in the light of their own concerns and experiences. Secondly, there is a kind of 'identity work' going on here: young people are actively forming their sense of who they are, both in relation to media images, but also in relation to other sources. This process is complex and provisional, and is characterised by a considerable degree of negotiation within the peer group, and within the interpersonal exchanges of everyday life. Thirdly, all these studies illustrate the potential of qualitative methods for gaining access to these processes of interpretation and identity formation. To reduce young people's relationships with the media to quantifiable measures of meaning or exposure or response is to oversimplify these processes to the point of unreality.

Conclusion

Surveys suggest that that public attitudes towards sexual content in the media have become increasingly permissive, even in the space of a few years. The public perceives there to be an increase in the amount and the explicitness of sexual representations on television (even if this perception is not always supported by the findings of research on media content); and in general it seems to be prepared to express tolerance of this situation. However, much less is known about the consequences of this situation for young people – and indeed how they themselves perceive it. Are young people in fact innocent and vulnerable to media influence in this respect – or are they more knowledgeable and sophisticated than many adults tend to assume? And to what extent might sexual content in the media serve a positive educational role?

Whilst the question of how young people respond to media narratives and images of sexuality is an important and interesting one, we have argued that effects studies are unlikely to provide satisfying answers. This research, which has hitherto dominated the field, is limited by its own questionable moral and theoretical assumptions, and by its methodological shortcomings. It adopts a reductive theory of meaning that insists on singular interpretations of texts, too often privileging those of the researcher without investigating alternative possible readings. Ultimately, it tells us very little about the complex ways in which audiences interpret and engage with media texts and assimilate them into their everyday lives – or indeed about what they find pleasurable (or unpleasurable) in the first place.

By contrast, we have sketched out some approaches within cultural and social research that do attempt to address these issues in a more sophisticated and subtle way. Despite differences between them, taken together they suggest that it might be more helpful to think in terms of the *uses* and *interpretations* of television rather than solely in terms of its *effects*. Media texts do not contain singular ‘messages’, nor do they have unequivocal, unilateral 'effects' on helpless consumers. On the contrary, they provide diverse, sometimes contradictory and multi-faceted cultural resources for building identities, including sexual identities. And the evidence would suggest that young people use and make sense of this material in active and diverse ways, in the context of their own everyday experiences and relationships.

As we enter the twenty-first century, these cultural resources may be more easily accessible, more plural, and are certainly different, than those in previous decades; although they also take their place alongside other texts and experiences that are available to young people for making sense of their lives. Some have argued that the range of material available can lead to gender polarisation, as young men and women draw on radically different sources to develop their understanding of sex and relationships. Others, however, have pointed to the media’s positive potential for creating diverse public cultures and constructing communities or subcultures of sexual interest that go beyond what some experience as the comparatively narrow confines of family and school. However, little existing research has explored such hypotheses.

Regulatory bodies are also bound to recognise that the meanings of media representations will vary according to the circumstances in which they are consumed and the cultural capacities and frames of reference of their audiences. They must attempt to adjudicate between the conflicting rights and claims of various sectors of society, and provide guidance through devices such as the television watershed and age-based film classification. However, it is increasingly recognised that the diversity of young people's responses to television – and indeed their understanding and experience of sexual matters - cannot be neatly encapsulated within a developmental model based purely on chronological age. Even if agreement could be reached on such issues, technological developments are making it increasingly difficult to restrict children's access to the media, or to confine them to material that we as adults might deem appropriate. In response, regulatory bodies are increasingly acknowledging the rights of children and parents to make their own decisions about what they watch – provided they are also given sufficient information and guidance.

In this situation, research should have an increasingly important role to play. As we have implied, researchers still need to address some fundamental questions about how young people use and interpret sexual images in the media; about the part the media might play in the development of sexual identity; and what implications this might have both for media regulation and for education. This is a task which, in our view, has only just begun.

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