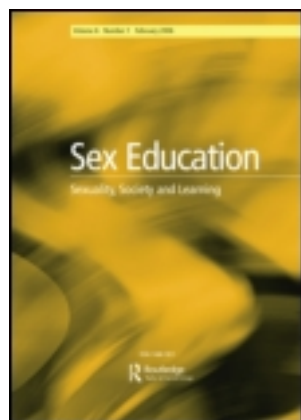




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Dafna Lemish^a

^a College of Mass Communication & Media Arts, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois, USA

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‘Can’t talk about sex’: producers of children’s television around the world speak out

Dafna Lemish*

College of Mass Communication & Media Arts, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Carbondale, Illinois, USA

As part of a larger study, this article discusses the views of 135 producers from 65 countries around the world regarding the presentation of sex on quality television for children. The article suggests that overall this topic is silenced because it is perceived as either inappropriate or culturally impossible to deal with in the context of a young audience. And thus, with the exception of some Nordic examples, quality television for children does not offer a healthy alternative to the fare available on commercial television.

Introduction

The scope and nature of television’s engagement with sex is debated frequently and often heatedly, and is undoubtedly a contested terrain of public concern regarding the well-being of young people in most societies. The media are often harshly criticized for making public the private domain of sex, and debates over freedom of expression and censorship (Semonche 2007), child protection from sexual abuse, and social moralities are frequently sparked by the appearance of sexual images across television, film, print and digital platforms. Discussions of sex in the media are complicated by conflicts of interest, cultural traditions, and ideological and moral perspectives drawing on contested terms such as ‘decency’, ‘obscenity’, and ‘taste’. These debates have particularly focused on moralistic discourses of ‘protection’ – both of society’s traditions and normative values towards sex and sexuality and of society’s free speech and individual rights for sexual fulfillment.

While scholarly examinations of sex and the media have tackled many issues beyond the putative effects on young people of exposure to sex – for example, evaluating the amounts and forms of sexualized content, public attitudes towards such representations, and the effectiveness of advertising strategies employing sex – little has been written on the ways in which arguments about media sexualization might impact on those who produce the images under discussion. In this article I examine the ways in which television professionals engage with these issues and how these might be inflected by particular cultural and social mores. Drawing on interviews with 135 producers from 65 countries around the world, my discussion illuminates the very real difficulties experienced by television producers in their attempts to make quality content for children that does not replicate normative and/or restrictive representations of sexuality.

*Email: dafnalemish@siu.edu

Sexualized media content

Children's exposure to representations of sex in the media has been blamed for many social ills; from promoting premature sexual activity, promiscuity, teenage pregnancies, and the spread of infectious diseases, through to the general erosion of morality and normative family values. Images of 'sexualized' children, in particular, have been criticized as encouraging adults to perceive children as sexually alluring and as a stimulus for the activities and fantasies of pedophiles (Brown 2008).

The media and popular culture are accused of 'over-sexualizing' girls (American Psychological Association 2007; Levine and Kilbourne 2008), offering representations of the sexy-little-girl and the fun-fearless-sexual-teenager in what one scholar has designated the 'Lolita Effect' (Durham 2008). Scholars argue that the media circulate and contribute to the cultivation of myths about girls' sexuality that link ideal body types and youth with conceptions of 'cool' and 'sexy', as well as cementing the idea of girls' innate exhibitionism, manipulation of male attention and incitement of possible sexual violence. Such imagery is thought to work to both undermine girls' healthy sexual development and at the same time to keep girls in their subordinated place in society by promoting restrictive ideologies of femininity focused on beautification through consumption, heterosexual romance as a central goal for girls and women, and the normalization of male domination in those relationships, while dismissing the validity of girls' own sexual feelings and desires.

The research presented as evidence of the sexualization of girls suggests that girls internalize self-objectification, develop lower self-esteem, believe their bodies are the key site of their femininity and that attractiveness, rather than personality, educational or career achievements, is the best path to social acceptance, romance, and status. These beliefs are manifested in girls' social relationships including policing other girls' conformity to the specific constraints of the beauty myth, competing for boys' attention through self-sexualization, and legitimizing patriarchal 'blame the victim' attitudes regarding sexual harassment and abuse (American Psychological Association 2007). The situation is understood to be ever more urgent because of the ways in which, spurred by technological advances (particularly digital technologies such as the internet and mobile telephony), sexual content and pornography are more easily available to young people without the traditional social sanctions associated with such consumption. Nevertheless, as this special issue demonstrates, other voices – coming out of Cultural Studies, and often feminist, scholarship – challenge claims of the all-encompassing and negative impact of sexualization of girls and bring to the forefront girls' sexual agency and desire (Lerum and Dworkin 2009).

A void of healthy sex socialization

Alongside the claims of increasingly sexualized content, another contradictory phenomenon is observed – the persistent and traditional silencing of discussions of sex and sexuality as a healthy and positive aspect of human life. Investigations of sex education programs have found that few touch upon central issues of appropriate sexual development, such as aspects related to relationships and interpersonal intimacy, sexual identity, or desire, playfulness, and pleasure. Furthermore, according to a popular truism, parents are too embarrassed and uncomfortable to engage in sex education with their children, and hope this task will be attended to by other socializing agents. As a result, children receive mixed messages: as they develop physically into active sexual subjects and are surrounded by cultural sexual stimulation, they are aware of the fear and shame that characterize much adult discussion of sex and sexuality. They are often told directly

that they are not supposed to be sexual and that they are expected to practice 'abstinence' (Irvine 2002; Arthurs and Zacharias 2006; Bragg 2006). Girls, in particular, are allocated the roles of maintaining a 'good' reputation by suppressing their sexual desires, assigned the role of controlling the 'unleashed' sexuality of their young male partners, and taught to feel guilty if this does not occur.

Overall, then, it would appear to be the case that since neither formal nor informal educators offer what many observers consider to be effective sex education, addressing the needs of pre-adolescents and adolescents as they grow up, the media fill this vacuum and become a central socializing force. Thus, sex is a realm of life that is initially encountered by many children through the media, alongside non-mediated reality. Their familiarity with it develops through years of consuming media content amidst the shortage of competing sources of information and models, well before engaging in their own real-life sexual experiences (Buckingham and Bragg 2004).

Given this analysis, it is not surprising that studies conducted from a Cultural Studies approach, which involves listening to children and adolescents, have found that teenagers relate to the media as their preferred source of information and guidance about sex. They use television's portrayals of sex and sexuality as a basis for conversations about its relevance in their lives. Researchers have found that pre-adolescents and adolescents report having frequent encounters with sexual material in the media, including popular texts such as soap operas and teen magazines, value the information received from them, and use them as a learning resource. Participants in these studies demonstrate a range of critical skills in interpreting sexual content and evaluate this through what they perceive to be sexual morality. Furthermore, teens' views are heavily influenced by their cultural background and gender, and they also use media content to resist sexual conservatism as well as to challenge like-minded messages advocated in formal sex education (Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Nayak and Kehily 2008).

In contrast to the Cultural Studies approach, research conducted through the media effects tradition implies that childhood is a sexually innocent period and that sexual knowledge is potentially dangerous. Adolescents' budding sexuality is considered to be of great importance and is, accordingly, framed as a social problem, particularly with regard to girls (Irvine 1994; Shary 2005). Content analysis studies concerned with potential media effects have found that popular teen stories are organized around the central theme of the 'troubled girl' who is usually also the 'sexual girl'. As Jackson has suggested:

One of the ways that such social anxiety is mapped on to the 'troubled girl' of soap is through the troubling of her sexual pleasure and desire so that indulgence in sex has negative consequences for her emotionally (e.g. turmoil, anxiety, depression, self-doubt), physically (e.g. unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection, abortion) or socially (e.g. rejection, derogation). (2006, 474)

One consequence of the behavior of 'troubled girls' is, of course, unwanted pregnancies. Accordingly, teen mothers are assumed to be sexually promiscuous and immature, 'children having children' (Kelley 2006, 35).

As a result, research in the effects tradition emphasizes the risks involved in heavy exposure to media sex, rather than the potential learning or pleasures that can be achieved through sexual portrayals. Accumulative effects research suggests that children and young people internalize sexual attitudes and behaviors from distorted portrayals of sex and sexuality on commercial media (Brown, Steele, and Walsh-Childers 2002; Gunter 2002). Based on research with college students (since studies of pornography consumption by underage teens are rare), media critics infer with reference to younger audiences that the pornography easily available today on the Internet, in magazines, and on DVDs has

serious implications for the development of a healthy sexual being: it supposedly models various sexual practices, prescribes promiscuous attitudes and beliefs about the role of sex in human relationships, establishes expectations about self-performance, objectifies women and disperses negative attitudes towards them, and underplays the severity of sexual crimes and their consequences (Zillman, Bryant, and Huston 1994).

Irrespective of research tradition, methodology, and assumptions regarding childhood, scholars are in agreement that media portrayals of sex have a central role in the development of young people's sexuality and, thus, should be looked at carefully. Furthermore, it is also clear that there are interrelationships between sex and many other central realms of life such as violence, emotions, commitment, family, childbearing, and homo-lesbian sexuality that require special attention by those concerned about the role of the media in advancing the healthy development of young people. Clearly, media play a central role in the formation of sexual cultures within which children come into age and acquire sexual knowledge and experience, and within which they negotiate their sexual identities.

The study

Given the complexity of the issues at hand, my study set out to talk to producers of quality television worldwide, to learn from them about their approach to the presentation of sex and sexuality on television for young people and the role they assign – if any – to quality television in this area. The meaning of quality television is a much debated issue in both the professional as well as the scholarly worlds. It is entangled with issues of power hierarchies: who defines what quality is and on whose behalf? How is quality judged differently for different audiences? Furthermore, the criteria for judgment of quality may shift across cultures as well as time. For the purposes of my study, 'quality television for children' was defined operationally as any television program accepted for presentation in one of the events specified below, as well as those produced by educational and public broadcasters around the world.

The description of the events that follows builds upon what I have found to be commonly accepted, self-adopted guiding principles for developing quality children's television. Those include, in short, programs prepared especially for children; programs that entertain, but at the same time try to advance child viewers – physically, mentally, and socially. Quality television allows children to hear, see, and express themselves, their culture, language, and life experiences in ways that affirm their personal identity, community, and place. It recognizes differences between children that are a result of their cognitive and emotional development, their talents, interests, personality characteristics, interpersonal relationships, and their social environment. Quality programs avoid the unnecessary presentation of violence and sex and offer children a variety of content and genres that do not necessarily reproduce successful formulas (Lemish 2007).

Because they are in a position to offer alternative images to the ones traveling the world through commercial corporations, I wanted to explore the personal and professional perspectives of producers on this burning concern. I also wanted to examine the issue from a variety of cultural contexts and traditions, exploring the political, religious, and ideological complexities involved in discussing sex and sexuality. Over the course of four years – between 2004 and 2008 – I interviewed 135 media professionals from 65 countries whom I met at various international events for children's media, including: Prix Jeunesse International festivals in 2004, 2006 and 2008 in Munich, Germany; the Japan Prize in 2006 in Tokyo, Japan; the Basel–Karlsruhe Forum in 2007 in Basel, Switzerland;

and The 5th World Summit on Media for Children in 2007 in Johannesburg, South Africa. These events are intended for professionals to exhibit, exchange, network, and learn from other professionals engaged in the production of quality television for children.

The responses of my interviewees ranged from enthusiasm, desire to converse, and a willingness to share ideas and dilemmas to rare occasions of outright antagonism – although those few incidents did not seem to have anything in common. Most expressions of reluctance to be interviewed were related to concern about inadequate English linguistic skills and an over-burdened schedule during the events. What was clearly helpful for my project was the atmosphere and expectations of conduct in these international events: professionals who attend them come with a predisposition to interact, network, meet new people, talk about their work, and demonstrate tolerance and interest in the work of others. So, being approached by a total stranger who presented them with a request to meet was a completely accepted situation. Therefore, on the whole, interviewees were agreeable and in the majority of cases seemed delighted to have an opportunity to talk about themselves and their work, as well as to express their views on the work of others that they had encountered during the event or outside it.

Interviews included questions about the producers' own personal career development; their current work; their perceptions of social issues in their culture and in television for children in their country; their impressions of social representations in their own and others' work viewed in the festivals and elsewhere; their suggestions and aspirations for change; and so on. Although I embarked on this study with a specific interest in changing gender representations in children's television around the world, the interviews developed in quite unexpected ways to encompass a host of issues of concern relating to children's television. However, for the purpose of this article, I focus on the parts of the interviews that dealt specifically with sex and sexuality-related issues. Needless to say, when interviewing producers on this topic, one confronts considerable difficulties given the many sensitivities involved regarding young people's own sexuality, questions of morals, values, and religion, and the personal inhibitions of the interviewees (and interviewer) themselves.

Each of the 135 interviews was unique, creating, collectively, a wide range and diversity of responses. Interviewees employed various types of response techniques that included the use of diversion, confrontation, and avoidance strategies as well as advancing personal agendas. Overall, it is impossible to summarize their nature in a unified manner, except to say that they required a great deal of flexibility on my part. Almost all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and, since most interviewees were not native English speakers, were also lightly edited for English, trying to preserve the style and flavor of the original conversation. The transcripts were later submitted to a grounded thematic analysis of the main issues that surfaced in the interviews. I use pseudonyms when quoting or referring to interviewees that reflect their gender, culture and individual characteristics.

Producers speak about sex

The realm of television portrayals of human sexuality was the most polarized site of cultural differences in the interviews. Discussion of these phenomena was almost always initiated by reference to programs produced in the Netherlands and the Nordic countries screened during the events. In their comments, interviewees were in agreement that a distinctive characteristic of these programs was their surprisingly open, direct treatment of this issue, irrespective of the age of the target audience. Among the programs and instances cited were: *Dancing* (the Netherlands), a program directed to an audience of pre-schoolers

in which there was full-frontal body nudity of a mature man and woman dancing; a discussion of male puberty, including the experience of first erections and wet dreams in *Ready Steady Grow!* (Sweden); *Invisible Wounds* (Sweden), which dealt with the sexual abuse of children; *The Day I Decided to be Nina* (the Netherlands), which followed a child who was born male but who experienced herself as a girl (all for 7–11-year-olds); and a kiss between two gay teenagers in *Danny's Parade* (the Netherlands), intended for 12–15-year-olds. Yet interviewees failed to note that what was also particularly striking, in comparison, was the absolute absence of such issues in other programs screened at all of the events I visited in the course of my research, and, concomitantly, the silence in dealing with these issues in productions from other global regions.

Localized interpretations of sex on television

Many opinions have been offered regarding the types of sexual relationships and practices appropriate for children to watch and at what age. These views vary not only from one society to another, but also within cultures, as there are many ways in which race, ethnicity, class, tradition, religion, and history, among other things, affect sexual beliefs and practices. While studying television programs for children and interviewing their producers, it became obvious that what is sexually relevant for cultures of advanced capitalist societies at this particular point in time in late modernity is not necessarily relevant to other societies around the world. For example, as noted, there is an unparalleled, relaxed and permissive approach in Nordic countries regarding the inclusion of nudity, erotic behaviors, scatological humor, and free talk about sex and bodily functions in programs intended for young viewers. In contrast, according to my interviewees, US television is, as a whole, much more conservative and less permissive. Yet it too is perceived as overly revealing, indeed indecent, by those from many developing countries in Africa, Asia, and South America.

The most common reference to queries about sex and sexuality in children's television was an unequivocal statement that such programs could never be produced and/or aired in one's respective country. The following statements were typical:

That's a taboo. (Chan-ho, Korea)

You don't talk about sex on television. (Obinna, Nigeria)

I think our parents – they will stop that broadcast, they would not allow it. (Sumita, Bangladesh)

They can talk about many things, but not sex. (Amer, Jordan)

Sex is one of the main NOs. (Maria, Qatar)

In Iranian festivals, if you even have a children's film where a boy and a girl are holding hands, they have to cut that scene out. (Carla, Canada, discussing working in Iran)

Sex, we cannot talk about sex. (Bounnhang, Laos)

I saw one production on sex, when they were teaching about love and kissing ... Nope, no way ... in Ghana that would be taken off, it would not even see the light of day. (Suzzy, Ghana)

We are sexually less liberal ... we don't speak about sex. (Augustine, Portugal)

When we saw this program we were really shocked, we were totally shocked, because we never show such programs to children on our TV. Parents would never, never agree to show it. (Katherine, Ukraine)

Most interviewees explained this taboo in terms of cultural inappropriateness; talking about sex or exhibiting sexual behavior was just not part of their culture; indeed, it transgressed many deeply ingrained values and traditions. They felt it legitimate to choose portrayals of romance over sex, illustrating very vividly arguments made by scholars who suggest that girls and women are taught to experience sexual arousal and desire as romantic love, and by so doing continue to relegate sex to the realm of procreation and family, thus maintaining the traditional social order (Pipher 1994; Currie and Kelly 2006; Galician and Merskin 2007). In romantic love attachments, the notion of sublime love breaks away from earthly sexuality as it elevates the spirit above the constraints of everyday reality and physical desires and needs. Different cultures influence how we codify sexual arousal as romantic love and how we will experience those sensations – be it ‘love at first sight’ or ‘sexual passion’ – the meaning and significance we attach to the experience as well as the various ways we are sanctioned for representing it, and whether it will fall under accepted norms of sexual conduct (Giddens 1993).

This interpretation seems to be particularly relevant to the views of interviewees from more traditional and nation-building societies where ideologies of sex are strongly bound to the procreation perspective and so serve the goals of the collective to preserve itself. From this point of view, in western representations of leisure culture that glorify personal liberties and the individual pursuit of pleasure and happiness, sex is perceived to be hedonistic and, as such, a threat to national ideologies and the goals of solidifying a collective identity (Arthurs 2004). Of course, this process is not unique to communist or traditional societies alone. Puritanical discourse, in particular, denies all sensual pleasures and views them as distractions from spiritual engagements and religious moralities (Giddens 1993). As Foucault (1976) and his followers argued, such an ideology produces and controls sex through discourses that are formal, institutional, and scientific. The social organization of sexual desire, they argued, subverts and redirects it to productivity; a mechanism that guarantees the continuation of labor and support of the economic system and/or the nation.

The striking differences between many Asian cultures and the Nordic ones were noted by interviewees when commenting on the variety of programs viewed during the festivals, as Salma (Pakistan) explained:

I find a lot of the programs from the Western world, like the Scandinavians, are very dominant, as usual, more based on the fact that there is more sexuality in them . . . I presume it is a way of life there, because they are very free. Maybe, for those of us from Asia, that is something that we don't talk about and don't discuss. We dream it, fantasize, I am sure we enjoy it, I do, but I think it is something we would like to make private, so that's something that is my cultural bias, where I come from.

A twist in this concern was shared by some producers who agreed that the discussion of sex was appropriate when there was a moral lesson to be learned, as in programs highlighting teen pregnancy (Emma, Bolivia). Thus, tying sexuality to improper behaviors and negative consequences was permissible, while discussion of other aspects was dismissed. Akiko (Japan) talked about the presence of condoms in programs for adolescents and in doing so echoed a media effects tradition, expressing her concern that the presentation of sexual practices on television encourages premature sexual activities. She described her public broadcasting station, NHK, as quite open to discussion of issues such as homosexuality and sexual abuse, yet asked: ‘Is it really necessary to teach growing up people about using condoms? If we do too much of it, are we also suggesting that you accept having sexual intercourse among the really young ages?’ The notion that the open discussion of sex – whether in sex education curricula or on television – legitimizes and

encourages the early initiation of sexual activities is clearly a central argument employed in discourses that object to such interventions in the lives of adolescents.

Sex on western children's television

Many of the interviewees from the South commented on the completely different approaches to sex and sexuality in television fare that their children encounter on local and global-commercial channels:

It's a hypocritical situation. On the one hand, local TV was being over protective of children. You are not supposed to see this or, you are not supposed to know that. But, on the other hand, they are flooded with these images and sounds from movies and TV programs from outside the Philippines. (Leona, Philippines)

We have a different mentality. We can't discuss it like that. But 'thanks' to American movies they know everything. I don't think it's good because they know more about sex than they need to at this age. They come home from school and they sit with their mothers and they see the soap opera; and they are talking about this one that divorced her husband, and this one who had sex with that man or with another man ... it is not good, sex all the time. (Yegor, Kazakhtan)

Eleonora (Argentina) was even more blunt in pointing out the double standard:

We don't talk about sex or we don't talk about our fears about it ... it is a very religious country and we can't talk about it to children on TV. But in the soap operas they are always fucking, and they're almost nude. So sex is everywhere, all the time, all through the day, for children and adults.

While western programs and movies, particularly those traveling globally, were pinpointed as containing a lot of sex, it is important to emphasize that many producers from western countries chose to disassociate themselves from the sexual openness exhibited by the Nordic programs, arguing that their own societies would not be receptive to such content:

We are not allowed to speak about sex on public TV ... and no kissing and no acting like American teenagers ... (Natalie, France)

American culture is one where sex is all around, but we never talk about it. So especially for kids, I feel like it's really important ... We would never have something like that ... it's not OK to talk about sex, it wouldn't be something that was really addressed. (Sally, USA)

Some American interviewees expressed real envy at their Nordic colleagues, as Laura (USA) put it:

Americans are squeamish about the issue of sex, in any form. Yes, they probably think about it all the time, guys in particular. And, pornography is enormously huge. At Cartoon Network I learned pretty quickly that I could show a show where people are killed and no one will call to complain. But one sexual comment and people will go absolutely crazy. And it's because of this whole refusal to acknowledge sex.

The discomfort with discussing sex, even in cultures associated with hedonistic cultural representations of sex, like the United States, was particularly evident in the discourse over homosexuality stimulated by some of the Nordic programs screened at the events. Homosexuality on children's television was related to as a taboo by the vast majority of my interviewees from around the world, and caused quite a bit of anxiety even among the North American interviewees, despite the fact that gays appear quite regularly in prime time television. Several interviewees related formative incidents in their professional lives that had clearly set the boundaries for them. One such experience was referred to by several US interviewees who recalled an incident with an animated PBS program featuring a lesbian family that caused an uproar resulting in it being taken off the

air. Thus, the representation or absence of homosexuality in children's television can be seen as hegemonic regulation, an informal taken-for-granted nature of heterosexuality, which is not itself spoken about in children's television.

The difference between the direct Nordic approach and the avoidance strategies employed by other western countries was strongly evident in discussion of *Mortified*, an Australian program about a young girl dealing with 'the talk' about sex with her parents. While the audience is presumed to know what 'the talk' is all about and so be capable of empathizing with the protagonist's anxiety, the program dwells on talking about 'the talk' rather than actually discussing the content of 'the talk' itself. As a result, it remains an embarrassing secret that is not exposed clearly nor talked about openly. In this way, sex and sexuality itself is reinforced as a private secret, one resonating with anxiety – perhaps even fear and shame – that should not need to be shared with others; a secret that talking about with parents is 'mortifying' for a maturing middle-class girl in an educated family. The message to the audience of such a moralistic lesson seems quite clear: there are limited chances that teens will engage in a frank dialogue about sexuality and sexual options; that is, one in which teenagers will be able to talk about their knowledge, experiences, anxieties, and so forth, without being lectured to by knowing adults (Irvine 1994).

The Nordic approach

Nordic and Dutch producers were very much aware of their prominent status in the festivals and of being the object of a range of reactions, from admiration to shock. Many of these interviewees dismissed the allegation that what they were doing was outstanding or problematic, insisting that it was in line with their lives. Karolina (Sweden) explained:

It is true that the issues around sex are much more openly discussed in the Nordic countries than other parts of the world. Children today are quite open about it, they are not shy, they know that they are allowed to ask about things and no grownup will be shocked.

Famke (the Netherlands) also tied it to her own cultural values:

In our society there is a strong belief that it's better to deal with some issues like prostitution, homosexuality, drugs; to keep it open, rather than to try to cover and hide it.

The interviewees from these countries dismissed the notion that they were being purposefully provocative, testing the limits, or challenging other societies. Instead, they believed they were only reacting to what they considered to be appropriate for their own cultures. They argued strongly in favor of giving children and young people information about procreation and safe sex, and offering them an opportunity to freely voice their own concerns, anxieties, puzzlements, and early explorations of their sexual identities. According to this view, letting boys and girls talk about sex in their own way, as well as their fears and vulnerabilities, is both innovative and valuable.

Conclusion

The findings presented here, based on interviews with producers of children's television around the world, suggest a global agreement that sex and sexuality are inappropriate topics on television for children, tweens, and even teens. This overarching finding tells us a great deal about the construction of childhood as a naïve pre-sex time that needs to be preserved by clear limits on the 'sayable' and 'unsayable'. Productions from the Netherlands and the Nordic countries are the exceptions that prove this rule. Programs from these countries serve as 'chaotic' gale-force winds in a waveless ocean, transgressing

the hegemonic sex order. However, it is interesting to note that the producers involved in the making of these programs do not see themselves as leading such a transgression, only as serving the needs of their audiences for healthy physical and mental development. In contrast, most non-Northern European producers refrained from incorporating such themes in what they perceived as quality television for children, nor did they advance age-appropriate engagement with sex-related issues. The exception to this rule can be found in programs whose aim is HIV/AIDS prevention, and in which sex is treated mainly as a risk-related behavior (see discussion in Lemish 2010).

This overall finding stands in sharp contrast to the arguments regarding the trend towards the increasing frequency and explicitness of sexual portrayals in popular media consumed by young audiences (McNair 2002). Children's culture is understood as highly sexualized, exerting tremendous pressure on girls to maintain a sexual appearance and on boys to exhibit strong sexual interests. If this is true, then children are being driven into premature sexual adulthood without the provision of appropriate tools, knowledge, and role-models for healthy sexual development. This is particularly intriguing, given the alarm expressed at suggestions that adolescents are increasingly engaging in sexual activity with significant consequences including teen pregnancy, the spread of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the medical claims of 'sex addiction', the moral panic over the Internet as a social space where sexual predators lurk, and growing evidence of the prevalence of child sexual abuse (Bancroft 2003).

The figure of the child has a symbolic role in debates over censorship and the regulation of media content. Children are framed as a weak, vulnerable segment of the audience in need of protection (Levine 2002; Semonche 2007) and constructed as the 'others' of adults. In this, they are a preventive social change tool used by adults to preserve the dominance of hegemonic conservative approaches to sexuality in adulthood and childhood. Sex on television, too, is related to all forms of adult power – political, economical, and cultural. These perceptions were evident in my interviews, in producers' beliefs that they were responding to dominant ideologies in their societies regarding sex and children and serving as guardians of normative discourse. Interviewees were also very aware that any deviation from these expectations would be sanctioned by disciplinary practices such as angry audience reactions, the cancelling of programs, threats to employment, and so on.

Children and adolescents remain outside any of these debates, addressed directly neither by sex education nor television programs, nor in ways that acknowledge the complex meaning of sexuality for young people, grounded in their cultures and traditions, and aimed at cultivating healthy sexual subjects. Instead, portrayals of sex were often limited to the glorification of heterosexual romance or the desexualization of complicated issues such as gender dysphoria, sexual abuse, homosexuality, and HIV/AIDS. Programs dealing with these topics, it was often suggested, are best viewed in school settings, where a mediated discussion with an informed adult can take place.

The void left by quality television strongly echoes the absence of engagement with issues of gender and sexuality in school curricula. Even producers of quality television, who are dedicated to promoting excellence in children's television and who have the well-being of their audience as a guiding light, find it difficult to deal with sexual issues. This is partly due to their own inhibitions, but mostly due to their perceptions of what is acceptable in the cultural context in which they operate. Many interviewees lacked even the vocabulary – at least in English – that would enable them to engage in such discussion. In this, they fail to address a central aspect of young people's development, leaving the field of socialization and education to profit-driven market forces on the one hand, and to right-wing anti-sex moralists on the other.

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