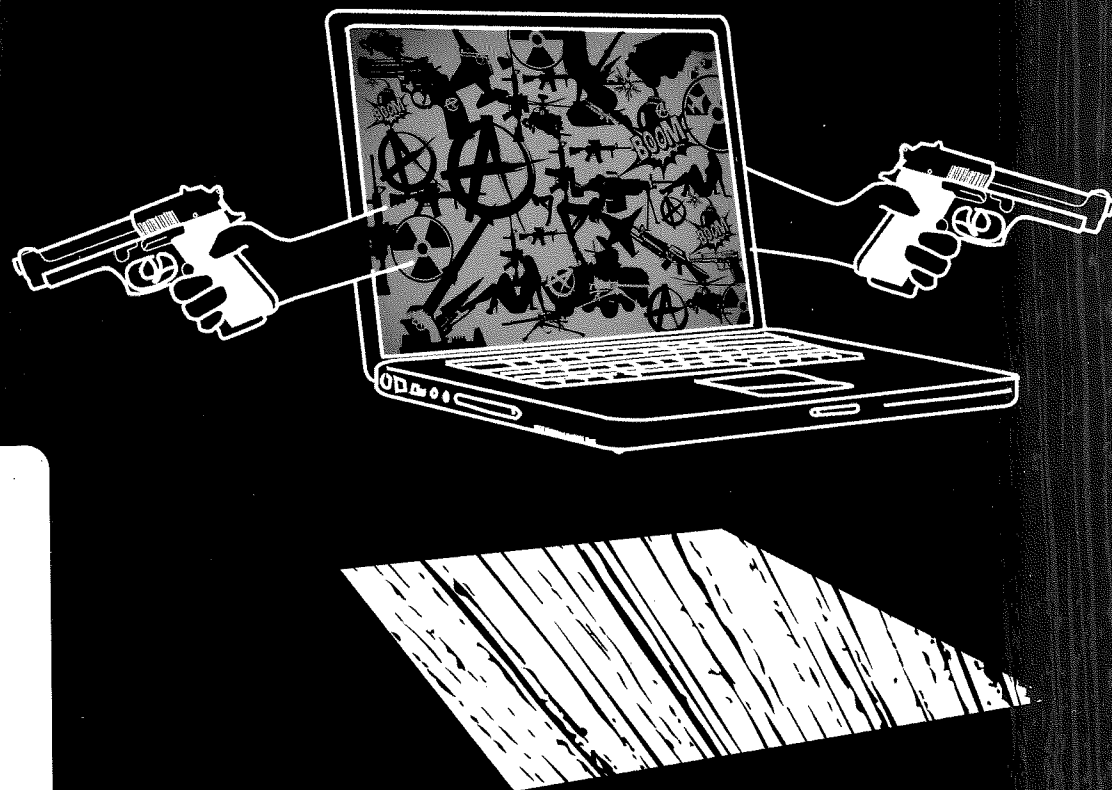


Second Edition

Connecting Social Problems and Popular Culture

WHY MEDIA IS NOT THE ANSWER

Karen Sternheimer



42. Researchers who study media violence often have backgrounds in communications, psychology, or medicine.

43. No females were included because primary investigators concluded from previous research that males were more likely to have been involved in violent incidents.

44. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*.

45. Elijah Anderson, *The Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000); Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, 8.

46. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Median Weekly Earnings by Race, Ethnicity, and Occupation, First Quarter 2012," April 19, 2012 (Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, 2012), http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2012/ted_20120419.htm.

47. Elijah Anderson, *Streetwise: Race, Class, and Change in an Urban Community*, 197.

48. Megan Garvey, "Washington Again Taking on Hollywood," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2, 2001, A1.

CHAPTER 6

Pop Culture Promiscuity

Sexualized Images and Reality

When Disney sensation Miley Cyrus, star of *Hannah Montana*, appeared in *Vanity Fair* in 2008, a firestorm of criticism erupted. The fifteen-year-old posed provocatively, wearing only a bedsheet in some of the photos. A year later, she performed at the Teen Choice Awards while dancing on a pole. Was she a bad role model for young girls, a young woman seeking to shed her Disney image, or both? Do representations of sexuality encourage teens to become sexually active?

We live in a time when virtually nothing is off-limits in pop culture, and the most private information about celebrities' love lives becomes tabloid fodder. Many adults fear that sex is no longer a big deal to kids, and young teens are casually "hooking up" and "growing up faster than ever." Books like *Teaching True Love to a Sex-at-13-Generation* suggest that today's entire generation of kids is sexually active before high school. Their evidence? They look to the media: pop culture is full of sex, and therefore so must be kids.

As we will see in this chapter, while popular culture may be awash in sex, young people are not nearly as sexually active as many fear. It may seem like a given that teens think sex is just another way of saying hello, thanks to news about “sexting”—sending racy pictures via text or posting them on Facebook or Twitter. The *Boston Globe* and other news sources describe young teens’ sexy Halloween costumes—including some dressed as prostitutes—and pretty soon it seems like a trend.¹ After all, who hasn’t seen a young teen or tween wearing an outfit that is anything but age appropriate?

Daytime talk shows have long featured promiscuous teens as problems that their parents can’t handle. Topics like “My teen is going on a date” might be more applicable to regular kids, but probably not a big ratings grabber. Horror stories of teen promiscuity make the news and appear to support the popular hypothesis that kids now are morally depraved and imply the media are at fault.

Note that stories about promiscuous *adults* aren’t common, but headlines like “Don’t Let TV Be Your Teenager’s Main Source of Sex Education,” “Grappling with Teen Sex on Television,” “MTV Show Promotes Teen Sex, Drug Use, Experts Say,” and “Racy Content Rising on TV” help create an atmosphere of anxiety among adults who fear that the rules have changed and that young people are becoming more promiscuous than ever.²

“Kids pick up on—and all too often act on—the messages they see and hear around them,” wrote sex educator Deborah Roffman in a *Washington Post* article titled “Dangerous Games: A Sex Video Broke the Rules, but for Kids the Rules Have Changed.”³ Interesting that we don’t level the same charges against adults, who are more likely to be sexually active, and more likely to be rapists and sex offenders, than teenagers.

Roffman’s article featured the story of a teenage boy from the Baltimore area who videotaped himself having sex with a classmate and then showed the video to his friends. Certainly, this story is troubling,

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Roffman’s article featured the story of a teenage boy from the Baltimore area who videotaped himself having sex with a classmate and then showed the video to his friends. Certainly, this story is troubling,

but also troubling is the supposition that this incident is representative of all young people, whose rules of proper conduct have allegedly changed. We wouldn’t dare make the same sweeping generalizations about equally appalling adult behavior. But Roffman is not surprised: “What else do we expect in a culture where by the age of nineteen a child will have spent nearly 19,000 hours in front of the television . . . where nearly two-thirds of all television programming has sexual content?”⁴

There are several things wrong with the assumption that sexual content from television led to this sex video. First, if our television culture is so sex laden and causes such inappropriate behavior, we would expect even more incidents like this, but this case was enough of an anomaly that it made headlines. Clearly, the story received media attention based on its shock value and its rarity. Second, the “19,000 hours” is an average, and perhaps a dubious one at that. How many hours of television did you watch last week? Last night? Personally, I have no idea, and neither do a lot of people who respond to surveys that statistics like these are derived from. The amount of viewing tells us nothing about the content itself. Besides, we have no idea if this kid even watches television—typically, television viewing declines in adolescence, and adults tend to watch more television than young people do.⁵

Finally, “sexual content” in such studies is often broadly defined to include flirting, handholding, kissing, and talk about sex, so the “two-thirds of all television programming” estimate is questionable at best. Roffman compared the incident to the 1999 film *American Pie*, where the lead character broadcast a sexual encounter over the Internet. However, there is no proof the Maryland boy even saw this movie.

It is far too simplistic to blame raunchy movie scenes for changes in sexual behavior. This chapter challenges this fear by examining why sexual attitudes have changed over the past century. The way we think about sex has changed much more than the actual behavior. We will

see that youth of today are not nearly as promiscuous as some might fear. Rather than being blindly influenced by sex in media, teens are actively involved in trying to figure out who they are in a culture that might offer a lot of sexual imagery but little actual information about intimacy, sex, and sexuality. In a 2012 survey, 38 percent of teens reported that their parents were the most influential when it came to making decisions about sex. Only 9 percent cited the media.⁶

When we take a closer look at how young people make sense of sexuality in media, we see that they are not simply influenced by popular culture, but use sexual representations to create identity and status within their peer groups. As we will see, changes in economics and demographic shifts during the past century have driven changes in sexual attitudes and behavior. But sexuality has always been part of coming of age, and parents have always felt anxious about this passage. Adults' declining ability to control children's sexual knowledge has created a high level of fear, and popular culture—the source of what seemed like secret information in the past—is often blamed instead of structural conditions and social changes.

The Sexual Revolution: Blame Social Structure, Not Popular Culture

Not too long after the motion picture camera was invented, someone filmed the first sex scene. Contrast this Victorian-era development with prevailing Comstock laws, which made any reference to birth control sent through the mail legally obscene and a violation of federal law. Now you have a basic understanding of the way in which concerns about sex in media have always existed—and have always been contradictory.

In spite of the common belief that sexually laden popular culture is something new to recent decades, film content in the 1920s featured stars like Rudolph Valentino's passionate kissing, occasional female nudity, and sometimes even orgies. Because most of these films were

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not preserved and are rarely screened, we can easily forget they existed. But critics were equally as concerned about morality and popular culture a century ago.

And like today, Hollywood's early stars engaged in sometimes scandalous behavior, including wild parties, frequent failed marriages, and sex scandals. Most notably, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle was tried for rape and murder when a woman died after visiting his hotel room in San Francisco. Although the cause of death was later determined *not* to be homicide, Arbuckle's notoriety made conservative groups concerned about the impact this growing industry would have on American society. Movies were a new source of influence that religious leaders feared would bypass the family, school, and religion in importance in young people's lives. If this sounds familiar, it is because things haven't changed as much as we might think.

Politicians and activists called for government censorship. Instead, the new film industry promised self-regulation by creating a special organization to monitor movie content and ensure movies met what were deemed acceptable moral standards. The new code, formally implemented in 1934, was led by prominent political figure Will Hays. What came to be known as "the Code" restricted film content to what the Hays Office deemed "wholesome entertainment."⁷

But the Code censored much more than just sex. Rules governing film production were overtly racist—no interracial relationships were allowed—and any criticism of the status quo was interpreted as a violation of the "moral obligation" of the entertainment establishment. The Hays Office justified extremely rigid boundaries of filmmaking in the name of preserving children's "morality." Films that critiqued corporations and capitalism were deemed un-American; content that seemed to criticize "natural or human" laws could potentially incite "the lower and baser element" of American society.⁸

The Code dominated film production until 1966. With competition from television cutting into box-office revenues, films started presenting sexuality more frankly beginning in the 1960s, particularly as

European New Wave films by directors like Federico Fellini and Jean Luc Godard helped redefine movies as art. Twenty years later, cable television and the VCR brought more sexually explicit programming directly to consumers, bypassing network television standards and practices. In order to keep their dwindling market share, networks have had to compete by offering content that keeps our attention when so many other things might tempt us to look elsewhere.

Why is there so much sexual imagery in media culture today? Blame market forces. Sex has become another product of contemporary society, circulating more rapidly and difficult to control and regulate because highly sexualized images attract attention and profit.

Popular culture may be different today than in the past—yes, Lucille Ball couldn't say the word *pregnant* on her 1950s television show. But it does not explain social changes. We didn't arrive here on the coattails of television or movies; popular culture incorporates and reflects societal issues and values, many of which some people find objectionable. Instead of targeting attention solely on popular culture, we need to first understand the social context of sex in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America.

Our concerns about sexually active young people are by no means new—during the 1920s adults were horrified by the short dresses young women wore and the “petting parties” young people attended, as well as what was going on in the backseats of the new horseless carriages. So why the often rose-colored view of sex in the past?

Many older adults today came of age between the 1930s and 1950s and were not entirely chaste as teens themselves. But the movies and television of their era were, and this is what we mostly think of when we think of the middle of the twentieth century. Chances are, if history is any indicator, in about fifty years people will look back at today as an age of innocence, too. When it comes to young people and sexuality, the past has always seemed more innocent because it is viewed through the lens of nostalgia.

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Rarely does a history book mention teen sex as a major concern of the day, nor do our grandparents typically discuss this aspect of their lives when recalling their youth. But rather than significant differences in behavior, what has seriously changed is the *expectation* of who teens are. Until the twentieth century, most teens were likely to be regarded as near adults with full familial and economic responsibilities. They worked, married, and raised children—siblings or their own—at much earlier ages than many of us do today.

The experience of adolescence, a middle period between childhood and adulthood, emerged as the outcome of industrialization and the diminished necessity for people in their teen years to join the labor force. The time before adulthood steadily lengthened throughout the twentieth century, as did the gap between sexual maturity and marriage. Socially and sexually, we expect teenagers today to function partially as adults and partially as children. The roles and expectations of adolescents today are far different from those of their counterparts a hundred years ago, and even from those of their grandparents at mid-century, when many young people married right after high school. Teen sex was very common: it just took place after a wedding (or precipitated one). Yet today we hope that people who are sexually mature don't engage in sexual behavior before socially defined adulthood, despite the fact that children—particularly girls—reach physical maturation earlier than in midcentury.

Along with changes in the experiences and meaning of adolescence came different beliefs about courtship and dating. During the “good old days,” adults shared many of the same fears that today's parents have, that young people were engaging in behavior they never did at their age and that kids had too much freedom and not enough sexual restraint.

Rather than the “revolution” we are so often told happened in the 1960s, young people's sexual behavior steadily changed throughout the twentieth century, as have perceptions of how parents should deal with the coming-of-age issues of dating and sexuality.⁹ Yes, birth

control became much more widely discussed with the advent and distribution of the birth control pill, but it was mostly available only to married women at first. And in states like Connecticut, any use of birth control was illegal until the 1965 Supreme Court ruling in *Griswold v. Connecticut*.

It is nearly impossible to understand these changes without considering the economic context. Courtship began to change with the rise of industrialization and marked the gradual decrease of adult control. Before World War II, American child-rearing practices reflected the belief that controlling children's behavior could prevent any untoward sexual exploration later in life. Additionally, parental supervision of courtship was much simpler in rural life, where work was more likely to be closer to the home. A suitor might call on a potential mate at her home with parents or chaperones very close by.

Industrialization led to the growth of cities and took adults away from the home for longer periods of time. The possibility for supervision decreased, as did the amount of space a family might have had in which courtship could take place. Dating moved from the parlor to the public sphere and progressively became more of an independent pursuit with less family intervention, particularly as marriage became more about romantic connections and less tied to making good economic matches between families.¹⁰

Factor in that the widespread availability of electricity at the beginning of the twentieth century enabled nightlife to emerge away from the family home and that the automobile became an important part of American dating. Having a car provided more privacy and the ability to travel even farther from parental supervision. Drive-in restaurants and movies as well as lovers' lanes are examples of semiprivate settings where teens went to be away from parental supervision.

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created the possibility for many people to experience youth as a time of leisure, whereas the previous generation was much more likely to be in the labor force. Young people likely had fewer responsibilities than their parents had before them, and childhood and adolescence were increasingly seen as time for fun.¹¹ Dating became associated with recreation rather than procreation, as the search for a spouse became a more distant concern.

Historian Beth L. Bailey describes how remaining chaste before marriage gradually lost its economic value in the marriage market, particularly as women had more opportunities to become self-supporting.¹² The new affluence of the postwar era led to higher rates of high school and college attendance, which increased the physical distance between adults and young people, as well as increasing the opportunities for couples to be alone.

The influence of Sigmund Freud and Benjamin Spock in the postwar era also altered perceptions about sexuality and childhood. Both Freud and Spock considered children inherently sexual, so sexual curiosity was natural, even necessary for healthy development. Unlike the prewar notion that control created a well-adjusted child, postwar advice urged parents to avoid shaming their children. Parents were encouraged to provide information about sex, a major shift from prewar practices.

Contrary to our collective nostalgia suggesting otherwise, premarital sex did occur before the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s; it was the *reaction* to premarital sex that changed. In midcentury, for instance, if sex resulted in pregnancy, it was more likely to remain secret through a quick marriage, a forced adoption, or, in some situations, an abortion disguised as another medical procedure.¹³ The main difference now is that we are more likely to acknowledge both premarital sex and teen pregnancy than in the past. Teenage girls today are less likely to be pressured into early marriage and more likely to have access to birth control and information about sex.

Starting in the early 1970s, a backlash against the new openness began.¹⁴ This new sexual openness led to fears that a more accepting approach to childhood sexuality had gone too far, that the lack of shaming in early childhood led to less restraint against premarital sex, blamed for the counterculture's freewheeling views toward sex and drugs.

These concerns about openness blamed behavioral changes on the availability of information and did not take into account the demographic, economic, and political changes of the twentieth century. Our contemporary ambivalence about sexuality was born, as were complaints that the media make them do it. Today American adults want young people to be both psychologically healthy and sexually restrained, which is why we are at best ambivalent about providing children with information about sex. In many schools, sex education now is often just abstinence education.

Rather than a secret shame, sex today is out in the open. It's on talk shows, in newspapers, blogged about, tweeted, and texted. Talking about sex and sexuality was once taboo; we do a lot of it now. But talk is not the same as action.

More Media, Less Promiscuous Teens

Just as sexuality seems like a new invention for each generation of teens, the fear of teen sexuality is renewed in each adult generation, particularly as new forms of media and communication technology enable young people to evade parental control.

In recent years, public concern has swirled around teens using social media and smartphones to post and send sexually charged messages or images. "Sexting"—a media-manufactured term if there ever was one—has become a big topic on infotainment programs. Google "teen sexting" and you will find more than a million hits, with many of the

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news stories about the alleged danger of this supposedly exploding new phenomenon.

Talk of charging teen "sexters" as sex offenders or with possession of child pornography, suicide following a missent "sext," and other horror stories of images posted online provide a frightening backdrop to our ever-changing media environment, one in which supposedly sexually out-of-control teens don't know any better than to send risqué photos of themselves.

There's just one thing that's often left out of these modern-day morality tales: most teens don't "sext." A Pew Internet and American Life study conducted in late 2011 found that only 2 percent of twelve- to seventeen-year-olds had ever sent nude or seminude photos of themselves. By contrast, more than double the percentage of people their parents' age admitted that they had: 5 percent of thirty- to forty-nine-year-olds sent racy pictures.¹⁵

Teenage sex is by now a cliché associated with irresponsibility, disease, promiscuity, and unwanted pregnancy, while adults are often considered more mature and capable of self-control. We claim that teens have trouble controlling themselves due to raging hormones, implying that promiscuity is somehow natural and inevitable. (Ironically, while we blame biology for shaping teen behavior, we condemn young people for doing what allegedly comes naturally.) Meanwhile, we ignore the majority of teens who are responsible or do not engage in sex, and we don't stereotype promiscuous adults as hormone-crazed animals.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) studies teen's sexual behavior in its "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System" (YRBSS) (emphasis mine), but rarely do we study *adults'* sexual behavior as risky.

Even teens themselves think their peers are having sex more than they really are. A survey conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that more than half of teens overestimated

the percentage of their classmates who are sexually active.¹⁶ Even teens might be surprised to learn that their age group is actually *less* likely to be sexually active than teens were twenty years ago. According to the CDC's YRBSS study:

- The rate of high school students who have ever had sexual intercourse declined from 54 percent in 1991 to 47 percent in 2011.¹⁷
- For those sexually active, condom use increased from 46 percent in 1991 to 60 percent in 2011; 87 percent reported using some form of birth control during their last sexual intercourse.¹⁸
- The birthrate for teens fifteen to seventeen fell to seventeen per thousand in 2010, the lowest rate in the nation's history.¹⁹
- Teen abortion rates dropped 59 percent between 1988 and 2008 to an all-time low since becoming legal in 1973.²⁰
- Despite claims of a widespread "hookup culture," where teens regularly have sex outside of relationships, the majority of both males (56 percent) and females (70 percent) report that their first sexual experience was within a steady relationship.²¹ Just 10 percent of teen females and 12 percent of males report having had heterosexual oral sex but not intercourse.²²

While media critics tend to focus on popular culture, the decisions to have sex, use contraception, and, if pregnant, have a baby or an abortion are complicated ones. But some clear patterns exist. Regardless of ethnicity, males are more likely to claim sexual experience, which may tell us more about their perceptions of masculinity than their actual behavior. African American males are significantly more likely to report being sexually active than any other group.

As sociologist Mike A. Males points out in his book *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents*, this does not necessarily mean they really are having sex, but they may feel pressure to report that they are. African American males are significantly more likely to re-

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As sociologist Mike A. Males points out in his book *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents*, this does not necessarily mean they really are having sex, but they may feel pressure to report that they are. African American males are significantly more likely to re-

port that their first sexual encounter took place before they were thirteen; in 2011 21 percent claimed early sexual activity. Among females only 7 percent of African American and 3 percent of Latina or white females report the same early sexual onset. By contrast, 11 percent of Latino boys and 5 percent of white boys claim to have had sex before age thirteen. A 2008 study found that African American males experienced a rise in self-concept after becoming sexually active.²³ Definitions of masculinity are often related to sexual experience, particularly among male peers, reflecting the concept of hegemonic masculinity I discussed in prior chapters. Despite the common belief that kids are having sex earlier and earlier, only 13 percent of American teens report having had sex before age fifteen, and 6 percent reported having sex before age thirteen.²⁴

Teen birthrates also reflect measurable racial and ethnic differences. The birthrate for African American teens is nearly triple and the birthrate for Latina adolescents nearly four times higher than for white and Asian American teens.²⁵ As I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, teen birthrates have declined dramatically over the past two decades, with the most dramatic drop in African American teen births from eighty-two per thousand in 1990 to thirty-two per thousand in 2009.²⁶

There are also racial and ethnic differences regarding sexual health. As a 2006 study found, just one-third of sexually active African American males and less than half of African American females had information about contraception before they had sex; African American teens also contract HIV/AIDS at a rate far higher than their peers.²⁷ Regardless of race, fewer teens today learn about birth control at school, thanks to the political support of abstinence-only education. According to a 2012 Guttmacher Institute Report, nearly a quarter of teens never received formal instruction about contraception; by contrast, in the mid-1990s less than 10 percent had not learned about birth control in school.²⁸

While popular culture provides some titillating explanations for teen sex, others are decidedly more mundane. Family monitoring, support, and communication are also important predictors of teens likely to hold off on having sex. Using drugs and alcohol is also associated with early sexual initiation.²⁹

Poverty is also a risk factor for sexual activity; this might seem counterintuitive, because early births also aggravate the experience of poverty, but for those who see little hope of college or a career ahead, the risk of pregnancy may seem less of an imposition than for middle-class or affluent teens who have aspirations that may feel unrealistic to a young person growing up poor. Sociologist Mike A. Males analyzed teen birth trends and found that we can best predict the teen birthrate by tracking adult birthrates and poverty rates; teen birthrates mirror similar adults' rates, not changes in media or abstinence education.³⁰ Simply charging poor people with personal failure helps us avoid examining why the link between teen motherhood and poverty is so strong, which I discuss in the next chapter.³¹

In order to understand teen sex, we need to consider the role that adults play. Males points out in *Scapegoat Generation* that adult men ages nineteen to twenty-four are far more likely than teen boys to father children born to teenage girls, and adult men, not teenage boys, are most responsible for spreading HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) to girls.³²

This reality highlights the inadequacy of the term *teenage sex*. We overlook the role adults, particularly adult men, play in teen pregnancy and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Adult men are responsible for six out of ten births to girls eighteen and younger. Also, because the HIV infection rate for teen girls is double the rate of teen boys, it is unlikely that teen boys are responsible for this disparity.³³

In a way, our society enables adult sexual involvement with teens. South Carolina's age of consent is just fourteen for girls, but sixteen for boys. If this seems very young, English common law, on which American laws are based, originally set the age of consent as young as

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ten. In most states, the age of sexual consent is now sixteen. Some states, like South Carolina, even have separate ages for males and females, making it legal for an adult to have sex with a sixteen-year-old girl but not a boy of the same age. In these states teens cannot vote or purchase alcohol, but adults can have sex with them without legal recourse. Now passing laws certainly does not make people have sex or not, but it tells us about what age lawmakers think that it is okay for adults to engage in sex with teen girls. The numbers indicate that adults are very much a part of the "teenage" sex equation.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we overlook the role of sexual abuse in the discussion about teens and sex. For many young people, sex is not a choice they have made, but was forced upon them. A recent CDC study found that 18 percent of women who had sex before the age of fifteen considered the experience "unwanted"; just 9 percent of males did. Women who had sex before the age of twenty were most likely to regard the experience as unwanted if their partner was at least three years older.³⁴

Adolescents who have been sexually abused as children are also far more likely to engage in riskier sexual practices in the future. As researchers Debra Boyer and David Fine found in their comprehensive study of teens who became pregnant, 55 percent of their respondents had been molested, and 44 percent had been raped prior to their pregnancy. The authors noted that "sexually victimized teenagers began intercourse a year earlier, were more likely to use drugs and alcohol and were less likely to practice contraception."³⁵ Yet much of our research on sex continues to focus on popular culture, ignoring the complex roles politics, race, and poverty play in the teen-sex equation.

Studying Sex: Media Research Makes News

In addition to violence, American media-effects researchers continually attempt to find negative connections between teen's sexual behavior and media. Using correlation studies, which measure relationships

but cannot assess cause and effect, several studies have claimed that watching sexual content leads to actual sex by teens.³⁶

One very interesting study, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, interviewed nearly eighteen hundred young people aged twelve through seventeen about their sexual experiences, television viewing, and other factors that may lead to earlier sexual behavior. They then reinterviewed them one year later to see what factors were most associated with sexual advancement. While they found that watching sexual situations on television is associated with more sexual behavior, other important factors, like age, parents' education, and scoring high on a "sensation-seeking" scale, were actually stronger factors in predicting sexual behavior.

Other important predictors, including having many older friends and engaging in other risky behaviors, are included in the analysis, but the authors don't discuss these issues in their recommendations. The authors acknowledge that they cannot really assess cause and effect here; teens thinking about having sex may be more likely to watch sexual situations on television. Nonetheless, they conclude that reducing sexual content on television would delay teen sex.³⁷

Researchers' continued focus on television as the main problem, even when their own research offers more important findings, reinforces the public's belief that television and media are the keys to change. Likewise, the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) has conducted several studies of sex on television, mostly looking for reasons to attribute risky and dangerous teen sexual behavior to popular culture. Examination of studies like these reveals our tendency to underestimate social structure and overstate the power of popular culture.

While the authors of the most recent KFF study, published in 2005, note the importance of peers, parents, and schools in sexual socialization, television is the main focus of their study. Researchers analyzed more than a thousand television programs, counting incidents they deemed sexual in nature.³⁸ By using content analysis, researchers de-

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termined the meaning of sexual messages of these programs, yet they interviewed no young people to ascertain how teens actually interpret these messages. This method isolates meaning from the context of both the program and the audience, a problem the researchers don't seem to be worried about.

Additionally, this study broadly defines sexual messages to include seductive gestures, flirting, alluding to sex, touching, kissing, and implication of intercourse. When the incidents get boiled down into statistics, hugs and handholding can appear the same as more explicit representations of sex. Their biggest finding: 70 percent of the shows they included in the 2005 study had some form of "sexual" content, up from 64 percent in 2002 and 56 percent in 1998.³⁹

The authors surmise that "televised portrayals of intercourse play a role in socializing young viewers to the patterns of behavior that are normative in our culture."⁴⁰ But the study never tests its assumptions about youth empirically in this or their previous studies. The researchers seem to presume that young viewers will be heavily influenced by television, completely negating young people's ability to interpret media images on their own or the role of other factors in deciding whether to have sex.⁴¹ The authors note that media are an important source of information about sex for teens, but media sources are not where young people get most of their knowledge. Within their 2001 report, the authors noted that only 23 percent of teens say they learn "a lot" about pregnancy and birth control from television, while 40 percent have "gotten ideas on how to talk to their boyfriend or girlfriend about sexual issues" from media.⁴²

In the third paragraph of the 2001 KFF report, the authors note almost as an aside that many teens feel they do not get enough information about sex from parents or teachers. Rather than focusing on this point, they continue to study the media issue. Adults should focus on enriching, rather than restricting, young people's knowledge about sex and start by dealing with what they do know. Media get flak for

leaking what we like to think of as adult information, which we are either too embarrassed or unwilling to share ourselves.

The authors of the 2005 study cite the risky sexual behaviors some adolescents engage in to support the need for their research. Although they preface their findings by acknowledging that teen pregnancy has declined, they go on to emphasize negative behaviors: the percentage who do get pregnant (including young adults eighteen and nineteen) or who contract sexually transmitted diseases.

As I noted in the previous section, most sexually active teens reported using condoms, yet the authors of the KFF report chose to invert these statistics to tell the negative story, focusing on how many teens did *not* use a condom during their last sexual encounter. Dangerous behavior is of course important to examine, but perhaps the biggest problem here is that we focus on adolescent risk and fail to put it in the context of adult behavior. For instance, the 2006 General Social Survey found that 23 percent of adults used condoms during their last sexual encounters.⁴³ By ignoring adults within the media-sex panic, we pathologize teen behavior even if it is consistent with (or better than) that of adults.⁴⁴

In sum, this study found that sexual content (as the researchers define it) on television rose from a similar study three years before, but so what? We are left with no information about how young people actually interpret and make sense of these programs. It is important that we find out how young people interpret sexual images in advertising, music, and television in their context, and in their own words. If we are so concerned about teen sexuality, we need to talk with them, not just about them, to learn more.

A British study did just that, yet received none of the media attention the KFF study did. "Talking Dirty: Children, Sexual Knowledge, and Television" critically examined how children make sense of representations of sexuality and romance on television.⁴⁵ Yes, initiating conversations about sex with children is difficult; it is considered

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morally questionable in some situations. Likewise, providing sex education in schools is frequently the subject of fierce debate. Maybe that's why studies conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation focus only on television. Talking about sex is considered indecent where children are concerned, enabling us to maintain the illusion that they can be separated from the rest of the world.

No doubt, this is why the British authors chose a provocative title for their study, which takes a rather different perspective on media and young people than the KFF study. "Talking Dirty: Children, Sexual Knowledge, and Television" was published in the journal *Childhood* in the spring of 1999 with no American fanfare. Not surprising, considering that the authors challenge our assumptions about childhood and sexuality at every turn.

The authors critique the belief that television is responsible for the loss of childhood innocence and argue it is best to find out what children think rather than continue to focus on what adults wish they didn't know. The researchers sought to find out how the children they studied made sense of the programs they watched and how they understood the content in the context of their own lives. Unlike the KFF study, which presumed heavy influence, these researchers were interested in how children negotiated their social roles as children dealing with a subject that is regarded as off-limits for them. The research team sought to find out what the children knew and how they made sense of it on their own terms, avoiding value judgments in the process.

Second, in contrast with traditional views that we need to pay attention only to teenagers when it comes to sex, these researchers talked with six-, seven-, ten-, and eleven-year-olds in small groups, asking them to talk about what programs they liked and disliked. Children were then asked to sort a list of program titles into categories, which enabled researchers to see how the children defined adult content. They then compared these shows with programs that the kids considered appropriate for children, teens, or general audiences. The researchers

never brought up the topic of sex themselves, but the children occasionally did when defining what made a program "for adults."

Researchers found that although most children felt that programs with romantic themes were "adult" shows (like daytime talk and dating shows), the ten- and eleven-year-olds were quite familiar with these programs and others like them. Kids reported that adult shows were appealing because they knew that they were supposed to be off-limits. Gender was also a factor here: younger boys were likely to deny any interest in shows with kissing or romantic themes; that was "girl stuff," which they wanted no part of. The authors also observed that children feigned shock or disgust about romantic scenes, as the kids properly performed the role of children, supposedly ignorant about all things romantic or sexual.

Rather than advance the narrow view that sexual content does something *to* children, the researchers also found that children use talk about sex in popular culture to build peer connections and to make sense of sexuality from a safe distance. Children use adult themes from television to try to demonstrate adult-level competence and knowledge. The researchers concluded that neither television nor audiences "hold anything approaching absolute power. Television obviously makes available particular representations and identities. . . . In defining and debating the meanings of television, readers also claim and construct identities of their own."⁴⁶ Young people may borrow ideas from popular culture as part of an interactive negotiation process where children seek acceptance and status from their peers. Although popular culture is an important part of this undertaking, it is not the all-powerful force many adults fear.

Several American studies also demonstrate the importance of sexuality within elementary and middle school children's peer groups. For instance, sociologists Patricia Adler and Peter Adler studied children's peer groups for eight years and concluded that we need to understand the process of how preadolescents navigate peer cultures. Rather than

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simply negative sources of peer pressure, the Adlers found that children negotiate individual identities while striving to maintain status among peers, and sexual themes are interwoven into this process. Adults somehow fail to acknowledge (or remember) that curiosity about sexuality is a big part of growing up.⁴⁷

Similarly, in her study of elementary school students, sociologist Barrie Thorne discusses how games like "kiss and chase" demonstrate that children actively construct meanings of heterosexuality through play.⁴⁸ We might deem this sort of behavior innocent child's play, but that would ignore how children themselves define their experiences. How many of us played chasing games like this, where girls and boys excitedly try to catch and kiss each other? Thorne details how children's play incorporates heterosexual meanings into everyday occurrences and shapes male-female interactions. She found that kids accused peers of "liking" a student of the other sex in order to police gender boundaries and sanction crossover behavior from time to time. Think of how popular rhymes ("Susie and Bobby sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G") among girls highlight the importance of romantic connections within children's games.

Obviously, as kids get older, sexual content takes on different meanings. In a study of middle school students, researchers found that boys regularly recounted sexually explicit scenes from movies for their peers in order for the storyteller to solidify his rank in the group.⁴⁹ The boys in this study used discussions of movies to reinforce their perspective of women, learning to at least appear to sexually objectify them in order to avoid rejection by their peers. For many boys, reinforcing male dominance and objectifying women lead to popularity.

This example demonstrates that young people are not simply influenced by popular culture; they negotiate meaning within the context of their friends and within the larger structure of social power. There *is* a problem when boys must adopt very narrow versions of masculinity to fit in with one another. But if we were to somehow totally

succeed in keeping children away from these sorts of films, or even do away with all such representations of sexuality in popular culture, we will have done nothing to address gender inequality, which is at the root of their status-seeking behavior.

The media did not initiate women's objectification, but we see it most clearly there. Popular culture is often where we see reflections of power and inequality. It is naive to think that the next generation reproduces this shallow form of sexuality *only* because they see it in movies or on TV. They are part of a society where gender inequality is replicated in many social institutions, including education, religion, government, and the workforce. Our popular culture shows us some of the ugly realities of our society but is not where these realities originate.

In my own research with high school students, I found that teens discuss sexuality in media differently depending on the context: in groups composed of mostly males, they collectively celebrated sexual images of women in advertising, while mainly female groups tended to challenge the objectification of women.⁵⁰ One male student in my study (whom I'll call Scott) stood out the most. Scott appeared to be sixteen, slender, and perhaps the class intellectual. After viewing an Evian commercial with a young, attractive woman swimming in a pool, Scott eagerly announced that he wanted to "buy this girl."

In truth, it seemed his intention was to fit in with his more athletic male peers than it was to demean women. As his male classmates laughed, he continued, saying, "I just want to go buy Evian with that girl swimming in it . . . I just like her commercial!" His peers met Scott's comments with supportive amusement. Interestingly, boys in predominantly female groups tended to agree with their female classmates that the ad's use of a scantily clad woman offended them. The teens I studied clearly demonstrate how the meaning of popular culture is created collectively in the context of peer culture, a negotiation process that goes way beyond simple cause and effect.

As this example shows, sexuality in order to be more than only criticizing it, creating more opportunities for women is a way to address gender. Instead of blaming the media and then asking how we can make sense of what we see. Seeing all these images and interpreting them by...

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As this example demonstrates, sometimes young people talk about sexuality in order to bolster their status among their friends. Rather than only criticize the quantity of sexual images in the media, providing more opportunities for young people to critically discuss these images is a way to better understand underlying beliefs about sex and gender. Instead of young people simply learning about sex in the media and then acting on what they watch, preteens and teens try to make sense of what they see in the context of their other experiences. Seeing all these images of sex does not necessarily mean that children interpret them by having sexual intercourse.

Coming to terms with sexuality in popular culture and their lives is a major part of adolescence and preadolescence as well. While many adults are concerned that kids are becoming sexually aware too early, we cannot place all of the blame on media. Although this is tempting, we must realize that sexuality is not just a consequence of media culture, but also a part of growing up.

The Social Construction of Sex and Gender

Highly sexualized imagery in popular culture matters, but reductive cause-effect, monkey-see/monkey-do arguments minimize its importance. People may not imitate media culture to the degree that many fear, but this doesn't mean that media content is irrelevant.

Instead, popular culture can help us understand the dynamic way in which both sex and gender are socially constructed. It is difficult to think of sexuality as anything but personal and individual, but the way we *understand* sex is socially constructed. We are not merely socialized by media messages as much as they reflect ongoing struggles surrounding the meanings of sex and gender, meanings that are often contested and reflect broader issues of social change. Sexuality is a central site where struggles over social power take place.⁵¹ So while sexuality is personal, the uses and meanings attached to the practice

are decidedly social and linked with broader systems of power, gender, race, and class.

Communications scholar Susan J. Douglas describes how highly sexualized images of women in media are a form of "enlightened sexism," reflecting a backlash against women's improved social status within the past half century. She argues, "Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women."⁵²

When we think about highly sexualized media content through a structural framework, we can see that such imagery is about more than just luring people to become sexually active young—which statistically we can see isn't happening. Instead, a highly sexualized media culture is one that can reinforce a narrow version of femininity, one that still emphasizes women's sexual appeal as central to her value. Not only do these images serve as a form of resistance to changes in the gender order, but by insisting on an ongoing quest to become and remain "hot," there are also countless products that can be sold. Our commercially based media require personal dissatisfaction to move merchandise.

Not only do media images reflect an ongoing power struggle, but debates about sex do as well. Controlling information about sex has historically been used in order to maintain dominance over others. Withholding knowledge about birth control keeps many women in developing countries in poverty, and withholding information about sex from children is a way to maintain adult authority.

An ongoing and unresolved political debate, whether and when children should have comprehensive information about sex, reflects this conflict. And whereas it may seem like keeping information from kids protects them, it can be more dangerous than we might think. As several studies have found, abstinence-only education does not effec-

tively delay teenagers from becoming sexually active, and is likely to use coercion to get them to have sex. It also increases the risk of contracting STDs and HIV, and increases the risk of sexual health problems and greater risk of pregnancy.

Second, mainstream media often promote a benign fantasy of sexual knowledge and power. Professor Valerie Salzman argues that a child with knowledge of sex is robbed of his or her innocence. She argues that the sexual system from sexual childhood innocence to adulthood is a process of defining children up for the world. She argues that our cultural construction of sex is a process of defining children up for the world.

Virginity has been a central female value on the one hand, and a source of fantasies in the press on the other. It has increased desirability of women's passivity and reinforced patriarchal power. Virginity has been used as a marker of adulthood and a way to mark their personal choices.

In fact, the mainstream media often promote teenage *girls*. High school girls and women are often the focus of the social construction of sex. The social construction of sex is a process of policing female sexuality. The turn of the twentieth century was a time of pleasure from sex.

are decidedly social and linked with broader systems of power, gender, race, and class.

Communications scholar Susan J. Douglas describes how highly sexualized images of women in media are a form of "enlightened sexism," reflecting a backlash against women's improved social status within the past half century. She argues, "Enlightened sexism is a response, deliberate or not, to the threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism—indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved—so now it's okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women."⁵²

When we think about highly sexualized media content through a structural framework, we can see that such imagery is about more than just luring people to become sexually active young—which statistically we can see isn't happening. Instead, a highly sexualized media culture is one that can reinforce a narrow version of femininity, one that still emphasizes women's sexual appeal as central to her value. Not only do these images serve as a form of resistance to changes in the gender order, but by insisting on an ongoing quest to become and remain "hot," there are also countless products that can be sold. Our commercially based media require personal dissatisfaction to move merchandise.

Not only do media images reflect an ongoing power struggle, but debates about sex do as well. Controlling information about sex has historically been used in order to maintain dominance over others. Withholding knowledge about birth control keeps many women in developing countries in poverty, and withholding information about sex from children is a way to maintain adult authority.

An ongoing and unresolved political debate, whether and when children should have comprehensive information about sex, reflects this conflict. And whereas it may seem like keeping information from kids protects them, it can be more dangerous than we might think. As several studies have found, abstinence-only education does not effec-

tively delay teen sexual onset. Teens who take virginity pledges are less likely to use condoms when they do have sex and are just as likely to contract STDs as their peers.⁵³ By trying to keep information about sexual health from young people, adults are actually putting them at greater risk.

Second, maintaining the myth of childhood innocence is not simply a benign fantasy; it can be a dangerous one. Sexually curious or sexually knowledgeable kids are defined as lesser children, or, as media studies professor Valerie Walkerdine put it, "virgins who might be whores." A child with knowledge of sex is considered damaged, spoiled, and robbed of his or her childhood, when in fact their knowledge may stem from sexual abuse.⁵⁴ Most important, clinging to the notion of childhood innocence serves to further entice those who exploit children. Defining children as pure and powerless ironically sets some children up for abuse. Abusers are often titillated by innocence, which our cultural construction of childhood unconsciously supports.⁵⁵

Virginity has served as a sexual commodity for centuries, increasing female value on the marriage market in the past and fueling male fantasies in the present. Innocence serves as a sexual marker denoting increased desirability, reflecting the traditional gender order where women's passivity and lack of experience are prized and reproduce patriarchal power. In recent years female teen celebrities have seen their virginity used as part of a marketing strategy and their transition to adulthood marked by a highly sexualized turn. Rather than simply their personal choice, industry executives often promote this shift.

In fact, the majority of concerns about teens and sex are really about teenage *girls*. Historically, abstinence has been a female burden, with girls and women supposedly responsible for regulating male sexuality. The social control of women has been secured in recent history by policing female sexuality. Even within the confines of marriage, at the turn of the twentieth century femininity meant not taking too much pleasure from sex. Clinics provided treatment to women who suffered

from such unnatural urges. Authorities viewed women who enjoyed sex as deviant and considered them dangerous.

Even when women's desire ceased to be considered a medical problem, sexual gratification was defined as a socially undesirable quality, one that might reduce a woman's chances for marriage. This was of course a serious threat in a time when women's wages rarely enabled them to live independently. The need for male financial support, as well as the fear of unplanned pregnancy, socially and economically constrained women in the recent past.

The threat of rape has also historically been used to keep women from public spaces, supported by the practice of humiliating rape victims in court (and in the news media), which sometimes continues despite rape-shield laws. Women's sexuality has been a double-edged sword: a woman's worth has been tied to her appeal to men, yet rape has historically been blamed on women for being too appealing. The threat of sexual violence, even if not carried out, serves to limit women's movement and freedom.

In recent decades the widespread availability of birth control and declines in the wage gap between men and women have created more personal freedom for women. But the old sexual double standards, that male sexuality is natural and female sexuality is a threat, are still alive in our fears about teens and sex. Concerns about teens' sexual activity reflect shifts in the gender order: attempts to control teen sexuality tend to leave male sexuality out of the conversation. A *New York Times* article even suggested that earlier onset of puberty for girls might be due to overstimulation from sex in media.⁵⁶ Interestingly, this hypothesis would not apply to boys, since their physical maturation has remained relatively stable over the past century. So why is female sexuality so frightening?

Teenage girls are considered a threat when they seek to become more than just sexual objects—when they act as sexual agents, we worry. American culture still promotes the idea that only girls hold

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the keys to chastity, but at the same time they are held up as the ideal form of female desire. We see this representation of teenage girls in many forms of popular culture, but it certainly does not originate there: its history lies in our tendency to value women who are young and sexually available for men. Rather than only blaming media culture for this representation of teenage girls, we need to take a closer look at the nature of power, sex, and gender in contemporary American society. Underneath fears of teens having sex are concerns about the changing meaning of gender.

Girls are not the only objects of concern: historically, the sexual and reproductive practices of disempowered groups like immigrants, racial ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and the poor have been subject to greater surveillance and control. When groups are considered a danger to themselves or to others, restricting their freedom seems justifiable. We rationalize social control of young people based on the few who are held up as promiscuous bad examples, insisting that these teens prove most adolescents are incapable of making responsible decisions or are too easily influenced by media.

Historically, fears that the population is becoming less Protestant and less white have led to attempts to control the reproduction of immigrant and nonwhite groups. This has been accomplished by policies promoting sterilization for the poor and racial and ethnic minorities, removing girls from their families if juvenile courts believed they were likely to engage in sex, and, more recently, demonizing mothers of color.⁵⁷ Due to this fear, during the early part of the twentieth century white women's pregnancies were encouraged, and their access to birth control and abortion was restricted. The sexuality of groups perceived to be a threat is labeled dangerous and serves to legitimate public policies that restrict members' behavior.

Many African American men were lynched by whites allegedly protecting white women's virtue; black male sexuality came to be defined as a threat to the racial order. States enacted miscegenation laws

for much the same reason—to prevent a union of a nonwhite man and a white woman—but they were certainly not enforced when slave owners fathered the children of black slave women. This double standard reveals how the dominant group maintains power by controlling the sexuality of others. Concerns about promiscuity, pregnancy, and disease have served as a way for powerful groups to assert control over those whom they feel threatened by, whether the threat is real or imagined.

Sex and Popular Culture

Societal shifts spurred by economic changes have altered American life, which has made it more difficult to monitor teens. Popular culture did not create these changes, nor is it the key to changing young people's behavior, which is not reflective of the sexually laden media content we so often see. As with violence, we have seen a decline in teen sexual activity in recent years.

Sex on TV, in movies, and online understandably makes many parents uncomfortable and embarrassed. Representations of sex in media expose the reality that childhood does not and cannot exist in a separate sphere from adulthood.

Ironically, we use sex as the ultimate dividing line between childhood and adulthood, the line in the sand that adults try so hard to maintain and young people try so hard to cross. We define sex as a ticket to adulthood, so we should not be surprised when teens do, too. Sex in popular culture reminds us that we cannot sustain the lengthened version of childhood we have idealized since the mid-twentieth century. Popular culture is an easy target, providing a never-ending stream of disturbing images, but it is not the root cause of the changes in the attitudes and practice of sexuality in the twenty-first century.

As we have seen, changes throughout the twentieth century provided young people with the means to become more independent from their parents, rendering their behavior far harder to control. We

often associate change with cultural shifts are difficult to make nature visible and alive.

That said, we should not ignore media. They provide a platform to launch greater exploration of race and gender.

Notes

1. Bella English, "The C1."
2. Kathleen Kelleher, "Source of Sex Education: 'Grappling with Teen Sex' MTV Show Promotes Teen Pregnancy," January 11, 2011, <http://www.foxnews.com/story>; Marla Matzer, "Race and Gender," N1.
3. Deborah M. Roffman, "The Rules Have Changed for Kids the Rules Have Changed."
4. Ibid.
5. See discussion in Charles L. McAleer, *Children and Television*.
6. Bill Albert, "With Ourselves: Adults About Teen Pregnancy," 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/story>.
7. Lyn Gorman and David, *A Historical Introduction*, 36.
8. Motion Picture Production Code, http://www.filmcommission.org/library/USA_-_Hays_code.
9. Henry Jenkins, "The Cultural Revolution," in *The Children's Cultural Revolution*.
10. Stephanie Coontz, *Love Conquered Marriage*.
11. For further discussion of recent American childhood, see Jenkins, 199.
12. Beth L. Bailey, *From Revolution to Reaction: Sex, Gender, and Race in America*.

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As we have seen, changes throughout the twentieth century provided young people with the means to become more independent from their parents, rendering their behavior far harder to control. We

often associate changes in sexual behavior with changes in media. Historical shifts are difficult to see and understand, while media are by nature visible and always trying to grab our attention.

That said, we should not ignore representations of sexuality in media. They provide useful clues about power and privilege and can launch greater exploration of contested meanings of both sexuality and gender.

Notes

1. Bella English, "The Disappearing Teen Years," *Boston Globe*, March 12, 2005, C1.
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6. Bill Albert, "With One Voice 2012: Highlights from a Survey of Teens and Adults About Teen Pregnancy and Related Issues," National Campaign to End Teen Pregnancy, 2012, <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/briefly-wov-2012-highlights.pdf>.
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9. Henry Jenkins, "The Sensuous Child: Benjamin Spock and the Sexual Revolution," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, edited by Jenkins, 209.
10. Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy; or, How Love Conquered Marriage*.
11. For further discussion, see Martha Wolfenstein, "Fun Morality: An Analysis of Recent American Child-Training Literature," in *The Children's Culture Reader*, edited by Jenkins, 199.
12. Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*.