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1

Introduction

Children today are growing up much too soon – or so we are frequently told. They are being deprived of their childhood. Their essential innocence has been lost. Indeed, some would say that childhood itself is effectively being destroyed. For many people, perhaps the most troubling aspect of this phenomenon is to do with sex. Young people seem to be maturing physically – and showing an interest in sex – at an ever-earlier age. Even quite young children appear to adults to be alarmingly knowledgeable about the intimate details of sexual behaviour. Children, it is argued, are being prematurely ‘sexualised’.

There is a certain amount of evidence for these claims, at least as regards the sexual behaviour of teenagers. The age at which young people first experience sexual intercourse has steadily fallen over the past few decades; while the number of young people – particularly girls – who are sexually active has risen significantly (Moore and Rosenthal 1993). Britain has the highest rate of teenage and unplanned pregnancies in Europe, which despite a fall in the early 1990s have now begun to increase again. So too have sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and particularly amongst the heterosexual population. In fact, many of these developments began in the 1950s rather than, as is often thought, in the ‘permissive’ 1960s; although they are now widely seen to represent a form of social crisis (Measor *et al.* 2000). Much of the blame for this supposed loosening of sexual boundaries and the subsequent ‘loss’ of children’s innocence has been placed on the media, and on consumer culture more broadly. These arguments are traditionally the territory of right-wing moralists. It is perhaps not surprising to find a conservative newspaper like the *Daily Mail* fulminating about the media’s ‘sick conspiracy to destroy childhood’, as ten-year-olds are apparently ‘bombarded on all sides by pre-teen make-up, clinging

clothes and magazines encouraging them to be Lolitas' (24.7.02). Likewise, its columnist Peter Hitchens (2002: 49) paints a picture of a culture saturated and deprived by uncontrollable sexuality, most of it derived from the media:

It is very hard to be innocent in modern Britain. Advertising on television, on posters and on the radio, is drenched in sexual innuendo. Television programmes rely almost entirely on sex and violence to raise their drooping audience figures. The playgrounds of primary schools echo with sexual taunts and jibes. Rock music, which is now almost compulsory in the lives of even the youngest, is full of sexual expression and desire.

Yet this image of childhood innocence debauched by media and consumer culture also appeals to more liberal commentators. Radio presenter Jenni Murray, writing in the *Mail* (30.5.02), recalls memories of her own childhood in the 1950s – 'I devoured *Bunty*. My chums and I read every word and then sat for hours in the bedroom discussing the daring deeds of the Four Marys' – and contrasts this with the 'obsession with sex and shallow celebrity' and the 'rampant consumerism' of contemporary girls' magazines. Here again, the media are seen to be guilty of a 'theft of childhood'. Meanwhile, Jasmin Alibhai-Brown of the *Independent* (18.3.02) laments her 'innocent' daughter's impending corruption at the hands of a 'sordid popular culture'. 'Powerful, immoral people', she argues, will 'manipulate her desires and appetites', pressurising her to transform herself into a 'sex machine'. According to Alibhai-Brown,

... the next campaign for British feminists needs to [be] directed at those advertisers, broadcasters, celebrity pedlars, newspapers, magazines, pop stars and others who have made this carnal hell for our young ones, and who still insist that this is nothing at all to do with them.

Fewer commentators seem prepared to argue that this development is in any way a positive thing. Some point to the levels of ignorance about sexual matters among the young, and to the inadequacy of formal sex education; yet few seem prepared to justify the availability of sexual information in the media on the grounds that it represents a greater degree of openness. Even liberationists like the gay activist Peter Tatchell, who argue for the importance of 'honesty' about sexual

matters and advocate 'sexual rights' for young people, tend to dismiss the 'half-baked and sensationalist' information which they perceive in the media (2002: 70).

Childhood in peril?

In some respects, of course, this is an old issue. In 2002, Channel Four screened a series excavating the history of sex on television, which clearly showed how the same debates and anxieties have surfaced time and again in the history of this medium – even if what counts as 'explicit' representation has changed markedly over time. The concerns provoked by the sexual gyrations of pop stars in the 1950s – as in Elvis Presley's celebrated appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* – or by the steamy intimacies of television dramas like *Bouquet of Barbed Wire* in the 1970s may now appear merely quaint. Yet the arguments that were made then about their corrupting influence on children, and about their contribution to a more general moral decline, are very similar to those that continue to be made today. And of course, similar concerns were raised in relation to much older media. In the late 1920s, early research on the effects of the silent movies on American youth partly focused on the influence of sexual content, in the form of stars such as Greta Garbo and Rudolph Valentino – although this aspect of the research was suppressed at the time (Jowett *et al.* 1996). As Judith Levine (2002) points out, the notion that young minds are particularly vulnerable to influence in this respect is one of the founding principles of obscenity law; and she quotes a judgment about an anticlerical pamphlet which was banned in 1868 on the grounds that it might stimulate 'thoughts of a most impure and libidinous character' among the young.

Nevertheless, this debate about the dangers of sexual content in the media seems to have taken on a new urgency in recent years. The advent of new media technologies – video, cable, satellite and of course the internet – has made it increasingly difficult to prevent young people from gaining access to sexually explicit material. Yet the regulation of the media has also become politically problematic. According to many social theorists, we now live in more pluralistic, secular societies, in which there is no longer a clearly defined consensus on moral issues. The media themselves have also increasingly sought to address more diverse, fragmented 'taste communities'; and there is a growing political commitment to the principle of 'free speech' (Thompson and Sharma 1998). Whether we see these changes as evidence of a greater

openness or as symptomatic of the rise of moral depravity, it is hard to deny that sexual material is now more widely available than it was in the past – perhaps particularly to children.

Yet what difference does this make? The recurrent claim that children are being ‘sexualised’ at the hands of the media obviously implies that they were not sexual in the past, and have now become so. Likewise, the view that children’s relation to sexuality is being ‘commodified’ or ‘commercialised’ also seems to presume that there was an earlier time in which childhood was somehow free from commercial influences. As ever, we are encouraged to look back to a golden age of innocence, well before the media led us all to ‘carnal hell’.

This narrative of decline is one which many historians of childhood would certainly dispute: the lives of children, even as recently as the nineteenth century, were far from insulated from the influence of sexuality, or indeed from the economy (e.g. Cunningham 1995; Hendrick 1997). The notion of childhood as an asexual condition was decisively exploded by the work of Sigmund Freud in the early years of the twentieth century. Yet the public visibility of sexuality in the modern media clearly undermines the separation between children and adults on which our modern conception of childhood is ultimately based. Children’s sexuality – or their knowledge of sexuality – may be becoming visible to adults in a way that it was not in the past, or at least in the recent past. It is not so much that children have suddenly become sexual, more that adults are now being forced to recognise this fact.

As in many other areas, the notion of childhood comes to be used here as the vehicle for much broader concerns about the social order. As Philip Jenkins (1992) has argued, children are often used in a ‘politics of substitution’ which has been practised by moral entrepreneurs of both Left and Right. In a climate of growing uncertainty, invoking fears about children provides a powerful means of commanding public attention and support: campaigns against homosexuality are redefined as campaigns against paedophiles; campaigns against pornography become campaigns against child pornography; and campaigns against immorality and Satanism become campaigns against ritualistic child abuse. Those who have the temerity to doubt claims about the epidemic proportions of such phenomena can therefore easily be stigmatised as hostile to children. Thus, children’s access to sexual knowledge is often regarded as part of a more general permissiveness, equated with a rise in violence, drug use and criminal activity amongst the young. From this perspective, sexual knowledge places children in danger; but it also makes them potentially dangerous.

To some extent, it is possible to distinguish here between broadly 'conservative' and 'liberal' perspectives. Thus, conservatives hold sexual permissiveness partly responsible for what they perceive as social or moral decline; while liberals argue that sexual repression leads to a whole range of social ills. Yet these views overlap in complex ways with different perspectives on childhood. On the one hand, children's awareness of sexuality can be seen as a healthy, natural phenomenon, which is distinguished from some of the more distorted or corrupted conceptions of adults. On the other, it can also be viewed as precocious or unnatural; and the acquisition of sexual knowledge can be seen to weaken the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, which are apparently designed to protect children.

Likewise, the debate about children's exposure to representations of sexuality in the media seems equally polarised. On one side, there are those who continue to argue that children should not be prematurely introduced to ideas about sex and sexuality, and consequently call for greater censorship and control. On the other are those who claim that children have a right to see and read things which may deal with their emotional needs and concerns, including those relating to sexuality. Yet both 'sides' in this debate invoke ideas about the 'natural' form of sexuality, and about children's inherent needs or interests; and in doing so, they inevitably define them in particular ways. While they may purport to speak on behalf of children, they also construct 'the child' in ways that can be seen to reflect broader social and political motivations.

Cause for concern?

Despite the range of views expressed in these debates, there appears to be some consensus about the idea that there is more sex in the media, and that it is more 'explicit' than it used to be. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of television. In the UK, both of the most recent newcomers to terrestrial TV have attracted criticism on these grounds. In its early days, Channel Four became notorious among more conservative critics for its explicit representations of sexual activity; and, more recently, Channel Five has been censured for screening soft pornography in late-night slots. It is often argued that sexual references and representations have become more frequent in mainstream programming – both before and after the 9 p.m. 'watershed' for family viewing.

But to what extent is this impression justified? Studies conducted in the United States suggest that there is indeed an increasing amount of sexual material on television there – although these studies rarely include systematic comparisons over more than a few years. One particular problem here is that researchers do not use a common set of definitions, categories or procedures. Only in recent years, in the work of Dale Kunkel and his colleagues (1999; 2001) have researchers begun to develop a more consistent approach. The most recent of these studies found that references to sex had increased quite significantly over a two-year period, and that sexual behaviour was either shown or discussed in around two-thirds of programmes. There is also some evidence that the range of sexual behaviours depicted or referred to has become more diverse in recent years (Greenberg and Busselle 1996). Nevertheless, talk about sex is more common than actual portrayals, and visual representations remain relatively rare.

US television is often considered to be less sexually explicit than British television, so it may be surprising to find that research in the UK has not reached similar conclusions. A report produced for the Broadcasting Standards Commission in 1999 found that less than one in five terrestrial programmes showed sexual behaviour, and just over one third contained verbal references, the large majority of which were fairly mild. Furthermore, there was no consistent increase in such material, at least over the 1990s. The report concluded that there was ‘no actual evidence to support public perception of increased sexual activity’ on British television (BSC 1999). The contrast between these findings and those of the US studies is quite striking; and while they may reflect differences between British and American television, they also reflect different definitions of what ‘counts’ as sexual content (for more detailed discussion, see Bragg and Buckingham 2002).

Yet even if people believe there is more sex on television than there used to be, are they really bothered about this? To what extent do the anxieties expressed by newspaper columnists and politicians reflect more widespread public concern? In fact, research on public attitudes suggests that most people in Britain are fairly relaxed about this issue. When asked directly, a significant proportion of people agree that there is ‘too much’ sex on television – although higher percentages agree that there is too much in the print media. However, attitudes towards sexual content do appear to have become more permissive in recent years: fewer respondents claim to find sex scenes ‘offensive’ or embarrassing, and a significant majority feel that they are acceptable if included as part of a storyline. As many as 93 per cent of respondents

in one BSC survey expressed a preference for self-regulation, claiming that viewers could turn off or over if they were offended by what they saw (BSC 1999).

These findings are paralleled by a broader shift towards more 'liberal' or 'permissive' attitudes towards sex in real life, particularly in respect of gay and lesbian relationships. Over the past 50 years, patterns of sexual behaviour have become more diverse, and attitudes have become less prohibitive (Moore and Rosenthal 1993). Research by the regulatory bodies (e.g. Hanley 2000; Millwood Hargrave 1992; 1999) and broader social attitude surveys (Hill and Thomson 2000) have found that the British public is less and less likely to support a restrictive approach to public discussion of sexual issues. However, there are some important social differences here. In general, men and young people are less likely to say that sex is an issue of concern; while women and older people are more likely to say they are 'offended' by sex on screen, or that there is 'too much' of it. Many respondents in the BSC survey – particularly women – expressed concerns that television might 'legitimise' early sexual activity for children. However, they also agreed that by the age of 15 young people were able to make up their own minds about what they should watch, a point on which adolescents and many parents also agree (Buckingham 1996; Millwood Hargrave *et al.* 1996). In terms of age differences, this research also suggests that there is likely to be a 'cohort effect' – that is, that attitudes are likely to become more permissive in the future, especially as regards representations of gays and lesbians.

Of course, there are significant limits to the value of such opinion polls. There is evidence that, in the context of interviews, people tend to 'perform' responses that are deemed appropriate for their age and gender: responses given in anonymous questionnaires tend to be more liberal (Barnett and Thomson 1996). Furthermore, there is very little understanding of the relationship between general attitudes (as measured by polls) and the specific decisions that parents (or indeed children) may make about the material they encounter. (This research is discussed more fully in Braggy and Buckingham, 2002.)

Yet despite the limitations of such research, the overall picture is fairly clear. People certainly believe that there is more sex in the media than there used to be; and yet public attitudes towards sex, both in the media and in real life, have also become more permissive over the years. The unanswered question is to do with the relationship between these things. To what extent are more liberal attitudes caused or reflected by the media – or are there other factors that are producing

both sets of changes? Is the perceived increase in the presence of sex in the media a result of pressures towards commercialisation, and the search for ratings? Is it a response to changes in sexual behaviour, or simply in attitudes towards that behaviour?

Sorting out the issues

To some extent, this debate reflects an ongoing concern about propriety or decency – about what should or should not be shown or discussed in public. However, it also reflects assumptions about the effects of the media, particularly as regards children. When it comes to sex in the media, children are learning about many things which (we assume) they have not experienced in real life – things about which they may be intensely curious. And for this reason, they are often deemed to be particularly at risk of negative influences.

Yet there is often considerable confusion here about the nature of the material that apparently provokes such concern; and about the kinds of effects that it may produce. Sexual material on mainstream television in Britain, for example, continues to be subject to the restriction of the watershed; although verbal references to sex frequently occur in early evening soap operas and situation comedies, and indeed in daytime talk shows. Yet, as we have seen, talk about sex is more common than visual depictions; and the large majority of visual depictions show precursory activity (flirting and kissing) rather than actual intercourse. We need to make clear distinctions here, both in terms of the verbal and visual ‘explicitness’ of the material, and in terms of its accessibility to children. What is sexually ‘explicit’, or indeed how sexually arousing something is, clearly depends on the perspective of the beholder. Indeed, whether or not (or to what degree) something is perceived as ‘sexual’ in the first place depends on what the viewer already knows or understands – and this may be particularly true with verbal references. As we shall see, children often claim that they know it all already, but there is actually a fair amount that they do not understand – not just about the mechanics of the sexual act, but also about how sex is culturally signified.

Likewise, it is important to distinguish between the different types of effects or responses such material may generate. As in the case of media violence, one can usefully distinguish here between effects on behaviour, effects on emotions and effects on attitudes. Thus, sexual material in the media might be seen to influence sexual behaviour – and particularly in the case of young people, to encourage them to engage in sexual activity

before they are deemed to be sufficiently mature. Such material can also generate emotional responses – not just those of arousal, but also of embarrassment, shock and even disgust, especially in instances where the viewer has apparently encountered it without choosing to do so. In addition, such material might be seen to influence attitudes towards sexual activity and personal relationships in general – for example, by encouraging young people to believe that ‘promiscuity’ is acceptable – or alternatively, by performing an educational function, informing young people about risks or about how to interpret potentially sexual situations.

These kinds of distinctions are frequently blurred in public discussions of the kind we have described. As with the debate about media violence, invoking concerns about children, sex and the media seems to serve as a powerful means of mobilising more general anxieties about social and moral decline. Yet the broad assertion that there is ‘too much sex’ on TV may conflate a number of quite different issues and concerns: it all depends on what we mean by ‘sex’, and on what it is about it that makes it ‘too much’. If research in this field is to arrive at a more complex understanding of the issues, it will need to move beyond easy generalisations, both about sexual content and about its potential effects.

Previous research

So what does research tell us about these questions? As we have shown, analyses of media content provide some evidence about what is now available to young people. Ultimately, however, they tell us very little about the meaning of that content. Counting references to sexual behaviour on television can involve a considerable amount of interpretation. Innuendo (the form in which most sexual references are couched in comedies) is most obviously problematic in this respect, as is assessing dance movements or gestures in music videos in terms of whether they are ‘sexually suggestive’. Attempts to assess the ‘messages’ or themes carried by sexual content are bound to be even more problematic. For example, researchers have studied the extent to which sex on television takes place in marital or ‘committed’ relationships; the extent to which such stories mention the risks associated with sexual activity (such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unwanted pregnancy); and, more broadly, whether sex is presented in a ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ manner. Perhaps inevitably, the results of this research are somewhat equivocal – and, in some cases, quite contradictory (see Bragg and Buckingham 2002).

Furthermore, such research frequently assumes that analyses of content necessarily tell us how viewers or readers interpret that content. Yet the basis for such assumptions can be quite paradoxical. On the one hand, children are assumed to be able to recognise sexual meanings from passing references, or to infer that sex has taken place between characters even where it has been elided from the narrative. Yet on the other, they are frequently seen as powerless to resist the 'messages' to which they are 'exposed'. They are assumed automatically to believe what they see. Furthermore, this research often reflects a characteristic tension between the world as it is and the world as we might like it to be. On the one hand, the media are condemned for presenting a distorted, unrealistic picture of the world; yet on the other, producers are urged to provide 'positive images' of healthy or responsible behaviour that might offer productive moral lessons to the young.

Research about the effects of this kind of material has been equally problematic. In comparison with the enormous amount of research about the effects of media violence, there has been relatively little previous work in this field. There is a controversial body of research on the effects of pornography, although (for obvious reasons) this has been almost exclusively conducted with adults (see Donnerstein *et al.* 1987; Segal 1993). When it comes to children, and to 'mainstream' media such as television – which are our primary concern here – the research is comparatively limited. Nearly all the research has been conducted in the United States; and much of it has focused on what are seen to be 'negative' effects, such as promiscuity, premature sexual activity and unsafe sexual practices. Most of it seems to be based on the notion of 'role modelling' – that is, the idea that young people identify with 'glamorous' media characters or personalities, and are therefore led to copy their behaviour, or to develop what researchers deem to be 'unrealistic' expectations or attitudes about sexual behaviour in real life.

This research has been somewhat equivocal and inconclusive in its findings. In general, there seems to be little agreement about influences on behaviour – for instance about whether TV-viewing influences the age at which young people first have intercourse, or their propensity to engage in extra-marital sex (Wartella *et al.* 2000). Much of the research on attitudinal influences is correlational: for example, there are studies that purport to show a correlation between heavy TV-viewing and approval of non-marital sex or 'ambivalence towards marriage' – which seem to be implicitly regarded as negative (Bryant and Rockwell 1994;

Signorielli 1991). The possibility that the media might have positive effects in this respect remains largely unexplored.

In all, this work exemplifies several of the familiar problems of American media effects research. It focuses almost entirely on negative effects; it implicitly assumes that correlation is evidence of causality; it relies on simplistic assumptions about the relationships between media use, attitudes and behaviour; it fails to explain why effects arise in some cases and not others; it isolates media use from other social variables, or accounts for those variables in unduly simplistic ways; it does not adequately consider how people relate media to other sources of information; and it tends to oversimplify complex questions to do with the meanings and pleasures people derive from the media.

Furthermore, much of the research is based on quite problematic moral and cultural assumptions. For example, it often seems to equate different kinds of extra-marital sexual activity – adultery and pre-marital sex are effectively treated as equivalent; and it implicitly presumes that these things are fundamentally undesirable, as are (what it defines as) ‘premature’ or ‘promiscuous’ – or even ‘unnatural’ – sexual behaviour. These researchers also generally begin with a clear sense of the kinds of interventions they wish to see. Kunkel *et al.* (2001), for example, state explicitly that ‘abstinence or waiting for sex ... constitutes arguably the most effective strategy for reducing one’s risk for negative outcomes from sex’; Strasburger (2000) entitles a research article ‘Getting teenagers to say NO to sex, drugs and violence in the new millennium’; while Bryant and Rockwell (1994) suggest that the following warning label could be attached to prime-time television shows: ‘Teenagers beware. Watching too much television programming featuring premarital, extramarital, or nonmarital sex can be hazardous to your moral health.’

It is worth noting here that several of these studies have been funded, not by media organisations or by the government, but by foundations whose primary concern is with public health and welfare. The fundamental preoccupation here is with sex as a potentially harmful health phenomenon. In this context, content analysis offers a way of making cultural texts available for calculation and regulation. The generation of statistics on the sheer amount of sex viewed (for example, 1,900 to 2,400 incidents a year, depending on the young viewer’s orientation (Brown *et al.* 1990; Greenberg *et al.* 1993)) becomes a potential campaigning tool rather than an illuminating statement about media representations.

In these respects, the research seems to reflect the progressively more puritanical moral climate in the United States. Levine (2002) and Landry (2002) describe how sex education and public policy on sexual matters in the US have effectively been monopolised by the moral Right, in alliance with pro-censorship feminists. Public discussion of these issues has been increasingly driven by moral panics about paedophiles, crusades against abortion, and the legal pursuit of young people who have engaged in under-age sex. In this climate, it appears that the only kind of sex education that will receive federal government funding is what is called 'abstinence-based' sex education – despite the fact that there is very little proof of its effectiveness. And this approach also seems to define media education (or media literacy) as a kind of prophylactic: if the media cause premature sexual activity by 'glamorising' sex, teaching children to be critical media users will be the best contraceptive there is.

Starting points

As we have seen, such concerns have been raised in Britain too; but in general, these issues are framed in a rather different way in this country, despite our reputation for being 'uptight' about sexual matters. Similarly, our research also starts from a rather different point from that of the American effects researchers. We can summarise these differences briefly as follows.

First, we begin with different assumptions about media. We argue that media are more diverse and contradictory than simply a collection of 'negative' messages; and that we need to look more broadly at the changing ways in which 'sex' is culturally defined, not least in the context of an increasingly consumer-oriented society. We also begin with different assumptions about learning. We assume that the formation of sexual identity is a complex process – that it is unstable, insecure, always 'under construction'; and we argue that this cannot be explained by mechanistic notions of 'role modelling' or 'sexual socialisation'. We also see this process in social rather than merely psychological terms: we are concerned with how young people use and interpret media in the context of their interpersonal relationships, and how this relates to the ongoing construction of social identities. We also begin, finally, with different assumptions about children and childhood. We start from the view that young people are active users of media, rather than passive victims; and we attempt to pay close attention to the ways in which they interpret and make judgments about what they see.

As this implies, we draw on some diverse theoretical traditions and perspectives. Our approach derives primarily from Cultural Studies – and particularly from the qualitative research on media audiences that has developed over the past 20 years (see Buckingham 2000). However, we also draw on forms of ‘social constructionism’, deriving primarily from the work of Michel Foucault (e.g. 1984); on forms of discourse analysis developed within social psychology (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987); and on psychoanalytically informed theory (e.g. Butler 1990). These diverse – and potentially conflicting – theoretical perspectives surface at various points in the book. We have tried to use them in a heuristic way, in order to explain and interpret our data, rather than attempt to fit the data into a pre-determined theoretical position.

This also leads us to adopt a different methodology from that of effects research. Most of the data in this book is drawn from in-depth interviews with pairs and small groups, as well as personal ‘diaries’ written by young people. Ultimately, our focus here is not so much on questions of cause and effect as on how young people use and interpret the media, and the kinds of ‘identity work’ they perform in doing so.

This approach therefore enables us to address some rather different theoretical questions. While we do not share the alarm of the moral conservatives, we do agree that there has been a growing ‘sexualisation’ of the modern media. Sexual content is now much more prominently displayed, not just in minority media, but in mainstream culture. We do not see this simply as evidence of moral or cultural decline; but neither do we share the view, held by some academic commentators, that it represents a form of ‘sexual democratisation’. Brian McNair (2002), for instance, seems to regard the ‘mainstreaming’ of sexual and pornographic imagery as evidence of a shift away from patriarchal, heterosexist values, and of a growing acceptance of more diverse forms of sexual expression. Far from ‘commodifying’ sexuality, he argues that contemporary capitalism has offered ‘a widening of popular access to sexual discourse’ that is broadly progressive in its consequences.

By contrast, we would argue that the sexualisation of the contemporary media is symptomatic of more general developments, both in the media and in the relationships between identity and culture in modern societies. Jon Dovey’s (2000) analysis of trends in contemporary television, for example, identifies a broader ‘subjectivisation’ or ‘personalisation’ of the public sphere, which is apparent in a range of ‘first person’ genres such as talk shows, docu-soaps and ‘reality TV’. Dovey argues that individual subjective experience is now being

promoted at the expense of more general truth claims, via a new emphasis on intimacy, confession and reflexivity. Across the range of genres that he considers, it appears that personal subjectivity has become the only point of control in a world that is represented as chaotic, complex and ever-changing.

More broadly, we can see these developments as symptomatic of more general shifts in the ways in which identity is defined and performed. The work of Michel Foucault (1984) provides an extremely influential analysis here of how sex and gender have been constructed within both ancient and modern societies. He proposes that sexuality is not an innate or natural quality that is simply expressed or discovered, but on the contrary that it is produced by institutional and discursive arrangements that 'systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). Thus, what seem to be our most intimate personal experiences and relationships are in fact intensively socially organised and managed. A prime example of this is the confessional form, for which sex has always been a privileged theme. In modern times, the confession has moved from religious to secular contexts, from an account of sexual acts given to an exterior judge to a more introspective search for the private feelings that surround them – for example, in the context of therapy. Such practices help to determine how we think about and act on ourselves; although they are experienced, not as coercive but as liberating.

Foucault asks us to consider the ways in which particular discourses or forms of knowledge – including those of the human sciences – serve to sustain particular forms of social power. He explores how, as a consequence of what is considered 'true' at particular historical moments, certain people or behaviours come to be seen as problematic, and what kind of interventions thereby become imaginable (medical treatment, censorship, and so on). Thus, the networks of agencies that surround human sexuality (psychologists, doctors, police, social workers, regulatory and welfare bodies) effectively bring new forms of sexuality into being through the act of defining them. The category of the 'homosexual', for instance, was effectively 'invented' in this way in the nineteenth century, and seems to have emerged before the category of the 'heterosexual'. This process also applies to the ways in which sexual imagery is regulated, for example through censorship (Kuhn 1988) and to representations of sexuality, such as pornography. Sexual images are thus not so much representations of sex as 'practices of sexuality', transmitting norms of sexual conduct and installing interests and capacities for actual forms of sexual behaviour (Hunter *et al.* 1993).

Foucault's work therefore challenges the familiar historical narrative which suggests that we have steadily liberated ourselves from the sexual 'repression' of the nineteenth century. The 'explosion of discourses' that characterises modern discussions and representations of sexuality, he suggests, reflects the move towards a new form of social regulation. Social control is now achieved, not through the imposition of power from above, but through invisible strategies of normalisation. Within modern societies, individuals have effectively become self-policing subjects, striving to attain internalised social norms (Rose 1999b; c).

From this perspective, the sexualisation of the modern media and of consumer culture is a profoundly ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, as McNair (2002) suggests, contemporary capitalism appears to allow a broader repertoire of ethical behaviours, to the extent that it addresses a wider range of sexual identities, forms and subjects as potential target markets. Examples here might include the growth of pornography for women, TV shows catering for lesbians and gay men, or the invention of the marketing category of the 'tweenager' (8–12-year-olds). It could be argued that this diversification is possible because the market discriminates on the basis of profit rather (or more) than morality. On the other hand, it can be argued that the market simultaneously makes these new identities and desires available for management and regulation by visibly categorising them. This approach also creates new norms, and creates new anxieties, as individuals become 'entrepreneurs of themselves' and subject every area of life (work, leisure, love) to constant self-scrutiny (Rose 1999b). Meanwhile, redefining citizenship as access to consumption excludes those who are economically 'unprofitable'.

Starting from this perspective enables us to move beyond the reductive either/or questions that typically plague media research. The question of whether sex in the media is good or bad for children is one that, in our view, has no absolute or meaningful answer. This is not to suggest that the media do not have 'effects' on children: on the contrary, it is to suggest that their effects are significantly more complex – and perhaps even more pervasive – than most effects researchers have begun to imagine. If we aim to develop a sensible basis for social policy (or indeed for educational practice) in this field, we need to be asking some more sophisticated questions.

We also hope that this approach gets us beyond the stand-off between permissiveness and puritanism, or repression versus liberation (for want of better terms), which tends to characterise discussions of

children and sex. The fact is that children are already 'sexual': the media do not make them sexual, and we cannot stop them being sexual. Of course, we believe in honesty and openness; and we believe that it is adults' role to prepare children for life, rather than simply protect them from it. But we would challenge the idea that we can simply teach children to be 'free' or 'natural' – in sexuality, or for that matter in any other area.

The chapters in this book are organised in two main ways. At the centre of the book are three chapters that address children's responses to different aspects of media, or media genres. Chapter 5 looks at responses to the display of bodies in pornography, 'pin-up' or 'glamour' photography, advertising and music videos. Chapter 6 considers a range of 'confessional' genres such as TV talk shows, problem pages in teenage magazines and celebrity gossip in the tabloid press. Chapter 7 looks at television drama series, focusing on soap operas, situation comedies and children's/teen dramas. These chapters are 'framed' by more thematic chapters, that look across a broader range of media issues. Chapter 3 considers how children learn about sex and relationships in real life, for example from parents, peers and teachers. Chapter 4 looks at how children construct and perform gender differences in talking (and writing) about the media. Chapter 8 looks at children's and parents' accounts of family viewing; while Chapter 9 returns to the social policy issue of media regulation. The book is based on a substantial empirical research project. It is to an account of this project, and of the methods we employed, that the following chapter is devoted.

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