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## 18. The Media as Sex Educator

In order to ensure that sexual activities produce satisfaction and promote sexual health, versatile information and knowledge are needed as well as an open attitude and skills acquired through sexual knowledge and experience of both about sexuality and about sexual interaction with partners.

A lack of knowledge hampers the formation of relationships, reduces the quality of sexual experiences and often easily leads to undesirable consequences. Attitudes also may become an obstacle for high quality experiences. Adequate skills for interaction between an individual and his or her partner in sexual communication are necessary for satisfying experiences. An individual is not born a good lover, but is able to learn and develop to become such a person.

### Media and Sexual Health

Although the school system, other public authorities, and various organisations do a lot of work to improve sexological knowledge, attitudes and skills of the population, a large part of sex education and sexual health promotion occurs through the media. The media disseminates the latest sexological information, news from that field, and provides a public forum for discussion of the sexual topics through its information and images the limits of socially acceptable sexual activity. The media is one of the most important factors in determining peoples' views of the meanings of sexuality. This includes also the ideas of the significance of different sexual experiences, or the lack of them, for the well-being and health of the individual.

The role and significance of the media in promoting knowledge about sexual matters has varied greatly in different times. The content of sexological messages conveyed by the media has been largely determined and influenced by the particular professional group or authority chosen to present such messages in various times (for instance, a priest or a medical doctor). Before the 1960s especially the media tended to mystify sexuality more than convey factual sexological information. Part of this was due to censorship restrictions of the media.

Sexological topics have created innumerable pieces of news and various review articles for the daily press, magazines and electronic media. News departments of the media have reported sexological news and events of current interest (often crimes). In other areas of the media since the 1970s sexuality increasingly has been presented in more enlightening ways and it has been described as an area of life which promotes human

well-being. When the importance of the media has grown, it has become the main source of information about sexual matters for a large number of people. Therefore, it is justifiable to consider the media as a significant societal institution affecting sexual health.

The significance of the media is partly based on the fact that people often trust experts appearing in public more than their own experiences. For example, in Finland the authority of physicians was used as late as the 1950s to distribute scare stories about the ill-effects of masturbation. This presentation was regarded as true by many and it caused a lot of unnecessary fear and anxiety. At a time when people were, in other ways as well, made to feel guilty about their sexuality, the perceived physiological threatening images portrayed by medical doctors led people to be afraid of the consequences of masturbation, an act that makes them to feel good. Enjoyment was loaded with a sickness label. Fortunately, the media later actively corrected these misconceptions and eased unnecessary fears connected with them.

Thanks to the media, more and more positive meanings have been associated with sexuality and especially with women's rights to enjoy sexual experiences. This process was slow in the beginning but still irresistible. Views of the meanings of sexuality by the present media generation are significantly more positive than the messages of preceding generations.

## The Finnish Media as Sex Educator before the 1990s

During the post-war years, sex life was publicly accepted only between married partners. Most commonly priests were asked to be the experts and commentators on the subject of sexuality. Sexual matters were then interpreted as moral questions. Only after the mid-1960s did media take an active role in actual sex education work. This created very lively sexual-political debate. Some magazines published their first theme issues about sexual matters. Men's magazines even wrote articles about the Kinsey report and the pioneering sexological studies of Masters and Johnson. Gradually, information leaflets and guidebooks became available for all who were interested. This break-through in the media concerning sexuality was later called the sexual revolution. It was, above all, a break-through of sexological knowledge becoming the common property of the whole nation.

I have studied changes in the presentation of sexuality in the Finnish media by comparing material of the years 1961, 1971, 1981, and 1991 (Kontula and Kosonen 1994). The break-through of sexological information and broader attitudes was clearly visible already in comparing press material for the years 1961 and 1971.

For instance, the leading newspaper Helsingin Sanomat diverted from old traditions in the early 1970s by starting to frequently write about contraception. This newspaper also discussed changes in sexual culture, the dismantling of censorship, the development

of the skills of loving and the standing of sexuality in some cultural articles. These kinds of topics were hardly at all to be found in the early 1960s. In addition, the crimes were repeatedly reported in the way of a daily newspapers and the problems of commercial sex were discussed.

Medical doctors acquired, at least from the beginning of the 1970s, a leading position as sex educators and authorities in the field. In their columns they answered questions about sexuality sent to them by their readers. Because of their professional background, abortions and sexually transmitted diseases got a good deal of coverage. The liberal abortion law enacted in 1970 created discussion. The image in magazines had changed from the early 1960s in that there were no longer warnings about sex. Instead it was often written about in a positive spirit and took women's sexual rights into consideration. Men's magazines taught men in a practical ways how to become better lovers. In the mid-seventies these journals started to publish sex stories of their readers, and these stories provided stimuli and models for the sex life of readers.

In addition of educational approach sexual topics started to get a more entertaining content. In the beginning, men's magazines published reports about the sexual customs of exotic cultures and the services of commercial sex abroad. In the middle of the 1970s verbal description of sexual acts was allowed. Starting in the 1970s the media gradually started to focus on the sex appeal and intimate life of domestic public figures. This was a continuation of the earlier Hollywood movie star culture and pin-up pictures of bare-breasted film stars. Even in everyday life and rural communities the interest became focused on sex appeal, and even men began to acquire the status of a sex object. As a result, matters of sexuality came closer to the consciousness of everyday life in peoples' minds.

New topics of the media in the early seventies, even in the United States, were the sexual enjoyment of women, women's sexual fantasies and various sexual problems, especially male impotence. The criterion for the acceptability of sexual acts no longer was the legality of the relationship but rather its quality (Herold & Foster 1975.)

During the 1980s the sex education given in the medical columns of the Finnish magazines spread to even the most conservative magazines. Journalists started to write about sex without the need to associate it only with marriage. Simultaneously, women's magazines began to discuss women's right to sexual self-determination and their right to sexual activity in a much more direct way. The discussion included, however, warnings about the threat of sexual violence.

During the 1980s men's magazines had evolved into distinct sex magazines in which both the sex material produced by the editors and the readers' letters described much more explicitly different stages of love-making. The stories can be interpreted to represent the peak sexual experiences or favourite fantasies of the writers. They changed the sex education given by these magazines to a level close to given reality.

In the 1980s sexual matters were naturally also subject to entertaining gossip and joking. At this time sex videos started to appear and they were recirculated from user to user because of their novelty interest. Pictorial descriptions of intercourse were allowed in domestic sex magazines in the mid-eighties. Soft porn came to at disposal of everybody interested at the latest in 1987 when the Finnish commercial television (MTV) started to show Emmanuelle movies. This was followed by the erotic evening programmes of the Finnish television channel three. With the help of videos and television, people received more versatile stimuli and models for the development of their sexual skills.

## The Media as Sex Educator in the 1990s

In the early 1990s the Helsingin Sanomat began to write about sexuality in a more versatile, moderate and positive way. Its articles described the spread of sexuality into new areas, the sexuality of minorities and ways to improve one's sex life. AIDS, commercial sex and excessive sex were identified as problems. The viewpoint of the articles was often to support sexual equality.

Sex information provided by medical doctors for both general and women's magazines had decreased in the beginning of the 1990s because the number of these columns was reduced. Instead writing about the sex life of celebrities became more common, as did presenting sex as an entertainment. A new aspect of women's magazines was a more diversified presentation of men, including their portrayal as sex objects. Women were repeatedly told how to develop their erotic skills and make them more versatile. Sexual matters were often discussed from a feminist point of view.

Sex magazines struggling with diminishing sales figures have tried to inform their readers about how to have better sex. It has often been women who have answered the questions of male readers in their columns about how to get new zest into a sex life which has turned stale. Different fact-based articles have also been published about various aspects of sex. Sex magazines have provided a wide range of material for the development of love-making skills.

In order to compare the current sexual material from newspapers and magazines, I analysed the way the Finnish press presented sexuality in a sample of material from the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999. The analysis was based on the contents of the Helsingin Sanomat, the freely distributed newspaper "100" and twelve magazines which were either women's magazines or health magazines.

The magazines of the end of the millennium differed significantly from each other depending on whether they were daily newspapers or magazines. Sexuality articles in the newspapers were much more sociological than in the magazines whereas they were more personal. The major difference was that the newspapers continuously wrote about

sex crimes and the world of commercial sex (especially prostitution). In contrast, the magazines concentrated on educational information and informative documentations on the subject sexuality.

Of all newspaper articles about sex in 1999 (with the addition of some news about commercial sex) crimes were the topics in about 40% of the articles. The second most common genre was material which dealt with sexuality from an entertaining point of view. Their share was about one fourth. The rest of the articles were divided into sex information, medical news about sexuality, and sexual political news and articles. The share of each of these of all newspaper articles dealing with sexuality was about 10%.

The articles dealing with sexuality in the magazines at the end of 1998 and in the beginning of 1999 were often informative. Magazines often included articles about, for instance, how to seduce a man and how to keep him, how more zest can be added to sex, how a woman can make a man happier, information about the woman's g-point, about imagination as a spice in sex life, advice about sensual massage, information about how to cuddle a man, and information about risks of contagious diseases. In addition, sexuality was dealt with from an entertaining perspective and documents were published about such topics as, for instance, flirting, searching for partners, the first time with a new partner, things which spoil good sex, the sex of celebrities and the sex life of fat women.

## The Break-through of New Values

During the 1960s the church was still a strong authority in defining the forms of publicly acceptable sexuality. At that time sex was strongly subordinated to a Christian marriage. At the end of the 1960s the authority and status of the medical profession gradually rose and it became more interested into sexual issues. Some knowledgeable medical doctors started to provide public sex education. During the 1970s there was a public clash of different values. The authority of the medical profession together with a liberal view defending the rights of an individual challenged the foundations of Christian sexual ethics. Medical doctors did not restrict themselves to merely providing information but they also gave guidance about how to have a safe and satisfying sex life from a health perspective.

In the beginning of the 1980s some religious groups with moralistic attitudes toward sexuality tried to create a backlash (by trying to change the contents of school textbooks), but they could no longer seriously challenge the authority of the medical profession in matters of sexuality. The status of medicine was at its strongest in the press in the beginning of the 1980s.

The individualistic ideology became more accepted during the 1980s and gradually reduced the status of the medical profession in spite of the lively AIDS debate after the

mid-eighties. The significance of medical profession further reduced in the beginning of the 1990s, when a value debate began heavily to emphasise respect for an individual's basic right to sexual self-determination and the relativity of sexual values and ideas.

Public discussion emphasised more strongly than ever that the individual has an independent right to choose his or her partners or refrain from doing so, that one is entitled to demand sexual knowledge and skills from a partner and that people have the right to sexual satisfaction and to realising their own sexual images and fantasies. People were no longer satisfied with a monotonous and boring sex life. The media supported in many ways these kinds of expectations of a higher-quality sex life.

After the early 1960s, one may conclude that sexuality and questions of sex were strongly transferred from the private sphere into the public sphere by the press. In a most concrete way this became visible in images of scantily dressed people becoming more common, detailed descriptions of the intimate lives of celebrity figures, and the detailed sex stories of the readers of sex magazines. Sex and nudity became a more and more everyday phenomena and they were described in more and more versatile ways. In a similar way the norm connecting sex with marriage was broken and the sexual rights and independent choices of individuals were recognised. The right to sexual self-determination received more and more support in the media. This change was shown most clearly in the promotion of the sexual rights of women.

Public discourse about sex in the media has a clear significance for the sex life of private individuals because most people will not otherwise get much practical information and guidance on the topic. Sexuality in films, videos and literature (also guidebooks) are for most people the only concrete models of sexual behaviour available to them (Abramson & Mechanic 1983). It is usually not possible for children to observe the sex life of adults or to formulate fantasies or models about how to enjoy their own sex life. Erotic literature, sex magazines and sex videos are therefore the main source of information about different sexual patterns and various forms of sexuality. This guidance is supplemented today by the stories in women's magazines about how women developed the skills of a good lover. All this sexual material simultaneously promotes sexual health.

## The Effect of the Media on the Attitudes and Love-Making Skills

Empirical evidence clearly demonstrates that sexuality has been publicly discussed during the 1990s in a more detailed way than ever before. It has been suggested that this discussion increases liberal attitudes toward sex (Stauffer & Frost 1976). The hypothesis has been that the more public discussion there is in both quantity and detail, the easier it is for people to accept sexuality in its various forms. The assumption is that as a result of wider and more versatile public discussions about sex, people's attitudes toward

sexuality will become more liberal. This means that people would accept for themselves and others more and more versatile relationships and experiences.

This hypothesis about the effects of the media on behaviour is consistent with the results obtained in the follow-up Finnish sex survey (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 1995). According to this survey attitudes of the general population became clearly more liberal from the beginning of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s. As a result of this change, sexual intercourse between young unmarried people was generally accepted, casual sexual relations were considered more satisfying, and sexual intercourse was accepted more often without love.

These changes in attitudes were especially great in the age cohorts that were young or young adults in the beginning of the 1970s or later. The more open public discussion about sexuality which began at that time had changed attitudes toward sex in these age groups to a more liberal direction. People who were young before the 1970s were significantly more conservative compared with younger age groups. In their youth public discussion about sexuality was much more restricted, moralising and closely tied to marriage.

It seems evident that public presentations of love-making and love-making fantasies as well as the practical guidance on sex have had a liberating effect on the sex lives of great number of men and women. According to the results of the Finnish sex survey (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 1995) the sexual habits of respondents under the age of 35 were significantly more versatile and more satisfying in the beginning of the 1990s than in older age groups. Sexual habits seems to have become more versatile by people experimenting with their partners about what they have seen and read.

From the point of view of the love-making skills of the population, sex magazines have fulfilled an important function of public educators in sexual matters. For decades they have guided men to be better lovers and disseminated theoretical and practical information to improve interactions between partners and make their sex lives more versatile. All this has taken place in a kind of an underground spirit, because these magazines were produced and sold under the threat of confiscation and suppression.

The bold sex education pioneering work done by the sex magazines has been continued in recent years by the women's magazines and health magazines. This has become possible for people in Finland have understood that sexual activity and satisfaction are health-promoting. This view is also a commonly accepted life value for women.

Commercial sex has created for its share the new symbolic world associated with sexuality. Receiving sex on a symbolic level and handling it psychologically is easier than to carry it out in concrete activities, because there isn't need to invest or apply the fantasies which arise to any physical relationship. They can remain as sexual fantasies in the same way as, for instance, the imaginary fantasy world of the television series "The

Bold and the Beautiful“. In the future people will be able to accumulate and test their interaction skills in the world of virtual sex and virtual relationships.

When sexuality has occupied a significant and permanent position in the media, it has led to a gradual significant erotisation of peoples' symbolic world. This has been found, for instance, in sexual autobiographies (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 1997), where sex often signifies an continually present erotic tension in women in the younger age groups. More and more of the components and situations of everyday life have acquired a sexual significance or interpretation as a result of the change in the symbolic world. This has contributed, for instance, to the fact that masturbation has lately become significantly more widespread in both genders in all age groups.

In addition to being an important institution of improving sexual health from the point of view of sex education, the media has a strong effect on attitudes toward sexual matters. When people have the chance to see, hear or read about the sexual habits, likings and dreams of different groups of people, they can better understand the variability of values related to sexuality and they are more ready to accept differences. This should lead to increasing tolerance. The most important aspect in this change is that people have been given permission (i.e. giving permission in the PLISSIT sex therapy scheme, chapter 10) to realise their own sexual needs and wishes in a more satisfying way than earlier. Sexual tolerance and liberalism has promoted sexual health.

Estimates on the population level indicate that the lack of a partner is possibly the biggest obstacle on the way to good sexual health. Even in this area the media has offered its services. In the articles, programmes and the counselling columns, advice is given on how to find a partner and people have looked for contacts and partners in the advertisement pages. Entertaining partner-finding programmes have given people models for how to make a good impression on a potential partner. In recent years various telephone services and the chat boxes for singles on the Internet have provided quick ways to find people in need of a partner. These new forms of making contact are suitable for a busy lifestyle in which people otherwise have too little time to search for a partner.

Sex therapy and family therapy can give people practical knowledge and guidance for the development of sexual skills. Also good friends can guide each other in these skills. In most cases the development of the love-making skills of individuals and couples remains, in addition to lessons learned from previous experiences, dependent on the contribution of the media and the commercial sex industry. They show and describe ways people can touch and satisfy each other in enjoyable ways. These kinds of stimuli encourage individuals to realise their own dreams and listen to the wishes and feelings of their partner in more sensitive ways.

Often, of course, expectations of the partners conflict. The media also gives unrealistic models about sexuality or models which are not suitable for one of the partners. Solving



these problems inevitably belongs to the reality of human partnerships. Nevertheless, if one is not able to solve them with one's own resources, sexological experts are available.

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