

SEX ON TELEVISION AND WHAT VIEWERS LEARN FROM IT

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Comments prepared for the National Association of Television Program Executives Annual Conference, San Francisco, CA February 19, 1980.

There are few things that cultures display as lavishly and guard as closely as sex. As violence is a show of force that demonstrates power, sex is a show of a kind of power that demonstrates qualities of human relationships. Among these qualities are warmth and intimacy vs. cool impersonality, equality and justice vs. domination and exploitation, instant gratification vs. lasting attachment, and self-centered individualism vs. broader family and community ties.

The concern over the depiction of sex is therefore a concern about the cultivation of the norms of basic human relationships. The most general process cultivating these norms is called entertainment.

Popular entertainment is the cultivation of conventional morality. It entertains people as it entertains the basic beliefs of the culture. Television is today the most pervasive selector and setter of social norms for the otherwise most diverse publics in history. My report is based on our research of what these norms are, and what conceptions of sexual acceptability and conduct they tend to cultivate in television viewers.

I do not need to belabor the change in the range of sexual depictions possible and acceptable today compared to only a few years ago. Our continuing study of network television drama and viewer conceptions of social reality, called Cultural Indicators, found the following changes from the 1977 to the 1978 television season:

Some depiction and discussion of sexual behavior increased its prevalence

from 8 to 9 out of every 10 prime time programs.

Some reference to homosexual or bisexual behavior increased from 7 percent to 10 percent of programs.

Comic treatment of sex, still most prevalent three years ago, decreased from 57 percent to 44 percent of programs, while serious treatment increased correspondingly. However, the mixing of sex with violence also increased from zero in 1977 to 10 percent of all programs in 1978.

Publicly acceptable sexual behavior such as kissing and embracing became more explicit as well as more frequent. More controversial matters such as premarital and extramarital sex just became more frequent, with references to such behavior rising from 21 percent of prime time programs in 1977 to 43 percent in 1978. Reference to nudity climbed from 2 to 14 percent of programs, and depiction of nudity from 3 to 6 percent of programs.

So much for simple counts. But sex is not a simple act. It is a social relationship structured in particular ways and for particular purposes. We have no evidence to suggest that the dramatic change in verbal or pictorial depiction of sex was accompanied by a similar change in the social structure of sex. Most nudity and other forms of dependency depicted on television is still female; most demonstration of power is still male. Although the proportion of female leads has increased in the past few years, men still outnumber women 3 to 1 in prime time television drama, and women are still cast in more restricted and vulnerable roles.

These social constraints are stable and pervasive; audiences take them for granted. They are more aware, however, of the surface changes in the sexual depictions. How have they responded to them?

Despite criticism and complaints, viewers seem to have taken the changes in stride. Surveys show that almost half of all viewers questioned agree that more openness about sex on television has some positive social value. Only

about one-third consider the changes damaging to public morality. Still, the majority want close controls kept on both the timing and nature of sexual portrayals.

More interesting, however, is the pattern of differential responses within the general population. The younger, better educated, more affluent groups tend to favor liberalization while the older viewers and those with more limited means and cultural opportunities are the most apprehensive of changes in traditional norms. It is in the latter groups, groups that are also the most dependent on television, that the television norms of sexual representation are likely to have their greatest influence.

Our studies show that to be the case. With all the recent changes -- whether because or despite them -- television seems to be at the center of current mainstream sexual morality. Viewing makes little difference in the responses of the "average viewer" to questions about sex. Viewing may even moderate the outlook of those who have the most liberal views on sex. On the other hand, television does make a significant difference in the responses of those who hold the most restricted and traditional views on sex. The role of television appears to be to bring these groups into the mainstream.

These results have come from the data bank of our Cultural Indicators project, based on a large-scale annual national social survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Corporation.

Favoring sex education has always been an indicator of a more open and enlightened approach to sex. Today 8 out of all 10 people favor sex education (9 out of all 10 young people between 18 and 29) regardless of whether they view little or much television. So for them television viewing makes little difference. However, only 55 percent of older viewers, 57 percent of nonwhites, and 61 percent of those who earn less than \$10,000 a year favor sex education-- provided they are light viewers of television. For these groups, viewing

makes a significant difference. Heavy viewers in the same groups approve sex education 7 or 8 to 10, near to or the same as the general average.

The pattern is similar for those who voice some approval of premarital sex, although the general average is not nearly as high. About half of all respondents agree that premarital sex is sometimes or always all right. Television viewing makes a difference among those who are the least likely to approve of premarital sex: the low income and less educated groups. Among the light viewers in these groups, only 40 percent approve premarital sex. Heavy viewers in the same groups are at the general average rate of approval.

Extramarital sex is seldom portrayed approvingly on television. In general, about 3 out of 10 respondents and 4 out of 10 college educated or high income respondents, voice some acceptance of extramarital sex. In these groups, television viewing reduces the rate of acceptance. However, among low income and less educated groups only 2 out of 10 are likely to approve; heavy viewing brings their approval rate up to the general average.

The pattern is similar for other presentations of sex. Television cultivates broad mainstream norms and tends to bring both more advanced and more traditional groups into the mainstream. Recent changes in sexual depiction may have detected and then standardized a change in the mainstream itself.

Not so for the social structure of sex. As I have suggested before, despite changes in society and the greater visibility of women in prime time drama, there has been no systematic evidence of change in their overall percentage, occupations, victimization, and power. Resistance to change in the social relationship of the sexes is what viewers seem to learn from the world of television. Our research shows that the more television most people watch, the more sexist their views are, even after we account for other differences between light and heavy viewers. It is also true, however, that, as

before, some groups of viewers are so far behind the times that even television's male dominated dramatic world is relatively enlightening to them. But these are in a minority compared to those who learn the lesson of sexism from their viewing.

So, to conclude: television is becoming more sexy but not less sexist. It sets a norm that is or becomes acceptable to most, and it brings other viewers up or down to that level. Openness and enjoyment of sex are all to the good; equity and justice would be even better.