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Competing for attention: Sexuality education and the commerce of sex

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Discussion paper on behaviour change communication

INTRODUCTION

Looking at pornography at least twice each working day has given me a lot to think about. On my way to and from the UN office in sleepy Bratislava I pass by a huge poster of a mysterious lady who, for two years now, has been inciting me to buy a locally made instant coffee by positioning her almost naked breasts invitingly over a cup of the precious steaming liquid. So far my behaviour hasn't changed and I never tried her brew – my former CST Director had renowned poor taste in coffee and as he liked it, I avoid the brand in the poster. It really is one of many rather nasty ads, but quite a successful demonstration of the use of sex for commercial purposes, which is a pretty straightforward aspect of pornography.

During an informal meeting of UNFPA advisers (also in Bratislava, September 2004) information, education and communications (IEC) experts, health promotion, adolescent and advocacy advisers asked ourselves about the obstacles faced in promoting sexual and reproductive health, of young people in particular. We made our act of faith in behaviour change communication (BCC). In this discussion paper (starting with that rather simplistic ad) I draw attention to what I believe are new and complex functional educational challenges. My starting point is in recognising the entertainment products (both erotic and pornographic) and communication services of the commercial sex industry. We can respond more effectively through sexuality education by clarifying its relation to commercial communication products. This is because buyers and users of pornography might well be among the young people who are supposed to receive sexuality education. Or at least have the same consumer characteristics. The present discussion focuses on what to do programmatically once we accept that the commercialisation of sex is a reality with implications: for the scope, choice of methods and content of BCC, IEC and sexuality education. Finally, is the idea of a business plan for comprehensive sex education useful?

A TRIP TO THE (media) MARKET

Sexuality AND reproductive health education together in the same breath, as well as in the same market place as porn? Did I surprise anyone? While the daily chore of health communications advisers is beating an IEC drum on the path towards reproductive health, I'd like to suggest that many of our potential clients are already tuned in to a different "infotainment" channel. Turning up the volume of our reproductive health beat (even with an HIV/STI coda) while playing down the tune that competes with it, that of pleasure and fun and the celebration of sexuality, will just lead us into a noisy battle which the pornographers will win. Yes indeed, as you too must have seen over the last few years, sex is selling well – in both senses, as a package and as a product. Except, perhaps, in global health programmes.

When it comes to sexuality education - whether based on BCC theories, underpinned by reproductive health education or incorporating both – I believe we have drifted far from our clients and seeing things as they see them. We seldom listen to the buyers of pornography (particularly young people) and are mortified at the idea of listening to the sellers of sex (especially those involved in the commerce of sexual services). A business plan based on not being close to the market and seeing how that evolves, will, not surprisingly, fail. But one which reflects knowledge of what is being bought and sold, differentiating the client base and

knowing how to adapt and diversify one's information product(s) may bring some success in this global media culture.

NEW PACKAGING FOR AN OLD PRODUCT

Adolescents are advancing towards a global media and technology-based society, as we read in the Secretary General's "World Youth Report 2005". This is not just a recent phenomenon of the hi-tech western world; data for example from Mauritius (National Computer Board 2000) clearly show adolescents as the age group that used Internet the first and the most in that small island developing nation. E-mail and quasi-anonymous chat still top the list of purposes for adolescents using the Internet. Consequently, young people are also attracted by new information and communication technologies (ICT) and readily use mobile phones with camera features, computers with almost no-cost telephony, and computer-based technologies for exchanging files, images - and of course incomprehensible music designed to addle the brain of anyone over 30 years of age. A UN Youth Unit report shows that adolescents have successfully bridged the global and local cultures and have widely innovated in respect to media (Youth Unit 2004).

It will come as no surprise to you (I hope) to learn that sexuality is a dominant theme over the Internet. My personal observation of - and participation in - chat rooms and websites in North Africa, to a large extent in the Middle East, throughout Eastern Europe and to some extent in Central Asia has revealed to me that sexuality in all forms is commonly expressed over the Internet; by adolescents, young men in particular but also by young women and by other specific categories of users. This contention is widely confirmed by observations in other regions (Rambaree, *et al* forthcoming).

A discussion about sexually-related use of new ICTs is not to be confused with the discussion about whether or not pornography is behaviour changing communication *per se* (Moller 2000); nor on whether it should be limited by legal measures, as foreseen for example by the UN Commission on the Status of Women:

1) Take effective measures, to the extent consistent with freedom of expression, to combat the growing sexualization and use of pornography in media content, in terms of the rapid development of ICT, encourage men in the media to refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities, combat ICT and media-based violence against women including criminal misuse of ICT for sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and trafficking in women and girls, and support the development and use of ICT as a resource for the empowerment of women and girls, including those affected by violence, abuse and other forms of sexual exploitation; CSW, Forty-eighth session, 1-12 March 2004

Putting aside such questions of social and state controls of media, or the criminalising of aspects of sexual behaviour and the illegality or otherwise of sexual images, we need some ideas on what to do programmatically. If the argument is convincing, that global commercial communications technology is driving a new wave of selling sex and selling anything else using sex, then it is imperative for the research methods and programming approaches of sexuality education to evolve. In this context, we need to be honest with ourselves about how sexuality is explored and framed, communicated, deconstructed, and understood by the young (and not so young) computer *literati* of our day.

Young people particularly are buying and selling sex while generally snooping around in that market, methods of choice seem to be: chat rooms (try www.paltalk.com) instant messengers (for example, on msn and yahoo) and dating sites (the least raunchy one of thousands is www.match.com). Next come Internet photo sites for showing yourself off - with more or less of you showing (go and find one like www.facebook.com). The more HTML adept go for personal web hosting (*Geopages* on for example www.geocities.com) and write blogs (publicly accessible diaries which may or may not link back to a photo site and which can be used to share personal information about sexuality). If you are squeamish about reviewing sites, there

are reputable commercial sites where you can start, go through a national site such as www.durex.com/ee/ (the .com is usually inaccessible due to high demand) and see how others are BCCing for the lion's share of the sexuality education market.

Off-line, you can invest in an interactive DVD sex game or choose a cable television station which is continuously updated with telephone numbers of other viewers who would like you to text them short messages (SMS) in order to procure longer meetings with them to explore similar (or maybe completely opposite) interests. Some people use the Bluetooth or infra-red technology contained in their mobile telephone handsets to send anonymous messages to people in cafes, bars, on the street. Outside SMS flirt channels, regular serials and soaps talk up sex and relationships on TV or radio; the jury is out on if they play an increasing role in forming opinion and changing behaviour or simply reflect it. A popular adolescent soap making it big outside its country of origin Canada, via Internet is www.degrassi.tv/index.jsp - I wonder if many UN communications advisers or adolescent sex researchers are fans of it?

Depth observation of, and discussion with, young people on commercial sex sites leads to the conclusion that users receive conflicting and mixed messages. On the one hand are modern ICT media and on the other are traditional sources which include school, parents, society, and regular media. Young people may not have the opportunity to choose the most reliable source, especially under the influence of peers. They generally choose the more entertaining media and almost always reject unexplained "Don't do this" approaches that use slogans like "Just say NO, don't have unprotected sex". They choose media which deal up-front with:

- love, emotion and intimacy,
- pleasure and enjoyment of sex, whether alone or with (an)other(s).

Those who struggle with personal identity formation or with peer pressure or social confrontation with it look for sites dealing with:

- sexual diversity,
- ethnicity and sexuality,
- sexual orientation,
- disability and sexuality.

A rights-based approach to adolescent or emerging adult sexuality, responsibility and sexuality education is not common on Internet. The unmet informational needs are so obvious, identifiable simply by creating a profile and nickname, and launching oneself into the adolescent chat rooms. Themes which recur in online discussion with adolescents, once confidence has been established with them online include:

- anxiety about behaviours, thoughts and feelings,
- fear about being different,
- gender inequity in relationships and in general,
- violence, abuse and coercion as victim or perpetrator.

Questions related to sexual and reproductive health, basic anatomy, physiology and psychology go largely unanswered on the commercial sex sites most frequented by young people. There are nonetheless significant numbers of information sites in a wide range of languages (citing the Swiss one I have been most associated with www.ciao.ch) aimed at young people from all backgrounds, while there are some specific to youth questioning their sexual orientation (<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbqtq.htm>).

METHODOLOGIES FOR MODERN SEXUALITY EDUCATION RESEARCH

The specific questions used for qualitative study by current researchers of adolescent sexuality (Rambaree *et al*) are illuminating. They presume that the ICT setting of sex, while

driven essentially for commercial purposes, has an inevitable psycho-pedagogical and social function. They ask (a) what types of sexuality-related information are shared by users, (b) how sexuality related information is framed, expressed, deconstructed and understood, and (c) what are the implications of 'sexuality on the Internet' for policy-makers, educators and health professionals? Let me hitch hike on the last point to suggest a few ways in which our communications approach can evolve.

Modern sexuality educators and researchers use innovative approaches to qualitative social research using their own technological tools (Hewson *et al* 2003) pointing out that Internet moderated methods offer the potential to observe a vast number of participants from unlimited distance and a variety of cultures cheaply and time-efficiently. Moreover, data collected from chat rooms or websites can be directly loaded into *Atlas-ti* sociological studies software (Thomas Muhr, www.atlasti.de) for analysis from anthropological, legal, medical, linguistic, criminological, theological and educational sciences perspectives. As you remember from training in Focus Group Discussion and the WHO Narrative Research Method; content and discourse analysis is essential to understanding behaviour, but the time needed for transcribing puts us off carrying out too many FGDs and narrative research. *Atlas-ti* saves time and money incurred in transcribing by inputting text directly from Internet and then analysing it according to your desired key words and concepts.

It is also worth noting that ethical issues such as informed consent of all stakeholders are seriously considered in undertaking this particular type of sexuality study. Sharing of pornography materials accessed and dissemination of personal information related to users and researchers are among several other principles of social research that are controlled. Autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and veracity are clearly also expected of innovative approaches to qualitative psycho-sexual research.

BROADENING THEORIES UNDERPINNING SEXUALITY RELATED BCC

The behaviourist tradition and learning theory of Skinner is immensely limiting in its influence on health education. This is so even if Bandura's reciprocal determinism is factored in. Sexuality related communication fits into public health, basic education and social development frameworks, and I believe this argument can be made by turning to Jung and Freire to complete our theoretical base. Unfortunately, the scope of this discussion paper does not allow development of this psycho-pedagogical point. However, a key Jungian notion is useful: that while imparting information in a curriculum is important; education is essentially about nurturing human feeling. The warmth, interest and credibility of the educational source is critical in a non-behaviourist approach to communication for transformation (*metanoia* is not merely behaviour change). For more on this, please see Clifford Mayes (2005) "*Jung and Education*" and my review of the book in Teachers College Record, Columbia University (<http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=12279>).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Perhaps by the time you read this paper, more discriminating segmentation of the global media market will have been undertaken by health and education professionals. But as stated above, this process has to be underpinned by accurate knowledge of today's global ICT if an adequate choice of methods for comprehensive sexuality education interventions can be made, including complementary BCC.

Our *infotainment* competitors have done their market research on the commerce sex by ICT. Established markets are Western Europe, Japan, North America, South-East Asia and Australia. Their emerging markets appear to be; the Arab states, the Indian sub-continent and southern Africa. Big sellers and generators of products are Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, while Latin America serves its own market and that of North America.

The development of comprehensive sexuality education curricula needs therefore to take into account not only the universal developmental tasks of puberty, adolescence and

adulthood, but also the consumer characteristics and sexual idioms which are familiar to the intended beneficiaries in their respective geographical and cyber-cultural settings.

Mainstream educational material based on standardised norms for comprehensive sexuality education will need to be produced, probably in close collaboration between agencies and the Population Council with IPPF. This will involve a clear definition of comprehensive sexuality education, which recognizes the competing influence on intended beneficiaries of ICT-based commerce of sex on the one hand, and traditional, religious, inter-generational and cultural concepts about sex on the other. By the way, I believe we should keep the terms of definition of sexuality education simple and quite distinct from BCC and reproductive health education.

Interest in digital '*Serious Games*' is a reflection of the above-mentioned global youth media culture, growing over the past few years across non-profit, government and media sectors. A few development educators are already involved, and that number will grow significantly in coming years in both North and South. Already, UNICEF gets 11,000 hits daily on its global educational game site ("*be a world hero*" www.unicefgames.com). An interesting operational enquiry on the use of video games for sex education has been stimulated by Peter Chen, Adolescent Adviser with UNFPA Bangkok, through which a very down-to-earth CD-rom for youth-to-youth sex education activities produced by UNFPA Romania came to light. An entry point for understanding digital games is the Development Education Journal (www.netaid.org/documents/DEJ_article-Games_and_Development_Education-June05.pdf).

Moving away from games, a Young People's Media Network (UNICEF sponsored and hosted by the European Centre for Media Competence, Berlin) is a news and views blog on Youth Media in Europe and Central Asia (<http://ypmn.blogspot.com/>). It is a useful exchange mechanism for testing ideas on how to package sexuality education in a way that will compete effectively for attention in the open market with the products of the sex industry.

From what I have seen when evaluating the professional audience research methods of UNFPA-supported soaps in Central Asia (which include needs assessment, consultation with stakeholders and audience research) the Fund's partners can play a role in reflecting identified opinion and behaviour through realistic characters and scenarios. This is a medium for effective contemporary education and draws attention to current, topical issues in the very difficult, conservative media environments of some of the countries we cover. Next time you are in Uzbekistan, tune into "*City Bus Stop*" for realistic storylines weaving harm- and risk-reduction information into family and reproductive health in every episode, with adolescent sexuality, trafficking of women and harmony and tolerance in society on a weekly basis. In addition to the radio programme, comic-strip versions of selected storylines were published in mass-circulation journals in both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The national radios of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan provided their studio and air-time free for the programmes. Along with thousands of Central Asian young people, you might like to have a look at the Tashkent-based Silk-Road Radio Soap website www.silk-roadradio.uz.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVOCACY

While struggling to understand the rationale behind diverse forms of opposition, partners need to develop a policy statement on what is comprehensive sexuality education, how BCC complements it and how it can position itself vis-à-vis the commerce of sex by making use of ICT. This is in keeping with the recommendations of a donor evaluation of youth programmes http://www.unfpa.org/monitoring/country_evals/synthesisrept.pdf.

Opposition to sexuality education exists; sometimes it takes the form of preference to maintain a purely reproductive health focus. This kind of opposition will also be found even in international public health bodies and needs a more targeted advocacy response to overcome the protective rationale operating within the reproductive health community. Note also that the media strategy of social conservatives already includes ICT products designed, for example, to give professional help to those suffering from sexual and gender confusion,

who struggle with homosexuality, sexual addiction, pornography, addiction, who are victims of incest and childhood molestation, and to those “affected by sexual brokenness in the lives of their loved ones” (Cloud 2005). Evidence indeed that ICT is the most important tool in the global media culture market place.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the adolescent and youth client base is not the only one for sexuality education and associated BCC efforts, it is the one which determines whether or not sexuality education can realistically compete for attention in the market of commercial use of sex.

Perhaps this discussion paper may set the scene for and stimulate an energetic recognition of some of the challenges in the provision of information and education to young people outside schools. Prevention efforts with vulnerable groups that effectively recognize and respond to risk behaviour will almost certainly have to take into account the nature of erotic content of the group members’ sexual lives. The functioning of condom programming is unlikely to be successful without making effective use of the market principles mentioned above, so successfully employed by pornographers but which need not be their exclusive domain. Perhaps most importantly, let us seriously attempt to imagine how formal sexuality education which is intended to lead to health-protective behaviour should look, feel and inspire in a market in which the high ground is occupied by attractive images and messages.

The lady in the Bratislava poster, or at least a feature of hers, seems to be gaining in use if not in popularity. The other day I saw the same image being used for selling bottled tea. More water, anyone?

Robert Thomson
Bratislava, 13 March 2006

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The present discussion paper reflects the writer’s involvement from 2001 to 2004 as an academic adviser to doctoral candidate Komalsingh Rambaree, whom I first met in 1994 while I was Adviser in UNFPA CST Dakar. Although the paper draws heavily on the methodology and results of research carried out for “*The Ecology of Sexuality in a Mauritian Internet Chat Room: An Internet Mediated Research*” by K. Rambaree, both at the University of Manchester (2001 – 2003) and at the University of Mauritius (2004); any deficiencies herein are entirely mine. “*The Ecology of Sexuality ...*” is currently under peer review for publication in *Cyber-Psychology & Behaviour*. UNFPA colleagues will be interested to note that Komalsingh Rambaree was one of the original project staff of a UNFPA-funded Ministry of Youth & Sport project. His interest in adolescent health and sexual behaviour lead him from that peer education and counselling project to his present position as lecturer and researcher in the Department of Social Studies & Humanities, University of Mauritius, Reduit.

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Abbreviations

- Behaviour change communication (BCC)
Information and communication technologies (ICT)
Internet Mediated Research (IMR)

Short messages (SMS)
Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML)