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Turning Sexual Science Into News: Sex Research and the Media

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In this article we report on the findings of a two-part project investigating contemporary issues in sexuality researchers' interaction with journalists. The goal of the project was to explore best practices and suggest curricular and training initiatives for sexuality researchers and journalists that would enhance the accurate dissemination of sexuality research results in the media. We present the results of a survey of a convenience sample of 94 sexuality researchers about their experiences and concerns regarding media coverage and a summary of the main themes that emerged from an invitational conference of sexuality researchers and journalists. In addition, we present some preliminary recommendations for training and best practices. Topics assessed include reporting accuracy; sex researchers' comfort with various topics, media, and journalists; researchers' perceptions of the purpose and content of articles; concern about the impact of media coverage; and training for sexuality researchers.

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In the past decade a growing number of quantitative and qualitative studies, editorial commentaries, and opinion pieces have examined the challenges of science reporting, including issues that influence relationships and interactions between journalists and scientists (Brennen, 2000; Brodie, Hamel, Altman, Blendon, & Benson, 2003; Conrad & Markens, 2001; Kennamer, 2005; Peterson, 1999; Picard, 2005; Reed, 2001; Rier, 1999; Wilcox, 2003). A recurring theme involves fundamental cultural differences that appear to exist between the processes and goals of science and science reporting, and that, at least according to some, result in tensions

between journalists and scientists (Kennamer, 2005; Reed, 2001). In general, these studies show that scientists are concerned about the accuracy of reporting, sensationalized coverage, overgeneralizations, lack of attention to limitations of research findings, and the release of findings that have not undergone the peer-review process (Entwistle, 1995; Kassirer & Angell, 1994; McGuire & Kelly, 2003; Schwartz, Woloshin, & Baczek, 2002). A qualitative study that used in-depth interviews with scientists, science journalists, and news journalists found that accurate, accessible, and informative reporting was a major concern to all participants. However, the interpretation of the characteristics of each of these aspects varied by group (Reed, 2001). As one scientist stated, "The problem with truthfulness...is...whose truthfulness?...[Y]ou might clarify it for the public, but the truth is slightly distorted....[I]t becomes so simple that it is misleading" (Reed, 2001, p. 284).

Studies exploring the challenges that journalists face in reporting on science have yielded additional information. For example, a study that included focus groups, a survey of medical journalists in more than 30 countries, and semistructured telephone interviews, found that 90% of the journalists were interested in having access to experts in diverse areas of health and in developing skills in preparing more informative reports that still are entertaining and 'saleable' (Larsson, Oxman, Carling, & Herrin, 2003). Further, 80% of the journalists in the sample were interested in learning techniques for presenting research results in simple terms, in having access to help in the translation of scientific and medical terminology, and in access to methodological experts.

Because the study of human sexuality has substantial personal, public, and political relevance, sex research has attracted media attention since the midtwentieth century, a pivotal period for the representation of sexuality in the media due to the convergence of multiple cultural, economic, technological, and social changes (Flamiano, 1999). Until the 1940s, most scientific writing on sexuality was limited to medical texts (Bashford & Strange, 2004). Social mores limiting public discussions of sex in the United States changed significantly in the midtwentieth century, in part due to the overturning of the Comstock Act, the publication of the Kinsey volumes (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953), the work of Masters and Johnson (1966, 1970), the "sexual revolution," and, more recently, the impact of HIV/AIDS and the advent of drugs like Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra. During this period, the public's access to information related to sex and sexuality has expanded, fueled in large part by the expansion of publishing and advances in communication technologies, making it easier than ever before to access scientific and health-related information. As a result, scientific studies of sexuality, sexual behavior, and sexual health have increasingly become the topics of news reporting and, thus, an important source of information for the public. In a series of 39 surveys, conducted between 1996 and 2002, and involving more than 42,000 men and women (Brodie et al., 2003), researchers found that almost 50% of the respondents indicated that they closely follow major health stories in the news media. Health news stories were, for the purposes of the study, defined as those stories related to national health policy, public health issues, or specific diseases and treatments.

Most of the scholarly work published during the past decade on the reporting of sexuality has raised the issue of the social implications of media coverage. Several scholars have expressed concerns about the news media's portrayal of research on sexuality and human sexual behavior and the controversies that followed from them (Conrad & Markens, 2001; Fishman, 2004; Peterson, 1999; Wilcox, 2003). For example, the news media's representations of the "gay gene" as the cause of homosexuality elicited mixed responses from both sex researchers and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendes (LGBT) activists (Conrad & Markens, 2001). While some gay individuals and activist groups feared further social stigmatization and negative policy-related implications, others viewed the information as positive, providing evidence that being gay is not a lifestyle choice—a stance they thought would attenuate social discrimination. Thus, these findings became fodder not only for scientific criticism, but also for political debate.

Accurate and well-articulated media coverage of sex research has the potential to improve sexual health and enhance individual lives. Because sexuality-related topics carry with them a multitude of social and cultural sensitivities, however, the way in which sex research is presented in the media has the potential to incite moral and political debates that can have negative repercussions for individual careers, perceptions of the field of sexuality research, funding for sexuality-related research, sex education, and public policy. Therefore, one might expect sex researchers to feel uneasy about interacting with journalists. Little research, however, has explored factors and issues specific to the interactions and relationships between sex researchers and the media.

To examine contemporary issues related to the accurate dissemination of sex research findings through the news media and to contribute to professional discussion regarding ways to improve the interactions between journalists and sex researcher, The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction and the School of Journalism at Indiana University, Bloomington, jointly undertook a project titled *Turning Sexual Science Into News*. First, the literature was reviewed to identify issues in news coverage of sex research. Based on the literature review and a locally conducted focus group,

an exploratory survey of sex researchers and journalists was conducted. The findings of this survey then served as a starting point for discussion at an invitational conference (a working group) of sex researchers and journalists who cover sexuality-related topics. The goal was to contribute to identifying best practices and to suggest curriculum and training initiatives. This article presents the main findings from the survey of sex researchers and the conference and suggestions for best practices and curricular development.

Part 1: Survey of Sex Researchers

Several of the issues sex researchers face in interaction with the news media are not unique. Most scientists are concerned, for example, about accuracy of reporting and lack of attention to limitations of research findings. Because sexuality-related topics carry with them social and cultural stigmas that scientists in other fields rarely encounter, however, the media's presentation of sex research may incite moral and political debates and affect research funding and public policy in ways particular to sex research. Little research, however, has studied how and to what degree sex researchers are confronted with and affected by such issues. To gain a better understanding of the interaction between sex researchers and the media, a preliminary questionnaire study was conducted to explore such issues as comfort with interview topics and types of media, accuracy of published interviews and reports, and concerns about the effects of news coverage of one's research.

Method

Participants. In an effort to obtain a sample of sex researchers who represented a variety of disciplines and work settings, with varying levels of experience, a number of professional organizations and electronic mailing lists were identified. Researchers then contacted each organization to obtain permission to recruit via their listserv. Permission was granted by the following listservs: SexNet, The New View of Women's Sexuality, SexLab, and the Society of the Scientific Study of Sexuality, and recruitment e-mail announcements were sent to members. In addition, a link to the online questionnaire along with a description of the study was posted on the homepage of the National Sexuality Resource Center (NSRC) and snowball sampling methods were used in an attempt to broaden recruitment. Inclusion criteria follow: (1) 18 years of age or older, (2) English speaking, and (3) currently residing in the United States or Canada. After providing informed consent, volunteer participants completed the questionnaire, which required approximately 20–30 minutes. Responses were anonymous unless participants volunteered their name. No incentives for participation were provided. Study protocol was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects. Data were collected between April and July of 2006.

Measures. The development of the questionnaire for sex researchers was informed by reviews of academic articles on news reporting of science and medical/health-related topics.[1] In addition, a focus group format was used to validate the content of the topics and to generate discussion of additional topics not identified through the literature searches. Participants in the 2-hour focus group session included faculty from a variety of disciplines. Eligible participants needed to be currently engaged in sexuality related research at Indiana University, Bloomington. Participants ranged in age, rank (both junior and senior level, tenure-track and tenured), level of experience interacting with the media, and research interests. At the beginning of the session participants were invited to brainstorm ideas. Through this approach and related discussions, several topic areas for survey investigation were identified. They included level of experience interacting with media, attitudes toward journalistic practices, comfort with specific interview topics and types of media, accuracy of published interviews/reports, concern over effects of published interviews/reports, and media training. A self-administered 52-item web-based questionnaire that included closed- and open-ended items was developed to address these issues. While the majority of items were closed, seven items were open ended, and three close-ended items included an option for providing additional, written information.

Data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze categorical and quantitative responses. For open-ended items, each of the responses was categorized into broad common themes, such as accuracy, context, and practice. Results from quantitative and qualitative data then were compared for consistency.

Results

Sample characteristics. A nonrandom volunteer sample of 94 participants involved in sexuality research completed the questionnaire. The sample was composed of 51 women (56.0%), 39 men (42.9%), and 1 participant who indicated gender as "other" (1.1%). Eighty-four participants self-identified as White (89.4%), 1 self-identified as Asian (1.1%), 3 as African American or Black (3.2%), 4 as Hispanic or Latino (4.2%), and 2 as multiracial (2.1%). The majority of participants

[1]Literature reviews were performed using the following search engines: EBSCO, Academic Search Premiere, ERIC, Health Source Academic and Nursing Edition, Medline, and PsychInfo.

Table 1. *Content Characteristics of Interviews*

Question	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Of the times that you were interviewed...					
About general topics related to sexuality, how often were you asked to comment on something related to your area of expertise?	6.7	8.3	20.0	56.7	8.3
How often were you asked to comment on something outside your area of expertise?	9.7	17.7	45.2	21.0	6.5
How often did a reporter ask you to discuss or comment on general topics related to sexuality?	8.1	9.7	25.8	51.6	4.8
How often did a reporter ask you to discuss or comment on general social or cultural interpretations of sexual phenomena?	12.9	11.3	19.4	50.0	6.5
How often did a reporter ask you to discuss or comment on moral judgments about sexuality?	41.0	23.0	23.0	11.6	1.6
How often did a reporter ask you to discuss or comment on political issue related to sexuality?	22.6	25.8	25.8	22.6	3.2
How often did a reporter ask you to discuss or comment on personal issue/values?	37.7	31.1	24.6	4.9	1.6

(60.2%) reported holding a doctoral degree (Ed.D., M.D., Ph.D. or Psy.D), and more than half of the sample indicated that they held a faculty position (55.0%).

Comfort with topics and media formats. Participants were asked to rate their level of comfort with (1) specific types of questions or topic areas, (2) various types of media, and (3) specific journalists or media outlets. The qualitative findings provide additional insight into some of the issues that affect comfort.

Topics. Although sex researchers from this sample were, for the most part, comfortable answering questions regarding general topics related to sexuality, providing general social or cultural interpretations of sexual phenomena and discussing political issues related to sexuality, they reported being much less comfortable answering questions that invite them to make moral judgments about sexuality or questions about personal issues and values (See Table 1).

While the quantitative data suggest that researchers from this sample are less comfortable with topics that relate to their personal values, the open-ended items revealed additional topics that cause discomfort. For some researchers, questions that addressed research still in progress or not yet published were viewed as problematic, particularly those that threatened basic principles or practices of research and peer review:

> [Q][2]: Are there certain aspects of your research that you will not discuss with the media?
> [P]: Anything that could jeopardize the confidentiality of participants.
> [P]: Experimental manipulations/preliminary findings in ongoing research.
> [P]: For projects that are still in data collection, I would be careful about releasing information into the subject pool that might affect potential subjects' responses to our paradigm.
> [P]: Findings not yet published.

Types of media. Participants were asked to rate their comfort level on a 5-point scale, with 1 = least comfortable and 5 = most comfortable, for seven types of media (see Table 2).

The results indicated that participants were most comfortable interacting with newspaper reporters (49.1%) and were least comfortable with bloggerrs (18.9%). The type of media was also found to influence participants' willingness to interact with journalists. For example, some participants noted their lack of comfort with hearing their own voice or seeing their image on television or video.

> [Q]: If you tend to avoid being in the media, please describe the reason:
> [P]: Fear of appearing foolish and my extreme distaste when I see my self on screen. So I have always preferred, and still prefer, talking to print media.
> [P]: Basically, I am shy.
> [Q]: What makes an interaction with the media negative

Table 2. *Mean Comfort Level for Media Interaction by Type*

Question	Mean (*SD*) 1 = Least comfortable; 5 = Most comfortable
For each type of media, please rank how comfortable you are in your ability to interact effectively	
Newspapers	4.12 (1.08)
Television	3.23 (1.38)
Radio	3.53 (1.21)
Web	3.67 (1.25)
News magazines	3.82 (1.29)
Popular magazines	3.44 (1.37)
Blogs	2.89 (1.45)

[2]For all quotes, questions are indicated by the letter Q, and the responses from (different) participants by the letter P.

for you?
[P]: I've had some bad interactions on the radio when the host just wanted to make jokes and the jokes were ignorant.

Specific journalists and media outlets. Further, participants were asked whether there were specific journalists or media outlets with whom they would not interact. To this question, 51.7% of the sample responded "yes." While a small number of participants indicated that they would not interact with the media under any condition, the vast majority of respondents indicated that their decision was based on the specific circumstance. Many participants noted in their responses to open-ended items that they base their decision on previous experience, positive or negative, with a specific media outlet or journalist, including first-hand experience, observation, or second-hand accounts relayed through friends or colleagues:

[Q]: Are there specific media outlets or journalists that you will not talk to? If yes, please describe:
[P]: I know the names of a few terrible journalists who have savaged my friends.
[P]: Certain media outlets have a clear political stance, and I have had poor experiences with their journalists.
[Q]: Are there certain journalistic practices that seem adversarial to you?
[P]: Those [journalists] that use sex research to drive conservative agendas, such as those who report on sex education to further promote more restrictive policies.

Conversely, there were those respondents who reported cultivating positive relations with particular journalists or media outlets:

[Q]: Please describe the benefits of interacting with the media.
[P]: I want my side of the story heard. The bonus is that I've developed good relationships with a number of reporters who report accurately.

Content. Participants were asked three questions regarding content of published news reports in terms of the purpose of the story and the reporting of specific aspects of studies.

The first question related to perceptions of the stories' purpose (e.g., educate, inform, sensationalize). The majority of respondents (73.6%) reported that, of the times that they were interviewed, they felt the purpose of the story "most of the time" or "always" was to provide education. However, 48.2% also felt that the purpose "most of the time" or "always" was to entertain. In addition, 30.2% believed that purpose was to sensationalize "most of the time" or "always" (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Purpose of the Story*

Question	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Of the times that you were interviewed, how often did you feel that the purpose of the story was to...					
Provide information	1.9	5.7	18.9	56.6	17.0
Provide education	1.9	16.7	33.3	37.0	11.1
Persuade the public	9.4	39.6	37.7	9.4	3.8
Entertain the public	9.3	14.8	27.8	27.8	20.4
Titillate	13.0	29.6	31.5	22.2	3.7
Sensationalize	13.2	26.4	30.2	24.5	5.7

Although the quantitative findings suggest that the majority of sex researchers perceive journalists' primary purpose in reporting on sex research is most often to provide education, the qualitative findings reflected a concern by a number of respondents that the purpose of such coverage was to sensationalize, titillate, or create controversy:

[Q]: What changes would you like to see in the way sex research is presented in the media?
[P]: I would like to see it [sex research] presented in a more unbiased, less sensational way.
[P]: Less sensationalized and more tempered—that single studies are not definitive answers but that general trends across many studies are more important and that independent of opinions, data matter.
[P]: There is probably no way to make it less sensationalized—it is just human nature, but I wish that titillation wasn't such a frequent motive.
[Q]: Please describe the negative aspects of interacting with the media:
[P]: Usually a reporter has an agenda, and, in my experience, that agenda is more about entertaining than informing.
[P]: ...seeing needless titillation trump academia time and time again.

The second and third questions on content of stories related to the importance of presenting certain aspects of research in media reports (see Table 4). On scales of 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important), the mean scores for presenting research methods, limitations of results, and how the study fits into the context of other research were all above 4.0, suggesting that researchers rated inclusion of this information as important. In contrast, they perceived public interest in these topics as low—less than the midpoint on a 5-point scale of 1 (not at all interested) to 5 (very interested). Some participants indicated that media coverage often does not give sufficient attention to describing the scientific process or its limitations:

[Q]: What makes an interaction with the media negative for you?
[P]: A reporter attempting to put a negative angle on the information that I have presented.

Table 4. *Importance of Research Characteristics Presented in Media Reports*

Question	Mean (*SD*) 1 = Not at all important; 5 = Very important
In news coverage of specific sex research studies, how important, if at all, would you say it is for journalists to report...	
Research methods?	4.05 (1.05)
Limitations of results?	4.54 (0.66)
How the study fits in the context of other research?	4.38 (0.75)
	1 = Not at all interested; 5 = very interested
In news coverage of specific sex research studies, how interested, if at all, would you say the public is in reporting on...	
Research methods?	2.09 (0.88)
Limitations of results?	2.34 (1.03)
How the study fits in the context of other research?	2.46 (1.02)

When it results in a misrepresentation of sex research, it methods, findings, or goals.
[Q]: Are there certain journalistic practices that seem adversarial to you?
[P]: Inaccurately representing results, especially to prove a political point.
[Q]: What changes would you like to see in the way sex research is presented in the media?
[P]: Less trivialization of findings or boiling them down to one talking point, which is almost always incomplete or inaccurate.
[P]: ... more reporting on how the research actually was done. Contextualization and analysis rather than sensationalism.

Accuracy. Six items assessed sex researchers' perceptions of the accuracy of news reports that were published about them or their research (see Tables 5 and 6). Concerns over accuracy were a common theme throughout the qualitative data. While a number of responses dealt with general issues of accuracy, others were more specific in nature and addressed issues such as fact checking, misquotes, and research being taken out of context.

General concerns. General concerns over accuracy were raised by a number of respondents in response to several of the open-ended items:

[Q]: What changes would you like to see in the way sex research is presented in the media?
[P]: More accuracy and that reporters don't always feel the need to get perspective from the "other side," as if there is a prosex side and an antisex side.
[P]: ...and there are others where accurate reporting doesn't seem a primary goal.
[Q]: What makes an interaction with the media positive for you?
[P]: If they report what I have said accurately and intelligently.

Fact and quote checking. The issue of fact checking was noted by several participants as being important. While many journalists believe that "fact checking" may lead to researchers trying to shape their articles in opposition to journalistic freedom and integrity, sex researchers reported that having an opportunity to verify facts and quotes was important to ensure that the reporter correctly understood the context of the research and the data. Further, some respondents reported that quotes too easily can be taken out of context to support a particular "spin," viewpoint, or agenda that the researcher does not necessarily support.

[Q]: What makes an interaction with the media positive for you?
[P]: Having the opportunity to fact check.
[Q]: Are there certain journalistic practices that seem adversarial to you?
[P]: I think it is completely unreasonable not to fact check and quote check.
[Q]: Please describe the negative aspects of interacting with the media.
[P]: I feel there is no excuse for not being willing to check quotes and facts, and I find the lack of willingness to do so under the guise of journalistic freedom to be bogus.
[Q]: Are there certain journalistic practices that seem adversarial to you?
[P]: I can be interviewed for hours, and then only a small misquote appears that is silly and makes me look stupid.
[P]: ... quoting out of context to makes us say something they want us to say but that we did not want to say ourselves!

Table 5. *Percentage of Sex Researchers Reporting Inaccuracies*

Question	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always
Of the times that you were ever contacted for an interview...					
How often did someone call you to fact check after an interview?	25.4	38.1	27.0	6.3	3.2
How often was the reporter well prepared or informed about your work?	8.1	29.0	53.2	9.7	0.0
How often were direct quotes accurate?	5.2	0.0	36.2	51.7	6.9
How often were references to you or your work accurate?	6.7	1.7	38.3	50.0	3.3
How often was you work taken out of context?	18.3	36.7	40.0	3.3	1.7

Table 6. *Percentage of Sample Reporting Inaccurate Coverage by Type*

Question	Percentage
Of the times that the media coverage of your research has been inaccurate, what about it was not correct?	
Research was oversimplified	79.2
Findings were taken out of context	37.7
Statistics were misused	11.3
Statistics were reported incorrectly	11.3
Research was presented as definitive	35.8
My research was politicized	18.9
Attribution was incorrect	17.0
Findings were reported inaccurately	20.8
I was misquoted	50.9
Information was omitted	83.0

[Q]: What makes an interaction with the media negative for you?
[P]: Being misquoted or incorrectly reported.

Context. Also, several participants raised the issue of context as an important component of accuracy. In general, there was a concern that sex research and its findings often are taken out of context, either being sensationalized, oversimplified, or presented as definitive. In terms of accuracy, some researchers reported that accuracy could be increased, and the chance for misinterpretation limited, by providing more contextual information:

[Q]: What changes would you like to see in the way sex research is presented in the media?
[P]: Honor the context of our research, don't quote out of context; talk about limitations of the findings. Don't overdo the stereotype stuff.
[P]: Increased contextualization of results.
[P]: Contextualization and analysis rather than sensationalism.

Concerns regarding potential outcomes of media coverage. Participants were asked to rate their level of concern regarding several potential outcomes (e.g., influencing public opinion about sex research) of the way their research is portrayed in the media (see Table 7). A 5-point scale, with 1 = not at all concerned and 5 = very concerned, was used to assess level of concern. The highest level of concern (mean = 3.70) was the potential for media portrayals to influence public opinion about sex research, followed by public opinion about sex-related issues (mean = 3.61). When asked whether they generally were concerned or hopeful about the impact that they or their data would appear in the media in the field of sex research, however, 61.4% of participants indicated that they were more hopeful than concerned. The qualitative data indicated that participants also were concerned that appearing in the media may potentially impact their external funding or have negative consequences for the field of sex research:

[Q]: If you tend to avoid being in the media, please describe the reason.
[P]: ... when I think that my comments might lead me to be on a blacklist for NIH funding.
[P]: ... concerns over funding.
[Q]: Please describe the negative aspects of interacting with the media.
[P]: ... ending up on the "list" that some agencies maintain about people who study sex.
[P]: Negative consequences for the field, research, campus, and self.

Training. Participants were asked whether they had ever had media training and, if it were offered to them, whether they would participate. While 36.7% of participants indicated that they had, indeed, had media training, 75% said that they would participate in media training if it were offered to them and 93.3% of respondents indicated that they would be interested specifically in training on how to prepare for and manage controversy (see Table 8). A few of the qualitative responses directly mentioned training:

[Q]: If you tend to avoid being in the media, please describe the reason.
[P]: I am not confident in my skills in managing the media.

Table 7. *Level of Concern Regarding Potential Outcomes of Media Portrayal*

Question	Mean (*SD*) 1 = Not at all concerned; 5 = Very concerned
How concerned are you that the way your research is portrayed in the media will influence...	
Laws or policies related to sex research?	3.52 (1.34)
Laws or policies related to human sexuality or behavior?	3.39 (1.38)
Public opinion about sex-related issues?	3.61 (1.18)
Public opinion about sex research?	3.70 (1.12)
National policy?	3.11 (1.43)
State policy?	3.15 (1.40)
Local policy?	3.00 (1.41)
Institutional/university policy	2.83 (1.36)

Table 8. *Training*

Question	Percentage responding "yes"
Would you be interested in learning about...	
How to write a press release?	64.4
Interview techniques for television/video?	77.8
Interview techniques for radio?	75.6
Interview techniques for print?	77.8
Preparing for and responding to controversy?	93.3
Managing and responding to requests from media?	73.3

[P]: ...feeling like I don't know enough to comment in an intelligent and layperson-friendly manner.
[P]: I would like more practice in how to prepare and what are the pitfalls.

Part 2: Conference[3]

In an effort to better understand the complexities surrounding news coverage of sex research, a small invitational conference that brought together sex researchers and journalists was held. The goal of the conference was to explore in more detail the issues identified in the survey part of the project and to generate suggestions for best practice and training for both sex researchers and journalists.

Method

Participants. The conference participants were sex researchers and journalists from across the United States (see Table 9).

Both groups ranged in age, number of years within their given field, and geographic region. The conference was facilitated by Kelly McBride, Ph.D., The Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, Florida, as well as two members of the Indiana University, Bloomington, faculty, Julia Heiman, Ph.D., The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, and Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences; and Trevor Brown, Ph.D., Dean Emeritus, School of Journalism.

Procedure. To spark the discussion, the conference began with a presentation of preliminary findings from the sex researcher and journalist surveys. Next, the conference participants broke into small groups to discuss specific case studies. The three case studies included major news articles written on the topics of bisexuality, female sexual dysfunction, and oral contraception and libido. After the small groups read and discussed the articles, identifying weaknesses and strengths within each, they reconvened into one large group to present and process their discussions. A major component of the conference was a discussion of ethics, values, and practices, focusing on identifying similarities and differences that influence interactions between the fields.

Results

While there was agreement among participants that news reports should be accurate and informative in order to benefit the public, fundamental differences in specific practices were identified. Below is a brief summary of the topics that received the greatest attention and the suggestions that were made for improved practice.

Framing the story: Novelty and controversy. One topic that led to substantial discussion involved the framing or timing of news stories. Journalists indicated that their primary aim is to provide audiences with information on sex research that is both practical and useful. In this, news media value novelty. Research is incremental and cumulative, however, and findings usually are preliminary and in need of replication. Also, journalists reported that controversy sells news, whereas for sex researchers, the same controversy can threaten funding, result in restrictive policies, and lead to negative consequences for the individual or the field. Yet, journalists often are encouraged to produce pieces that are somewhat controversial and attract attention, or face having their piece cut. Journalists suggested that researchers could benefit from finding ways to present their research in ways that attract and sustain the public's interest and to communicate the key points to journalists in a way that will promote accurate, yet interesting, coverage.

Presenting both sides. Another issue that was discussed in detail involved the journalistic practice of presenting multiple perspectives or sources. Journalists value objectivity and often seek opposing viewpoints in an attempt to present balance and avoid the impression of bias. Researchers discussed how this practice can be problematic for scientists because it may lead to situations where opposing views are not based on empirical research, and such dissenting opinions often are given equal weight in a news report. Thus confusion and doubt may be created by the requirement of having opposing views, even if there is consensus among researchers. As a result, researchers worry that members of the public may lose confidence in the scientific process because it appears that research continually is contradicting itself. Journalists were sympathetic to researchers' concerns; however, they felt that weighing multiple perspectives aids in the pursuit of the "truth.". According to journalists, even if some of those perspectives represent a small

[3]*Turning Sex Research Into News: Sexual Science for the Public's Interest*, Indiana University, Bloomington, June 12, 2006.

Table 9. *Conference Participants*

Sex researchers	Journalists
Eli Coleman, Ph.D., University of Minnesota Medical School	Marilyn Elias, Health and Behavior reporter, *USA Today*
John DeLamater, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, Madison	George Lundberg, M.D., Editor and Chief, Web MD–Medscape
Lisa Diamond, Ph.D., University of Utah	Doreen Marchionni, Former Editor, *Seattle Times*
Janet Hyde, Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, Madison	Susan Orenstein, freelance journalist
Neil Malamuth, Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles	Judith Peres, *Chicago Tribune*
Vickie Mays, Ph.D., M.S.P.H, University of California, Los Angeles	Shari Rudavsky, *Indianapolis Star*
Robert Michael, Ph.D., University of Chicago	Steven Schnee, Producer, *ABC News 20/20*
Stephanie Sanders, Ph.D., Indiana University, Bloomington	Sunny Sea Gold, *Glamour Megazine*

minority, incorporating them provides the public with the opportunity to weigh the "evidence" and decide for themselves what to believe.

Deadlines influence source selection. Issues of timelines and the selection of sources were seen as challenging by both groups. Journalists reported that they are often under pressure to produce a piece in a very short time and must locate and interview expert sources quickly. Researchers, however, said that this practice often made them less likely to want to participate in an interview because of other obligations in their busy schedules or wanting to prepare for the interview. To this point, journalists responded that a story will be published regardless, and if experts are not available, journalists need to resort to interviewing sources that may not have the same level of expertise but who are willing to be interviewed.

Informational ownership. Perhaps the most controversial discussion centered on issues of ownership. While some of the researchers felt a sense of ownership over stories that covered them or their research, journalists were adamant that this was not the case. Similar to researchers "owning" the data they collect and the findings they report in articles they author, journalists felt a sense of ownership over the data they collect to produce their stories and their interpretation in the articles they author. Just as research participants usually do not have a say in the analysis and interpretation of the data that they contribute to a study, researchers cannot expect to have a say in the analysis and interpretation of the data that they provide to journalists. Although this may seem problematic for researchers, to use the analogy of the scientific process, researchers can exert some control by exercising their rights as a human subject. For example, journalists suggested that researchers go through a process of informed consent before they agree to an interview. This process would include asking whether there would be an opportunity to review the piece for accuracy prior to publication, asking whether fact checking will occur, asking who else the journalist has contacted, determining if the journalist is familiar with the one's work, and asking whether the journalist is seeking an expert or merely looking for opinion statements from someone in the field. In addition, if time permits, it was suggested that researchers send a journal article to journalists in advance and ask them to summarize the piece. If a particular journalist is unwilling to do so, or unable to articulate the key points correctly, the researcher may want to consider declining the interview.

Reporting on complexity in research. Journalists recommended that researchers consider explaining not only what the data say but also what they do not say, giving particular attention to context such as what the study adds to preexisting knowledge and what remains unknown. Further, it was suggested that researchers ask journalists if they are seeking to serve the public's interest and point out inaccuracies or misinterpretations that will mislead the public. By taking such steps, researchers are, in a sense, regaining some ownership of stories that include them or their work. It also was recommended that journalists who cover sex research have some basic knowledge in interpreting statistics.

Building relationships. Although there were a number of issues on which sex researchers and journalists expressed divergent viewpoints, one point of agreement involved the need to foster relationships between sex researchers and journalists. Senior researchers described many positive outcomes from established relationships with journalists whom they trust and respect. Likewise, journalists indicated that they are better able to produce a solid piece when they have an open and established relationship with a researcher. Researchers and journalists were both believed to benefit from candid and direct, yet collaborative and respectful, communications with one another. As one participant pointed out, "Keep in mind that you might need each other again."

Training. One of the goals of the conference was to explore training issues that might inform future curriculum development and other initiatives. The final discussion session of the conference was devoted to discussing specific types of training for both researchers and journalists. Consensus among sex researchers and journalists was that researchers would benefit greatly

from explicit media training. Such training would not only help researchers learn to communicate better with media but also would focus on learning to identify "red flags" that may indicate a particular journalist lacks the ability or intention to produce an accurate, unbiased piece. Further, media training could help facilitate the development of realistic expectations among researchers. For example, one journalist stated that there is no such thing as "off the record" and that researchers need to be aware that anything they say during a conversation or interview may be used by the journalist. By learning what to expect and accept as standard journalistic practice, researchers will be better prepared for interactions with media. Perhaps more importantly, media training could teach researchers techniques and practices that would allow them to exert more control over their interactions with the media, allowing for an increased sense of ownership.

With respect to the training of journalists, it was agreed that education focusing on an increased understanding of statistics and research methods could enhance the accuracy of reports. Also, suggestions were made related to issues of personal comfort and values regarding sexuality. While journalists strive to produce stories that are informative and unbiased, personal values inadvertently may influence the content or message of a story. Thus, it was suggested that journalists examine their own boundaries, biases, and values related to sex, with the same attempt to be objective as they strive for in their journalistic work.

Discussion

This project sought to increase understanding of the issues and challenges in disseminating sex research through the media. Although the findings are preliminary, several issues worthy of additional investigation were raised by the survey and conference. Based on the combined findings of this project we developed a "tip sheet" for researchers to aid in working with the media (see Appendix).

Perhaps more importantly, the survey and conference mark the beginning of a dialogue between journalists and sex researchers. Working toward a better understanding of one another's values and ethics is not only mutually beneficial but beneficial to the public as well. A common theme in both the survey findings and the conference discussions was the desire by both groups to provide information that will serve the public in a positive way. This common goal unites sex researchers and journalists and may serve as a primary motivating factor for better understanding and further studying the issues that interfere with achieving this goal. Although this project has limitations, including sampling issues and participation biases, it focuses attention on a topic that long has needed and deserved exploration and that warrants further curriculum development and training initiatives. The findings suggest that sex researchers would desire and welcome media training. Such training could be included as part of formal graduate or professional education programs as well as at professional meetings. Media training should focus on creating more realistic expectations for interactions. Researchers could be taught what types of practices and interview methods to expect, how to ensure receiving "informed consent," and how to improve interviewing techniques. Similarly, many journalists would welcome further training in science reporting and the issues unique to covering sex research, particularly interpretation of statistics and analysis and understanding of methodological issues. While the core values and practices of scientists and journalists may not and, perhaps, should not change, an increased understanding one another's perspectives and practices may facilitate stronger relationships and benefit both groups and the public they seek to serve.

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Appendix

Media Tips for Researchers

Identify your specialty—do not speculate or feel obliged to speak outside your area of expertise.

Be prepared for interviews—if you get a phone call, schedule your interview for another time. Most phone interviews last 20 to 40 minutes.

Know the perspective of the journalist and of the institution or outlet behind the reporter.

Prepare yourself ahead of time by jotting down a few of the most important points you want to convey about your work. Think about relevant headlines.

Ask questions to assess the reporter's knowledge and where the article might be headed.

Review the rules of engagement with the reporter. Remember you are always "on the record" unless you ask to go "off the record" and the reporter grants your request.

Recognize that most journalists are generalists, writing for a lay audience. Be able to explain your research for public understanding, and provide context for the readers. Explicitly state what your study is about.

Although it is your research, the reporter's outlet owns the story. Although you may influence the approach the journalist chooses to take, you cannot dictate it.

Ask about deadlines and respond in a timely manner, or decline if you are too busy.

Describe the limitations of your research, and ask the reporter to include these in the story.

Be explicit about your concerns, and ask for a fact check. Be easy to find, and give good contact information including a phone number for quick follow-up.

Suggest other reliable sources who might comment on your study.

Have realistic expectations and know what the news will be about.

Be wary of red flags about the reporter, e.g., if the journalist is uninformed, unable to reiterate your statements, or asks uninformed or vague questions.

Be wary of red flags about the story; if the questions are too obscure or off the topic of your research, say so. If the reporter is clearly biased, asking loaded questions, or trying to provoke sensational responses, point it out. If it continues, end the interview.

If there is an error in fact or context, request a correction. If you disagree with the perspective of the story, you can talk to an ombudsman, send a letter to the editor, or propose your own op-ed piece in response.

Get media training—learn to convey complex messages simply without losing accuracy, to handle difficult questions, and understand how the media works.

Additional Reading: Boynton, P. M., & Callaghan, W. (2006). Understanding media coverage for sex: A practical discussion paper for sexologists and journalists. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 21*, 333–346.