

JOURNAL OF POSITIVE SEXUALITY

Volume 3, March 2017

Published by Center for Positive Sexuality Non-Profit Organization

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The semi-annual Journal of Center for Positive Sexuality, a 501c3 non-profit organization.

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“You’re Doing God’s Work”: Reflections on *Sex Ed*

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Editor’s Note: This article is meant to be read along with an audio file that is available on the *Journal’s* website. If you cannot access the link, or cannot listen to an audio file, a transcript of the file has been made available in the Appendix of this issue.

Introduction: The Internet of Kink

In the past five years there has been a rapidly growing interest in sex-themed podcasts and video blogs (vlogs). Dan Savage’s advice-focused *Savage Lovecast* (2006-present), one of the longest running and best-known podcasts in the US, has been joined by a variety of other programs that release on a regular schedule and have large followings (given iTunes rankings and SoundCloud plays). These podcasts often rely on round-table discussion formats and hosts with an every-person approach to advice-giving and personal narrative (e.g., *Guys We Fucked: The Anti Slut-Shaming Podcast*, featuring two stand-up comedians, Krystyna Hutchinson and Corinne Fisher, and *New York Magazine’s Sex Lives*, hosted by sex writer Maureen O’Connor). And YouTube has been flooded with advice-focused sex education channels, many by young cis and trans women, that garner an impressive quantity of views and have received mainstream media attention (Hess, 2016). These podcasts and vlogs vary in quality, differ in their incorporation of research studies and reliance on traditionally defined experts, and tend to target different age demographics. Taken together, these media projects have helped facilitate a cultural shift toward a more open environment for everyday people to ask questions about a range of seemingly ordinary to more kinky sexual practices.

The general structure of this new media content seems to be similar within each medium. Podcasts use informal interview conversations and vlogs rely on heavily edited monologues. Both types of media feature mostly humorous personal experiences to speak to not only sexual relationships in the current climate of new media dating apps but also an expansion of public discourses about sex. In short, the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964). The advice-giving sexpert and their kinky (and/or vanilla) callers and guests were made for free-flowing blogs and vlogs compared with the more restrictive standards of commercial and/or public media. While the Internet offers the freedom to produce a show (whether podcasts or vlogs) that can represent the varied experiences of callers/guests, a significant public is missing – the type of public radio

¹ This is one of many projects that we have coauthored or coproduced. We rotate first author because all of our research and productions are created and developed through equal participation and contributions. We thank Emily Prior and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

listener who tunes in to hear stories (on occasion outside of the mainstream) that are reported in a narrative and/or documentary style. We contend that the gap between sex-advice/education vlog and blog projects versus the documentary reporting and storytelling approach one would hear on public radio is worth our attention. Our goal has been to fill this gap by producing sex positive research-focused documentary stories that mirror the reporting one would hear on National Public Radio (NPR) while making use of the global reach of web-based platforms. In short, we are researchers who work with audio documentary to reach a public audience that is intellectually curious about a range of social, cultural, and political shifts in contemporary US culture, including sex-positive culture. This essay maintains a dual focus. First, we contend that audio documentary, as a research-based methodology to study everyday life, is an ideal medium for studies of sex positive culture, or other practices, behaviors or beliefs that might be deemed outside of mainstream culture. We argue that the audio documentary format creates a space for an audience to suspend judgment and engage the storyteller, and, by extension the subject(s), in a one-on-one listening experience. Second, we specifically discuss the ways that *Sex Ed*, a six and a half minute audio documentary that weaves together the experiences of three sex positive educators living and working in Chicago, models sex positive documentary storytelling. The three women featured in this piece promote healthy sexuality through educational outreach focused on individual practices and challenging social norms.

Sex Positive Research and the Intimacy of Sound

Of course, documentary-focused sex-positive stories have appeared on television networks, such as HBO's *Real Sex* or Showtime's *Sex with Sunny Megatron*, but these programs and others have not found an equivalent in the radio marketplace. In part, this is because public radio's two most popular programs broadcast during peak all-ages listening times (NPR's *Morning Edition* during morning commute hours and *All Things Considered* during the afternoon commute). The topics might seem too explicit for younger listeners so producers may avoid this type of content, whereas HBO and Showtime air "adult programming" later at night. Additionally, the variations in regulatory oversight for cable and satellite television versus broadcast radio are significant enough to limit the sex-related content of a radio show. The dearth of sex positive documentary reporting on public radio is important to highlight because of the audience size that could be reached (36.6 million per week), and, by extension, educated, through such sex-positive stories. (NPR sees large, 2016). At the very heart of the argument we present here is that the mission of public broadcasting is exactly the type of directive that guides our work: education. Following public broadcasting historians John Witherspoon and Roselle Kovitz, we believe that education "has never meant just instruction" (Witherspoon & Kovitz, 1987, p. 1). The founding interests of public broadcasting stations were much more populist, first emerging on college campuses across the United States. And "public broadcasting's programming mission traditionally has centered on alternative programming," where even stations that "carry little or no formal instruction are seen as educational, just as museums, libraries or theater groups often are considered broadly as educational community resources" (Witherspoon & Kovitz, 1987, p. 1). Given the broadly defined educational mission of public broadcasting, grounded in an ethos of democratic participation, it could be a platform prime for any research-based narrative non-fiction reporting—even broadcasting sex-positive stories. Similarly, because this medium has influenced a type of intellectually engaging storytelling, it is exciting when these types of documentary stories extend out to new media outlets.

We work with audio because it offers a unique way to tell stories and to connect with an audience. As *This American Life* producer Nancy Updike notes in her transom.org manifesto about writing for radio, there is an “intimacy of radio—that feeling that someone is talking directly to you” (Updike, 2006). As opposed to television, radio is a 1:1 medium where the narrator and the listener, in theory, are engaged in an intimate conversation. People starting out in radio and/or documentary storytelling are taught, when speaking, to imagine a single audience member sitting opposite them at the table. Audio documentary’s intimate form is mirrored in the content of *Sex Ed*. Participants discuss how sexual identities and desires can and should be explored in the safe spaces in which the participants teach or advocate for in the health care community.² For example, this sentiment is expressed when Dana, a sex educator in Chicago, describes one recurring theme in her workshops: “The most challenging thing is the fact that the women frequently talk about how much he [their current partner] notices, like, how like floppy their boobs are or how fat they, or, stuff like that,” she tells us. “It’s like, I just have to reassure them that you’re having sex with someone, you’re judging yourself, sex is not really a place for judgment.” In Dana’s voice we hear the burden of having to debunk myths of perfect bodies or having the sexiest sex that prevents her clients from enjoying the pleasure of healthy sexual experiences.

Working with audio also allows us to develop deeper connections with participants, which is another layer of intimacy and ultimately adds to the depth of connection with the listener. Terry Gross, the host of *Fresh Air*, notes in a *New York Times Magazine* feature that “there’s an intimacy in the interview” when interviewers and interviewees are able to open up and reflect on issues in ways that might not happen in their everyday lives (Burton, 2015). Of course, interviews are very different than informal conversations people have with one another in everyday contexts. “In casual conversations, people take more or less balanced turns, and there is no sense that somehow the discussion has to stay on track or follow some theme” (Bernard, 1995, p. 211). Knowing that any kind of research project can create an unnatural conversational environment, we seek to reduce reactivity by working with a less invasive medium. As producers of audio we don’t need to subject participants to the bright lighting required for video production or demand that participants remain within a shot. Instead, we use small professional quality digital audio recorders, short shotgun mics (much smaller and thinner than the boom mics used in film), and headphones. Because we work as a team, one person can record room sounds or focus on mic placement related to questions asked while the other person is responsible for making sure the participant is “on mic.” When making *Sex Ed* we interviewed one participant at a dining room table in their home, another recording happened while we sat on a couch in a studio/workspace, and the third was recorded as we walked around the participant’s dungeon. Each of these scenarios would have been much more difficult if we were working with a small film crew. With that said, we must always balance a need for mic placement and background noise reduction (i.e., trying to maximize optimal recording qualities) with gaining trust among participants through thoughtful interview questions and explicit representations of our ethical approach to the topics at hand. When we recorded interviews for *Sex Ed* we were invited into people’s homes, places where they work, and sites where the two blend, and we take this level of trust and generosity very seriously.

² Any identifying information provided by the participants was done so with their consent and knowledge that the information would become public.

It is also important to add that the audio recorder can represent a less sensationalistic medium for representing people's stories, especially stories focused on sexual practices and desires, or a combination of both, compared to the video camera, which has tended to be a tool for capturing more action-oriented footage. For example, the casting call for *Sex with Sunny Megatron* notes that "Most spots require nudity, and/or play with your partner– the specifics of that are negotiable based on what you feel comfortable consenting to (your enthusiastic consent regarding what you're doing and how you're doing it on camera is the #1 priority here!)" (Uzarski, 2014). Thus, we can critically engage the issues addressed in the stories we tell, but we can do so while retaining and modeling ethical fieldwork that facilitates comfort among our participants. We often hear a palpable sigh of relief and change in tone when we explain to a potential interview participant that we will *only* be using an audio recorder during an interview. And while there is still some lag time between the start of an interview and when the interviewee "forgets" about the microphone and the interaction becomes more of a dialogue, this transition happens much faster than in an interview with a video camera. This focus on intimate sound and ethical documentary research and production, where we treat documentary work as an extension of our qualitative fieldwork toolkit (see Makagon & Neumann, 2009; Gould, 2013; Makagon & Gould, 2015), frames how we approached the production of *Sex Ed* and why we work with audio.

Conclusion: Transformative Storytelling

Although there has been a rapid rise in media content that helps individuals reflect on their sexual desires, practices, and relationships, mass communication content is, by its very nature, directed at a mass audience. While multiple listeners might learn about ways to be safe with ass play, for example, such learning occurs at a distance, often mediated by film, television and the Internet, and isn't personalized to individual desires, fears, or body histories. The women we interviewed for this documentary work with individuals, couples, and small groups in a variety of sex education contexts. These sex educators help couples identify BDSM desires and boundaries, work with women to link sexual practices with body confidence, and coordinate with health care providers and sex workers to foster positive doctor-patient relationships. In some cases, our participants were the only connection that their students, clients, and/or advocacy partners had to someone who provided access to reliable, non-judgmental, and confidential support for their sexual curiosity, desires, or practices. As Mistress Sophia describes in a sweet, heartbreaking, and hilarious moment, a client once proclaimed, "you're doing God's work" after she provided just the service for which the client had been searching. All of these actions taken by the sex educators with whom we worked, as well as others who serve a similar role, blend a focus on holistic public forms of sex positivity with specific individual sex-positive education. In this sense, our own documentary serves as another example of mass communication reaching a diverse audience with varied experiences and interests. Through documentary work focused on sex positive topics, such as the work in the story *Sex Ed*, we hope that the content helps those audience members, as individuals, in multiple ways. First, we hope listeners think about an expanded sense of sex education beyond the physical education teacher's awkward middle school or high school lessons. Second, we want the audience to consider the myriad ways that one can learn more about one's own sexual health, interests, and relationships. Third, we want listeners to understand sexuality and sexual desires along a spectrum within the broader social

context. Finally, we hope that people who hear our story will gain more self-acceptance as well as less outward-directed judgment of others' sexual practices. Through the stories we produce we extend into the realm of public broadcasting the transformative work of education in a one-on-one context.

The rise of sex-focused podcasts and vlogs means that more information is shared in the public sphere, which can be a good thing. But because many of these media projects lack a connection to sex research, there is the potential for misinformation to be shared. Both of us have been making audio documentaries for nearly two decades, but we started co-producing sex positive documentaries about five years ago. We wanted to blend careful reporting, collaboration with community-based experts, and storytelling with the intimacy of sound recordings that could also reflect our own interests in public scholarship. *Sex Ed* is the latest in a series of projects that represents that goal.

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Appendix A: Sex Ed Transcript

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Interview Participants: Mistress Sophia, Dana and Serpant Libertine

Mistress Sophia: I teach a Kink 101, or, I teach one that's called "Dominance for Nervous Beginners". I teach another class that all about mummification with plastic wrap and suspension.

Dana: I teach oral sex, anal sex, couples sex, pasty design.

Serpant Libertine: We always do, like, this tax money management workshop, we've done know your rights workshops. We're going to be doing legal workshops.

Daniel Narration: Mistress Sophia owns Chicago Dungeon Rentals, Dana co-founded Chicago Museum of Sex, and Serpant Libertine is an outreach coordinator for Sex Worker Outreach Project, it's also known as SWOP. And are all three are sex educators in Chicago.

Mary Narration: We all remember the sex education lessons offered in school. The physical education or health teacher presented a series of slides or videos to a sheepish or wincing audience.

Sometime between middle school and high school, formal approaches to sex education dwindled. From then on we were left to our own devices. Some of us look to friends for advice. Others to the Internet for anonymous aggregated resources.

Daniel Narration: Sophia, Dana, and Serpant help fill an information vacuum and provide adults with opportunities to ask questions, learn techniques, and make sense of their own sexual interests. Each teaches sex positive classes on a variety of topics.

Dana: It's set up in a room and there's three sheets of paper and everyone has a dildo, and there's a pen, and there's a couple of condoms and there's lubrication, and it starts off with, like, a sex positive talk and then we talk about anatomy, we go into biology, and then intertwined with all of that is a little bit of, uh, Eastern philosophy.

³ This is one of many projects that we have coauthored or coproduced. We rotate first author because all of our research and productions are created and developed through equal participation and contributions. We thank Emily Prior and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback.

Mary Narration: There is an interplay between the politics of sex education and the personal discovery that becomes part of each class or workshop.

Serpant Libertine: It's usually kind of a Sex Worker 101, who is a sex worker, what are the needs of the community, and then, you know, one thing I always stress is, the difference between, you know, choice, coercion, and circumstance, um, because we do recognize that there are different motivations for individuals to get involved, in the, uh, sex trade.

Daniel Narration: You know, there's an interesting thing that happens with sex education where the teacher never knows in advance who will come into the classroom and what fantasies or desires motivate a student or a client.

Mary Narration: One of the things that all three women say is that debunking myths is one of the most important parts of the education process, which isn't a surprise given how little formal education we have about sex in our culture.

Daniel Narration: And, for Sofia this happens at an individual level.

Mistress Sophia: Ther ...there's always a certain amount of burning questions people always wondered, well, is this really the truth. One myth that comes up again and again in the S&M classes that I teach is that there is only this one right way to be dominant. You have to have authority in all the situation, nobody can question you, you have to be absolutely certain of what you're doing at all times, and, that's just not true. There are just so many ways to be an effective, fun, safe dominant person.

Mary Narration: Sometimes Dana's finds that her free spirited approach to teaching comes into conflict with her students' struggles with their own body shaming.

Dana: The most challenging thing is the fact that the women frequently talk about how much he notices, like, how like floppy their boobs are or how fat they, or, stuff like that. It's like, I just have to reassure them that you're have sex with someone, you're judging yourself, sex is not really a place for judgement.

Daniel Narration: Our inability to talk openly about sex is reflected in antiquated notions about gender and sexual identity.

Serpant Libertine: So, it's actually been challenging cause we're not really up against people with conservative viewpoints, we're up against these liberals who are promoting, what I feel is, a really conservative viewpoint, in that it's promoting this idea that women are always victims and they don't have agency.

Mary Narration: Either in the setting of a classroom or through individualized experiences with sex workers, people are looking for something that will change *their* sense of self or *their* relationships with others.

Mistress Sophia: I'm just fascinated by kink, by fetish, by people's sexuality, because it's so broad I'm always seeing new things. You know, any time you think you have seen *everything*

there's always going to be somebody who brings in something new and you go "oh, okay, well, let's look into that".

Daniel Narration: These sex educators seek to inspire their students or clients to be open to a range of fetishes, kinks, or seemingly vanilla desires.

Dana: They just, like, want, like, someone who talks about it and verbalizes what they want to explore, so then they can say, "oh, this is normal and okay, I can try this and this and this".

Mary Narration: Other times the sex educator addresses *society's inability* to embrace sexual diversity, which is often seen as deviance.

Mistress Sophia: And there's a lot of questions you have to answer to get the person the right thing for them. And, I've had, at least, on three occasions, somebody who was so relieved after we figured what they were looking for, they got it, they were feeling good and they said, "you know, you're doing God's work" [laughter] which I thought oh, you know, that's so sweet.

Dana: I think everybody needs to understand just how to accept themselves and all the weirdness that they possess [laughter].

Serpant Libertine: Most sex workers that I know have had a negative experience with some sort of service provides, whether it be a therapist, a doctor, social workers, where they came out, they admitted what they did, and th...the rescue effort was put out, "you need to stop doing what you are doing".

Daniel Narration: Here the task is to influence public policies and the practitioners on the ground who use policies to define social norms.

Serpant Libertine: One things SWOP did, we launched last year, something called the Pro's Network Chicago, so we've got quite a few agencies and organizations as well as individual provides, they have all signed a contract to provide nonjudgmental services to individuals in the sex trade.

Mary Narration: Perhaps, it's that healthy sex education involves rethinking how we understand *our* public and private lives. We can all start with efforts to push through the discomforts of our middle school selves that might lead to inaction, misinformation or relying on secret Internet searches.

Mistress Sophia: I wish it was just understood by our culture that there are a million different ways to have sex and to be happy and be fulfilled. As soon as folks are starting to look at what *they* want and not what other people are telling them what they want, I think that changes the world.