International Journal of Communication 7 (2013), Feature 2457–2467 1932–8036/2013FEA0002

IJoC Sexuality Research in Communication

Putting the "Sexual" in "Public Intellectual"

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Introduction

In September 2012, I was invited to take part in a panel discussion that addressed the topic of sex and the media: what media are getting right, what they are getting wrong, and how those of us who work with the media can do it better. The occasion was the first-ever CatalystCon in Long Beach, California, a sexuality conference that brought together a mix of sex educators, activists, and scholars for a weekend of talking and thinking about contemporary sexual politics. How, panelists asked, do we effectively communicate about sexuality when as a culture we are not very good talking about sex? What strategies can we use when talking to reporters who themselves are likely to be uneducated about sexual topics or limited in their ability to discern good research from bad? How do we begin to shift media messages about sexuality away from a focus on alarmism and sensationalism toward more nuanced, factual and substantive discussions, all in easy to digest sound bites?

As a gender and sexuality scholar who is frequently called upon by reporters to provide an "expert opinion" on a variety of sexuality-related topics, and as someone who also pens a monthly column on sex and culture, I've thought a lot about these questions. I've also thought a great deal about the relationship between traditional academic publishing and public intellectual work, including what it might mean to position public scholarship as an essential part of, rather than separate from, our research methodology and praxis.

For the past decade, I have studied the growth of the women's market for adult entertainment and products, with a specific focus on the history and retail culture of feminist sex toy shops (Comella, 2010a, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b). Of particular interest to me is examining how feminist entrepreneurs—sex toy store owners, sex educators, and pornographers—challenge the idea of "business as usual" within an industry that has long catered to men, reimagining, in the process, the relationship between marketplace culture and social change. My research counters the idea that the adult industry is inherently inimical to women and antithetical to feminism, revealing instead that the logic of consumer capitalism can be reworked and refashioned to be conducive to feminist social change, albeit sometimes in ways that produce uneven outcomes.

My research exists at the interdisciplinary crossroads of communication and media studies and gender and sexuality studies and is indebted to what sociologist Paul du Gay (1997) describes as the "language of culture," including the ways that people "think, feel and act in organizations" (p. 1). I draw upon my training as a communication scholar by foregrounding theories of signification, representation, and discourse; I also take seriously questions of power and identity, concerns that are central to women's and gender studies. Collectively, these interests inform my research and teaching. An important part of my job, however, takes place outside the context of the college classroom, in the wider world of public scholarship and publishing. For me, then, where I "do it"—and by "do it," of course, I mean my work as a sexuality scholar and writer—matters greatly. This essay discusses how communication scholars working in the area of sexuality studies can put the "sexual" in "public intellectual" and the idea of "community" into "communication research." What follows details my commitment to public scholarship as a form of civic engagement and describes how this activity extends the reach and impact of my research program beyond the bounds of the academy and into the realm of the popular.

Sex and the Media

The story of how I became a public intellectual starts in Las Vegas, a city I moved to in 2007 after accepting a position in the women's studies department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Las Vegas is full of contradictions: a fascinating blend of strangeness and possibility, glitz and urban decay, multimillion dollar homes and blighted foreclosures, all of which are set against a backdrop of sprawling desert, neon lights, and a highly gendered and sexualized service economy. Las Vegas is bold, in your face, and unrepentant. But for all the talk of Sin City's bawdy licentiousness, its attitude toward sex is surprisingly conservative (see Comella, 2011a), a viewpoint that's often reflected in the narrowly prescribed ways that journalists write about sex and sexuality in Las Vegas.

An example of this occurred just weeks after my arrival, when *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert (2007a, 2007b, 2007c) wrote a series of op-ed pieces about prostitution and trafficking in Nevada. In the column, "City as predator," Herbert argued that there is "probably no city in America where women are treated worse than Las Vegas" (p. A19). Las Vegas, he continued, is a "place where women and girls by the tens of thousands are chewed up by the vast and astonishingly open sex trade" (ibid.).

I was struck by more than just Herbert's heavy-handed rhetoric and moralizing tone. His condemnation of an entire city and the sexual dangers he believed to exist in Las Vegas' seedy underbelly was based on his having read an advanced copy of psychologist and independent researcher Melissa Farley's (2007) self-published book, *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections*. Herbert became a mouthpiece for Farley's "research" and his column a means through which to uncritically disseminate her findings.

The problems with Farley's research are far too numerous to detail in this forum (see Weitzer, 2005), but if Herbert had actually done some homework on the topic of prostitution in Nevada, he might have discovered that other researchers studying both legal and illegal prostitution had arrived at very different conclusions than those reached by Farley, an avowed antiprostitution advocate (see Brents,

Jackson, & Hausbeck, 2010). Yet at no point did Herbert attempt to situate Farley's research in a wider body of scholarship on prostitution and the commercial sex industry. Instead, Farley's claims about male predators and the victimization of women and children played perfectly to a commercial media system accustomed to exploiting sex—and sexuality research—for the purpose of either titillation or outrage. The stage was set for Herbert to present a sensationalized, one-dimensional account of a phenomenon that is arguably far more varied and complex than either he or Farley cared to admit. It's also likely that most readers never considered that a different story about prostitution in Nevada could have been told.

To be fair, the propensity for journalists to uncritically accept research about sexuality at face value simply because it is labeled as such or to present readers with one-dimensional depictions of commercialized sex—with a generous side of hand-wringing thrown in—is certainly not unique to Herbert. His columns about trafficking and prostitution in Nevada were only the tip of the iceberg, an introduction to the fascination that many writers have with "sexy Vegas" on the one hand and their limited ability to write about sex the same way they would write about any other area of social life on the other—rigorously, fairly, and without judgment. It didn't take long for me to notice that many stories in the popular press that discussed the nexus of sex and Vegas—from the annual Adult Entertainment Expo to prostitution stings on the Las Vegas Strip—amounted to little more than titillating "fluff" pieces intended to generate Internet hits or thinly veiled denunciations that invited readers to pity sex workers, johns, and unsuspecting children, the latter of whom are positioned as victims simply by living in a world where pornography and prostitution exist (Comella, 2009).

Because sex is such a visible component of the everyday cultural iconography of Las Vegas, as well as an integral part of the city's tourist economy, there are good reasons for journalists to write about the sexual economy of Las Vegas. The problem, however, is that most reporters don't know how to talk about sex, let alone write about it. Journalists, like many people, come to the table with deeply internalized assumptions about what counts as "good" sex and "bad" sex. As a result, there is a lot of lackluster, if not downright bad, reporting on sexuality. This problem is exacerbated by many of the "expert" voices regularly featured in discussions about pornography, prostitution, and sex trafficking are those of abolitionists who want nothing more than to convince readers of the social harms of commercialized sex. Not only are individuals such as Melissa Farley and Gail Dines everywhere it seems, from the *New York Times* to *The Guardian*, but, to their credit, they know how to effectively disseminate their antiporn and antiprostitution messages. How could I, a sex-positive feminist scholar living and working in Las Vegas—a kind of "sexual ground zero"—intervene in and help to shape what gets said about sex in print, on the radio, on television, and on the Internet? What role could I play in changing how sexuality is talked about in popular media?

Working with the Media

My first opportunity to work with the media came when I started to get interview requests from reporters and invitations to appear on the local NPR station (KNPR) in Las Vegas. As someone with no prior experience working with the media, these requests gave me the opportunity to develop and hone my media skills. This included making sure I had relevant facts and figures at my disposal, learning to speak in sound bites, and, when it made sense, reframing the focus of a reporter's story so it wasn't just a series

of ruminations about whether sex work was "empowering" or "degrading." I learned to ask for interview questions in advance and Google reporters so I'd have a better sense of to whom I would be speaking. If I was invited to take part in a radio segment, I'd make sure to ask the producers who else was invited and what the format would be (e.g., panel discussion versus debate). I discovered that live radio lends itself to fleshing out ideas and making thoughtful points, whereas a news segment edited down to 20 seconds does not. I also learned that I didn't have to say "yes" to every media request, especially if it fell outside my areas of expertise or if the proposed story idea wasn't much to work with.

One of the most important tactics I learned early on was that I could steer a reporter toward the points that I felt were important to make—regardless of the questions being asked. While this strategy might seem obvious to some, the realization that I could "keep ownership" of an interview was a revelation to me. The first time I did this I was speaking to a reporter writing about Natalie Dylan, a young woman who was attempting to auction her virginity at a Nevada brothel. It was a story that had received national media attention, and the reporter wanted to know if I saw this as an act of "empowerment." I didn't find this story angle to be especially compelling; nor, for that matter, was it a question I felt I could reliably answer without knowing more about the young woman and her motivations. The real story, I offered, was that this had become such a big story to begin with, one that had more to tell us about contemporary media culture than it did sexual culture. The reporter welcomed my spin and featured my quotes prominently in the story (Lake, 2009). In this instance, I realized I could actively shape the direction of a story and that a good reporter was someone who was responsive when an "expert source" attempted to use their expertise to do just that.

I've also learned that sometimes you can squash a story in advance by convincing a reporter that a topic or direction they are pursuing is simply not a good one. For example, a few years ago, I was contacted by a local broadcast news reporter who had read a story online about men's porn consumption and wanted to pursue a local angle. His initial pitch was rather vague, so I asked what story he was referencing to identify the context in which to situate his request. It turned out he had stumbled upon an online story summarizing a recently published article in *Newsweek* titled, "The John Next Door" (Bennetts, 2011). I was familiar with the article, because it had been swiftly and roundly criticized by a number of sex researchers and writers for being an incredibly disingenuous piece of reporting, contributing, as one sex therapist and author put it, to "America's feverish sex panic" (Klein, 2011).

At issue, once again, was the influence of antiprostitution and antipornography advocate Melissa Farley in shaping how the topic of commercial sex—in this case, men who buy sex—was discussed by the mainstream media. Farley et al. (2011) had provided *Newsweek* with an exclusive copy of a study she had conducted with several associates titled, "Comparing Sex Buyers with Men Who Don't Buy Sex." The article was set up this way: "A new study reveals how the burgeoning demand for porn and prostitutes is warping personal relationships and endangering women and girls."

What the *Newsweek* story failed to discuss, however, was that Farley and her research team had collapsed men who buy sex and men who buy sexualized entertainment into a single, undifferentiated category. The researchers made no distinction, for example, between men who frequent prostitutes, men who purchase lap dances, and those who watch Internet porn, often for free and in the privacy of their

own homes. In this schema, all practices of sexual consumption, legal or not, as well as their social effects, were viewed as equivalent. Indeed, the category of "men who buy sex" was so all-encompassing that Farley herself acknowledged they had "big, big trouble finding nonusers" for the control group who were nonsex-buyers:

> We finally had to settle on a definition of nonsex-buyers as men who have not been to a strip club more than two times in the past year, have not purchased a lap dance, have not used pornography more than one time in the last month, and have not purchased phone sex or the services of a sex worker, escort, erotic masseuse, or prostitute. (as quoted in Bennetts, 2011)

In an e-mail to the reporter, I briefly summarized the problems with the *Newsweek* article, noting that Farley's research methods and findings had been discredited by a number of academics. While there still might be a story here, I told the reporter that I did not think following the most obvious path was the way to go. The next day the reporter e-mailed to say that after discussing the issues I raised with his producer, they decided to kill the story.

There are several lessons here. First, the *Newsweek* article shows just how easy it is for stories about sex—and by extension, bad sex research—to take on lives of their own, traveling from one media outlet to another, oftentimes without anyone—a writer, editor, or producer—stopping the flow of sexual misinformation and fear mongering. Second, a news story that has received national media attention becomes easy fodder for reporters on tight deadlines trying to find a local news angle for stories that they think are "in the air." Third, and equally important, the "john next door" is a stark reminder that it is far easier to be on the media radar if you're writing a press release or pitching a story that highlights sexual exploitation and harm. Tracy Clark-Flory (2011), the sex writer for the online magazine *Salon*, summed up the *Newsweek* story this way:

> Sexual fear-mongering sells. That's true whether it's about philandering husbands, sexting youth or "the john next door." Many of us get a charge (dare I say an erotic one) from taking a glimpse of America's sexual underbelly; it confirms our worst fears — about others and ourselves. But it's true what they say about fear: It distorts reality. (ibid.)

The stakes are high for how we talk about sex in the public arena, and perhaps nothing exemplifies this more than during the 2012 United States election season, when the very definition of rape, as well as women's reproductive rights, were seemingly up for grabs. The pushback from feminist activists and writers, especially online, through social media, was swift and instructive. Indeed, if sex-positive writers, scholars, and educators are not intervening in and challenging how the mainstream media frame discussions about everything from sexual assault and rape to the difference between consensual sex work and human trafficking, then bad research, sexual misinformation, and distorted realities risk becoming the basis for troubling actions and dangerous policies.

Becoming the Media

Making yourself available to talk to reporters is certainly one way for scholars to intervene in media discussions about sexuality. Another way is for you to become the media you want to see. After several years of living in Las Vegas, I became increasingly frustrated by the stories I was not reading and decided to do something about it. I pitched an idea for a monthly column on sexuality and culture to the then-editor of *Las Vegas Weekly*. My idea was simple: I wanted to write the kind of stories about sexuality that I wanted to read. My hunch at the time was that if I was hungry for a column about sex and culture in Las Vegas—something smart and substantive that moved beyond sexual caricatures and clichés—it was likely that other people were, too. I had a long list of story ideas and a community of sex-positive entrepreneurs, educators, and activists on speed dial ready to be interviewed. The editor liked my pitch and a column was born.

Writing for a popular audience was new and unchartered territory for me. While I knew I could string a grammatically correct sentence together, I had no training as a journalist and no relevant experience writing for popular venues. I quickly learned, for example, that the Oxford comma should be avoided, and that I was not writing an "introduction" but a "lede." I was given 1,000 words every month—a generous amount of space in the shrinking world of print media—to write about whatever topics related to sex and culture that I found interesting and timely. The one request I made, in turn, was to ask that my headlines be neither cheesy nor gratuitously sensationalist. The editor agreed.

My column for *Las Vegas Weekly* made its debut in August 2010. In my inaugural story, I covered the Desiree Alliance sex workers' conference (2010b). Using the conference as a jumping off point, I wrote about the history of the sex worker rights movement in the United States, foregrounding the importance of labor issues and criminalization to sex worker rights activists and their allies:

> For five days, conference attendees, including prostitutes, Internet escorts, strippers, web models, telephone sex operators, and professional dominatrixes, people of various ages, genders, and walks of life working in both the legal and illegal sex trades, networked and attended workshops designed with their professional and personal needs in mind. . . . Almost anything a sex worker might want to know about professional development, harm-reduction, sex worker organizing and public policy was there for the taking. How to screen clients? Check. Manage finances? Check. Safeguard personal privacy? Check. Internet advertising? Outreach services? Legal issues? Check, check, check. (Comella, 2010b)

I wanted my column to be a thoughtful engagement with a variety of sexually-related topics, and at the same time, a fun and entertaining read. I wanted it to be smart, but not too academic; educational, but not overly pedantic. I wanted to take readers behind the scenes and into the sociologically rich world of sex and culture that I knew existed, both in Las Vegas and elsewhere.

Since then, I've written about the greening of the sex toy industry and the history of "Masturbation May." I have profiled feminist porn pioneer Nina Hartley, sex toy entrepreneur Greg

DeLong, porn publicist Brian Gross, and sex researcher Debby Herbenick. I've written first-person accounts about my visit to a Nevada brothel and my night flying solo at a Las Vegas swingers club. I've covered the red carpet at the "Oscars of Porn" and written about a local dominatrix. I've discussed the state of sex education in Nevada public schools, the history of quasi-legal prostitution in Las Vegas from 1905–1955, and the rise of the "purity" movement, among other topics.

I have also used my column as a platform for sex-positive intervention, as a way to push against antipornography, antiprostitution, and antisex work advocates who are not shy about bending facts and reality to suit their purposes. A case in point involves commentary about the 2011 Adult Entertainment Expo penned by sociologist and antipornography feminist Gail Dines (2011). In her essay, published in *The Guardian*, Dines takes to task the "predatory capitalists" who, according to her, fill the "airless, poorly lit conference rooms" at the Sands Expo and Convention Center in Las Vegas. "What excites these guys (and it was overwhelmingly guys)," she writes, recalling her visit to the Expo in 2008, "is not sex, but money." She continues:

> One of the seminars at this year's expo is called In the Company of Women. Here academics will mix with pornographers to share ideas on how to develop niche products targeted to women. I'm sure there will be lots of talk about how women can be empowered by watching porn, because the pornographers, being the savvy businessmen they are, like nothing more than telling women that porn is actually good for them. This is their "trick," and one we must resist if we want to replace the plasticised [*sic*], formulaic and generic images of the pornographers with an authentic sexuality based on our own experiences, longings and desires. (2011)

The seminar Dines mentioned but did not attend, because she was not in Las Vegas at the time, was one I had moderated and helped to organize, and it couldn't have been more different from what she described. Even a cursory glance at the Expo schedule would have revealed that joining me on stage were two feminist sex toy retailers, a feminist sexologist and author, a female porn producer and a male sex toy designer—the first man ever invited to be part of the women's seminar. It was hardly the cesspool of women-hating "tricksters" and "predatory capitalists" that Dines had presented to readers.

I felt I had to respond to Dines' blatant distortions, and in a column titled "Feminists gone wild!" I did just that:

> There are numerous mischaracterizations that run throughout Dines' commentary, but none is more personally offensive than her blatant misrepresentation of this seminar. Her description is an utter fabrication designed to conjure up a bogeyman where none exists. And frankly, she should know better. (Comella, 2011b)

I continued:

> Had Dines actually been in Vegas and attended the women's seminar this year, she might have learned a thing or two about the women's market for sex toys and

> pornography, including the fact that female entrepreneurs have helped bring a concern with quality products, sex education, ethical porn production and alternative sexual imagery to the adult industry. Overlooking these things or, worse, pretending they don't exist is like narrating a history of college athletics without any mention of Title IX. (ibid.)

I did not relish going toe-to-toe with a fellow academic in print, but the alternative —to not respond and thereby let her inaccurate version of events stand as fact—was not an option. I had a platform—a pulpit in print, actually—that I could use to offer a counternarrative that challenged the monolithic world of pornography that antiporn proponents like Dines rely on to make a case about porn's inherent evils. If I was not willing to complicate this narrative when it came to rest on my very doorstep and show how both academic research and social reality contested Dines' claims, then I was not doing my job as either a sexuality scholar or as a public intellectual.

Conclusion

Writing for popular media outlets has been immensely rewarding in ways I could not have predicted in advance. For one thing—and it might sound trite—people read what I write and that is enormously gratifying. To meet someone and have them say, "I know your byline. I love your column," is not the kind of feedback I typically receive for articles published in more traditional academic venues. Second, writing for a popular audience, where word count is everything, has made me a much better academic writer and editor. Popular writing is about being engaging, lively, and concise—things we are not necessarily taught in graduate school. I have learned through my popular writing what is required to draw the general reader into a story and keep them on a page from start to finish. Finally, I get paid to write. That my time, labor, and expertise are compensated financially has made me value these things even more, especially in an era of stagnating university salaries.

Treading into the murky and often contentious waters of gender and sexuality also has its challenges. In a media world where readers treat online comments like an invitation to rumble, I learned quickly that there was not much to be gained by reading reader comments, as tempting as it may sometimes be. I have been called a "porn apologist" (and worse) every time I write about the adult industry, even if I am not writing about pornography. When I wrote about Ashley Madison (2011c), an online dating site for married people known for its provocative tag line, "Life is short. Have an affair," someone sent a three-page, handwritten letter to my office at UNLV blaming me for the downfall of marriage. When I wrote about the rise of the purity movement, I was called a hypocrite and accused of not respecting the choices of young women who opted for abstinence before marriage (2012b). The fans of my column, however, far outweigh the naysayers; and truthfully, nothing that has been hurled at me as a result of my sex writing comes close to the vitriol I received when I wrote about the importance of funding for higher education in Nevada.

You do not have to live in a place like Las Vegas to intervene in and shape media discourses about sexuality. Regardless of where you reside—a small college town or a large urban metropolis—you can find ways to make sexuality-related news, research, and policy debates relevant and accessible to a popular audience, and in the process, become more of a community-oriented scholar. The first step should

be establishing a relationship with the office of media relations at your university. Let them know that you are available to speak with reporters who are writing about issues of sexuality and culture. Ask what kind of media training is offered and learn to generate pithy sound bites and quotes. If you have one minute to make one point, what will it be? Be clear about your areas of expertise, and equally important, mindful of what you don't know. Sometimes being a good source means directing a reporter to an even better source. And remember, if you have something to say about an issue, you do not have to wait for a reporter or news program to come to you. You can write op-eds, start a blog, pitch a column, and find other meaningful ways to become the media you want to see.

Finally, there is a tendency within the world of academia to position public intellectual work and engaged scholarship as ancillary to the "heavy lifting" of peer-reviewed publishing. I think it is crucial to challenge this perception and broaden the scope of what counts as "real" scholarship. I also think it is up to those of us who do this type of work on a regular basis to make the case for how it serves as an extension of, rather than a departure from, our larger research programs. I've met colleagues, for example, who have discovered my research on gender and sexuality through my popular writing and scholarship, which circulates widely via social media platforms such as Twitter. I also make a point to use terms such as "public scholarship and civic engagement" when I discuss these publications on my annual review. While I do not expect my popular scholarship to count as strongly toward tenure and promotion as my peer-reviewed articles, I do expect it to be recognized as an impactful form of scholarly praxis that extends discussions about sex and culture beyond the often insular world of academic research and writing and into the realm of the everyday—the place where all our scholarship should ideally reside.

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