

Sex Media by Feona Attwood. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-5095-1687-2

While media have always been an important part of sexual expression, communication and connection, recent advancements in new media technologies have significantly reshaped how we experience and understand sex, how we connect to our bodies and those of others, and how we embody intimacy. Attitudes towards sexuality and sexual practices have evolved dramatically with the proliferation of technologies like dating apps, smart sex toys and virtual reality (VR), and relationships between technology and the body have become more complex. Porn is now mainstream, the sex tech industry is buzzing and sex cultures are intertwined with new media practices more strongly than ever before.

Sex Media addresses these issues from a humanistic, rather than behavioral, perspective, offering a broad, but useful, introduction to the study of gender, media and sexuality. Interweaving the fields of gender, media and cultural studies, it is designed as an elementary text and is intended primarily for undergraduate students in the above and related fields. The book's main premise focuses on the significance of sexual media practices and their products, emphasizing that one needs to understand their nature, characteristics and aesthetics, as well as their shifting relations to art, politics, commerce, education and religion. Attwood sees critical media and sexuality studies playing a key role in providing intersectional and inter-disciplinary frameworks for tackling these issues.

It is worth noting that the book takes a distinctly Western approach, by focusing on cases and debates from English-speaking countries. Moreover, the content covered is heavily skewed towards children and young people's engagement with sex media, as well as 'older' types of media overall, such as sexualized images, pornography and sexting. Readers interested in cutting-edge technologies and those looking to learn more about how people use technology for intimacy—to connect with prospective partners, increase the excitement of their sexual relationships, or track their sexual activity – will have to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, *Sex Media* offers a solid springboard for those seeking to understand the various roles that the internet and mobile devices play in postmodern sexual culture.

The book is organized into five chapters that unfold like different topics from a course syllabus, starting from basic introduction to diving deeper into the content. The first chapter, "Sex, Gender and Sexuality," starts with an overview of how these concepts are defined and treated in the humanities, biological sciences and in mainstream discourse. Introductory definitions are provided for a host of critical concepts that map the terrain of the debates that are to follow. The book also includes a brief history of Western sexual politics since the 60s, and the role

of countercultures and subcultures in challenging norms of sexual identity and practice. According to Attwood, mainstream debates surrounding technology and contemporary sexual behavior have, more or less, always been tainted by misunderstanding and the tendency to conceptualize sex as good/bad, feminine/masculine, moral/immoral and normal/deviant. Critical approaches, she argues, can help us overcome such binaries and better understand the complexity of sex and sex-related phenomena. This is a point she returns to in the fifth chapter as well.

The second chapter, “Regulating Sex Media,” examines the regulation of sex in film, art and literature. Like Chapter 1, it begins with definitions and a broad-scope history of media regulation in Britain and the United States. It also explores the construction of pornography in public, political and intellectual discourse, highlighting the hypocrisy around the use of terms like ‘extreme’ pornographic material. The later half of the chapter deals with young people’s sexual practices, in particular texting, and how those are regulated. Specifically, the discussion here focuses on sexting and its relation to cyber-bullying, shaming, (sexual) double standards and pedophilia. The chapter ends by looking at some contemporary trends in sex media regulation. Despite frequent suggestions that sex and sex media are now less regulated than ever, there is evidence that “a process of juridification – an expansion and intensification of regulation – is part of a broader move towards the surveillance of people’s communication which increasingly involves an interest in regulating their creative and fantasy worlds.” (p. 60)

The third chapter, “Sexualization,” examines the claims that media has become ‘sexualized’, and that sexualization is oppressive to children, youth and women. According to the author, many claims about sexualization made in popular discourse focus on the abstract and imagined figure of the ‘child’ (rather than young people’s actual lives and experiences). These are selective and biased beliefs in how they interpret scientific evidence; and reproduce binaries of masculinity/femininity, good/bad sexuality and normative/deviant behavior. This chapter also provides a review of the literature on young people’s relations to sex and media. Attwood points out – and rightly so – that interest in young people’s use of technologies for sharing sexual images has been much stronger compared to other aspects of their lives, such as their views about sexual practices or the ways they develop sexual desires. In addition, Attwood highlights the silencing of young people’s lived experiences in much of mainstream research, and the lack of intersectional approaches to the study of (their) sexuality.

The fourth chapter, “Forms of Sex Media,” looks at a broad range of porn styles, forms and genres, such as gonzo porn, drawn pornography and virtual sex. It begins by examining the place of these media within the cultural industry – typically situated low in the cultural/ aesthetic hierarchy – before discussing the

characteristics that porn shares with other forms of popular entertainment. Attwood seeks to highlight the wide range and aesthetic complexity of sex media and the differences between different types of pornographies. The chapter ends with an interesting overview of “Sex Media Interactions,” which briefly mentions cybersex, internet-enabled and 3D-printed sex toys, and geosocial hook-up apps. In this part, a deeper engagement with these new forms of ‘technosexualities’ and techno-sexual practices would have been beneficial, and would have given the book a more current edge. Instead, her discussion about the future of sex and sexuality feels rushed and overlooks many of the issues (about trust, privacy, identity etc.) raised by innovations such as cognitive computing and the Internet of Things.

The fifth chapter, “Sex Media, Culture and Society,” places sex media into a broader social and cultural context. The chapter starts out by discussing the significance of sex as a form of work, and the various ways in which intimacies are entangled with commerce in today’s world. Attwood then moves on to consider how sex is linked to leisure and how the idea of ‘sex-as-play’ manifests itself in contemporary culture through, for instance, fantasy-themed sex toys, DIY sex machines and sex-robots. Attwood uses this discussion to argue that sex has become an increasingly commercial practice and “part of the broader corporatization of intimacy.” (p. 117) The later half of the chapter considers how bodies and technologies are increasingly becoming ‘hybridized’, and what this means for how we embody our sexuality and how we communicate it to others. It also discusses the relationship between education, sexual health, and well-being, suggesting that the use of sex media in the context of a rights based ‘sexuality’ education can support young people’s healthy sexual development and sexual citizenship practices.

Ultimately, Attwood contends, understanding the role of media and technology in culture is essential for developing ideas about sexuality education, sexual ethics, and sexual development.

The book concludes with a brief summary that highlights the role that critical media and cultural studies can play in helping us understand sex media and its significance. The core idea put forth here is that sex media cannot be understood in terms of ‘media effects’. To understand the significance of the book, one needs to examine sex media in terms of their distinctive characteristics, as well as their relationship to art, culture, politics, and society more broadly. While this is not a novel argument, it remains a critical one, for too often technology is discussed in terms of what it ‘does’ to people, rather than by what it *is* and how it relates to society.

Overall, *Sex Media* is a useful addition to the current texts on gender, media and sexuality and will be of value to instructors seeking a course reader that offers a nuts-and-bolts overview of what sex media are and how they may be

studied. Two of the book's greatest strengths are its broad scope and structure. Besides using highly accessible language, Attwood begins and ends each chapter with bullet points that sum up its main arguments and the topics covered. In addition, several of the more theoretical sub-sections in the book start with a one-sentence summary of the main intellectual argument put forth by Attwood. Written in a highly structured and modular manner, with aids that will certainly appeal to less scholarly readers, this is an excellent book not just for undergraduate students, but also a curious lay audience.