

9-16
Robert J. Samuelson

Sex, Spin and Circulation

The clean little secret about teenage sex is that there's less of it than there used to be: not much less but enough to reverse a long upward spiral. You would not have learned this, however, from Time magazine's recent cover story: "Everything your kids already know about sex." Teens know more about sex than ever, it said. So there must be (it implied) more teen sex than ever. The first notion may be true; the second isn't.

Surveys by the National Center for Health Statistics show that teenage sexual activity has declined in the 1990s. In 1995, the proportion of girls 15 to 19 who had ever had sex was 50 percent, down from 53 percent in 1988 and 55 percent in 1990. That ended years of rises: In 1970, only 29 percent of teen girls had had sex. Boys showed a similar drop. The frequency of sex may also be declining. Among boys, 38 percent had had sex within three months of the survey in 1995; in 1988, the figure was 43 percent.

We in the press prize a reputation for honesty, and when one of us falsifies, we get huffy. There has been much of this lately. Stephen Glass, a writer for the New Republic, was revealed to have invented sources. Patricia Smith, a Boston Globe columnist, resigned after fabricating people and quotes. But lying is a rare sin. The more common problem—less noted—is selective or sloppy reporting of the type in the Time story. The facts and quotes may be correct, but the overall message is questionable or wrong.

Time isn't alone. Almost any reporter with a long career (me included; also note, I write for Newsweek) has erred sometimes. The Wall Street Journal recently said, in a review of public opinion, that "the defining political issue of the 1990s is health care" and cited mass unhappiness with managed care. Well, maybe. But after reviewing polls on health care, Karlyn Bowman of the American Enterprise Institute concluded that discontent is overstated. For example, Gallup regularly asks people to rate the nation's biggest problem. The April results were: the budget deficit, 5 percent; health care, 6 percent; the economy, 11 percent; crime, 20 percent.

"The secret of our business—first, you simplify; then, you exaggerate," an unknown newsman once said. Deadline pressure is a worn,

yet often true, excuse for mistakes. Other causes are weaker. How about ambition? Most reporters crave the big story. How about commercial pressure? Powerful media empires threaten journalistic integrity less than new sources of news—cable TV, the Internet. Editors face fierce competition for people's attention. Everyone needs hot

"Time's story"

offended me as a
parent and a
reporter."

stories to boost circulation and TV ratings, which draw advertising. Packaging (covers, headlines, pictures and prose) becomes everything; spin is in. Truth gets pinched.

I suspect—but can't prove—that this sort of climate encouraged Time's cover on teenage sex. It instantly got my attention, because I have a 13-year-old daughter (and also sons 11 and 8). She avidly watches one of the TV shows featured in the story, "Dawson's Creek," a series in which, among other things, a high school student has an affair with one of his teachers. Time then leaps from more TV teen sex to more real teen sex.

Although the story never states this directly—it can't without hard evidence—it suggests the connection in many ways. The story opens with a four-column picture of two teens, partially disrobed and sprawled on each other, with his hand creeping toward her fanny. The story's first four pull-quotes (highlighted in big type) emphasize the ease of real sex:

"If you're feeling steamy and hot, there's only one thing you want to do."—Stephanie, who lost her virginity at age 14.

"If the President can do it, why can't we?"—a male student, reasoning at a Denver middle school.

"Teens today are almost nonchalant about sex."—junior high school counselor in Salt Lake City.

"If you watch TV, they've got everything you want to know."—Brett, 14, in Denver.

The story's writer, Ron Stodghill II, said he knew of surveys showing less teenage sex but minimized the drops because they occurred from

levels much higher than in the early 1970s (true). He emphasized "how kids are bombarded with sexual images" and how parents have less influence over their behavior. Halfway through, the story briefly mentions that the teenage birthrate is down 12 percent since 1991—a fact attributed to more contraception. The story's editor, Howard Chua-Eoan, said he didn't know that surveys showed less sex; Stodghill said he was told.

Whatever happened, the story was misleading. "Those are real kids in the story," said Kristin Moore of Child Trends, which monitors children's issues. But "there's also the other extreme—fundamentalist kids who take chastity vows." And many teens are in the middle. They feel awkward, hesitant or fearful toward early sex. Surveys confirm this muddled picture.

Some teens are having sex earlier than ever. Between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of girls having sex before age 15 rose from 11 to 19 percent, report Joyce Abma of the National Center for Health Statistics and Freya Sonenstein of the Urban Institute. Not all this sex is voluntary. Some is rape. Some is so compelled that girls later judge it "unwanted." By contrast, the broader decline in teen sex is concentrated in the suburbs. Among suburban girls 15 to 19, the proportion who had had sex within three months of the survey dropped from 41 to 34 percent between 1988 and 1995. In central cities, there was little change.

We can't fully explain these trends. Isabel Sawhill of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy says that the fear of AIDS deters teens. She also suspects that values are shifting. A poll of college freshmen asks whether "sex is okay if people like each other." In 1987, 52 percent thought so; by 1996, only 42 percent did. And parents may matter: In families with two biological parents, teen sex (at age 15) occurs half as often as in one-parent families. If children feel more secure or loved, they may be less vulnerable, adventurous or foolish.

Time's story offended me as a parent and reporter. It falsely told teens that everyone's "doing it"—or soon will—when everyone isn't. Peer pressure based on bad information isn't likely to lead to good decisions. The story was a fine read but achieved spin at the expense of truth.

The Washington Post

WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 1998

Inside: Food, Classified
Today's Contents on Page A2

FINAL

Prices may vary in areas outside
Metropolitan Washington. (See box on page A2)

25¢