



# The Media Project

A Program of Advocates for Youth

## Love American Style: Some Like It Hot, Some Like It Not

*Summarized Transcript*

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**KATE LANGRALL FOLB, DIRECTOR, THE MEDIA PROJECT:** Welcomes everyone and introduces The Media Project, describes its services, and introduces moderator Meryl Marshall, CEO of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

**MERYL MARSHALL:** It is so important for the industry as a whole to take an active role in discussions about sexual health issues. We can't be afraid of this; we have to admit we have a role in exploring these topics. Today should act as a starting point to begin a dialogue and start thinking about television taking the responsibility for addressing sexuality and youth in our programming. Both Washington and the public have decided that we're responsible. Whether we take an active or a passive role they'll blame us, so we should take a more active role when it comes to shaping American attitudes towards sexuality. Introduces James Wagoner, President of Advocates for Youth.

**JAMES WAGONER:** This past summer, Advocates for Youth sponsored a European study tour to the Netherlands, Germany, and France to explore why these countries have managed to attain some of the lowest rates in the world in areas like teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and abortion. One of the most striking things that we discovered was the incredible difference in attitudes between European teens and their American counterparts when it comes to sex. We have put together a short video for you that includes interviews with teens as well as excerpts from European commercials and PSAs which will illustrate clearly what we found.

[Everyone watches video.]

**JAMES:** Thank you Robin Smalley for putting the video together. Our teen birth rate in the U.S. is higher than anywhere else in the industrialized world as well as our statistics for HIV/AIDS and STDs. Our teen birth rate alone is 13% higher than in the Netherlands. In Europe, we talked to teens, parents and experts. The difference is those countries' policies are driven by research and science whereas in America, policies are driven by religion and politics. Wide ranging health insurance in Europe also plays a part in their success...here 4 million children have no health coverage at all... as does massive "safer sex or no sex" campaigns. Here we have no ads for safer sex. Maybe it's the comprehensive sex ed in the schools that helps make a difference. In the U.S., one-third of our schools teach abstinence-only and half of southern schools prohibit any discussion of protection. In some schools, kids are asked to make an abstinence pledge and told that good alternatives to having sex include baking cookies and washing each other's cars. Never mind that the current average age of puberty is 12 and the average age of marriage is 26 and by 18, the majority of kids have had intercourse! Although the American Medical Association has said that condom availability in the schools would be more effective than abstinence-only programs, their recommendations are ignored.

Perhaps the biggest difference is in attitude. In Europe, religious interest groups have little impact on public policy whereas here, religious groups succeed in having pages that deal with sex ripped from health and sex ed books. In Europe, sex is viewed as a normal and natural part of becoming an adult and their society spends more time and energy educating and empowering their young people to make healthy choices and less time saying, "Don't do it." Here that would be considered an open forum for promiscuity. **Yet Dutch youth commence sex later than our teens here in America.** We

haven't learned that isolating sex simply encourages experimentation. Their culture says it's OK to prepare for sex with safety. In America, some people want to make the media their "scapegoat *du jour*." So, where do we go from here? There are four things we need to accomplish. Number one: We think this European message needs to get out; we need more polling about what are really the public attitudes because the politicians confuse us. In fact, the American public is all for abstinence but is also all for information. Number two: It costs \$38 billion a year for us to deal with our teen pregnancy fallout. If our statistics were the same as in the Netherlands we'd save \$970 million in the first year alone. Number three: We need a new paradigm for viewing adolescents. In Europe, teens are valued as an asset to society. But we persist in seeing them in a way I call the "Bermuda Triangle of adolescence" ... We don't give them any credibility, we don't credit them with values and we only see them for who they will become, not for what they are right now. And number four is responsibility: It comes down to Rights, Respect and Responsibility. Teens have the right to information and services; they need to be treated with respect as full members of society; and society has the responsibility to provide them with the tools they need. In Europe, young people are expected to act responsibly and they do, because they are given the information to do so. Many of our TV shows do an excellent job when it comes to adolescent sexuality. I laughed myself silly when I watched the hilarious way *Everybody Loves Raymond* managed to normalize condom use; both *Once and Again* and *Get Real* do a beautiful job when it comes to creating positive sexual messages within a family dynamic; *Felicity* and *Moesha* are great examples of teens being responsible by learning about safer sex. But we still need a dialogue that can get us closer to where sex is viewed as natural.

**MERYL:** Asks everyone around the table to introduce themselves.

**EXECUTIVE 1:** During your study, did you look at family structure in the Netherlands? Is it more cohesive?

**JAMES:** Because of government support for raising families, there aren't as many workaholics. The society supports the need for families to be together. Also I noticed parents are more tactile with their kids: holding them, taking them along on errands, touching them.

**MERYL:** What messages do you all try to convey with your programming regarding teen sexuality? What do you try to communicate with "Felicity" and "Dawson's Creek"?

**EXECUTIVE 2:** We take the approach that we speak up to our audience, not down to them and in that way, we appeal to young adults as well as older audiences.

**EXECUTIVE 3:** We encourage our producers to incorporate their messages into their storylines rather than relying on PSAs. We've found that messages that are interwoven within the shows' content are much more powerful than PSAs.

**EXECUTIVE 4:** We don't have a policy on the number of safer sex episodes or messages that we do. At the beginning of each season, we talk about the issues we'd like to do that are specific to each show. "Moesha" has dealt with many milestones like teen pregnancy, Roofies, and pot smoking. There is no policy to deal with sexually explicit topics. It's a question of balance. At one point, we ran Trojan ads, which turned into such a big deal. We had a major problem in the South with a powerful, vocal contingent of affiliates that pulled our programming. But we have a wonderful CEO who said to keep running them anyway. It amazes me that we can do anti-smoking ads without controversy but not ads that promote sexual health.

**EXECUTIVE 5:** On "Real World" and "Road Rules," since they're a documentary format, we hold a mirror up to our audience and we are able to influence through our casting people with different attitudes. We currently have two committed virgins on the show, which creates dialogue that we haven't heard before on the show.

**EUROPEAN DIRECTOR:** I tried to produce "Studs" in Holland. But because the show is based on innuendo and sex is so open there, adults didn't realize why we were beating around the bush... why can't you just say "I want to get laid"... and the show didn't work. This is so strange here because in Europe we would never have a meeting such as this, about portraying sexual issues, because we just portray real life, which includes love and sex. American TV is hypocritical. Ratings for American soaps are way down in Europe because it's all about affairs and promiscuity but they don't really talk about sex... it's surrealistic. It boils down to censorship here. Government policies and Broadcast Standards determine what your viewers get to see. We don't have any censorship.

**EXECUTIVE 3:** Maybe you're just sensitive to different things. In Europe, they're more sensitive to violence. Here, it's sex.

**EXECUTIVE 6:** There are significant power factors at play. There is a regional power structure. We have a Bible Belt reaction that is insurmountable as well as political and economic sanctions not to air certain programming, especially regarding teens and sex. At Broadcast Standards and Practices, we'd love to open things up and allow more safer sex messages, teen sexuality, etc. But we have these other influences. Hollywood takes the blame for sex equals fame equals money equals power. Our soaps like "Melrose Place" send unrealistic, inaccurate messages and we're aware of that. We know how to send healthier messages...we just need more opportunities.

**EXECUTIVE 7:** With Saturday morning shows we're governed by the FCC as educational so we work closely with the producers when it comes to sex. Our target audience is 12- to 17-year-olds and we try not to talk down to them, but rather provide a realistic view in a comedic context. We're going to start doing drama on Saturday mornings because kids tell us that they aren't being taken seriously. They aren't listening to comedy messages. They want a realistic mirror of themselves. So we're talking to a lot more kids and even adopting schools to get their views. It's easy to take pot shots at the South but they control so much of what we see. I recently visited the FCC and you could hear the voice of the South there. It's important to talk to people there, we shouldn't ignore them and just write them off because then the problem will only get worse. It's very important that the message in this room today is sent out.

**MERYL:** A lot of what we do is focused on romance.

**JAMES:** I was really struck by European youth that their culture allows them to integrate sexuality and therefore, free them up more for a romantic view of sex. Our programming is good because it's focused on relationships and peer interaction which is so important to kids.

**EXECUTIVE 8:** What differentiates healthy sex vs. unhealthy sex? The folks in Europe sit down with their kids and tell them the difference. We blur that here, there's no real distinction. What we have is an interpersonal problem. Sex has become a way for people to feel better because we have inadequate internal resources to feeling whole and sex works to fill the void. I don't see that difference in the media. I spent the weekend in the South and found that when you talk like this you can make them into allies. The emphasis has to be away from the mechanics of sex and towards what is healthy. Also if you concentrate on relationships and the spiritual aspects of the relationships rather than the physical aspects, they'll listen. Remember, we are all fighting the same battle to lower teen pregnancy and disease.

**EXECUTIVE 4:** You get over the stumbling point about sex by talking about what's healthy and unhealthy. That's where romance comes in...the soaps are all about unhealthy, interpersonal relationships.

**MERYL:** Are there specific dramas that are examples of showing healthy relationships?

**EXECUTIVE 9:** Yes, in some of our shows, but it's more along the lines are "I'm doing this for all the wrong reasons" so I'm not going to do it. If we could show healthy sex relationships, how would we get it through the South?

**EXECUTIVE 10:** Our culture still says that, not only do good girls not have sex, they have no sexual feelings whatsoever and that boys are randy and can't help themselves. Boys still get that old message.

**EXECUTIVE 8:** We don't tell women what healthy sex is or what a healthy sexual feeling is, so we can empower them.

**MERYL:** What are the thoughts from advertising?

**EXECUTIVE 11:** There are several standards for selling products but sponsors can't sell products when people protest programs with questionable content. Advertisers range in sensitivity from the ones who are sensitive to getting one irate letter to those who stick by their convictions to do what they think is right and don't care about the reaction. We seem to be shooting ourselves in the foot. Do we flaunt content to hike ratings so protest groups can hype the show, knowing there's a controversy that will promote ratings?

**EXECUTIVE 4:** For us, the protests from affiliates have always come as a surprise, except with the condom ads which we took to them in advance. They hated it, but we did it anyway.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** Have there ever been stories in the press regarding the affiliates' problems with some of the subject matter?

**EXECUTIVE 4:** No, no stories written.

**MERYL:** Have the protests been organized?

**EXECUTIVE 4:** Both organized and not.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** What would happen if this problem were addressed at affiliates meetings by region? You could show the video, give them information and enlist their help as a health service.

**EXECUTIVE 4:** I think we should show the video we just saw to all our producers and affiliates.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** Is progress slowed because we're not focusing on the powers that be...the FCC, advertisers, affiliates? If you break down their barriers with the statistics we saw you might get a different reaction from the FCC. If they saw these statistics and they could see what works. Let's experiment and help ourselves.

**EXECUTIVE 12:** My company has, at times, been known for irresponsible sex. I was shocked by watching the video and seeing the Americans' response to how negative and hung up we are. I had no idea of the degree. This is a huge global issue...you can address the content problem but we have to look at specific projects to help develop healthy relationships.

**MERYL:** Does anyone else have something to add about this issue?

**EXECUTIVE 13:** I recently started production on "Jane's Coming Out Party" about a teen girl coming out about her lesbianism. I'm not popular with Standards people at the moment! We did "Sex and Mrs. X" with Jacqueline Bissett about a French madame. Bissett, being European, thought it was interesting how in America, women can either be successful *or* sexy, not both. It's empowering for a woman to see both.

**EXECUTIVE 1:** There's a maturity difference between women and men. We can't always use material because we can't show some real life situations. We interviewed 35,000 kids for the shows: half from broken homes, half from abusive situations. It's not surprising they use sex to feel better.

**EUROPEAN DIRECTOR:** Kids' attitudes, especially men's, are different in Europe. You watch Rikki Lake and Jerry Springer and the average American thinks unhealthy sex is necessary to be a citizen! What is the connection between extreme tolerance for violence on TV and zero tolerance for sex?

**MERYL:** I'm seeing a sense of helplessness here in the face of audience and advertisers. Other countries' media takes a more pro-active role in their values.

**JAMES:** In Washington, there is a fixation on policies but here policy doesn't drive culture. Entertainment is a significant component. We do poll attitudes and the antidote to denial is public health information showing that the issue is pragmatism vs. idealism.

**EXECUTIVE 14:** Shows don't have to do episodes devoted entirely to sexual health issues. If the messages are incorporated into existing stories, it can be just as effective... like wallpaper, they can be the backdrop that doesn't call attention to itself but is always there.

**EXECUTIVE 15:** On *Once and Again*, the young girl just had a relationship with a black boy and that was never even discussed as a problem and if you do the same thing with sexual messages, the same thing can happen.

**MERYL:** But do the people who write and produce our shows have the same attitudes as the kids that we saw in the video? Do we think a girl who carries condoms is loose? What are our own attitudes toward these issues? I bet even in this room we'd be divided, which makes it all the more difficult for programming.

**EXECUTIVE 3:** Half of the producers I work with are sympathetic and half are resistant.

**EXECUTIVE 9:** One of the basics of drama is conflict and it's easier to do that with unhealthy relationships. We need new ways to tell stories other than using all the ones that tend to be unhealthy. Do promo people at the networks look to highlight controversial moments? That's what gets people to watch. I would love to make 24 dubs of the video to give to all our producers. Sometimes, though, statistics don't get the message out to change attitudes. Producers go to the familiar and what's easy. Are there cultural/sociological guidelines to help people think about issues? We need one piece of information that has both statistics and guidelines to help producers find the dramatic conflicts.

**MERYL:** Where would you anticipate groups who would take issue besides the South?

**GROUP:** Congress.

**EXECUTIVE 3:** Aggressive health campaigns are government funded in Europe. The FCC isn't the issue. The South is exaggerated, we get complaints from all over. We get more complaints from ads, not program content. Gay issues we can't get into. Cable shows don't have affiliates...they can do condom advertising, we can't.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** It's not advertisers; it's fear of consumers. Why not put my money where it'll do the most good. We have to focus on the consumer arena. The perception in the U.S. runs from A to Z...how do we change that? Let's focus on one issue...health. What if the creative community got together during a sweeps period and every show did an episode of a health issue with PSAs of the same issue and brought in a Web site at the same time. If you take that concept might you then not have a complete package with harmony of a complete message? Bring in the ad councils from the beginning.

**EXECUTIVE 3:** Generally, yes, but the specific content of a show can still be an issue. On *Dawson's Creek* we did a gay coming out and it was a big problem.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** Then focus on an easier issue that is more health related.

**MERYL:** What about Americans saying carrying condoms is bad and we try to bring attention to that?

**EXECUTIVE 10:** You still run into economic barriers. We did that several years ago and advertisers dropped out...it was very costly.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** Why don't you bring advertisers in with the 4 As? Do it up front and ask for help in a joint project with advertisers and all the networks working together...we could accomplish it.

**EXECUTIVE 3:** Agreed. For example, what happened with the animated anti-drug message.

**EXECUTIVE 11:** The 4 As are meeting in two weeks in Florida.

**EXECUTIVE 16:** Unity is really important to build a bridge where you're talking together. Parents want to know how to talk to their kids and they have to worry about changing their own mindset first.

**MERYL:** The Academy will be doing a Family Screening Event this summer in affiliation with our START Program that will address this very topic, using TV episodes to facilitate kids and parents communicating about issues. We've talked about some very important things here today and there's still much to do. If no one has more to add, we'll wrap it up now.

**KATE:** Thanks everyone for coming.