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Groundhog Day: Digital Media Is Fake and Teaches Young People the Wrong Things About Sexuality

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On September 11, 2023, the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab (IERLab) at Curtin University hosted "Groundhog Day"—a one-day online-only open-access collection of roundtables on the cyclical nature of academic spotlights and hot topics, and some of the frustrations related to the ahistoricity of the discussions and moral panics. Over four panels, the event addressed the cycles, patterns, templates, and related fatigue on digital media discourse. Find out more at ierlab.com/groundhogday.

This article is an edited and truncated version of the highlights for panel two: "Digital Media Is Fake and Teaches Young People the Wrong Things About Sexuality." The panel was hosted and moderated by Professor Kath Albury and features Dr. Samantha Mannix, Dr. Barrie Shannon, and Hao Zheng.

Kath Albury:
In my honors and PhD projects, I researched then-contemporary practices of what was commonly called amateur pornography. These analogue pictures were traditionally posed in hotel room settings or domestic spaces like bedrooms or lounge rooms. They were both still and moving images, and often they were clearly made to be shared with lovers, friends, or strangers. They were circulated through snail mail, often using anonymous post office boxes.

In the late 90s, these older practices of mediated sexualities were shifting into digital spaces. They moved on to online forums and chat groups that blurred the erotic and the mundane. Eventually, they appeared on social media platforms and mobile phones as nudes and selfies and sexts. And you no longer needed a polaroid camera, a VCR, a desktop computer, a magazine subscription, or a private mailbox to participate in mediated sexual cultures because all these things were on your phone.

Since then I have had what feels like the same conversation many times with journalists about the "fake" and "misleading" aspects on mediated sexuality. But if we are asking, "Does digital media teach young people the wrong things in the wrong way about sex and sexuality and gender?", where and how do we *expect* young people to access this knowledge?

My three panelists are emerging scholars who have conducted very careful empirical research with high school–aged and university-aged young people, exploring questions of where and how social media and digital media practices fit into sexual and social learning—and which aspects of sexuality we consider to be "real" or "fake."

Samantha Mannix:
My PhD research looked at how young people, predominantly those aged 14 to 16, come to understand and experience intimate, dating, romantic relationships. One of my key findings about learning was around the role of digital spaces, practices, and cultures. This was particularly important in the context of what my participants described as inadequate and heteronormative formal school curriculum related to relationships and sexuality. They spoke about the ways they learn through engaging in digital cultures on Tumblr, for example, but also through the social media practices of their friends.

This learning was playful, sometimes silly, sometimes hurtful, sometimes incredibly critical. While some participants questioned the authenticity of these kinds of practices, and also described really nuanced rules for understanding and engaging this authenticity, they also described the very real care and love they received through this participation - or through engaging in observing. While not all participants posted photos of their partner online, for example, they did participate daily in seeing social media feeds of friend's relationships. My findings suggested that participation in these practices really helped or really shaped norms for what a relationship looks like, sometimes in ways that transgressed gender norms and at other times rearticulating old gender binaries and heterosexual privileges.

Barrie Shannon:
My research looks at sexuality education for trans and gender-diverse young people. I am really interested in how these young people understand and perceive the lessons that are offered at school—but more so how their day-to-day engagement with media and digital cultures constitute a sort of informal education on sexuality. And also an education on civics—things like identity, belonging, diversity, discussions about homophobia and transphobia—the sort of sentiments that are usually lumped in with the idea of sexuality education.

The key findings and takeaways of my research are that trans youth want their schools to be better at providing this education to them, obviously, but they do not consider them a reliable or a particularly relevant source of information about sex, sexuality, or gender. More compelling to those young people are the opportunities that are available to them in networked publics to learn from experts in being trans—other young people.

Most of my participants talked about viewing transition timelines on YouTube, for example, following queer users on Tumblr, being members of queer Facebook groups. All of these environments where

online content, posted and shared by other young people, became a sort of curriculum on gender, sexuality, history, art, politics, and all sorts. Things that are way beyond the scope of what can go on in a health or physical education class.

Naturally, those experiences for my participants were better than those that were available at school. And in many cases, and I think this is the most important part, they were fundamentally transformative. They were vitally important in how participants were able to develop as queer young people.

Another key finding is that lots of digital environments are reliable sources of information and community for queer youth. The areas of the school curriculum that did resonate and that were helpful were usually social studies, and especially English. Exploring queerness through analyzing films and books was much more affirming than learning about the concept of "a gay person," or why "homophobia is wrong" in their health classes. There is more to sexuality, identity, and belonging than sexual health.

Hao Zheng:
My PhD explores Chinese queer female students' queer and adult identity-making in Australia. My study sits at the intersection of queer youth and mobility migration studies. And I am here today because digital media has always been a significant element in my research, in my research design, in my research focus, and in my findings.

The participants of my study are aged from 20 to 34. They were born in mainland China, and they migrated—or arrived in Australia—after they were 13. They might be older compared to standard understandings of "young people." But compared to the expectations set by their family and by society, they are immature. In their family's eyes, and maybe in the public's eyes, in Chinese culture. So, they are still quite young in that way. This is definitely a relational definition of youth and young people.

When I was a baby researcher—in my honors year—I examined Chinese lesbians' double marginalization in the digital era. My current research project employed the social media scroll-back method in interviews. The findings also show that digital media has been profoundly influencing, shaping, and facilitating these students' transnational identity-making in many nuanced ways. Chinese queer female students' process of crafting their queer and adult identity is quite nonlinear and uneven, often complicating the conventional paradigms of youth transitions with all these remarkable milestones, and they even challenge the previous conceptualization of queer temporality. The strong sense of uncertainty often challenges different aspects of our understanding of norms in these young people's lives, and that includes their use of digital media.

It might be for placemaking, exploring a new culture with which they are not familiar. It also can be used to seek belonging and community to connect with other people. But I found that they use this maybe for a personal refuge where they feel an emotional breakdown, or they might use that for hyperlink storage, for memories and personal archives. They also might use this to stay connected with their families.

Understanding Historical Concerns

Kath Albury:
What are the historical concerns that your research is speaking to or building on? What is the context for your work? This could be an academic debate, it could be a public controversy, or it could be something else entirely.

Samantha Mannix:
I come from a public health background. Particularly working in the prevention of gender-based violence and sexual health areas. And here we are frequently considering young people in terms of risk: at risk of violence, at risk of sexually transmitted infections. While obviously this framing is often warranted, I kind of entered into my PhD as a former young person, thinking, "This doesn't really capture all experiences, all desires and identities." However, what I think is really important to note is that the digital media did not *create* these risks.

For example, gender violence and harassment has always occurred in young people's relationships. The concerns with the digital have come to kind of dominate these discussions now, moving forward. And, as I said, this is often warranted. However, the mechanisms that underpin the perpetration of these violences, such as gendered and racial power, have remained the same.

Similarly, young people's sexualities have always been positioned as risky, some more than others. My participants spoke of the frustrations they had with adults consistently dismissing their relationships as fake or not important, and the impact that had on their experiences.

Barrie Shannon:
In terms of my research on sexuality education, the main concern relates to the almost identical and cyclical moral panic about youth, sexuality, and schooling that seems to have repeated over and over again. I had the pleasure of reading some truly wild sex education booklets that were made for young people in the 50s. And the way they talked about the "inherent" risks of sexuality, especially of homosexuality, was a lot more explicit than perhaps today's moral panics are, but they still have those same kinds of fundamental tenets to them.

My research responds to this and asks how we can make progress on a comprehensive sexuality education, one that examines sex and the body, sexuality, pleasure, erotics, diversity, civics, and belonging. I ask if this is even possible in a school in a political environment that has not really changed for decades. These sorts of moral panics are not new. They just kind of keep repeating. But even though each of them have different actors, different focal points, and are ignited over different political issues, under the façade they are pretty much the same.

Hao Zheng:
Chinese digital media might be seen to provide a really unfriendly environment for young people to explore their sexuality, especially for queer young people. It is quite easy to say, "Yes, this is being censored," or "This is being scrutinized by the authority." But how do we study them in a more diverse and expansive and also productive way to understand the complexity behind this not-easy-to-understand digital media use?

On Being "Fake"

Samantha Mannix:
For my participants, that was very much about posting a photo and seeing how many likes it gets. "Is this what it looks like to be in a relationship?" For others, it was posting, "Me and my boyfriend doing stereotypically heterosexual things," and putting it up online. Seeing my friends doing those things does not ring quite true to me, maybe *because* of the gendered, stereotypical things that they are doing. And that is testing those ideas around what it might look like to be in a relationship, what it might look like or feel like to be in a relationship.

Whether adults decide this is real or not is beside the point. It is a space for young people to test boundaries, test out ideas related to their desires and their sexualities and their genders. And that does not just end when they turn their computer off or close the phone. If posting about a fun time with your girlfriend makes you feel good and is a way of showing that you care and sharing that with your friends in a way that *also* subverts adult conceptions and restrictions, why is this fake?

If we are always constantly dismissing what happens online as being fake, what does that mean, for example, of the experience of sexual harassment or gender harassment? Do we think that is fake, too? For the participants in my research, I think that had very real repercussions.

Barrie Shannon:
Adults engage in this pure fantasy that young people do not experience sexuality, and if they do, it is naturally heterosexual and gender conforming until they are shaped otherwise by external forces. It rehashes this idea that gayness and transness, especially nowadays, can be transmitted through social contagion, through corrupt elites, through their shaping of the education system or anonymous bad actors online. In this way [moral panics] are straightforwardly homophobic and transphobic projects. I think it is important to call them what they are.

The debates about sexuality, education, and informal education within digital platforms—whether they are suitable or not, or whether they are fake or not—perpetuate the view that schools are automatically and always the best possible place for this sort of education to take place. My research with young people and their engagement with networked publics would suggest almost the opposite of that, that schools are really struggling to keep up with not just the information that is available online, but how sexuality is mediated by digital technology and how digital spaces allow for that.

I think that separating sex and technology is no longer possible, even though I think that's kind of what schools try to do. And prominent discourses on young people, sex, and the Internet seem to create this binary in which face-to-face, corporeal sexuality is traditional, natural, and therefore potentially good. And technology mediated sexuality is unnatural, immoral, and dangerous and does not deserve to take up that space of legitimacy.

Hao Zheng:
I would like to share a common question I receive when I share my work at conferences. Why do my participants—Chinese queer female students—stay on Chinese digital media platforms? Why do they not just migrate to a platform, for example, Tumblr or Instagram, when they are here in Australia, where they can be more *real* as themselves? This is definitely not the "wrong" question. Actually, it is a really critical and good question. I think it is very hard to explain the *why*. And I think if you threw the same question to my participants, they could not explain why they stay.

But rather than providing an answer, I might just share a scenario. On one hand, you have this new platform that may give you more freedom to express your sexuality, you can post more exposed pictures of yourself, and you can talk to people in more explicit language. But it is in a language you are struggling to speak, and you have never used this platform before you came here, which could have been just two months ago. On the other hand, you have another platform you have been using since you were 12, and you use that every single day. It has all the silly pictures of yourself, since maybe primary school, and it is in your language that you speak every day. In that scenario, which one would make you feel more real and more comfortable and safe?

I think as researchers we should understand this is a poly-media environment. The users are making moral decisions for *if* and *how* they use every single different platform. And so I think it speaks to "fake" or "real." We should understand more about the rationale and the evidence our participants shared with us, but not only to determine if it is good or bad, or real or fake. Just let them and their stories speak.

Biographies

Professor Kath Albury (she/her) is an Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellow, leading the "Digital and Data Capabilities for Sexual Health Policy and Practice" research project (2022–2026) and an Associate Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society at Swinburne University of Technology. Recent publications include *Everyday Data Cultures* (with Jean Burgess, Anthony McCosker, and Rowan Wilken; Polity, 2022) and *Data for Social Good: Non-Profit Sector Data Projects* (with Jane Farmer, Anthony McCosker, and Amir Aryani; Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

Dr. Samantha Mannix (she/her) is a postdoctoral research fellow at Swinburne University of Technology. Her doctoral research, awarded in 2022, explored the ways school-aged young people come to understand and experience their intimate and dating relationships through schooling and digital practices. She is particularly interested in the ways young people make sense of their participation in digital sexual cultures and how this has the potential to shift and shape norms, understandings, and possibilities for gender, sexuality, and relationships.

Dr. Barrie Shannon (he/they) is a postdoctoral research fellow in University of South Australia (UniSA) Education Futures and a member of the Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion (CRESI). Their research expertise is in sexuality and relationships education for LGBTIQA+ youth. Barrie's first monograph, titled *Sex(uality) Education for Trans and Gender Diverse Youth in Australia* was published in 2022 in the Palgrave Studies in *Gender and Education* series. Their current research agenda at UniSA focuses

on pathways into higher education for LGBTIQA+ youth and the ways in which engagement with networked publics constitute an informal sexuality education for trans and gender-diverse young people.

Hao Zheng (she/her) is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Influencer Ethnography Research Lab and a recent PhD graduate from Deakin University. Hao's research interests are in the areas of gender and sexuality, transnational mobilities, digital cultures, and queer female studies. Her PhD research explores Chinese queer female students' transitions in Australia and analyzes how they craft their queer and adult identities in the transnational context. Prior to winning the Graduate Scholarship at Deakin, Hao completed her BA (honors) and was awarded First Class Honors at the University of Melbourne. Her honors thesis examines Chinese lesbians' double marginalization in the digital era. Hao's works have been published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* and the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*.