

## Masthead Conversation with Kate Julian on Thursday, November 8

Matt Peterson: Hi, I'm Matt Peterson. I have assembled The Masthead's team to talk about *The Atlantic's* new cover story, called "The Sex Recession," because we're all obsessed with it. Kate Julian is the author of the story and she's a senior editor at *The Atlantic*. Hi, Kate.

Kate Julian: Hi, Matt.

Matt Peterson: What Kate found in the story is that young people are having a lot less sex than they used to and nobody seems to know why. She found a ton of different possibilities. A ton. "I was told," she writes, "it might be a consequence of the hookup culture, of crushing economic pressures, of surging anxiety rates, of psychological frailty, of widespread antidepressant use, of streaming television, of environmental estrogens leaked by plastics, of dropping testosterone levels, of digital porn, of the vibrator's golden age, of dating apps, of option paralysis, of helicopter parents, of careerism, of smartphones, of the news cycle, of information overload generally, of sleep deprivation, of obesity."

Matt Peterson: The article goes through some of those, but she never really finds one, big, overarching cause, and that long list left us with a lot of questions. So to help us talk through these questions, I've also got Caroline Kitchener and Karen Yuan from The Masthead here. Hi, Caroline.

Caroline Kitchener: Hey, Matt.

Matt Peterson: Hi, Karen.

Karen Yuan: Hi, Matt.

Matt Peterson: Caroline, do you want to explain what we're doing today?

Caroline Kitchener: Yes. So we're gonna play a little bit of a game. There are some rules, so, Kate, are you ready?

Kate Julian: I'm so ready.

Caroline Kitchener: Excellent. Alright, so this is how it's gonna work. Kate is going to be asked a lot of questions from me, from Matt, from Karen, and each time we ask Kate a question, she's going to put each question into one of four categories. So category one is, pass. This means that the question just isn't really relevant to you, Kate, or you just don't really feel like answering it. It's totally fine. Just say number one, pass.

Kate Julian: I love that concept.

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Caroline Kitchener: And then category two is, short answer. This is a question where you feel you can answer it right here on the call, on the spot. You've done a lot of research on this topic, and you can just give us a couple-minute answer to the question. Category three is, don't know, but I'm interested. This is a question that you can't really answer without doing a little more research, and this is hopefully where we come in. We will be doing a little reporting after this conversation and extending on your cover story a little bit. So those category three questions are the ones that we will focus on. And then finally, category four is, that's too big to answer. This question is too big to answer right here in our conversation and probably too much for us to answer in a couple weeks of reporting, so we'll just leave it there. All right, does that all sound good?

Kate Julian: Sounds great.

Caroline Kitchener: So the first question that I wanna ask is about the surveys that your piece is at least partially based on. You said a couple surveys report on how much sex Americans are having, and we know that people lie about their sex lives all the time. That's one of the things that we lie about the most for all sorts of different reasons. Can we even be sure of those kinds of numbers?

Kate Julian: So it's a great question. One of the challenges in trying to chart changes over time is that we don't have a lot of surveys that do that with regard to sex. So the research that I'm drawing on in the piece is primarily from Jean Twenge's several journal articles for the big sex-research journal, the Archives of Sexual Behavior. She draws on a survey called the General Social Survey, which goes back to the early '70s and asks the same questions over time, so it's great for these purposes. The problem with it is that it's not sex-oriented. They only ask a few questions about sex and some of those questions are pretty dated. For example, they say, have you seen an X-rated movie in the past year? Many people—

Caroline Kitchener: Have you seen an X-rated movie in the past year?

Kate Julian: Many people don't even know what that means.

Caroline Kitchener: What does that mean?

Kate Julian: Right?

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah. That's funny.

Kate Julian: So to try to fill that in, we can try to look to other surveys that are more focused on sex, but those tend to be a lot smaller and they tend to not be

nationally representative and they may not have been asked over time systematically. So yeah, we do have a big gap in our knowledge. That would be, absolutely, an interesting thing for you guys to look into a little bit more.

Caroline Kitchener: Category two.

Kate Julian: Category two.

Caroline Kitchener: So do people lie about sex though when they're asked about it?

Kate Julian: I think that depends so much on the context. I do think that sex researchers will tell you that there may be different levels of response based on whether you're being asked a question by a computer, for example, or by a person. In general though, if it's anonymous and nobody else is listening, I think people are fairly straight. One question though that's interesting is, do we actually know the correct answer ourselves? So for example, if you say to somebody, how often do you watch porn or how often do you have sex, the answer they give you may be one that they believe, but it may not be true, and so sex researchers have found that a more effective way of asking a question ... I thought this was interesting ... is to say, have you done this thing today or in the last week or in the last month or in the last year.

Caroline Kitchener: 'Cause people just don't remember?

Kate Julian: Because you'll recall that, right? You may be inclined, if you think that what you're doing is good or bad, to try to adjust the answer subtly or to give the answer that you hope is true, whereas if you say, "Have you had sex in the last week?" or, "Have you watched porn in the last week?" you might get a more accurate—

Caroline Kitchener: Answer?

Kate Julian: Yeah. Average across the population.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah, that's really interesting.

Matt Peterson: Alright. Well, let me jump in on the question of porn because there's a lot of interesting stuff about pornography in the story. One of the things that jumped out at me was that you said, "People don't really get addicted to porn." You found in your research that it does affect people's sex drives somehow. So it does something to people who watch it. Do we know what that thing is?

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- Kate Julian: So I'm gonna say that this question maybe fits in more than one of these categories. On some level, it's category four, because it is an enormously big question that a lot of people have been looking for answers for, we know with not great success, but there's also a category two aspect of it, which I will attempt to give you here. The research we have on porn is pretty limited. A lot of what's been done is ideologically motivated in one direction or other. There's a good bit of research that seems to be by people who really have an interest that showing that porn is okay or that porn is bad. A lot of the research we have isn't necessarily good, controlled, blind experimental research, and so it's hard to know what else may be coming into play.
- Kate Julian: One key thing that we do know is that there's what researchers would call a really big, confounding variable, which is your sex drive, right? So if you have a high sex drive, you're more likely to watch more porn and you're also likely to have more sex. Does that mean that watching porn makes you have more sex? Absolutely not.
- Matt Peterson: That's confusing.
- Kate Julian: But it does make this very complicated to tease out.
- Matt Peterson: Right.
- Caroline Kitchener: Yeah.
- Karen Yuan: Well, actually ... So speaking of research, one thing that really was startling in your piece was how, apparently, there's actually a lack of sex research in academic institutions aside from Indiana University, which is—
- Kate Julian: That is ... Yeah, Indiana is absolutely the hotbed, no pun intended, of sex research in this country, and has had that distinction going back quite a long time. There's also quite a bit of really good and interesting sex research coming out of Canada, interestingly. But I was surprised by the fact that it is a fairly small field.
- Karen Yuan: Yeah. Would you have any ideas about why that's the case? Why there's a lack of sex research?
- Kate Julian: Well, to some extent, it may be that this is a politically controversial and fraught topic, right? A lot of research involving health and behavior is funded by the federal government. Certainly, there is some good federal research that speaks to some questions about sex, but it tends to be oriented toward pretty narrow public-health outcomes. So for example,

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they'll gather data about teen pregnancy rates, which I talk about in the piece, or STD or STI rates, but it may not look at other types of questions that might be a little bit more politically sensitive.

Karen Yuan: Right, right. So category two?

Kate Julian: Category two, I would say.

Karen Yuan: Okay.

Kate Julian: Yeah.

Caroline Kitchener: I have a question about how we talk about sex, particularly this word or term "hooking up," which I'm sure you heard many times during your research.

Kate Julian: Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

Caroline Kitchener: And it's so confusing because it's not at all clear what this means. Does this mean sexual intercourse? Does this mean kissing? No one knows.

Kate Julian: Yes.

Caroline Kitchener: And so I'm really interested in the origins of this term. When did we start to see it being used and how did it pop up and then, also, why are we not just saying what we mean?

Kate Julian: So I think this is a category two for sure. The terms seems to date to the '90s in terms of media mentions, and I would say, based on interviews that I've done, in the late '80s, it was in more colloquial, just regular, use. Certainly when I was a teenager in the early '90s the term was in use. I think researchers who've looked at hookup culture, and there's been an emergence of research on this topic the last several years, some of it very good, do find pretty clearly that it's a totally elastic term. So it means what you want it to, which is one of the reasons people love the term; it's that it actually can be wonderfully private. You can say you hooked up with somebody, and who knows what really happened? That's between you and them. You can say it in a way that implies more happened than it did and you could maybe use it to imply that less happened. Yeah.

Matt Peterson: That's interesting. Along with the decline of hookup culture is this rise of the thing that Jean Twenge has written about a lot, which is the over-scheduled child, the tremendous burden of being a young person in today's society. People are trying to get into college, they have a million activities, they just don't have time for sex basically. One of the ideas that you write about a little bit, and as I was reading this, I thought, "What the

hell happened to rebellious teenagers?" If all of these kids are suddenly being domineered by their parents into playing soccer after school or whatever it is, where in our culture did this idea of teen rebellion—when did it disappear? What happened to it?

Kate Julian: Category three, for sure. Please find the answer to this. I do talk about that in the piece, the idea that the way that adolescence has changed may be implicated here, and definitely some of that would be the phenomenon of more scheduled life, and *The Atlantic's* written about this going back to David Brooks's "The Organization Kid." This is not a new observation. Of course, like any generalization, it may apply less or more to people in specific areas and on specific educational tracks. I do think though that even if we're not looking at college-bound hyper-achievers, there is something interesting going on in the way that parents' and children's relationships have changed and how that might affect some of the downtime of adolescence.

Caroline Kitchener: Yeah.

Kate Julian: In my interviews, both with experts on adolescence and with people looking back on their own adolescence, there was just a notion of, there's less time that's unaccounted for. Whether or not it's scheduled, your parent knows where you are and they can find you and they can call you. So I think that's an interesting question.

Karen Yuan: Yeah. Young people. I really enjoyed the portion of your story in which you were digging into teenage romance and how that's ... Just how the perception of that has really shifted over the years. Then later on in your story, when you wrote about online dating apps, I thought there might be an interesting connection between those two items because in your story, you mostly talked to people who were at least in their mid-twenties in terms of their relationship with dating apps. I would love to know more about how dating apps are affecting teenage romance today, because these are teenagers who don't know a world of romance in which dating apps don't exist. I mean, crazy.

Kate Julian: This is a perfect category three question. I could give you a couple of leads. There's one interesting forthcoming study that I've heard about that you can possibly look into, that's looking at how apps are being used on college campuses by people who want to opt out of hookup culture, which is counterintuitive and interesting.

Karen Yuan: Yeah.

Kate Julian: Then it's a way to say, "Actually. No, really, I want to go out with you and I wanna find other people who want to do that." As for how it's playing

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outside of college-campus settings among people who are on the younger side, I don't know, but I would be fascinated to hear.

Karen Yuan: Cool.

Matt Peterson: Alright, I'm super interested in the apps. So I'm an old person, but I still met my wife on a very early dating app, and feel like I did it the right way.

Kate Julian: Can you tell us which app?

Matt Peterson: Match.com.

Kate Julian: Okay.

Matt Peterson: She was the first person that I had messaged on this app, and we met in person almost immediately and I stopped using the app. I think this is not the way that people actually use them today, and you wrote about this, about this false promise of dating apps where people spend huge amount of time swiping through profiles and not actually talking to anybody. What that reminded me of was Ashley Madison. There was this scandal involving this site that was premised ... The premise of the site is, you're a married person and you go on here to cheat, and what turns out is that there are not any women on this site. It's all bots and people working for the company pretending to be women, and no one is ever meeting, but it still operates. Is Tinder a new version of Ashley Madison? Do they know how their users are actually experiencing these apps?

Kate Julian: So I'm gonna say this is squarely between category two and category three, and I'm gonna give you a short answer, but there's doubtless more to be found here. There's just lots of interesting research coming out on this topic all the time. As far as what the app makers know, they're probably not gonna tell you, and the numbers that Tinder has released, which I cite in the story, do certainly give a user pause. I think they talk about the number of swipes per day and the number of matches, and the number that results in matches is tiny, like one or two percent.

Kate Julian: Now I will say there is a more positive way to look at the apps, which is that if you're really a committed user and you're really willing to put in your time and you have other things going for you that make you probably likely to come across well in that venue, for example, you photograph well, clearly they can work and they do work for a lot of people. They are, by some counts, the leading way that people meet each other now. So I do not mean to leave people with the idea that this is a road to nowhere. I just mean to pause and say, "It may not be the most efficient way for some people to get there, especially the way some people are using them now."

Caroline Kitchener: I wanna veer in a little bit of a different direction and talk about sex education, which you say in the piece ... You touch on what you say is the abysmal state of sex education in America, and I wanna talk a little bit about why that's abysmal, but more specifically ... I know one of the big problems, as we've talked about before, is that sex education just varies so wildly from state to state, and private schools are just a whole other thing all together, so would there be something to the government working toward some sort of nationally standardized sex program? Is that the ideal ... Would that work? What do you think?

Kate Julian: This is a great category three. I'm personally interested in doing further reporting and writing on this. I think it's a really pressing and fascinating question. I am skeptical not knowing more that a national mandate on this question is going to work out for all the obvious reasons of just political sensitivity around this issue. I do think that what we've got right now, though, is really appalling and that people should, at a local level, try to get more involved with this issue.

Caroline Kitchener: What makes it so bad? It's so much worse in other countries.

Kate Julian: Well, we don't, for the most part, have any kind of standardized curriculum on it and sex is an area where you can do some damage. I talked to people who'd been in sex-ed classes where they were told that if they had had sexual contact with someone, that made them the equivalent of a piece of chewed gum or a piece of tape that had lost its stickiness. I talked to people who had been shown videos that they found really traumatic of diseased genitals. That's troubling to me. What's equally troubling to me is that some people may not be getting any sex ed, and so the first image they have of sex may be, not only porn, but really bad porn, really misleading porn, or violent porn, or scary porn. I think we need to rethink what the point of sex ed is in that context specifically.

Matt Peterson: Did you come out of this reporting project thinking that porn should be regulated in any way?

Kate Julian: Category four. Category three. Yeah, I don't know. I really don't know. Clearly, as you alluded to earlier, I think that some of the things that get said about porn are clearly not true or we don't know that they are true in terms of it being addictive. I also talk in the piece that it's commonly blamed for an epidemic of erectile dysfunction. There's really no evidence that that's happening, and yet, clearly, this does have some important relationship to people's actual lives, whether it's in terms of their ideas about sex or how they spend their time. Yeah, I would ...



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Caroline Kitchener: You have a section of the piece where you're talking about how the most popular types of porn are not anything like you would ever experience. In some cases, they're anime or something, right? They're cartoons.

Kate Julian: Yeah, yeah.

Caroline Kitchener: Did you look into the psychological reasons for that? Why are we not just watching normal sex porn?

Kate Julian: Category three. I don't know. I will say that I did not do a lot of first-hand research for that part of the piece. I relied on secondary sources. But I think it's a fascinating question, right? I think we've seen this a little bit in Japan, specifically, which is one of the countries that I talk about briefly, that's had its own sex decline and also has a very booming porn business. That it doesn't seem that porn is necessarily related to one's in-person sex life the way you might think that it would be, that it seems to be a separate thing, and that the things that you might like to watch on porn could very well have nothing to do with what you want in personal interactions.

Matt Peterson: Let's go back to some of the culture questions. One of the tropes that comes up a lot in the story is the idea of the bar and that no one is meeting people in bars anymore, and people have conflicting opinions about this, and I wanna know what yours is. First of all ... So the idea ... You wrote to a young man ... Or you write about a young man who felt compelled to try to meet women in bars and you wrote that "he couldn't escape the sense that hitting on someone in person had, in a short period of time, gone from normal behavior to borderline creepy." When I read that, my reaction was, "Was it ever really normal to meet people at bars?"

Kate Julian: Category three, I would say, slash category two. I will say this. I can't say that I've met a lot of people in bars in my day. I'm 40, as I discussed in the piece. I met my husband in an elevator, which is a different story. But I do think it is interesting that this idea has so much cultural resonance for people, whether or not people actually met in bars. That's almost become a shorthand for saying, "I met somebody not at my workplace. Not in my neighborhood. Not through my church. I met them out there in the real world in a public setting." So yeah, I don't think it's really about bars, although bars are not irrelevant either because if you think about it, the gay community pioneered dating apps with Grindr, and it's commonly said that Grindr killed the gay bar.

Matt Peterson: Right. Should we lament the death of the bar in our culture? That is one of the things that comes through in your reporting is that young people at

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least think that the bar is no longer a part of our culture in the way that it was. Should we be sad about that?

Kate Julian: Maybe a little bit. It's an interesting question, right? The bar, in a way, is this thing that we have this idealized version of that maybe never really existed, like the Cheers bar is not a real place. That being said, I do find the nostalgia that that idea seems to provoke sort of meaningful. Yeah.

Matt Peterson: The other thing that made people nostalgic was similar, in which you mentioned, you say you met your husband in an elevator. You tell people this, they sort of sigh, and I think I could totally picture ... As someone who did not meet his significant other in an elevator, you have the opposite reaction. It was a little bit taboo to say that for a while. It's less so now.

Kate Julian: Yeah. Yeah.

Matt Peterson: Where does this idea come from?

Kate Julian: Well, it's interesting that you use the taboo because I feel like we're at this moment of really rapid shift where actually the taboos are reversing places, right? So now, if I were to say to somebody ... Rather I should say, I met my husband in an elevator. I should hasten to add that that elevator was in our workplace. It was in an office building. He and I didn't work together directly, but we were employed by the same institution. I do think that now there is, for good reason, post-#MeToo, some reconsideration of whether it's okay to express romantic interest in somebody else in your workplace, right? So 10 years go, it might've felt a little weird to admit that you met somebody on an app and now it might feel a little weird to admit that you met them at work or maybe, more to the point, it might just be harder to strike up that conversation at work in a way that would take it out of work.

Karen Yuan: I do wanna add to that. This whole time, as we're talking about how we meet our significant others, h

The concept of a meet-cute, right? Kate, are you familiar with the term?

Kate Julian: Absolutely. Yeah, totally.

Karen Yuan: Yeah, I bet you are.

Matt Peterson: A meeting in an elevator is like the ultimate meet-cute.

Karen Yuan: Yeah.

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- Kate Julian: I'm biased, but I thought it was pretty cute. Yeah. I don't know. That seems like a good category three question to me. I will say I do think that people often invoked things from pop culture in terms of talking about meeting. I think there's a reference in the piece to somebody talking about a scene in *Sex and the City* and how dated that felt, but of course, like the *Cheers* example, I'm not sure that *Sex and the City* was ever realistic, nor was *Friends* ever necessarily all that realistic. *Friends* is another show that came up when people were talking about how they imagined things might have changed. One thing I thought was interesting though, is there definitely was a sense of nostalgia among a lot of people I talked to about a past. "I wish I had been dating before smartphones. I wish I had been dating before apps." That's interesting to me.
- Karen Yuan: It's this nostalgia expressed from younger people?
- Kate Julian: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. People who are 23 or 24 were saying this often in response to pretty open-ended questions.
- Karen Yuan: Yeah.
- Matt Peterson: What is the range of that nostalgia, because I'm conscious that you're using television shows of a certain era, right?
- Kate Julian: Yeah.
- Matt Peterson: And I suspect that some of our nostalgia dates back only like 20 years.
- Kate Julian: Exactly. We wouldn't want to go back to some sort of really clearly retrograde sexist and otherwise intolerant past, but we'd like to go back to a sort of woke-ish, late '90s kind of *Friends* thing where there weren't so many phones.
- Caroline Kitchener: Yeah, I had a friend at work come to me the other day after finding out that I had met my fiancé at a college extracurricular and just being like, "Girl, that's like my dream. I'm never gonna have that. That's my dream." And I was like, "What? It doesn't really matter. Really? Does it really matter how you met?"
- Kate Julian: Yes. Yes. I will say I do think there's part of this, of course, that is eternal, right? When you're looking for somebody and you can't find them, it seems extremely elusive, and that would've been true 20 years ago or 40 years ago or really at any point in time, and now, of course, it is easy to blame the things that have changed really recently in our culture if you haven't found somebody. In some cases, I'm sure that's warranted and in some cases, it probably isn't decisive.

Caroline Kitchener: One thing that we haven't touched on yet is masturbation, which you talk in the piece a lot about. You say it's only recently that masturbation has become less stigmatized in America. One of the things that I underlined and put exclamation points by in your piece was that the cereal maker, J.H. Kellogg, urged 19th century parents to keep their kids from masturbating by circumcising them without anesthetics and applying carbolic acid to the clitoris. Okay. Why was it so taboo and why has the taboo been dissipating recently?

Kate Julian: Category three in terms of the "why was it so taboo." That would be a fascinating question to dig into about. As for why it's less taboo ... I will say it's more taboo or it has remained taboo in some ways more than you would think, longer than you would think. There was a big sex survey in the early '90s out of the University of Chicago, and when they had their paid, trained interviewers go out to ask Americans about various sexual practices then, the interviewers were okay with asking about all sorts of things that were, frankly, more taboo than they are now, including anal sex, but they refused to ask people face to face about masturbation, and they had to deploy a written questionnaire for masturbation questions only, which is wild if you think about it because it's a really commonplace practice and yet people still really, really are uncomfortable talking about it. I think that that has shifted a little bit, particularly with the rise of the vibrator, which is something that I talk about in the piece that several sex experts raised with me. I think there's a shift back against masturbation though in a way, which I also talk about in the piece, insofar as some of the anti-porn activism has become very focused on the idea that masturbation is bad for you, especially for young men, and that it will ruin your life.

Karen Yuan: Yeah. Yeah, to that point ... When you talked about the "no-wank" policy that The Proud Boys had, I was like, "What?"

Kate Julian: Yeah.

Karen Yuan: Yeah, there's this cultural movement, especially among a certain demographic of young men, in which they have these very specific concepts of celibacy and abstinence. I'm guessing there's probably quite a lot of overlap between the culture of The Proud Boys and "incels," which you mentioned as well. I was wondering, what is this concept of this ... I guess you would call an ideal male lifestyle that these men subscribe to, and why does it play such a big role in their political identity formation, because these are also two very political groups?

Kate Julian: I think that's a great category three. I didn't spend as much time looking into this, but it certainly seems ripe for further explanation. One thing I will

say, which is peripherally related to that, but going back to the porn question, I mention that there's not as much really good research about porn as many people would like to see, that's just trying to tease out its effects. But one theme that is emerging from some of the more recent research is that, to some extent, whether porn is predictive of bad effects, other unhappiness, and other kinds of dysfunctional behaviors, we could call them, that seems to go hand-in-hand with whether you expect that it is bad.

Kate Julian: So they find that if you have a strong religious belief, [then] porn is bad, and then [when] you use porn, lo and behold, it turns out to be bad for you. And there may be something to that idea in the context of some of the anti-masturbation and anti-porn and Proud Boy stuff, which is that if you think that doing this shows that you are lacking in self-discipline, then you may feel really badly when you lapse and do it and that it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Matt Peterson: Alright. Well, we have a lot of homework, which is good. That's exactly what we want when we come out of these conversations.

Kate Julian: Excellent.

Matt Peterson: Our homework is to do some more reporting. You, everyone listening, your homework is to read Kate Julian's story, "The Sex Recession," at [theatlantic.com](http://theatlantic.com). Kate, thank you very much.

Kate Julian: Thank you so much. This was really fun.

Caroline Kitchener: Thanks, Kate.

Karen Yuan: Thanks so much.