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Sex, Booze & Surveys: Journos Gone Wild

By Howard Kurtz

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Call it binge journalism, as out of control as a crazed keg party.

"Girls Behaving Badly," said the Louisville Courier-Journal.

"Girls Go Wild for Booze, Sex," said the Boston Herald.

"Spring Break Can Be Hazardous to Your Health," said the Philadelphia Inquirer.

"There may be some truth to the image of spring break as an orgy of wet T-shirt contests, booze parties and sex on the beach," said USA Today.

"Stop the presses: Sex and intoxication among women more prevalent during spring break," said MSNBC's Tucker Carlson.

The breathless coverage was fueled by a survey of college women and graduates under 35, released in March by the American Medical Association. Some 74 percent said women use drinking as an excuse for outrageous behavior. Fifty-seven percent of women agreed that being promiscuous is a way to fit in, while 83 percent said they had friends who drank most nights while on spring break.

At the risk of spoiling the fun, it must be noted that this poll had zero scientific validity.

For starters, it was an Internet survey of women who volunteered to participate, not a poll relying on randomly selected respondents -- even though the AMA mentioned a "margin of error" common to such polls.

Nonetheless, AMA President J. Edward Hill had warned in a statement that "spring break is broken. . . . These survey results are extremely disturbing because it brings up an entirely new set of issues including increased risk of sexually transmitted diseases, blackouts and violence."

As first reported by the Mystery Pollster blog, which covers debates about the field, Cliff Zukin, president of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, has dismissed the survey as scientifically useless.

"I think it's irresponsible to put that in the public domain," says Zukin, a Rutgers University professor. "There is no scientific basis. I don't trust those numbers. . . . It's silly and it shouldn't have seen the light of day."

Richard Yoast, director of the AMA's Department of Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Abuse, says his organization posted a correction on its Web site to note that this was not a nationwide random sample and should not have included a margin of error, as in standard polls. "In the future, we're going to be more careful," he says.

Yoast says some of the findings reflect only the 27 percent of the 644 respondents who said they had actually been on spring break, but the statistics highlighted in the

AMA's press release make no distinction between those who have taken such trips and those who haven't. "We didn't report this as a scientific survey that was completely representative," Yoast says. "We were trying to find out what the female perspective on spring break is."

The flawed methodology didn't stop CBS's "Early Show," NBC's "Today," CNN's "American Morning," "Fox & Friends" and countless other programs from reporting the findings, or dozens of newspapers from carrying an Associated Press story or their own pieces.

"It got picked up partly because it was sexy," says Zukin, who complained to the New York Times about a chart the paper ran on the findings. The Times later ran a correction.

There's little doubt that lots of women (not to mention men) misbehave on spring break. So, on occasion, do credulous journalists.

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