

Eroticising Inequality



Technology, pornography and young people



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Maree Crabbe and David Corlett lead the *Reality and Risk* project, which aims to promote critical thinking among young people about pornography and the messages it conveys about women, men and sex. As part of this project, they have interviewed academics, porn industry insiders, young people and a range of professionals in Australia, Budapest and the USA. In this article, they argue that porn now pervades popular culture and this is shaping how young people think about and experience sex. This article is an adaptation of a paper delivered at DVRCV's *Partners in Prevention* forum.

Over the past decade or so, pornography has become both more mainstream and more hard-core. Technology has played a significant role in these shifts. For young people growing up in this era of ever-new and accessible technology, it is almost impossible to avoid exposure to pornography. Consumption, particularly for young men, has become normalised. And the ways young people understand and experience gender and sex are being influenced by what they—or their partners or peers—observe in porn.

Pornography now enjoys unprecedented legitimacy around the world. Pornography and the 'pornified aesthetic' are found throughout popular culture. Porn has come out of its 'brown paper bag' and into the mainstream¹.

The mainstreaming of pornography can be demonstrated, in part, by the sheer scale of the commercial pornography industry. Globally, it has an annual profit of US\$24.9 billion. This makes pornography a larger industry than US basketball, football and baseball combined². The commercial success of the porn industry indicates that pornography is being consumed at vast rates by—mainly male—consumers around the world.

It is estimated that a third of Australian adults are consumers of pornography [10]. And, equipped with the most recent technology, young people also are pornography consumers. International research documents that significant proportions of young people are exposed to pornography [5]. In a 2006 study of 13–16 year olds in Australian schools, 93 percent of males and 62 percent of females had seen pornography online [4].

As is the case among adults, there is a significant gender divide in young people's consumption of porn. Young men are more likely than their female peers "to use porn, to do so repeatedly, to use it for sexual excitement and masturbation, to initiate its use (rather than be introduced to it by an intimate partner), to view it alone and in same-sex groups, and to view more types of images" [6].

Technology has assisted in this movement of porn to the mainstream by providing ever cheaper and easier ways of manufacturing sexually explicit material and by providing platforms through which to deliver this material. Technology enables easy access to the multitude of free pornographic images available online. And, significantly, this can be done anonymously.

Porn is marketed aggressively on the Internet. Explicit pop-ups can appear

uninvited on the screen, children's games can turn into pornographic images and a simple misspelling in a search engine can provide links to an array of images. Consequently, it is not only those young people who intentionally seek out sexually explicit material that consume pornography. Eighty-four percent of boys and 60 percent of girls report having been exposed accidentally to Internet sex sites [7: vi].

The porn aesthetic

Access to explicit imagery is only part of the story of the mainstreaming of pornography. The pornography industry has had an incredible influence on popular culture. A porn aesthetic pervades culture—in fashion, music, entertainment and behaviour. This is evident in the billboards, music videos and designer stores that shape the desires and imaginations of a younger and younger demographic.

It is not just that culture has become more sexualised. It is that the imagery of the pornographic erotic has shaped the sexualisation of culture. There are certain porn insignia that are now commonplace within mainstream culture, such as the removal of women's pubic hair, or the use of porn labels and messages on clothing. The pervasiveness of this porn signature throughout popular culture provides a kind of legitimacy to porn itself. If you grow up seeing *Playboy* bunnies on t-shirts, pencil cases and car windows, these symbols are likely to seem familiar and inoffensive. This is very effective branding for both the particular companies concerned and for the pornography industry more generally.

Aggressive imagery

At the same time that pornography has become mainstream, there has been a marked shift in its content towards rougher, more aggressive sex—including, for example, fellatio inducing gagging, heterosexual anal sex, ejaculating on women's faces and breasts, and double penetrations in which one woman is penetrated anally and vaginally at the same time. According to Anthony Hardwood, an LA-based male porn actor who has been in the industry for about 13 years, there has been a shift from the 'love-dovey' sex that he performed in the early years to more 'gonzo' sex³.

Strictly speaking, 'gonzo' refers to a cinematic style where the camera is hand-held and in which the person holding the camera, and the camera itself, can become a part of the scene. Gonzo is also synonymous with a type of sex that is rougher and more 'extreme'. Describing the gonzo scene for which he, another man and a woman won the porn equivalent of an Academy Award, Hardwood said that it was not like sex, it was like 'crazy', that you wouldn't think that they were human, and that the girl was "very tough, because she took everything"⁴. This kind of material has grown in popularity. According to Hardwood, "the customers love it". They want a scene like this where "you have to be very rough with the girl and take charge".

1 Jason Sechrest, interview—Los Angeles, June 2010. Sechrest is a writer on the porn industry and agent for gay male porn performers.

2 Jennifer Johnson, interview—Boston, June 2010. Johnson is a sociology professor at Virginia Commonwealth University.

3 Anthony Hardwood, interview—Budapest, March 2010.

4 Anthony Hardwood, interview; John Stagliano, interview—LA, June 2010. Stagliano is the CEO of Evil Angels porn production company and is the founder of gonzo porn.

Gonzo is no longer marginal. It has been extraordinarily influential on mainstream pornography⁵. The sorts of sex acts that started out as gonzo are now the staples of mainstream porn. What was soft porn is now popular culture; what was extreme is now mainstream. And the industry has employed mind-boggling creativity to redefine the 'extreme'⁶.

Technology, particularly the Internet, has facilitated this shift in mainstream pornography to more aggressive, rougher sexual imagery [7] [9] [1]. The Internet has been a contributor for several reasons. It is a widely accessible, anonymous and unregulated marketplace, meaning that people can access the sorts of material that, in the past, they may have had to work harder and be more discrete to consume⁷.

The Internet, as well as other technologies, means that it's now possible for anyone with a small amount of money to create and distribute porn. According to Jason Sechrest, with the porn industry promoting itself as a multimillion-dollar profit-making venture, "everyone with a camcorder decided to pick it up". The resultant increase in availability of explicit material has helped to move hard-core acts into the mainstream as the producers of this material push the edges of the market in order to make money.

This is not to say that technology is the only factor involved. Technology and culture interact. Contemporary pornography reflects cultural norms, including gender stereotypes and unequal sexual relations that well predate the Internet.

However, porn is a particularly powerful vehicle for communicating these cultural norms. Porn speaks of sex and of intimacy. It tells its audience what these things look like.

While there is diversity within pornography, there is also a sameness. Mainstream pornography communicates messages of male aggression and female sexual subservience. Often it eroticises the degradation of women

and male brutality⁸. It is both a reflection and an amplification of the hostile attitudes and behaviours towards women seen in broader society. Porn is an effective tool for the promotion of misogyny.

IT, porn and young people

Sexual exploration is a normal part of adolescent development. Sex and sexuality are topics of intrigue and fascination. And while it is not new for porn to play a role in young people's sexual exploration, it is no longer just one of many voices in young people's sexual world.

Rather, porn has become a central mediator of young people's sexual understandings and experiences. Young people are exposed to porn at unprecedented rates. Many young people discover porn before they've encountered sex⁹. They are seeing it more frequently, through more media, and what they are seeing is harder and more aggressive. Young people are living in an era of new sexual expectations, acceptance and practices. And, significantly, porn is normalising sex acts that most women in the real world don't enjoy, and may find degrading, painful or violating. There is evidence that many young people are enacting porn scripts¹⁰.

We are seeing young women internalising the messages of porn [17]. The porn erotic is so 'normal' that women may not see that this construction of sexuality is about appealing to men. It is not about a woman's own dignity, respect or multi-dimensional nature—not to mention her pleasure. The young women we interviewed talked about young men trying things they'd seen in porn, sometimes without even asking. According to a young woman we interviewed in Los Angeles:

Sometimes you might be surprised about what you find you might be into that you didn't really think of before, but most of the time it's just like pleasing the guy, which sounds bad, but I mean that's kind of what things have come to today.

Similarly, young men are internalising the porn erotic. Heterosexual anal sex, which research indicates most women in the real world do not want or enjoy¹¹, for example, is more common among high consumers of porn [6: 8] [8]. For men, sex remains something that is constructed in porn as pleasurable but not in a mutual, respectful way. Young men have told us that they have tried or proposed porn moves with sexual partners. According to one man we interviewed, guys "expect girls to be open; when a guy says do this, do this, they expect the girl to do it without hesitation". Sometimes, the

5 By 'mainstream' pornography, we refer to material that is widely available online and easily accessible via other mediums such as DVDs. This is mainly targeted at heterosexual men, although it also includes material targeted at the so-called 'couples' market. Gay male pornography is another significant category of mainstream porn but is beyond the scope of this article.

6 Some of this more extreme material challenges the widely accepted definition of pornography—sexually explicit material produced for the primary purpose of arousal. There is now a significant amount of material that is overtly sexual and explicit but was described by interviewees as being primarily about the shock value of the imagery, rather than about arousal.

7 Neil Malamuth, interview—LA, June 2010. Malamuth is Professor of Psychology and Communications Studies at UCLA and a pre-eminent scholar on the impact of porn on consumers.

8 Emily Maguire, interview—Sydney, January 2010. Maguire is the author of *Princesses and Pornstars: Sex, power, identity* (Penguin, 2008); Michael Flood, interview—Melbourne, December 2009.

9 The median age of first sexual intercourse in Australia is 16 (Moore & Rosenthal, 2006: 10). According to US research, the age of first exposure to pornography is 11 (Maltz & Maltz, 2008: 25).

10 Tim Gregory, interview—Sydney, January 2010. Tim Gregory is a Sydney-based researcher, theorist and artist; Michael Flood, interview.

11 Michael Flood, interview.

young men are surprised that what they are mimicking from porn is not what women like or want.

Commercial porn is not the only form of sexually explicit imagery more available through technological innovation. The creative possibilities enabled by new technology include rapid, easy production of 'home-made' pornography. Mobile phones can be used to create explicit images, which can then be sent on via texting or *Bluetooth*—a practice known as 'sexting'. For young people today, access to the technology is widespread [14: 6] and the use of the technology for these kinds of sexual interactions is increasingly an acknowledged aspect in adolescents' social landscape [13]¹².

While this technology can be used as a means of sexual exploration, it is also associated with difficult issues [15]. 'Sexting' can include women being pressured into sending sexually explicit images of themselves, which are then sent on without the permission of those whose image it includes.

Sexting, even if it is consensual, can also serve to reinforce and amplify gender inequality and sexual stereotyping. For example, a 'home-made' image of a sex act between a man and woman passed on by mobile phone will reflect differently on the man and the woman because of the cultural context within which we operate and the sexual double standard that prevails.

Young women walk a fine line—between status and denigration—with regard to their sexuality [2: 38]. It is now no longer only rumour they have to contend with.

In contrast, for the young men involved the same images often provide evidence of their supposed sexual prowess. The technology means that the implications for each of these parties will be amplified in ways previously unknown.

Learning critical literacy

As a result of modern technologies and the loudness of the porn voice, young people today face unique challenges as they negotiate their sexual identities.

In this world, we need to find ways to equip and to encourage young people to critique the images and the meanings they see in porn. Significantly, this is about teaching young people critical literacy. As anti-porn feminist academic, Gail Dines, has said, in the contemporary world, to be unable to read imagery is akin to being illiterate in a world of words¹³.

But it is not only about being able to critique the imagery. It is also about having frameworks with which to understand these images. We need to help young people to think well about gender, power and consent. We need to do this by having conversations with young people—in schools, at home and

in society more broadly. We need to model good practice by engaging in just and respectful gender relations. We need to find ways to encourage young people to act differently from what pornography tells us about what it means to be women and men, and what sex is about.

While the porn erotic is normalised, it is possible to imagine an alternative vision. As porn demonstrates, it is possible to eroticise inequality, mere physicality, and even degradation and violence. But it is also possible for the erotic cultural sensibility to allow diversity and individual taste, and at the same time to promote equality, tenderness, communication, consent and mutuality.

Sex can be fantastic, or terrible, or anywhere in between. We have some agency about how we experience sexuality. What we eroticise matters. It taps into powerful physiological, psychological and social forces. Our desires, indeed our attitudes to desire, shape our engagement in the intimate space of sexual relations. This is not just a matter of personal taste or what we do in the privacy of our sexual lives. What we eroticise can impact not only on ourselves and our partners, but also on broader social attitudes and behaviours. It impacts on the ways individuals and communities view men and women.

Part of the challenge of engaging with young people around these issues is to try to inspire them that things might be different, and indeed better, than what is being broadcast at them from pornography. In the words of the philosopher Rebecca Whisnant (2007):

We need to richly imagine, and encourage others to richly imagine, another world: one in which no woman or girl is ever called 'slut', 'prude', 'bitch', 'cunt', or 'dyke'; in which no woman, man, or child ever has to fear rape or suffer its damage to their spirits; in which men do not control their own and other men's behaviour by the threat of being seen and treated as women; and in which lesbian love and connection is not reduced to a pornographic fetish for men. In this world, every woman and girl sees her own body as beautiful, no man or boy is made to see his as a weapon, and people take part in sexual activity only when (and only because) they expect to enjoy it and to be honoured and fulfilled therein.

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12 According to US research, one in five teenagers have engaged in sexting (Cox Communications, National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children & John Walsh, 2009: 11).

13 Personal correspondence, 5 September 2010. Gail Dines is Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies, and Chair of American Studies at Wheelock College, Boston.

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