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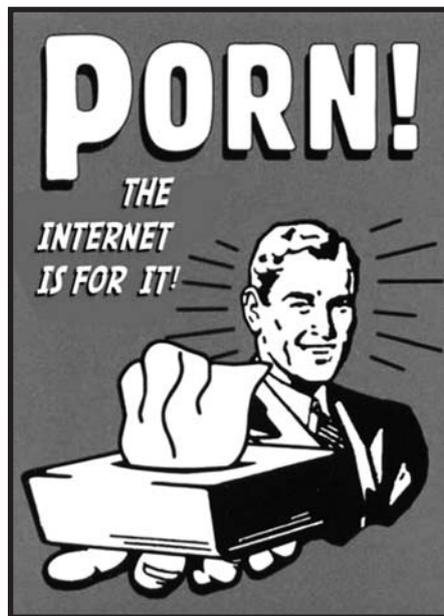


Pornography and Education

I don't think you can blame young people who watch porn. Its often free, it's easy to access and they think they have something to learn. Western societies have accepted pornography almost without question, believing it to be a harmless bit of fun which some people like and some people don't. This is certainly the public image which the industry is keen to promote for itself. Underneath the self-promotion however, there is a problem, the scale of which is not readily acknowledged, and there are vast implications for us as Religion and Values teachers. This article is written to raise awareness of the serious issues involved, in order that schools can begin to recognise and engage with the problem.

Pornography is a multi-billion dollar industry which has successfully promoted itself to western societies. The goal of the industry is to make money, and it exists only to serve the interests of shareholders. As with any other big business, it needs to attract new clients and secure the long term loyalty of customers. The porn industry has experienced exponential growth because films can be shown in the privacy of the home via the internet. Before this the industry was hampered by issues of accessibility. Purchase of sexually explicit material was generally done by post or 'under the counter'. The consumer was often self-conscious about the risk of being acknowledged in the act of purchase, and the range of available material was limited. The widespread availability of the internet in western society has ended the unease with which many clients once approached sexually explicit material, with 12% of all websites now pornographic in nature and

12% of all websites are pornographic in nature and 25% of all search engine requests are for pornography.



25% of all search engine requests being for pornography.¹ The internet is acknowledged as the hub for modern day pornography. Western societies have become very relaxed about pornographic products with widespread availability on mobile telephones, iPads, iPods, laptop computers – anytime, anywhere. The visibility and 'mainstreaming' of pornographic images are also evident in shopping centres with 'adult shops' seen in most high streets. Pornographic images are normalised when they enter the public arena, and this has inevitably led to a change in attitudes towards pornography as a whole. Sexual images form the wallpaper of our lives, all-pervasive but hardly noticed. The 'pornographication' of our culture² is the language used to describe the way that pornography has crossed over from the private to the public sphere. It is now a major growth industry, with the United States sector alone estimated to be worth \$13.3 billion per annum. The western world plays perfect host to this multi-billion dollar industry.

Pornography appears to offer an education about adult sexual relationships. Young people are not formally educated in the western world in the skills of love-making. Apart from

a biology lesson or two, in which the sexual reproductive system of plants was probably studied at the same time, nothing but the basic mechanics of human sexuality and sexual health are taught. The highly complex psychological and physical chemistry involved in human physical relationships and the practical skills involved in being a lover are never addressed. In many eastern cultures, love-making is regarded as a skill to be passed on to young people with great care, since the success and permanence of relationships often depend upon the physical and emotional bonds established in the bedroom. The Western world, historically, has shrouded sex and the bedroom with silence and mystery. And yet there is natural curiosity and a strong desire to get this area of our human lives right. In education we do not teach our students how to really be with another person, and parents willing to share at this intimate level are rare. So where would a person, keen to understand, and wanting to get this area of their life right, look for information? In technologically advanced societies the answer is obvious – the internet. And what the internet provides is what the pornography industry sells.

The pornography industry targets an educational deficiency and exploits it for financial gain.

Young people are acknowledged as the primary target group for the porn industry. The average age of first internet porn exposure is 11 years old, with 90% of 8 – 16 year olds having viewed pornography online, typically while doing homework.³ Many parents believe that if the parental controls of a computer or internet device are switched on, that their child will not be exposed to pornography. 'Parent filters' do not protect from the industry's more

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advanced mechanisms which can deflect filters. An independent UK government Review written by Reg Bailey (2011), said that of those children who had seen pornography online, 41% of their parents said that their child had not.⁴ Parents are often unaware and excluded from their child's exposure to pornographic images. For those young people who have not been exposed to pornography on the internet, music videos form the 'bridge' between youth culture and porn culture. In Australia music is classified, but the classifications carry no legal basis and are strictly self-regulated. The Australian council for the Arts cautioned against any legal classification because the providers of music, including international online music stores, would make it impossible to implement. This means that there is effectively no restriction on children viewing and purchasing music videos which regularly contain highly sexualised proto pornographic imagery. In the UK Bailey Review, parents of boys expressed concern that these videos influence their sons' behaviour towards perceptions of women and girls in a negative way:

Whenever I have seen music videos lately I have been completely disheartened by the relentless portrayal of women as sex objects. More often than not they show young women in hardly any clothes... basically simulating sex...

Music videos are often watched on-line, and are both an introduction and a gateway to internet pornography.

The Industry Formula

There is only one story line with respect to sexual relationships found in all heterosexual pornographic films. In the same way that MacDonald's hamburgers has a formula, so the pornography industry has a narrative framework which is simply repeated. This may seem very odd, but it makes sense in the context of an industry which has discovered a blueprint which 'works'. The fiction is totally repetitive, and whilst it is 'working,' the consumer is perhaps unaware of the very restrictive diet and the messages about sex

which they are sharing. The 'money shot' is achieved very simply with a formula plot.⁵

The pornography industry is not interested in relationships. In fact the more people who repeatedly turn to porn for sexual gratification the better for this industry. The solitary person sitting at a computer in the privacy of the home masturbating is precisely what the industry needs. There is no escaping the formula since the 'pay here' button, which claims to offer higher levels of entertainment, gives exactly the same legend just with higher levels of violence. The storyline of sex offered by the industry includes messages about how both sexes behave in adult relationships. The women in porn basically conform to a pretty standard mould in terms of appearance, availability and willingness to acquiesce. Women exist as sex objects there to arouse and satisfy men. Sexual relations are entirely devoid of intimacy and sex is hardly ever linked to the concept of relationships or domesticity. Men are presented as having an insatiable need for sex and their satisfaction depends upon variety – both in terms of a variety of women and in terms of variety of sexual practices. Men are generally portrayed as predatory and aggressive. They are generally soulless, unfeeling and amoral. In gonzo pornography, women are ritually abused by men during sex and subjected to demeaning and painful practices, which they are presented as enjoying.

Research by Papadopoulos and Flood⁶, argued that people who watch these images are genuinely *educated* by it. Those who watch it:

...became convinced that they had to behave and look like the on-screen participants in order to have 'proper' sex; which generally meant sex without any basis in love or display of affection or equality; and to conform physically to some very narrow gender stereotypes.

The marketing machine of the industry is very persuasive, and it is hard to see through the

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smoke and mirrors to the reality beneath. The industry promotes itself as a bit of 'harmless fun' and claims merit for educating people. Academic research is unable to confirm this up-beat market image.

Pornography and Relationships

Research by F. M. Christensen⁷ suggests that masturbation to pornography not only has the potential to damage a person's sexual responsiveness to another person, but also has the power to damage a person's capacity for intimacy. Research typically involves exposing men to less than one hour of pornography a week and monitoring any shifts in the way they think or behave towards women after being exposed to the images. In research by Dolf Zillmann,⁸ watching six hours of non-violent pornography left the research participants much less likely to desire sexual intimacy with their real partners, or to be interested in marriage or children. Academic research done over the last thirty years, has consistently shown that limited exposure to pornography alters perceptions of sexuality, and, for users who have a partner, it breeds discontent with the physical appearance and sexual performance of their partners. Ana Bridges,⁹ reports that women in relationships with male users are affected in the following ways:

- a sense that their partners are fantasising about pornography during sex,
- frustration that their partners no longer seek them out for lovemaking and instead prefer to masturbate to pornography,
- pain and confusion about their partners asking them to participate in sexual acts seen in pornography,
- a strong decline in intimacy and connection with their partners,
- intrusive thoughts during sex about how they look rather than how they feel,
- guilt-ridden compliance to act more like the women in porn – to act in ways that feel demeaning, inauthentic, and uncomfortable.

In the USA, Naomi Wolf (2003) claimed that the ubiquity of porn is leading young men on American University campuses to expect their girlfriends to behave like porn stars in the bedroom:

the young women who talked to me on campuses about the effect of pornography on their intimate lives talked about feeling they could never measure up...if they did not offer what porn offered, they could not expect to hold a guy.

Research by Simon Hardy (1998) recorded that single men who use pornography reported difficulty in negotiating the complexities of a genuine sexual relationship after the easy unproblematic satisfaction they experienced using porn. Some men reported losing interest in sex with another human being altogether. For many men, moving between the two worlds did not prove at all straightforward.

Pornography and Violence

In a study conducted on the content of contemporary pornography,¹⁰ it was found that the majority of scenes from the 50 top rented porn movies contained both physical and verbal abuse of the female performers. Physical aggression occurred in 88% of the scenes, while verbal abuse was found in 48% of the scenes. The research concluded that:

if we combine both physical and verbal aggression, our findings indicate that nearly 90% of scenes contained at least one aggressive act, with an average of nearly 12 acts of aggression per scene.

In pornography, violence and degradation against women are sexualised, and women are presented as a group which *enjoys* being debased. Violence and aggression are therefore seen as consensual, and that which should be regarded as sexual assault is rendered almost invisible to the viewer. Sexualising violence against women in pornography means that the viewer associates sexual pleasure with violent behavior. The viewer takes physical pleasure while watching the association of sexual performance with violence.

Neil Malamuth has produced one of the most well known psychological studies on the consequences of viewing pornography, in which he summarises available research on this topic. He concludes that

experimental research shows that exposure to non-violent or violent pornography results in increases in both attitudes supporting sexual aggression and in actual aggression.¹¹

He also found that viewing pornography changes the attitudes of the viewer towards rape and child sex abuse, and promotes insensitivity to victims of sexual violence.

The Bailey Review acknowledged Papadopoulos' 2010 research, showing that people convicted of serious crimes of violence and sexual violence often have a history of using pornography, and recommended that strong measures be taken to prevent access of young people to pornography.¹²

What the research does not acknowledge, is that sexualising violence against women has entered the mainstream. In the recent Twilight film, *Breaking Dawn Part 1*, the wedding night results in a completely destroyed bedroom, and a wife battered and bruised. The wife, Bella, then reports to her husband that it was entirely satisfying for her, before, quite literally, begging for more. The mainstream film, *A Dangerous Method* also trades on the same theme.

It is obvious that pornographic films which involve children place children at risk. In societies which accept pornography, violent attitudes towards women become culturally embedded, and this places women at risk. Under what circumstances would it not place women at risk?

The links between pornography use and subsequent aggression were proven so successfully by Zillman and Bryant, that their research was stopped because of the risks to those participating in the research.

Addiction and Pornography

It is well known by young people that smoking alcohol and drugs can be addictive. It is not widely known that pornography is also addictive. The most famous self-declared porn addict was the American serial killer, rapist and kidnapper, Ted Bundy, who, shortly before his execution wrote (in an article published by the Guardian, 2003), that porn, like 'drugs and drink, is an addictive substance'. Modern day sexologists draw attention to the addictive nature of the practice, referring to



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it as a 'triple A Engine' addiction, fuelled by access, affordability and the anonymity of the internet. Dr Al Cooper, Stanford University psychologist, found in his research that 20% of porn surfers are addicts. Research has indicated that those who watch pornography can become attached to pornographic props for staying aroused during sex.¹³ Successful intimate relationships can come to depend upon imaginary or real pornographic images. Simon Stephens, director of Addictions UK reported, 'We are seeing an increasing number of people suffering from what we call 'process addiction' – the stimuli of looking at pornography, which creates a chemical imbalance in the brain.' Addiction is an issue for men and women and is increasingly reported by school counselors.

With the availability of pornography on the internet, traditional censorship models (which recognised the unsuitability of pornography for the young), have broken down. Western societies have become sexualised without public consultation, and without proper consideration of the impact upon our children, our relationships or our culture. Schools and parents are yet to engage with the problem of pornography. The conversation has not even begun. What the industry offers is a sexual 'formula' sold by the industry to generate business. This material carries quantifiable risks and it is addictive. What pornography does not offer is information about our shared human longing for connectedness, intimacy and love, or the sanctity of an exclusive sexual bond. Human sexuality is mysterious, sacred and beautiful, but it is also subtle and refined. The young are betrayed if they come to believe that human sexuality is simply an appetite which can be easily and cheaply satisfied outside of a loving relationship. Most parents would be shocked if a school invited a business person, interested only in personal gain, to teach students about sex and relationships. And yet nobody questions the pornography industry. The industry needs to be exposed, talked about and opened up to public scrutiny. It is not what it seems. It does not self-regulate and needs to be brought to account. There are signs that some government agencies are beginning to engage with this task, but there is a great deal more to do. It is increasingly difficult to control the material which is seen by young people, both at school and in the home, and educators need to engage with this fact. Students must be helped to understand the

risks of pornography and offered a different story of human sexual relationships. The West has experienced a vast culture shift since the sexual revolution began in the 1960s, but sex education has progressed very little. There is a vacuum which the porn industry is cashing in on at the expense of our culture and our relationships. Love-making can, in part, be taught and the very real question for all liberal democracies is what sort of education is given, and whether the pornography industry should have carte blanche to assume the task.

Julie Arliss

Hear Julie debate this issue.

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Endnotes

- 1 www.internetfilterreview.com
- 2 Brian McNair, *Mediated Sex: Pornography and Postmodern Culture*, Hodder Arnold, 1996 and *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire*, Routledge, 2002.
- 3 www.internetfilterreview.com
- 4 Quoting research by Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig and Olafsson, 2010 in Reg Bailey, *Letting Children Be Children: the Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood*, 2001.
- 5 For an account of 'The Money Shot,' see Caitlin Moran, *How to be a Woman*, Ebury Press, 2011.
- 6 Papadopoulos 2010, and Flood 2009 quoted in the UK *Bailey Review*, 37.
- 7 F.M Christensen, *Pornography: The Other Side*, 1995:87-99.
- 8 Dolf Zillmann, 'Effects of Prolonged Consumption of Pornography,' in Dolf Zillmann & Jennings Bryant Hillsdale (Eds.), *Pornography: Research Advances and Policy Considerations*, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1989; 127-58.
- 9 Researcher in Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*, Boston: South End Press, 2007.
- 10 Robert J Wosnitzer & Ana J Bridges, 'Aggression and Sexual Behaviour in Best Selling Pornography: A Content Analysis Update,' Paper presented at the 57th Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, San Francisco, 2007.
- 11 Neil Malamuth, Tamara Addison & Mary Koss, 'Pornography and Sexual Aggression: Are There Reliable Effects and Can We Understand Them?' *Annual Review of Sex Research* 11, 2000; 45.
- 12 UK Bailey Review, 2001: 37.
- 13 Pamela Paul, *Pornified; How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*, New York: Time Books, 2005.

For discussion

1. *Do those who consume pornography bear any responsibility for what the actors and actresses are required to do on set?*
2. *The participants in porn movies must be over 18. Do you think that they must LOOK over 18 as well?*
3. *Is it right to have an age limit for consumption of pornography? If not, why not? If yes, then who should be responsible for enforcing this?*
4. *Do you think more can be done to educate people about sex? Would this be worthwhile?*
5. *What is the pornographication of a culture? Do you think a sexualised society encourages people to be more promiscuous?*

Julie Arliss

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"The energy Julie brings to her presentations is truly invigorating – the buzz from the boys was great afterwards. I really enjoy their enthusiasm as participating in something which challenges them to rethink their ordered view of the world." Sarah Kirk, Christchurch Boys High School, NZ



JULIE ARLISS

Julie Arliss lectures at King's College and works in close association with Oxford and Exeter Universities. She organises and lectures at the best attended student study days in the UK for 15-19 year olds. Internationally she works with students in Australia, NZ and Singapore and is the joint author of a number of books and academic articles including *The Thinker's Guide to Evil*. She is Principal Examiner in Cambridge combining a strong commitment to young people with academic rigour.