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Rethinking the effects paradigm in porn studies

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Rethinking the effects paradigm in porn studies

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It has been an assumption of most anti-pornography discourse that porn damages women (and children) in a variety of ways. In *Porno? Chic!*, the author interrogated this assumption by examining the correlation between the incidence of sexual violence and other indicators of misogyny, and the availability and accessibility of pornography within a number of societies. This article develops that work with a specific focus on the regulatory environment as it relates to pornography and sexual representation. Does a liberal regulatory regime in sexual culture correlate with a relatively advanced state of sexual politics in a given country? Conversely, does an illiberal regime, where pornography and other forms of sexual culture are banned or severely restricted, correlate with relatively strong patriarchal structures? A comparative cross-country analysis seeks to explain the correlations identified, and to assess the extent to which the availability of porn can be viewed as a causal or a consequential characteristic of those societies where feminism has achieved significant advances.

Keywords: pornography; sexual violence; misogyny; comparative

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Introduction

One of the core questions for porn studies is that of effects. There are many ways of asking, but the question usually boils down to the following: does the production, distribution and consumption of pornography cause harm to a society or not?

Moral conservative perspectives and some religious perspectives (religious believers are not necessarily anti-porn) assert that it does, as do anti-pornography feminist perspectives. The former implicate pornography, in so far as it advocates taboo-breaking, hedonistic, polygamous sex, in the erosion of 'family values' and heterosexist socio-sexual relations (specifically, the decline of the nuclear family as a core structure of capitalism, and the erosion of male domination inside and out of the domestic environment, including the bedroom). From this perspective pornography is viewed as an anarchic, disruptive force, undermining the moral and ethical values that hold society together as we know it.

Anti-porn feminists, on the other hand, since the key texts of the 1980s 'porn wars' (Dworkin 1981) up to more recent work by Gail Dines and others (Dines 2010; Boyle 2010), have asserted that exposure to pornography induces misogynistic behaviour and attitudes, and to this extent reinforces patriarchy. This argument has many variants, from the influential proposition of Robin Morgan in the 1970s that

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'pornography is the theory, rape is the practice' – echoed in Robert Jensen's (2011) labelling of the United States as a 'rape culture' fuelled by pornography – to contemporary suggestions that pornography 'conditions' both men and women and is responsible, for example, for the growth in popularity of vaginal depilation and other manifestations of what Ariel Levy (2005) has called 'raunch culture'. By this she meant a climate in which women engage willingly in sexual self-objectification and display. These 'female chauvinist pigs', as Levy described them in her best-selling book, are viewed from this perspective as victims of a sexualized, patriarchal culture, even if they are unaware of their victimization.

In a 2013 column for the *Sunday Times*, journalist Eleanor Mills typified this approach when she wrote that 'a good barometer of porn's influence is the fact that young people, raised on hairless porn stars, spend vast amounts of time and money having their pubic hair removed for fear of being seen as unattractive' (Mills 2013). No evidence was presented in the article for this assertion, or for the further claim that 'young minds are being conditioned by the violent sex they daily access online' (2013). Pornography's harms are often cited alongside a generalized critique of cultural sexualization, and with a similar lack of substantiating evidence beyond reference to 'popular perceptions' that there is a problem (Papadopolous 2010, 7).

The lack of convincing evidence for claims about porn's effects is also a feature of anti-porn academic discourse, which tends to draw on personal anecdote and secondary sources, and to be framed by the analysts' own, subjective readings of what pornography means to its male and female consumers (regardless of what the consumers themselves think). Amongst the mainly anti-porn essays in Karen Boyle's (2010) edited collection, for example, the reader will find many assertions of the harms that porn does to women, children, and men. Supporting evidence, however, is non-existent to thin. In the case of Robert Jensen's essay, the apocalyptically titled 'Pornography is What the End of the World Looks Like' – evidence of harm amounts to the author's no doubt sincere declaration that he wept on contemplation of porn's excesses (Jensen 2010, 110).

Here and elsewhere in the anti-porn literature (Waltman 2010) the transgressive–fantastic element of pornographic texts, especially those that represent forms of sexualized violence, is discounted in favour of a literal reading of their content. The representation of a woman giving oral sex to a man, for example, might be defined from this viewpoint as 'degrading' in and of itself. Pornographic representations of sadomasochism have been defined by anti-porn lobbyists as 'torture', even when it is clear that the images are fulfilments of fantasy role-play for those involved. Images of consensual bondage and discipline, sadism and masochism activity are often included in a broad category of violent and abusive content that in some regulatory regimes, such as the United Kingdom, has been significantly criminalized in recent years (Attwood and Smith 2010).

A 1992 paper to the Australian Institute of Criminology, informed by this approach, began its exploration of the effects question with identification of 'the increasingly virulent tide of material in which the primary concern appears to be to demean women and reassert their inferiority' (Goldsmith 1992, 1). Very similar language appears in contemporary writing about the harms done to young people by exposure to what is often perceived to be a more violent and degrading pornography than has been available before. The view that pornography is evolving in a more abusive direction is not new, it has been a common feature of anti-porn discourse

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since the nineteenth century. Despite frequent assertions to the contrary by journalists and anti-porn academics, research on pornographic content has not found that the twenty-first-century pornosphere is on the whole more violent than that of two, three or four decades ago (McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008).

Pornography consumption has also been characterized as a new form of addiction, its users in need of therapeutic help (Maltz and Maltz 2005; Skinner 2005; Manning 2009). Like alcohol or gambling, excessive porn consumption is alleged to damage relationships and family life (Paul 2005). There are self-help guides available for those who may feel themselves to be porn addicts, while the internet hosts a growing number of websites devoted to 'recovery' from porn and/or 'sex addiction' – a broader diagnosis, particularly common amongst male Hollywood movie stars, within which addiction to pornography is viewed as a symptom.[1]

Reflecting the centrality of the effects question in porn studies is the large literature devoted to it. Since the 1960s, researchers have sought evidence for a causal-effects relationship between pornography and (predominantly) male attitudes and behaviour. Throughout that period there has been debate about the status of evidence and the experimental methods used to collect it, as well as the inferences to be drawn from findings. The many psychological studies undertaken in laboratories with young men and (less frequently, women) exposed to porn images have been critiqued as limited in their application to real-world contexts. The definitions of pornography used, and the criteria used to define key effects such as 'aggression', 'acceptance of rape myths' and so on, have constantly been challenged and remain contentious. Most writings on pornography, even those that are critical of the form and advocate restrictions of various kinds, concede that there is no convincing evidence of linear causal effects on male behaviour towards women, preferring to assert more nebulous and unprovable effects such as 'conditioning', 'desensitising' and 'predisposition to aggression'. It has been a circular debate, and this short article is not the place to pursue it much further. Rather, I will pose the question differently.

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Rethinking the effects paradigm in porn studies

If there has been a 'pornographication of mainstream culture', as many observers accept (McNair 1996, 2002; Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa 2007), and if the harmful effects alleged by anti-pornography observers, be they in the media, the academy, or the anti-porn advocacy movement are real, one would expect the misogynistic, sexist and anti-social behaviours and attitudes attributed to pornography to be increasing. This is the implication of a term such as 'rape culture', whereby the United States is perceived as a culture defined by rape, actively encouraging of it, in large part because it is a culture in which pornography exists and is more or less freely available – the ideological underpinning or 'theory' of the practice. So we can ask: if 'porn is everywhere', as is often claimed, can increased levels of the various harms associated with its use be observed and measured? At the macro or structural level, where individual behaviours are aggregated into long-term statistical trends, has patriarchy been reinforced by the expansion of pornography?

In the rest of this essay I examine what correlations can be found between the availability and accessibility of pornography in a sample of societies with different regulatory regimes around the pornographic, the incidence of sex crimes, and observable trends in sexual politics and attitudes in those societies. I will then ask

what inferences can be drawn from these observations as to the impact of 'pornographication' on patriarchal social structures more broadly. I will not address here the subject of gay porn, and such trends as the rapid decline in measured incidence of both individual and institutional homophobia. The anti-pornography discourse typically ignores this aspect of the phenomenon, although it obviously has implications for the assertion that all pornography is by definition misogynistic or 'woman hating'.

Pornography and sex crime – the evidence so far

Since the 1970s, when pornography had begun to be liberalized in many advanced capitalist societies, researchers have sought to establish the impact of that trend on the incidence of sex crimes. What they have consistently found, with some deviations from the general trend in some countries at some times, is that in so far as there is a correlation, it is one of inverse proportionality. That is, the more pornography that circulates in a society, and the easier it is to access and consume, the lower is the reported incidence of most categories of sexual offending, with a particularly marked decline since the 1980s.

Kutchinsky's (1991) early work on trends in Denmark – the first country to legalize 'hard core' pornography as that term is generally understood – compared the increase in availability of sexually explicit materials following the liberalization of anti-pornography laws in Denmark, Sweden, West Germany, and the United States with both pre-liberalization and post-liberalization data regarding sex crimes reported in these countries. His research found that in three of the four countries between 1964 and 1984 the reported incidence of rape and attempted rape was stable or fell slightly. In the United States the reported incidence of all violent crime, including rape, increased until 1979, and then plateaued. Kutchinsky suggests that these US data cannot be read as evidence of pornography's effects, since the trend in sexual violence precisely parallels that for all violent crime in American society.

From the 1980s until the 2000s, however, and again following the trend for violent crime, the incidence of reported rape and attempted rape fell in the United States, and by 2009 was at the lowest level for 50 years (Ferguson and Hartley 2009). Steven Pinker (2011) points to a reduction of 80% in incidence between 1973 and 2008, notwithstanding the late 1970s spike referred to above. Similar trends were evident in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Croatia and Finland (Diamond and Uchiyama 1999), although we note that different countries have different ways of defining and measuring sexual offences, that these may change over time, and that not all have equally reliable official statistics. For example, a change in the definition of sexual offences in Scotland in 2011 led to a 5% increase in the recorded incidence of this category of crime for 2012/13. The Scottish government's report on crime statistics for that year noted that the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act 2009:

> resulted in some increases in sexual offences … some crimes that would previously have been classified as either breach of the peace or other miscellaneous are now classed as sexual offences … Caution should therefore be taken when comparing sexual offences with previous years. (Scottish Government 2013, 6)

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Overall, it is possible to state with confidence that 'few studies have linked the availability of porn in any society with actual associated antisocial behaviors or sex crimes in particular. None have found a causal relationship and very few have even found one of positive correlation' (Diamond 2009, 305). Bauserman has observed that:

> Rape rates are not consistently associated with pornography circulation. And the relationships found are ambiguous. Findings are [not] consistent with … the view that sexually explicit materials in general contribute directly to sex crimes. (1996, 405)

This does not mean that there is no correlation, nor any effects, even of the direct kind. Media of all kinds impact on individuals and groups in a variety of ways. People feel fear when they watch a scary movie, sexual arousal when they watch porn, consumerist desire when they see a glossy magazine advertisement for a Tag Heuer watch. These are all media effects, in so far as images are intended to and do trigger responses in the viewer. Therefore, a failure to find negative effects in the long history of porn effects research may indicate only that the wrong question has been asked, and the wrong model of communication systems applied. I do not wish to match the unfounded claims of anti-porn advocates with an equally unfounded assertion that there are no negative effects of any kind, ever, associated with its use. But the key anti-pornography claim – that consumption of pornography leads men to rape and otherwise abuse women, or makes them more likely to – has no basis in the official data now available for a large number of countries.

There are several reasons why reported incidence of sexual offenses might go up over time, such as increasing population (where an absolute rise in incidence is compatible with a reduction in rate). Increasing awareness of sex crime issues, and the growing readiness of women and children to report abuse which flows from that, alongside better policing, might lead us to expect higher reported incidence of sexual offences over time. In the 1970s heyday of a paedophiliac celebrity such as BBC icon Jimmy Savile, sexual abuse and harassment were common but rarely reported, and even more rarely the subject of legal sanction. Indeed, following the publicity around the Savile case in 2012 there was a spike in reported incidence of sexual offences, as individuals came forward with accounts long kept secret. The global news coverage of systematic child abuse in the Catholic Church has led to a flow of cases dating back decades, which will presumably impact on official statistics.

Today, adults and children are much more likely to report such behaviours, knowing that their society has close to a zero tolerance of them. For the same reasons – heightened public awareness and associated political pressure – legal authorities are more likely than was once the case to pursue allegations, take them seriously and act upon them. This heightened sensitivity makes it all the more notable that, despite cultural sexualization and pornogaphication, the reported incidence of many sex crimes has fallen in recent decades.

It is also the case (although precise statistics are hard to come by in many of these countries) that societies where women are most likely to be sexually assaulted and disadvantaged across the range of indicators (human rights, political rights, workforce participation and economic independence, etc.) are those in which pornography and sexual culture in general are either banned or tightly restricted, almost always on grounds of religious doctrine. I am not blaming the relative

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absence of pornography for these realities, anymore than we can give pornography the credit for a reduction in sex crime over time in those societies characterized by 'pornographication'. But it does suggest that those moral and cultural climates which are most hostile to pornography also display the greatest hostility to women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender rights. Those societies where misogyny, violence against women and institutional sexism remain most visible are those in which extreme forms of patriarchal religion hold sway, and where pornography and sexual culture in general are fiercely suppressed, largely because of the 'effect' they might have on female sexuality in those regimes.

Just because the reduction of sex crimes coincides with pornographication does not mean that the latter has caused the former. It could be that pornography does have the harmful effects attributed to it by anti-porn advocates, but that what might otherwise be predicted to be a rise in sexual crimes arising from greater accessibility of porn is counteracted by other factors, such as women's growing sense of empowerment and social entitlement due to the influence of feminism over four decades, or changing expectations of male sexual behaviour and etiquette. Putting it another way, it could be the case that pornography does indeed have the potential to 'cause' some men to rape, but that social pressures and heightened individual awareness of sex-political issues inhibit the vast majority from ever doing so. Laboratory-based studies may show that college students exposed to certain kinds of pornography become more 'aggressive' or 'demeaning' of women in an experimental setting (however these terms are defined by the researcher), while in the real social world young men understand that aggressive male behaviours such as domestic violence and rape or the expression of conservative sexist values are no longer socially acceptable.

The evidence that rape and other sex-related crimes have decreased in many societies where the availability of pornography has been increased does not prove that porn reduces rape (is a cathartic), although that may be one reading of the data. Another reading, which to this author seems more logical, is that societies in which sexually explicit materials circulate with relative ease are also likely to be societies in which there have been progressive changes in sexual politics and public attitudes (Smith 2008, 2011), which in turn contribute to reductions in sex offences over time. The mainstreaming of homosexuality, the ascendancy of feminism, the heightened understanding by men in general of the damage done historically by patriarchal norms and structure – all have proceeded at the same time as pornographication and cultural sexualization. The evolving social environment that has supported one set of changes in the sex-political arena has at the same time removed the religious and patriarchal bases on which access to pornography was historically constrained.

More exposure to and discussion of sexually explicit materials in the culture is one element in an emerging environment of increased openness and transparency around the sexual, making women progressively more able to recognize and then resist coercive sex. In relation to homosexuality, the advance of gay rights since the 1970s, and the recorded decline of homophobic social attitudes in large-scale surveys have increased the visibility of gay sexuality, including gay male and lesbian pornography. Increased visibility has meant reduced stigma, if only because gay porn fundamentally challenges the Dworkin–Dinesian denunciation of all porn as misogynistic.

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Disentangling the impact of pornographic stimuli as against the inhibiting effect of changing social norms, and assessing both amidst the unknowable complexity of individual experience and environmental context, is for practical purposes impossible. All we have are the figures, and the evidence they provide that, in nearly every society which has been identified as undergoing pornographication and cultural sexualization, rape and other sexual offences have been in steady long-term decline. There is no such thing as a 'rape culture' (Jensen 2011), no epidemic of misogynistic hate crime, no increase in the sexual degradation of women in contemporary capitalism to be attributed to pornography or any other stimulus. At the same time, the socio-economic, political and cultural status of women in these societies has improved dramatically, alongside that of previously marginalized sexual communities. As surveys of social attitudes repeatedly show, public resistance to the equality of women has declined in advanced capitalist societies, as have homophobic attitudes on such matters as marriage equality and adoption by same-sex parents (for a detailed review of these trends, see McNair 2013).

None of this means that there can never be a situation in which pornography is not used in an abusive context, nor that pornography is not, in some variations, misogynistic; nor that there are no issues of regulation and management of pornography to be taken seriously in societies characterized by diversity of sexual identity and lifestyle. They mean, simply, that the rationale of harmful causal effects on which the effort to prohibit pornography has been based since the nineteenth century lacks solid foundation. Indeed, if one was to apply a crude empiricist analysis to the accumulated evidence on the incidence of sex crime, one could easily make the case (although I do not) that pornography 'causes' its reduction.

To be 'against' pornography, then, is not a rational response to a set of statistics that demonstrate harm, but an application of moral and taste criteria with which one may agree or disagree, but which are not rooted in evidence of the quality required to justify the restrictions often called for. To be offended by pornography's messages about hedonistic and transgressive sexuality is intelligible, if they challenge one's religious beliefs in the sanctity of heterosexual marriage, or the exclusively reproductive function of sex.

In secular terms, to be shocked and offended by some of the things women do in pornography, and have done to them, is intelligible, if it challenges a political ideology – that subset of radical feminism from which sprang the Dworkin–MacKinnon model of effects – which declares that women could not possibly consent freely to such acts, or desire the kinds of sex that pornography depicts, were it not for the pressures imposed on them by patriarchy. Even as more and more women use pornography, and profess desire to participate in the sexual behaviours and consumption patterns traditionally monopolized by men, the view that such women – Levy's 'female chauvinist pigs' – are victims of a malevolent sexual culture, 'conditioned' to shave their vaginas or wear skimpy clothes on a Saturday night, is not evidence-based, and it seems unlikely that it will ever be refuted with evidence, even evidence showing, as I have argued here: a dramatic and unprecedented decline in sexual offending throughout the liberal capitalist world since the 1980s; and a dramatic and unprecedented improvement in the status of women in those societies.

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Pornographic effects – an ecological paradigm

The inherently chaotic nature of the communication system means that no environmental stimulus or influence on an individual human subject can be understood in isolation, separate from the complex mix of factors that comprise the reception environment. Laboratory experiments may seek to show otherwise, but the results of such efforts are always methodologically contentious because of their fundamental artificiality. In the real world a plurality of circumstances, or contexts, will combine to create the environment within which a pornographic text will or will not have some kind of effect on a user's behaviour or beliefs and attitudes. Those contexts will determine the nature of the effect – direct, indirect, mediated, unmediated, and so forth – and its implications for individual (and thus social) behaviour. In itself, the pornographic text is like all other kinds of cultural artefact: an empty vessel of signs, devoid of meaning and consequence until the point of consumption by real human beings (although the production of pornography can have adverse effects on some of those involved). Only when given meaning by that combination of contextual factors that make up the reception environment can a pornographic text go on to have impact, be it positive or negative.

Thus, a rapist who habitually uses porn may use porn in the course of a rape, either as stimulation, source of emulation or tool of seduction or coercion (as in a paedophile's grooming of a child). On the other hand, a man who abhors violence and would never dream of committing any kind of sexual abuse may use porn as a sexual stimulant, or an erotic accessory in consensual sex with a partner, but never be compelled by that use to commit rape. Behind both very different patterns of use are a myriad of background factors dating back to childhood and family, education and peer group, personality and experience. The antisocial, dysfunctional use of porn, as in the case of the rapist, relates to only a small proportion of all porn use. Porn, like the knife in every household kitchen, is used by the vast majority of people in ways which cause no harm to others. Only a small minority will use it to injure another, which is why we do not ban kitchen knives (although some jurisdictions restrict possession outside the domestic zone).

There is, by extension, no inherent quality of the pornographic that justifies its prohibition in a secular, sexually liberal society where men and women of all sexual orientations regularly use it without apparent harm to themselves or others. With the exception of porn made with non-consenting adults or children (child porn depicts real, as opposed to simulated, sexualized violence, and is rightly prohibited because it is the record of criminal acts, rather than because of its propensity to cause copycat violence), all pornographic texts have positive or negative consequences only in the context of their consumption and use, which is determined elsewhere and before the act of consumption occurs. The Quran was not banned because of 9/11. The Bible continues to be revered across the Judeo-Christian world, despite the homophobic hate speech spewed out by some Christian fundamentalists who claim to draw their inspiration from it. This is as it should be, and precisely the same logic applies to porn.

To eradicate sex crime, and thus bring to an end the association of porn in the commissioning of such crimes, it is necessary to address the circumstances within which porn acquires anti-social or misogynistic meaning. If further reducing the incidence of rape and other sex crimes in our societies is a worthy goal, and it is, the

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evidence discussed in this article suggests that the prohibition of pornography would make no difference. Rather, education about women's rights (and men's, and children's, by extension – indeed, all who can be considered potential victims of sexual offending), popular cultural representations of strong women and sexual diversity, women's greater economic and political independence – work to make rape and other misogynistic acts a more despised, less tolerated crime.

Conclusion

The paradigm shift of my title, therefore, is this: to move away from the view of porn as problematic cause of negative social phenomena, to one that accepts its presence, and the visibility of sexually explicit material in general, as a constituent element of a sex-political ecology which is, yes, more open and transparent – and more 'sexualized' in its pro-sex messaging – but which is also more diverse and liberal, more 'progressive'. This is not a blanket defence of all forms of pornography, which would make no more sense than to say 'I defend all knives'. It does not preclude regulation and control of legal pornography (as opposed to illegal forms, which should be aggressively policed), in order to maintain a pornosphere that is distinct from the public sphere and adequately signposted. Pornography does offend many people, and its intimate, explicit, often provocative images should not be permitted to infringe the private space of those who do not wish to be exposed to them. In an online world, too, parents and carers have a legitimate expectation that children will not be exposed to porn's adult content.

Removing all porn from the face of the earth tomorrow would neither reduce nor end sex crime, however, which has existed in all societies at all times in human history, regardless of the extent of their pornographication (Schinaia 2010), and today occurs with as much frequency, if not at higher rate in the non-sexualized societies of the world where porn, like homosexuality and feminism, are likely to be banned or vigorously policed by patriarchal judiciaries. Distinguished UK journalist Robert Fisk (2010) wrote of the 5000 cases recorded by the United Nations every year of women 'beheaded, burned to death, stoned to death, stabbed, electrocuted, strangled and buried alive for the "honour" of their families' in mainly Islamic societies where nothing like 'pornographication' or cultural sexualization has occurred.

Changing the circumstances within which pornography can be an accessory to sexual violence would imply the almost unimaginable human achievement of ending sexual violence altogether, whether through education, judicial means, or persuasion and example set by the media and popular culture (McNair, 2002). Rather than a circular and repetitive debate about the particular harms of pornography, this goal requires an ambitious and determined global effort to continue building on the progressive changes in sexual politics and culture seen since the 1980s.

Notes

1. Beyond the moral conservative and feminist critiques of pornography, there is a long-standing tradition of elite distaste, even disgust, at the perceived excesses of pornography and the impact these have on morality and aesthetics. Having critiqued this reading in previous work (McNair 2002, 2013), I will note here only that amongst the many harms associated with the pornographication of mainstream culture seen in the liberal democratic

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societies since World War II is a sincere anxiety about what we might think of as its coarsening or degeneration under the influence of ever more explicit and transgressive forms of sexual representation.

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