

Submission to the "Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet"

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I am a writer and filmmaker with a personal and professional interest in pornography and sexuality.

1. The Major Unstated Premise of The Terms of the Inquiry

To begin, I want to draw attention to the stated aims of this Senate Inquiry. To quote the website:

"Harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet, with particular reference to:

- a. trends of online consumption of pornography by children and their impact on the development of healthy and respectful relationships;
- b. current methods taken towards harm minimisation in other jurisdictions, and the effectiveness of those methods;
- c. the identification of any measures with the potential for implementation in Australia; and
- d. any other related matters. "

This inquiry appears to be proceeding with the basic assumption that porn *does* harm to children. It does not provide any evidence to back this claim. I would question the outcome of this inquiry if it is proceeding from this stance as it appears biased from the very beginning.

2. Definitions

The inquiry doesn't define its terms. It appears the scope for inquiry is particularly broad. I would ask:

- a. How does the inquiry define "pornography"?
 - b. How does the inquiry define "children"?
 - c. How does the inquiry define "harm"?
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- a. The term "pornography" is ridiculously broad. Are we talking about visual depictions of explicit sex? Photos? Videos? Online erotic fiction - *50 Shades of Grey*? *Lady Chatterley's Lover*? Does the definition only focus on mass-produced, American male-gaze heterosexual pornography or does it include feminist pornography, amateur porn, gay porn, animated porn, porn that screens at international film festivals? Are we talking about the pornography individuals produce for their partners on their iPhones?

And does the inquiry plan to conflate illegal material with consensual pornography made for adults? Will the definition expand to also include child abuse material ("child porn"), which will no doubt result in far more inflammatory conclusions?

I would argue that there is no single "pornography"; rather there are many pornographies, depicting the vast diversity of human sexuality. In deciding if "pornography" creates "harm", it certainly helps to be very specific about what kind of pornography you are discussing.

b. Who are the "children" that are being discussed? What age are they? Does this inquiry make a distinction between pre-pubescent children and teenagers? This is an important distinction, since adolescents are far more interested in sexuality and more likely to seek out porn. They are also more mature and may have many varying reasons for their interest in porn. Muddying the waters between children and teens can result in skewed results. To give an example, *Regulating Youth Access to Pornography* by Clive Hamilton and Michael Flood, spoke of harm done to "children" and used a Newspann of 16- and 17-year old youths as their statistics.

c. How is "harm" being defined? Physical harm? Mental harm? Incitement to assault? Or are we more worried about "the wrong message"? Is the inquiry more concerned with "moral harm", a nebulous concept that varies according to the religion and ethics of those who see themselves fit to judge others.

To give an example, in his 2009 study *The harms of pornography exposure among children and young people*, Michael Flood included the following definition of "harm":

"the potential of pornography to foster 'open' sexual lifestyles (e.g. acceptance of casual and extramarital sex, multiple partners, etc.) and 'unnatural' practices (e.g. anal and oral sex, homosexuality)"

If this inquiry defines the acceptance of non-monogamy, homosexuality and non-penis-in-vagina sex as "harmful" then there is a very serious problem with the basic approach. If it accepts these kind of "moral harm" arguments as valid, it is obviously more interested in imposing a particular moral compass than in genuinely assessing evidence.

3. The Need For Evidence

I would call upon the inquiry to rely on peer-reviewed evidence when reaching their conclusions. I would also point out the contradictory problem that scientific study of the effects of children watching pornography is extremely difficult. It is unethical to allow children to watch porn and study any effects and, of course, there is the ongoing problem that correlation does not equal causality.

I refer your attention to a 2013 meta-study by the UK Children's Commissioner entitled "*Basically... porn is everywhere*" :*A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography has on Children and Young People*.

Their summary states:

Overall, there were seven significant concerns about the reviewed evidence base:

1. The lack of consensus within the literature regarding what was being examined, or even about who could be considered a child or young person, meant that it was difficult to generalise or extrapolate.
2. Problems with operational definitions of key terms made comparison challenging. These problems included limited knowledge of children and young people's conceptions or understanding of pornography.
3. Why do we still not know anything about causality? Maybe it is time to ask different questions.
4. Has the nature of the issue changed qualitatively or merely been exacerbated by the pace of technology and people's uncertainty in a climate of rapid change?
5. Very little research has been conducted that keeps children and young people's experiences at the centre.
6. The impacts of cultural differences and cultural context are rarely acknowledged or examined.
7. Few papers reviewed for this REA – whether they were included or excluded – even began to consider the effects of pornography on children and young people who were: an ethnicity other than the majority for the country in which the research was conducted; a sexuality other than heterosexual; transgender; or anything other than able-bodied and with full capacity (relative to their development).

A further example of flawed studies into children's use of pornography occurred in 2015. The NSPCC asserted that "a tenth of all 12- to 13-year-olds fear they are 'addicted' to pornography." An open letter by a collection of academics and writers challenged their statistics, as follows:

We write to express our deep concern about a report you published last week, which received significant press coverage. The report claimed that a tenth of 12-13 year olds believe they are addicted to pornography, and appears to have been fed to the media with accompanying quotes suggesting that pornography is causing harm to new generations of young people.

Your study appears to rely entirely on self-report evidence from young people of 11 and older, and so is not – as it has been presented – indicative of actual harm but rather, provides evidence that some young people are fearful that pornography is harming them. In other words, this study looks at the effects on young people of widely published but unevidenced concerns about pornography, not the effects of pornography itself.

It appears that your study was not an academic one, but was carried out by a “creative market research” group called OnePoll. We are concerned that you, a renowned child protection agency, are presenting the findings of an opinion poll as a serious piece of research. Management Today recently critiqued OnePoll in an article that opened as follows: “What naive readers may not realise is that much of what is reported as scientific is not in fact genuine research at all, but dishonest marketing concocted by PR firms.”

There have been countless studies into the effects of porn since the late 1960s, and yet the existence of the kinds of harm you report remains contested. In fact, many researchers have reached the opposite conclusion: that increased availability of porn correlates with healthier attitudes towards sex, and with steadily reducing rates of sexual violence. For example, the UK government’s own research generated the following conclusion in 2005: “There seems to be no relationship between the availability of pornography and an increase in sex crimes ...; in comparison there is more evidence for the opposite effect.”

The very existence of “porn addiction” is questionable, and it is not an accepted medical condition. Dr David J Ley, a psychologist specialising in this field, says: “Sex and porn can cause problems in people’s lives, just like any other human behavior or form of entertainment. But, to invoke the idea of “addiction” is unethical, using invalid, scientifically and medically-rejected concepts to invoke fear and feed panic.”

Immediately following the release of your report, the Culture Secretary Sajid Javid announced that the Tories would be introducing strong censorship of the Internet if they win the next election, in order to “protect children” from pornography. The Culture Secretary’s new announcement would probably lead to millions of websites being blocked by British ISPs, should it come into force. We would point out the experience of the optional “porn filters”, introduced in early 2014, which turned out in practise to block a vast range of content including sex education material.

The BBC news website quotes you as saying, in response to the minister’s announcement: “Any action that makes it more difficult for young people to find this material is to be welcomed.” We disagree: we believe that introducing Chinese-style blocking of websites is not warranted by the findings of your opinion poll, and that serious research instead needs to be undertaken to determine whether your claims of harm are backed by rigorous evidence.

Signatories:

Jerry Barnett, CEO Sex & Censorship

Frankie Mullin, Journalist

Clarissa Smith, Professor of Sexual Cultures, University of Sunderland

Julian Petley, Professor of Screen Media, Brunel University

David J. Ley PhD. Clinical Psychologist (USA)

Dr Brooke Magnanti

Feona Attwood, Professor of Media & Communication at Middlesex University

Martin Barker, Emeritus Professor at University of Aberystwyth

Jessica Ringrose, Professor, Sociology of Gender and Education, UCL Institute of

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Ronete Cohen MA, Psychologist

Dr Meg John Barker, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, The Open University

Kath Albury, Associate Professor, UNSW Australia

Myles Jackman, specialist in obscenity law

Dr Helen Hester, Middlesex University

Justin Hancock, youth worker and sex educator

Ian Dunt, Editor in Chief, Politics.co.uk

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Dr Kate Egan, Lecturer in Film Studies, Aberystwyth University

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Dr. William Proctor, Lecturer in Media, Culture and Communication, Bournemouth University

Dr Jude Roberts, Teaching Fellow, University of Surrey

Dr Debra Ferreday, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Lancaster University

Jane Fae, author of "Taming the beast" a review of law/regulation governing online pornography

Michael Marshall, Vice President, Merseyside Skeptics Society

Martin Robbins, Journalist

Assoc. Prof. Paul J. Maginn (University of Western Australia)

Dr Lucy Neville, Lecturer in Criminology, Middlesex University

Alix Fox, Journalist and Sex Educator

Dr Mark McCormack, Senior Lecturer in Sociology, Durham University

Chris Ashford, Professor of Law and Society, Northumbria University

Diane Duke, CEO Free Speech Coalition (USA)

Dr Steve Jones, Senior Lecturer in Media, Northumbria University

Dr Johnny Walker, Lecturer in Media, Northumbria University

I've included the above letter because I think it does a great job of pointing out many of the issues surrounding the moral panic surrounding pornography and children. I also support the research being done by those many of the academics listed. I would recommend the following site to the inquiry, which provides useful resources, essays and information relating to this particular topic:

<http://www.onscenity.org/>

I also recommend the work of Clarissa Smith, who has done extensive research into how and why people watch porn. Her most recent publication deals with teens and porn and goes to the trouble of actually speaking to teenagers about the subject.

<http://www.clarissasmith.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Explicit-Chapter-Final-Draft-Jan-2014.pdf>

I also recommend the work of Professor Alan McKee who is also going to the trouble of actually *asking* people about their thoughts on porn without starting from an automatically negative position. In 2007 he wrote a very useful paper called "Positive and negative effects of pornography as attributed by consumers"
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/14575/1/14575.pdf>

In any case, what I want to say is this: there are academic studies that claim that porn harms children, just as there are studies that find the opposite, or are inconclusive. At this point I can't say the evidence is there, one way or the other, because there's just not enough of it. What I do know is that vested interests are very keen to back up their moral views with whatever evidence fits their case. We need to be very careful about what evidence we accept and constantly ask: who wrote it, what were their methods, who funded the research and what were their unconscious/moral biases?

4. The Plural Of Anecdote Is Not Data; But Here's Mine

I suspect that some submissions to this inquiry will include the personal anecdotes of people who watch porn or who are concerned about porn. I would again urge the inquiry to remember that an individual anecdote does not equate to research. Still, I will offer my own to be added to the pile. Take it with a large grain of salt.

I am 43. I first saw porn when I was probably 8 or 9 in the early 80s. I was fascinated with my father's Penthouse magazines under the bed. I enjoyed looking at them and they inspired a life-long interest in pornography. The magazines only showed women, not men; I learned that lingerie was very sexy. The one time I was caught looking at these magazines, my parents - who were admittedly pretty embarrassed - didn't make a big thing of it. I grew up in a house that was relatively OK with sex and nudity and I fondly remember reading *Where Did I Come From?* over and over when I was a kid, laughing at the sperm wearing a top hat.

I also read a lot of teenage romances when I was growing up. These books taught me that girls behaved a certain way, that boys were the ones in control, that being in love was the most important thing, that you had to be pretty to get a guy, that you might say "no" to tease him when you really meant yes. In hindsight, I can say that romance novels were far more harmful to my perspective than any encounter with porn.

When I was old enough to buy an adult video, I did. But I was disappointed; again, women were the focus. My desire for a female-oriented type of porn led me to discover the films of Candida Royalle. Then I started reading *Australian Women's Forum*, a feminist magazine that featured nude male centerfolds. I went on to write for AWF and I became a strong sex-positive feminist. For me, pornography and sexual liberation have gone hand in hand. Through my work with pornography I have gone on to meet some of the smartest and most interesting people, many of whom don't fit into narrow categories of "normal". Queers, sex workers, avant-garde filmmakers, sex bloggers, photographers. I have been exposed to the wide and diverse world of human sexuality and I'm extremely grateful for that.

I do not believe porn has not harmed me in any way. It has allowed me to embrace my own sexuality and to be more open minded toward others. And I should add: I am a heterosexual ciswoman who has been monogamously married for over 20 years and

who has a happy and fulfilled sex life. I'm the poster girl for "normal", whatever that is.

So there it is. A single positive anecdote for the record.

5. My View

This submission is too short; I've written it at the last minute and haven't had enough time to include enough research to back up my opinions (that is, I know I've read it somewhere, I just don't have the time today to find all the URLs). Still, the inquiry welcomes pure opinion so I'm just going to summarize my perspective here.

My own view is this: I understand that this is a field of research that is very complicated and difficult to study. There are nuances that are often missed in the moral panic that surrounds the topic. I am inclined to believe that pornography itself is not inherently a problem; it is simply a form of media, just like any other media - films, cartoons, music, novels. What makes pornography problematic in some cases is society's approach to sex and sexuality. So much shame, misinformation and misunderstanding surrounds sex that it skews the context in which pornography is viewed. It also skews the way pornography gets produced and distributed.

I think that a child's background and education make all the difference when it comes to how they will deal with pornography, if and when they encounter it. And any perceived "harm" most likely occurs through shame, guilt or a lack of education.

I do understand the concern about modern pornography. I know some (*some*, not all) of it can be sexist, racist and it often presents a vision of sexuality that gives priority to heterosexual male desire. This particular type of porn is now easily available on the internet and can be viewed without context or any understanding of human sexuality. I know that porn can be seen as a guide to having sex - and in some cases, it's a very bad guide, especially if you want to know how to have good sex.

But, as always, the best and only workable solution lies in sex education.

If we want pornography to be less problematic, the solution is openness, education, critical thinking and less shame. We need to be able to talk openly about sex and about pornography. If we are concerned that teenagers are taking all their sexual cues from porn, the best solution is to give them honest, factual and comprehensive sex education. We need to move beyond anatomy and contraception and include important concepts like consent, negotiation and pleasure.

And we need to make sure pornography is discussed; we need to teach them to think critically about what they may be watching. Ask: How was the porn made? Why does it depict this particular thing? Who benefits from it? Why is this thing considered sexy? What power relationships are being depicted? How does it depict gender and sexual orientation? How can you tell the performers are consenting? This can be a discussion held within a classroom without the need to actually view porn.

Knowing that porn isn't a how-to-guide and then being able to think critically about what it means will lead to people being able to make better personal decisions about their own relationships and their own enjoyment of pornography.

I think we also have to be realistic about human nature and sexuality. We have to acknowledge that humans are sexual creatures, even when young, and that sexual curiosity is natural. We can't suppress our curiosity or our desire and I think the scandals within Catholic church - and the ongoing legacy of Catholic guilt and shame - have shown the negative consequences of attempting to do that. Acknowledging human nature means we need to stop pretending that teenagers are innocent about sex and that they should only watch porn when they're 18. It is happening before that and the only solution is to talk about it and to teach them critical thinking and respect for each other.

I don't doubt that there will be calls for an internet filter or some kind of content ban during this inquiry. We've already been there once with Stephen Conroy's proposed filter: it won't work. There is no filter that cannot be worked around by a smart kid. There's no filter that won't ban LGBT and sex education sites. There's no filter that can keep up with the rapid creation of content online. There's no filter that can block children without also blocking adults. And any technical "solution" invariably results in an attack on freedom of speech. It goes back to the fundamental idea that depictions of sex are a form of speech that are just as legitimate as any other speech and the government should not be an arbiter of what adults can see, hear or read.

By all means, encourage parents to monitor their children's internet use. Encourage the use of home PC filters. But better, encourage parents to talk honestly with children about sex and porn because there's just no way that you can successfully create an internet filter that will cover all the bases, all the time.

And yes, take the time to listen to teens about pornography rather than just panicking about them.

References

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<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/nspcc-accused-of-risking-its-reputation-and-whipping-up-moral-panic-with-child-porn-addiction-study-10171195.html>