

## **Senate inquiry into the harm being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the internet.**

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To the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry on the harms being done to Australian children through access to pornography on the Internet. I do so as an internationally acknowledged expert in the field of mediated sexuality and what I have called the ‘pornographication of mainstream culture’ (Mediated Sex, 1996). I have written three books and many scholarly essays on the subject of how sexuality is represented in contemporary culture, including pornography and its impacts. My books in this area have been translated into Russian, Greek, Spanish and Polish, and are widely cited. I have contributed to documentaries on pornography and related matters made in Norway, Spain, the United Kingdom and Canada.

I will begin with some background on the rise of internet pornography.

### **The sexualisation and pornographication of western culture**

The sexualisation of western societies has been ongoing since the 1950s and the emergence of the first teen idols, accelerating with the 1960s’ ‘sexual revolution’ and the pornographication of mainstream culture we have seen since the 1990s. By ‘pornographication’ I refer not to the narrow form of pornography itself, but the many ways in which the styles and codes of pornographic texts have become embedded in pop music, fashion, advertising and other cultural formats including ‘high art’, as in the notorious work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Jeff Koons in the late 1980s. Madonna’s Sex book of 1992 exemplifies the trend towards ‘porno chic’, with its deliberate evocation of pornographic poses and tropes in its imagery. Miley Cyrus’ Wrecking Ball video, with its nudity and sexually charged performance, would be a more recent example of pornographication.

At the same time as western culture has become more sexually explicit in general terms, the more specific form of pornography – defined as **sexually explicit material intended to arouse the user** - has expanded its reach. Pornography has been the ‘killer application’ driving the evolution of the internet since the 1990s, and pornography remains one of the most commonly accessed forms of online content. Digital tools for sharing and connecting make pornography more accessible to more people, including children and young people, than ever before in human history. Pornographic imagery dates back to ancient Pompeii, but its contemporary reach and accessibility are unprecedented.

This is the background to current concerns about the potential harms of children’s and young people’s exposure to sexually explicit material. Those anxieties are shared in the United Kingdom and other jurisdictions where similar trends are in evidence.

While figures for the exposure of children to inappropriate sexual material are inconclusive and hard to verify, the potential for such exposure is clearly increased by digital technology. Why does that matter?

### **The harms of pornography**

The perceived harms of pornography on individuals fall into two broad categories:

#### **Impacts on sexual morality, ethics and behaviour**

It is asserted by some that pornography is misogynistic and supportive of patriarchal attitudes, which are by definition harmful to women and girls; in the famous slogan from the 1970s, 'porn is the theory, rape is the practice'. Pornography has been argued to degrade women in its production and, in the act of consumption, to reinforce male attitudes which subordinate and degrade women in everyday life. In the context of this inquiry, it is argued that boys' attitudes to girls and to sexuality in general could be adversely affected by exposure to pornography. In the short hand form of this anxiety, boys 'learn' to abuse women by observing pornography.

More recently, as more women produce and consume pornography, it has been argued that female attitudes to sexuality are changing for the worse. Women and girls, it is argued by some, are becoming more promiscuous, or what American author Ariel Levy calls 'female chauvinist pigs'. Some observers identify the rise of a 'raunch culture' fuelled by what is characterised as female 'sluttishness' and sexual hedonism. Some have argued that the trend in personal grooming towards female genital depilation is learnt behaviour by girls who have watched porn.

Some observers assert that, in encouraging unrealistic expectations of what is acceptable sexual behaviour for both men and women, pornography use is associated with marital breakdown and family dysfunction.

Religiously inspired critics of pornography tend to focus on those alleged harms which undermine traditional notions of family structure and women's role within marriage. Islam's opposition to pornography (and indeed to all sexual culture) is the extreme form of a belief common to many religions, and contemporary Jihad includes pornography prominently amongst its targets.

By their nature such claims are contentious. Society as a whole does not agree on what is harmful or appropriate in sexual terms, nor are religious beliefs around family and sexual morality universally held. As women have gained more freedom and autonomy since the 1960s it has become accepted that one person's perceived 'promiscuity' or 'sluttishness' may be another's 'sexual liberation'. The Slutwalk movement is a recent expression of this ambivalence, in that women protest for the right to behave in public as they wish, without condemnation from self-appointed moral guardians.

In short, there is not, nor could there be any objective evidence base to support the thesis of porn's moral harms, to children or anyone else. These are matters of subjective taste and judgement, and trends are open to varying interpretations. Miley Cyrus may be seen as a negative role model by some parents – like Madonna, Lady

GaGa, Britney Spears and a host of others before her – and as a positive example to follow by many young girls who emulate her creativity and success. Both positions are valid, and one suspects that Cyrus, like Madonna today, will eventually become a revered elder stateswoman of popular culture.

The same caution applies when interpreting social trends such as rates of divorce. If divorce rates are increasing – though they are actually falling in Australia at present – this might simply reflect women’s greater access to legal aid and support in removing themselves from unsuitable or abusive marriages which would once have been inescapable. One would not necessarily ‘blame’ porn-watching by young people in the 1990s for an increased rate of divorce in young adults in the 2010s, then. As it happens, people tend to marry later, have children later, and stay married longer, than in the ‘pre-porn’ past (Australian Bureau of Statistics). It is true that more couples cohabit than in the past, choosing not to marry, but this does not equate to a weakening of the bonds which secure healthy families so much as societal relaxation about the role of marriage in family life.

Twenty years after the emergence of the internet as a mass medium, and with it a dramatic rise in the accessibility of pornography, we see in Australia positive change on women’s rights and gender equality, increasing acceptance of gay rights and same sex marriage, and reduced tolerance of domestic and sexual violence. As Steven Pinker’s important 2011 book on the history of violence shows, we in the advanced liberal capitalist societies live in the least sexually violent, most respectful and law-governed societies in history. There is close to zero tolerance in most public fora for domestic violence, child abuse, sexual harassment and other indicators of misogynistic behaviour. The rise of pornography in our culture has paralleled those positive trends.

Attitudes to sexual violence and harassment have indeed never been more condemnatory, as seen in recent coverage of stories such as football players’ lewd behaviours (see the media storm directed against Mitchell Pearce in February) and the Royal Commission on child abuse. In the face of widespread outrage caused by Cardinal Pell’s most recent testimony in Rome, it could well be argued that Australia is less tolerant of sexual misbehaviour, be it from priests, politicians or pop stars than at any time in its history.

In short, the harms allegedly caused to young people by exposure to pornography are elusive. If sexual etiquette and ethics are changing in our time, it is often for the better, and away from the brutally sexist standards of the past. Far from pornography generating a ‘rape culture’, as is sometimes claimed, twenty years after the internet became a mass medium, the incidence of rape and sexual violence in general in western societies are at historic lows. As a society Australia is making great progress in identifying and policing sexual misconduct from whichever source it comes, and today’s children will grow up in a world where their sexual rights and responsibilities are much better understood and respected than in their parent’s and grandparents’ time.

Many children remain vulnerable to sexual abuse, of course, and pornography may be a factor in bad parenting and other neglect of the type reported in the **Australian** and elsewhere, referring to incidents whereby young children have been ‘turned into

sexual predators by online porn’.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/online-porn-turns-schoolaged-kids-into-sexual-predators/news-story/5d313098d7cbd50ad936ea86d6528ca0>

Such dysfunctional parenting long predates the era of online porn, however, and there is no evidence that its incidence is increasing. A minority of parents have always failed to supervise their children’s media consumption habits, and this continues, regrettably, in the era of online porn. The majority of parents take considerable care to ensure that their children are not exposed to inappropriate material, on whatever medium.

Indeed, it can be argued that parents today are much more aware of and equipped to deal with these issues than previous generations. As the Royal Commission on child abuse makes depressingly clear, child abuse was ‘hidden in plain sight’ within the family and trusted institutions such as the churches, boy scouts’ associations and schools for decades. We are finally as societies coming to terms with these tragic phenomena, which have very little to do with the accessibility of pornography, and everything to do with the abuse of trust. Indeed, the age of online pornography is also the age of zero tolerance for paedophilia, and that is surely progress.

All that said, the desire and right of parents and policy-makers to protect children from age-inappropriate sexual content and exposure in all platforms including the internet is valid, and digital tools pose special challenges to that exercise of parental authority.

Classification systems designed for cinema and TV break down online, in so far as the technology allows easy bypassing of regulators and censors. Children are more often at ease with the digital environment than their parents, and routinely use mobile tools outside of the home to access the kinds of material which concerns this inquiry. Some countries, such as the UK, have introduced opt-in systems for digital access which seek to filter pornography out of the domestic online environment, but the effectiveness of these remains to be seen. The attempt to control sexual content online inevitably provokes opposition on free speech grounds, since it will inevitably impact on adult consumption too.

## **Responses**

How then to address the anxieties of parents and others responsible for the welfare of children around the impact of online sexual content, without attacking the fundamental freedoms of speech and opinion (and lifestyle, where sexuality is concerned)? Combinations of the following approaches promise the best solutions.

1. Education of adults and parents on media literacy and mediated sexuality, and the importance of supervising the online usage of children in their care. This to include discussion of the potential benefits as well as harms of sexualised culture, such as the increased emphasis on female sexual agency and responsibility.
2. Education of teachers and other working with children about the digital media environment, its risks and benefits. This education must include sex education,

linked to the recognition that many children will indeed be exposed to sexually explicit material of a type rarely available to that age group pre-internet.

3. Education of young people in the importance of ethical, non-exploitative sexual relationships. Education in basic safe sex techniques – already required by the need to fight STDs – but also of value if indeed a young person is prompted to have sex by something accessed online.
4. Further development, in cooperation with industry, of parental filters and classificatory systems which allow parents to more effectively supervise their children's internet usage.

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