

# Boys, Sex, and Porn: New technologies and old dangers

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*Whatever Happened to Child Sexual Abuse?* London: BASPSCAN and Nottingham Trent University Unit for Critical Studies in Men and Masculinities, London, 29 November

## Abstract

Michael's paper will explore boys' and young men's consumption of sexually explicit media. He will argue that boys' use particularly of internet pornography, combined with the wider pornographication of popular culture, is exacerbating violence-supportive social norms and intensifying some boys' participation in sexual abuse.

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## 1. Introduction and overview

Thank you to Jim Wild and the others involved in this conference for inviting me to speak at this forum...

Violence. Youth. Sex. The Internet. Each of these four is a site of enormous social change, an area of social policy, and at times, the subject of moral panics and media frenzies. In this presentation, I'm going to link these four to another area which also has been the subject of great controversy, pornography.

These five topics first became entangled for me in 2003, when I wrote two reports on children's exposure to pornography. The reports, co-authored with Clive Hamilton, examined the extent and impact of children's exposure to pornography in Australia. As you might expect, this research attracted a storm of media attention.

Issues of children's and young people's exposure to Internet pornography are as important now as they were four years ago months ago, and in fact, social and technological developments have made these issues all the more pressing. But before explaining this, let me begin with some context.

I should mention too: I am happy to send anyone here the full reports and articles on this research.

### Children, sex and pornography

A range of issues relating to children and sexuality have been the subject of public controversy. Cultural anxieties have been articulated in recent decades about a range of issues relating to youth and sexuality, from premarital sex and teenage pregnancy to child abuse and the premature sexualisation of girls. Such fears also have deep historical roots. While adolescent sexuality is often seen as undesirable, deviant or risky, moral panics about young people's sexual activity fail to acknowledge that most young people move into adulthood as healthy and responsible sexual beings. At the same time, 'Sex among [Australia's] youths, like sex among its adults, is too often neither gender-egalitarian, nor pleasurable, nor safe.'

Public concerns about young people's exposure to pornography have been prompted in part by six shifts in young people's sexual lives over the last few decades.

### Other shifts in the sexual lives of young people

First, children in Western countries are now starting puberty and adolescence earlier and staying in it for longer than ever before. Second, the average age of first intercourse has declined. Third, younger people engage in a wider variety of sexual behaviours than older people, including oral sex and anal intercourse. Fourth, young people now have a greater number of sexual partners. Fifth, some young people are participating in an increasingly visible gay and lesbian community, and from Australian studies, about one in ten secondary school students is sexually attracted either to the same sex only or to both sexes. Finally, today's children are growing up in a sexualised cultural environment. Late twentieth-century Western cultures saw a proliferation of sexual imagery and an explosion of popular sexual debate.

### Sexualisation of contemporary culture. Media's role in (informal) sexuality education.

Today's children are growing up in a very different cultural environment: sexual imagery is more common and sex is part of popular discussion.

The mass media plays a powerful role in the socialisation of children and adolescents (Goldman 2000, p. 16). In fact, the media may be particularly important in shaping young people's sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours in that they have limited access to other sources of sexual information. Parents seldom provide detailed information and communicate about sexuality-related topics only with difficulty, while school sexuality education often focuses on biology and neglects sexual behaviour, romance and interpersonal relations.

Given the increasing sexualisation or 'pornographication' of mainstream media, X-rated movies and 'adult' websites are hardly the only sources of young people's encounters with sexually explicit representations. Still, I focus on pornography because it is at the centre of contemporary debates regarding youth and sexually explicit representations.

So, what is pornography?

### What is pornography?

Pornography can be defined as 'sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience' (Malamuth 2001, p. 11817). 'Sexually explicit' representations include images of female or male nudity or semi-nudity, implied sexual activity, and actual sexual activity.

I use the term 'pornography' as a neutral term, rather than as a negative term referring to representations of bodies and sexual activity which are offensive, obscene, or harmful.

## **2. Exposure of youth to pornography**

### 2.1 Paths to exposure

How are children and young people exposed to pornography?

First, children may deliberately seek sexually explicit materials. They do this for reasons which overlap with those of adults: curiosity, interest in sexual and reproductive health, interest in

information which may benefit their interpersonal relations, and a desire for sexual stimulation. On the Internet, minors may search for sexually explicit material using a search engine, go to a particular web site, use a chat room, or sign up to a sexual mailing list.

Second, young people are exposed to pornography accidentally. On the Internet, it is easy for children and indeed all Internet users inadvertently to encounter pornography.

In this discussion, the term 'exposure' refers to both deliberate and accidental, voluntary and involuntary, viewing of pornography.

Legally, minors' lack of access to sexually explicit materials is very clear. Individuals under 18 years cannot purchase or view R- and X-rated films and videos and publications. And neither children nor adults can view 'Refused Classification' materials.

But on the Internet, it is child's play to see sexually explicit materials. This is because of three distinct characteristics of Internet pornography.

The Internet hosts an enormous variety of free pornography.

First, sexually explicit material is available free in mammoth quantities. Commercial websites routinely include free images and tours to entice people to subscribe, while the Internet also hosts large collections of free pornographic images and movies. While children have sought out sexual material for a long time, the Internet makes doing so easier, faster, and more anonymous (Strasburger & Wilson 2002: 308-309). A curious child can type in sexual words in a search engine and will be given a list of literally millions of sites in response. To illustrate, a search for 'sex pictures' using the popular search engine Google yields over seven million web sites in one-tenth of a second.

Figure 1 Listing of Sex Picture Sites From Google [See PPT image]

Age and lack of money may prevent children from gaining access to pornographic films and magazines. Yet they can spend hours wandering online through a vast collection of free images and video clips.

There are virtually no age-related barriers to access.

Second, there are virtually no age-related barriers to access. Three-quarters of commercial pornographic websites display sexually explicit content on the first page, where anyone can access it. While one-third of such websites state that the viewer is entering an 'adult' site, they do not actually prevent minors from entering. Some websites require that the viewer prove they are an adult, using either a credit card number or programs such as 'Adult Check'. However, very few commercial sites require these to proceed past the first page of the site; most allow the user to take a 'free preview'

Internet pornography uses indiscriminate, coercive and manipulative strategies. (E.g., 'pop-ups', 'mouse trapping' and traffic forwarding, 'spam' e-mails, & the manipulation of search-engine processes)

Third, Internet pornography has an indiscriminate and sometimes coercive relationship to potential consumers. Individuals viewing 'softcore' websites may be subject to unsolicited 'pop-up' windows, advertising and offering links to other pornographic websites. Adult websites often use the method

of ‘mouse trapping’ where the user is forwarded involuntarily to another site. And children and adults receive unsolicited e-mails or ‘spam’ promoting pornographic websites or sending images themselves.

### Youth, sex and the Internet

Although this discussion focuses on young people’s exposure to pornography, it should be noted that use of the Internet brings other dangers for children and youth. In interacting online with others, young people may be subject to personal attacks, unwanted or inappropriate sexual advances, or recruitment into vulnerable sexual situations. The Internet is a new medium for the perpetration of old forms of child abuse, including child pornography, paedophile advocacy, the promotion of child sex tourism, and the commercial exploitation of children through online advertising (Stanley 2001). At the same time, the Internet is an extraordinarily valuable, and indeed essential, educational tool for children and young people. Furthermore, the Internet also fosters a wide variety of social and sexual interactions among young people, delivers responsible information and advice on sexual and reproductive health, allows the exploration of diverse sexualities (Hillier *et al.* 2001), and is a means of sexual pleasure and expression. In short, the Internet is a space of both pleasure and danger.

#### 2.4 New evidence (our study)

The Australia Institute, a public interest think-tank, commissioned a telephone survey among a representative sample of 200 respondents aged 16 to 17 years regarding their exposure to pornography. Youths younger than 16 could not be interviewed for ethical reasons.

We asked about both *actual* exposure to pornography and *perceptions* of exposure – e.g., ‘do you think that porn use is common among boys your age?’ But here I report our findings only on actual exposure.

#### Exposure to X-rated movies (video & DVD)

Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) of boys report that they have watched an X-rated video themselves. One in twenty watch them on a weekly basis while more than a fifth watch an X-rated video at least once a month.

Among girls, only 11 per cent report that they have watched an X-rated video, and this has been very infrequent. The 15 per cent of boys who believe that watching X-rated videos is widespread amongst 16-17 year old girls are clearly wrong in their assessment.

Boys and girls follow different paths to exposure to pornography. Other research suggests that girls watch videos only once, because a boyfriend wanted them to or because they were curious, and then do not watch again. Boys are more likely to be frequent viewers, and more likely to be encouraged by male friends.

#### Exposure to Internet porn

Eighty-four per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls say they have been exposed accidentally to sex sites on the Internet. Our results replicate other research which finds that children and adolescents who use the Internet routinely encounter pornography.

What about *deliberate* use? Nearly two in five 16-17 year-old boys (38 per cent) have searched the Internet for sex sites. Only four per cent say they use the Internet for this purpose on a weekly basis,

but over one fifth of boys access Internet sex sites at least every two or three months. Nearly nine out of ten 16-17 year-old boys (88 per cent) believe that looking at sex sites on the Internet is widespread among boys of the same age.

Among girls, only two per cent say that they have deliberately sought out Internet sex sites and all of those have done so only very occasionally. Among 16-17 year-old girls, only seven per cent believe that looking at sex sites on the Internet is widespread among girls.

The figure of two per cent of girls who have *deliberately* sought out sex sites stands in stark contrast to the 60 per cent of girls who have had *accidental* exposure to explicit sex on the Internet. Internet users who have no interest in sex sites therefore find it difficult to avoid seeing the images displayed on these sites.

### 3. What young people see: The content of pornography

When a 12-year-old or 16-year-old boy or girl views a pornographic website, what are they likely to see?

Pornography's content ranges from images of female or male nudity or semi-nudity to explicit depictions of sexual acts. Most of pornography's images are of women or of male-female sex, and most pornographic imagery is directed at heterosexual male viewers. Pornography includes typical genres or clusters of content. These include 'teens', anal intercourse, fellatio, male ejaculation, 'amateur' participants, breasts, buttocks, 'lesbian' sex, lingerie, gay male sex, Asian and black women, multiple male partners, bondage, and many other categories (Flood & Hamilton 2003a: 21-29).

Most pornography presents a narrow and sexist view of sex and sexuality. In mass-marketed heterosexual pornography,

sex is divorced from intimacy, loving affection, and human connection; all women are constantly available for sex and have insatiable sexual appetites; and all women are sexually satisfied by whatever the men in the film do. (Jensen & Dines 1998: 72)

Themes of sexual violence are well documented in the images circulated on Internet newsgroups and on some websites. Some websites centre on violence, subordination and degradation, while many use derogatory and hostile language in describing the women depicted. There are three genres of pornography which are non-consenting by definition: (1) 'rape' websites claiming to show images of women being raped and depicting sexual torture, abuse and pain; (2) 'upskirts' and 'peeping Tom' genres centred on images taken illicitly of women; and (3) images of bestiality (Flood & Hamilton 2003a: 30-35).

While there are violent acts in, and violent genres of, pornography, some scholars go further to argue that pornography *per se* represents and encourages violence against women. For anti-pornography feminist writers, pornography 'sexualises and normalises inequalities' and 'makes violence sexy' (Russo 1998, p. 18; Russell 1993). Other feminist and non-feminist authors argue that there is great diversity in pornographic imagery (Snitow 1988, p. 14).

My own position is that while there certainly is diversity, there is also a dominant form of pornography, a cluster of repetitive themes in mass-marketed heterosexual pornography. This dominant pornography is in part the product of men's control of economic, political and cultural power, so that much pornography caters more to heterosexual men's desires and fantasies than it

does to women's (Chancer 1998, p. 77). In other words, social inequalities are the context for the particular passions of much heterosexual pornography. Of course, heterosexual pornography does not cater for all men's desires, nor are its appeals exclusive to men, but it works in a symbiotic relationship with common constructions of masculine heterosexual sexuality.

#### **4. Effects of exposure to pornography**

What is the likely effect of exposure to pornography on children's attitudes, values and behaviours?

##### Sexuality education is good for children and youth.

Some people assume that exposing children to *any* sexually explicit information can hurt them.

Some parents and teachers are concerned about sexuality education leading to earlier or increased sexual activity. But the evidence is that kids given sexuality education are more likely to delay having sex, have fewer sexual partners, and are more likely to practise safe sex if they're already sexually active. Children who've received sexuality education have lower numbers of unplanned pregnancies and reduced rates of sexually transmitted infections.

However, pornography is not sexuality education. And exposure to pornography is likely to have a series of negative effects among children and young people. I identify five negative effects.

##### Negative effects of exposure to porn exposure

###### (1) Premature or inadvertent exposure to sexually explicit content

First, children may be shocked or troubled by premature or inadvertent encounters with pornography. They may feel disgusted, upset, or disturbed. Although older youth may be annoyed rather than upset.

###### (2) Liberalisation of sexual knowledge and attitudes

There is a small literature on the effects of sexual media content on youth. It finds that adolescents exposed to sexual content show a greater acceptance of pre-, extra-, non-marital and recreational sexual relations, greater factual knowledge, and an increased belief that one's peers are sexually active.

###### (3) Being disturbed by seeing 'extreme' behaviours

Third, young people may be troubled or disgusted by images or accounts of non-mainstream sexual behaviours in pornography. Children, just like adults, may be disturbed by images of practices which are outside common cultural norms, such as sex involving multiple partners, bondage and sadomasochism, urination or defecation, and rape.

###### (4) The inappropriate acceptance and adoption of non-mainstream sexual practices

Fourth, young people exposed to images of non-mainstream sexual behaviours may be more likely to accept and adopt them.

There is one version of this argument that we reject, the notion of the 'recruitment' of children into homosexuality. There is no evidence that being exposed to sexually explicit materials can change a person's overall sexual orientation, their attraction to one sex or the other.

On the other hand, exposure to pornography *can* influence young people's attitudes towards particular sexual behaviours. But these effects are only a problem if these practices are undesirable in some way, and there is substantial debate over the ethical or moral status of different sexualities, which I won't try to resolve here.

#### (5) Sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviours

Perhaps the most important impact of pornography about which we should be concerned is its impact on sexually aggression – on rape, abuse, or sexual violence.

A wide range of studies on the effects of pornography have been conducted among young people aged 18 to 25, as well as older populations. Across these studies, there is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women. This association is strongest for violent pornography and still reliable for nonviolent pornography, particularly when used frequently.

In experimental studies, adults show significant strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression following exposure to pornography. Exposure to sexually violent material increases male viewers' acceptance of rape myths and erodes their empathy for victims of violence.

Some experimental studies test changes in behaviour: they find that adults also show an increase in behavioural aggression following exposure to pornography, again especially violent porn.

In everyday life, men who use hardcore, violent or rape pornography, and men who are high-frequency users of pornography, are significantly more likely than others to report that they would rape or sexually harass a woman if they knew they could get away with it.

There is a circular relationship among some men between sexual violence and pornography;

Men who are relatively high in risk for sexual aggression are more likely to be attracted to and aroused by sexually violent media... and may be more likely to be influenced by them (Malamuth, Addison & Koss 2000, p. 55)

#### Caveats

There are four caveats to note.

First, various factors mediate the impact of exposure of pornography. These include the nature of the materials in question; the viewer's age, personal development, and their level and nature of sexual experience; whether exposure is deliberate and anticipated or accidental and unwanted; and other aspects of exposure (the duration and intensity of viewing, and whether it is solitary or collective).

Second, sexist and violent pornography is not the sole determinant of men's violence against women, and sexual assault is shaped by multiple social and cultural factors.

Third, pornography is not the only important source of sexist and violence-supportive attitudes in our culture.

Fourth, it has been argued that pornography can have *positive* effects and meanings. While pornography does exaggerate sexism, it has also challenged sexual repression and restrictive sexual norms and thus benefited women. And forms of pornography such as gay male and lesbian

representations are important positive expressions of non-heterosexual sexualities. But these positive effects should not blind us to other, harmful, effects associated with pornography.

### **Porn and sexual violence *cont'd*: New technologies**

So far I have argued that pornography contributes to boys' and men's tolerance for and perpetration of sexual violence, and that the internet is an increasingly important source of boys' exposure to pornography. But I also want to argue that new technologies such as the internet and mobile phones are also allowing new ways in which to perpetrate violence, document it, and enjoy it.

The best and most well-known example is child pornography. The Internet plays a central role in facilitating the distribution, consumption, and in turn the production, of child pornography. Child pornography, where children are depicted in sexualised ways or in sexual acts, involves abuse *by definition*. But I also want to mention other ways in which new technologies are playing a role in violence.

#### When abuse becomes pornography

In Australia last year, a group of teenage boys were arrested after they sexually abused and degraded a teenage girl, filming the abuse and selling it on DVD to other youths. In similar cases, boys and young men have coerced girls into sex and photographed or filmed it using mobile phones. Thus, some boys and men perpetrate violence and make pornography out of it.

In such cases, as with child pornography, there is an initial act of sexual abuse or violence, and documenting and circulating this violence further adds to the violence involved.

#### When pornography is abuse

In a variation on this, a boy or man may engage in consenting sex with a girl or woman, photograph or film this, and then circulate the images or movies. Where filming the sex was consenting, then it becomes abusive when the images are circulated without her consent. Where filming the sex was not consenting, it already involves abuse and circulating the images compounds this. There are anecdotal reports from Australian schools for example of boys, when dumped by a girlfriend, then circulating sexual images of her taken on mobile phones to peers or even posting them online.

Such cases are instances of a much wider social trend, in which every mishap, incident, or mundane event becomes fodder for amateur filming and circulation on YouTube and other online image-sharing sites. This trend is highly gendered, with adolescent boys and young men being the most frequent and enthusiastic consumers of online images and movies of fights, crashes, female bodies, and sex.

### **Boys, sex, and pornography**

#### Pornography plays a significant role in boys' and young men's peer cultures.

Pornography may have a particularly significant role in boys' and young men's peer cultures and sociosexual relations, given the gendered patterns of consumption documented in this study. In general, boys are more interested than girls in visual depictions and more likely to view online adult-oriented sexually explicit material (Thornburgh & Lin 2002: 158-159). Among minors, adolescent males are especially likely to be regular consumers of pornography such as adult videos, while



adolescent females find sexual content elsewhere and are less likely to seek out sexually explicit materials (Huston *et al.* 1998: 75).

The gender gap in porn use is also evident among adults. In general, men are significantly more likely than women to view pornography frequently, to be sexually aroused by it, and to have favourable attitudes towards it (Lo & Wei 2002: 16).

Regular consumption, particularly of violent pornography, is a risk factor for young men's perpetration of sexual assault.

It is likely that relationships between some forms of pornography and sexual aggression exist among teenage boys, as they do among adult men. This association may be particularly strong for the five per cent of 16 and 17-year-old boys in our study who watch X-rated videos and view Internet sex sites every week.

Regular consumption of pornography, and particularly violent pornography, is a risk factor for boys' and young men's perpetration of sexual assault. We know that young men aged 15-25 are responsible for more sexual assaults than older males, and young women are three to four times more likely to be subject to sexual and physical violence than older women.

Porn helps teach sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships. Porn intensifies dangerous constructions of masculinity and sexuality.

More generally, pornography helps teach young people sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships.

In most mass-marketed heterosexual pornography,

sex is divorced from intimacy, loving affection, and human connection; all women are constantly available for sex and have insatiable sexual appetites; and all women are sexually satisfied by whatever the men in the film do. (Jensen & Dines 1998: 72)

Heterosexual pornography's 'narrative of female nymphomania and male sexual prowess' (Jensen & Dines 1998: 77-78) does not cater for all heterosexual males' desires, nor are its appeals exclusive to men. But heterosexual pornography does intersect closely with common constructions of masculine heterosexual sexuality. Pornography consumption may intensify boys' investment in problematic constructions of gender and sexuality which are already part of some boys' peer cultures, such as pressure to gain masculine status through sexual achievement, a sexual double standard of female 'sluts' and male 'studs', narrow images of female sexual desirability, an obsessive focus on bodies and sexual acts, and tolerance for sexual violence (Flood 2002).

Boys are perpetrating violence to produce porn.

I suspect that one of the further relationships between porn and violence is that boys are perpetrating violence in order to *produce porn*. In other words, some boys and young men are so fascinated by pornography, and receive so much pleasure and status from producing and circulating it among male peers, that they are pressuring or coercing girls and young women into sex in order to produce it. And they are having sex, even ostensibly consenting sex, with a view to secretly creating images of girls' bodies and sex to keep and circulate.

### Boys' use of porn extends cultural 'pornographication'.

More widely, young males' use of pornography extends cultural 'pornographication' or what Levy (2005) terms the rise of 'raunch culture'. In 'raunch culture', women make sex objects of themselves and others, there is a cultural expectation that women will exhibit their bodies, female empowerment is signaled only by overt and public sexuality, and sexuality itself is only recognisable in the codes of pornography and prostitution (Levy 2005: 26). Among Australian youth there are positive signs of the increasing acceptance of norms of gender equality and a growing assertion of sexual desire and agency by young women, but both may be constrained by the sexist sexual codes of much pornography.

### **In the near future...**

Substantial proportions of minors are exposed to sexually explicit materials intended for adults. Significant proportions of youth aged 16 and 17, especially boys, are deliberately consuming pornography: over 40 per cent have seen X-rated videos and 20 per cent have visited sexually explicit websites. In addition, over 70 per cent of this age group have been exposed accidentally to online pornography.

### Youth's exposure to pornography is likely to increase

There are several reasons to think that children's exposure to pornography, particularly Internet pornography, may increase. First, children are using the Internet at increasingly younger ages, using it more frequently, and for longer periods.

Second, new channels of exposure to pornography are opening up to children and adults alike, particularly through web-enabled mobile phones, personal digital assistants, and game consoles.

Third, the pornographication of culture in general is exposing both children and adults to pervasive, pornified images of women and sex.

At the same time, other trends point to declining opportunities for minors' exposure to pornography. In Australia for example, parents have increased their efforts to minimise children's exposure to inappropriate Internet content, through both filtering software and supervision and monitoring.

### **What to do**

How should we respond to the evidence of youth's exposure to pornography and its negative effects? When the results of our survey first were released, many media commentators assumed that the appropriate response was to prevent all access to pornography, by children and adults alike, and at the very least that children must be 'protected from sex'. Instead, protecting children from sexual harm does not mean protecting children from sexuality. In fact, maintaining children's sexual ignorance fosters sexual abuse and poor mental and sexual health. Children and youth are sexual beings and should be provided with appropriate and compelling materials on sex and sexuality.

At the same time, as I have said, pornography is a poor, and indeed dangerous, sex educator. Most pornography is too explicit for younger children, most shows sex in unrealistic ways and neglects intimacy and romance, most pornography is sexist, and some is based on and eroticises violence.

A more appropriate response would seek to minimise children's exposure to pornography, both accidental and deliberate; to minimise the harmful effects of exposure among children when it does

occur; to minimise exposure to violent pornography among children and adults alike; to encourage the production of better pornography; and to provide comprehensive sexuality education for children and youth (Flood 2003). To accomplish such goals, the second report by the Australia Institute proposed a strategy with three components: media literacy and ‘pornography education’, regulation of Internet Service Providers to limit children’s exposure while allowing adults access to classified pornographic materials, and some additional measures by internet-based providers of pornography (Flood & Hamilton 2003b).

I won’t go into these strategies here, but they are outlined in slightly more detail in the handout, and I can send you the full discussions of them.

## **Conclusion**

I want to end by returning to the themes with which I began this presentation: Violence. Youth. Sex. Pornography. The Internet. There is little doubt that pornography is an increasingly significant influence among boys and young men. And that internet porn, as well as other media and technologies and other social trends, are facilitating and feeding into sexual violence and abuse by boys and young men.

To prevent sexual violence against girls and women, we must address the ideologies, social conditions, and power relations which underpin this violence. Pornography is implicated in boys’ and men’s perpetration of sexual violence and their tolerance for it. New technologies such as the internet and mobile phones are facilitating old forms of abuse, but also allowing new ways in which to perpetrate violence, document it, and enjoy it.

At the same time, new technologies also offer new opportunities for prevention and intervention. The internet is an invaluable resource in providing information and support to victims and survivors of sexual abuse, educating communities in general about violence, and facilitating political organising and activism against violence.

Using the internet and other tools, we must nurture children’s and youths’ empowerment and minimise the harms they face and they perpetrate. Fostering the health and safety of children and youth is not well served by blanket condemnations of sexual speech. Yes, we need to improve the kinds of sexual materials available to youth and minimise their exposure to sexist and violent content, but this should not be at the expense of sexual speech in general.

More widely, we must continue the work of building a gender-just and sexually ethical culture. We must create a culture based on a fundamental respect for children – for their bodily integrity, personal autonomy, and sexual agency. And a culture of gender equality and sexual respect.

## Boys, Sex, and Porn: New technologies and old dangers



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### The context...

- Controversies & anxieties about children's sexuality
- "Sex among [Australia's] youths, like sex among its adults, is too often neither gender-egalitarian, nor pleasurable, nor safe."

### Shifts in young people's sexual lives

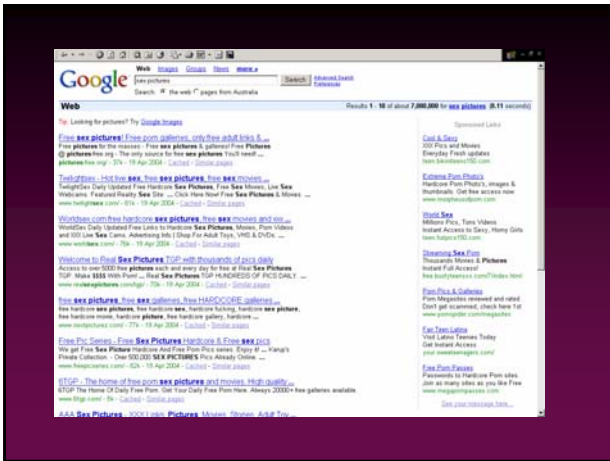
- Earlier puberty and longer adolescence
- A decline in the average age of first intercourse
- A wider variety of sexual behaviours
- A greater number of sexual partners
- A supportive gay and lesbian community
- The sexualisation of contemporary culture

### Pornography

- Definition: Sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience
- Images of bodies and sex may be harmless or harmful.

### Youth's exposure to pornography

- Exposure: Deliberate or accidental
- Exposure on the Internet is 'child's play', because;
  - a) The Internet hosts an enormous variety of free pornography.
    - 70 to 80 per cent of adult material is carried on free sites



**b) There are virtually no age-related barriers to access**

- Three-quarters of commercial websites show sexually explicit content on the first page.
- Only one-third have an 'adult' notice.
- Only 3 per cent of commercial sites require age verification to see content

**c) Internet pornography uses indiscriminate, coercive and manipulative strategies**

- 'Pop-ups'
- 'Mousetrapping' & traffic forwarding
- Spam e-mails
- Manipulation of search-engine processes

## Youth and the Internet

- The Internet is a space of both pleasure and danger.
  - *Danger*: The internet is a new medium for the perpetration of old forms of child abuse.
  - *Pleasure*: The internet is also used by children and youth for information, support, and social and sexual interaction.

## Exposure to X-rated movies (video & DVD)

- Australian research: Phone survey of 16- and 17-year-olds
- 73% of boys have watched an X-rated video.
  - 21% at least monthly
- 11% of girls have watched an X-rated video.
  - 0% at least monthly
- Boys and girls follow different paths to exposure to pornography.

## Exposure to Internet porn

- Accidental exposure:  
84% of boys and 60% of girls have been exposed accidentally to sex sites on the Internet.
- Deliberate exposure:  
38% of boys have looked at Internet sex sites.  
Over one fifth of boys access Internet sex sites at least every two or three months.  
2% of girls have looked at Internet sex sites, all very occasionally.

## Exposure to porn videos and websites (%)

	Boys	Girls
Watch X-rated videos	73	11
At least monthly	21	0
Accidental exposure to sex sites on the Internet	84	60
Deliberate exposure to sex sites on the Internet	38	2
At least monthly	11	0

## What children & young people see

- Images of women and of male-female sex, aimed at heterosexual male viewers
- A wide variety of genres, focused on particular sexual practices, sexual participants, body parts, or other aspects of sexuality
- Narrow and sexist depictions of sex

## Violent content in pornography

- US X-rated video analysis: One-quarter of scenes involve themes of sexual violence.
- Websites may show violence, subordination and degradation.
- Internet porn includes three genres which are non-consenting: rape, upskirts / voyeur, bestiality.
  - Does porn 'make violence sexy'?
- Mass-market heterosexual pornography is linked to gender inequalities.

## What are the effects?

- Sexuality education is good for children and youth.
  - Sexuality education does not lead to earlier or increased sexual activity.
- However, children and youth exposed to pornography may:
  1. Be disturbed by premature or inadvertent exposure to sexually explicit content
  2. Experience the liberalisation of their sexual knowledge and attitudes
  3. Be disturbed by seeing 'extreme' behaviours
  4. Accept and adopt inappropriate non-mainstream sexual practices
    - But how do we judge what is acceptable or not? (Sexual ethics.)
  5. Adopt sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviours.

## Effects *cont'd*: Sexual aggression

- There is an association between pornography and male sexual aggression against women:
  - Experimental studies of attitudes: Adults show strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression following exposure to pornography.
  - Experimental studies of behaviour: Adults show increases in behavioural aggression following exposure to pornography.
  - Correlational studies in the 'real world': Find associations between the use of at least certain forms of pornography and sexually aggressive behaviour or the willingness to use it.

## Caveats regarding effects

- Pornography's effects are complicated, and various factors mediate the impact of exposure.
- Pornography is not the sole determinant of men's violence against women.
- Pornography is not the only important source of sexist and violence-supportive imagery and attitudes.
- Pornography also can have positive effects and meanings.

## Porn and sexual violence *cont'd*: New technologies

- When abuse becomes pornography
  - Child pornography
  - Documenting and circulating images of abuse
- When pornography is abuse
  - Taking and circulating images of bodies and sex without consent



Stills from Australian abuse DVD

## Boys, sex, and pornography

- Pornography plays a significant role in boys' and young men's peer cultures.
- Regular consumption, particularly of violent pornography, is a risk factor for young men's perpetration of sexual assault.
- Porn helps teach sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships.

## Boys and pornography *cont'd*

- Porn intensifies dangerous constructions of masculinity and sexuality.
- Boys are perpetrating violence to produce porn.
  - For personal pleasure and status from male peers.
- Boys' use of porn extends cultural 'pornographication', or 'raunch culture'.
  - Positive trends among youth (growing acceptance of gender equality and female sexual agency) may be undermined by porn's sexist messages.

## In the near future...

- Youth's exposure to pornography is likely to increase, because of:
  - Younger and more frequent internet use and increased access;
  - New channels of exposure to porn (new media);
  - The pornographication of culture.
- On the other hand:
  - Increased parental monitoring and filtering (at least in Australia).

## Children, sex, and harm

- Protecting children from sexual harm does not mean 'protecting' them from sexuality in general.
  - Maintaining children's sexual ignorance fosters sexual abuse and poor sexual and emotional health.
- At the same time, pornography is a poor, and dangerous, sex educator.

## What we can do

- a) Social & educational strategies
  - Pornography education and media literacy; Parental understanding and monitoring; Providing alternative content on sexuality.
- b) Technological strategies: Filtering
  - Proposal for filtering of content by all Internet Service Providers (ISPs), with an adult 'opt-out' option.
- c) Additional measures by porn providers



## Preventing sexual violence

- To prevent sexual violence, we must address the ideologies, social conditions, and power relations which underpin it.
  - Including pornography
- New technologies:
  - facilitate old forms of abuse;
  - are generating new ways in which to perpetrate violence, document it, and enjoy it;
  - offer new opportunities for prevention and intervention.

## Conclusion

- Our tasks:
  - Foster empowerment and minimise harm.
  - More widely, build a gender-just and sexually ethical culture.

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