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# Pornography, violence and popular debate

According to a widely cited Australian book, *The Porn Report*, popular pornography rarely depicts violence against women. However, Michael Flood argues that the book's analysis is simplistic and methodologically flawed.

Pornography has been widely identified by feminist critics as a significant contributor to men's sexual violence against women. Some argue that pornography itself is a form of violence against women. Other feminists are sceptical about these claims and critical of the censorship-based strategies, among others, with which they are associated.

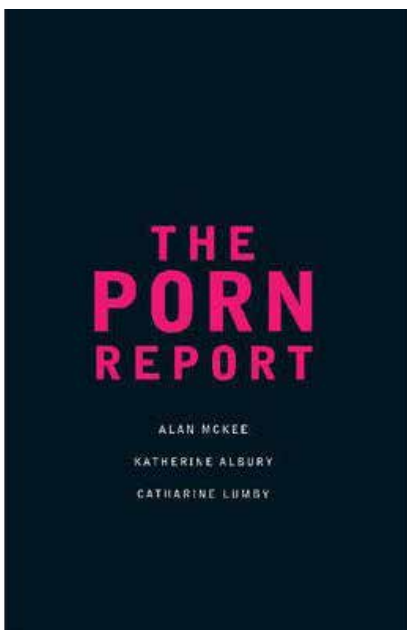
In contemporary Australian debates regarding pornography and violence, a book titled *The Porn Report* has become a common reference point. Co-authored by Alan McKee, Katherine Albury, and Catharine Lumby (Melbourne University Press), the book was released in 2008 and generated substantial media attention. The book examines the production and consumption of pornography in Australia. However, the book and its research have important methodological and theoretical limitations. This article provides a critical assessment of the book, comparing its findings and arguments with wider scholarship on pornography.

## Which porn users?

*The Porn Report* is valuable particularly for its documentation of the

consumption habits of a self-selected sample of pornography users. For example, among the people who responded to its survey are a substantial number who report positive effects from their pornography use. This is a valuable counter to the stereotype that all pornography users are wracked with guilt and shame.

However, the book's account of its survey of pornography consumers is written as if it is based on a representative sample of pornography consumers.<sup>1</sup> This is not the case. The book's data come from a sample of users who responded to advertisements in mail-order pornographic video catalogues and online advertising. For example, the survey was promoted in the newsletter of the Eros Foundation, the main advocacy group for the adult industry, and circulated on the anti-censorship email list 'stop-censorship'. Given that the sample was self-selected, and recruited in part through pornography advocacy networks, it is more likely than other sampling methods to pick up people comfortable with their pornography use. On the other hand, those who feel guilty or ashamed or who identify negative effects of their pornography use are less likely to participate in the study.



*The Porn Report's* sample shows a substantial overrepresentation by individuals who are gay, lesbian or bisexual, or involved in bondage and discipline or sadism and masochism (BDSM). In contrast, nationally representative data suggests that over 95 per cent of pornography users are heterosexual.<sup>2</sup>

The skewing of the sample towards gay, lesbian and bisexual and sexually libertarian consumers is likely to generate more positive reports regarding pornography, given that it can normalise and celebrate non-dominant sexualities and sexual diversity.

Further, while *The Porn Report's* sample of users had high levels of formal education, national data suggests that the most frequent users of pornography are men without university education and in blue-collar jobs (Richters et al. 2003, p.186), as the book's authors acknowledge.

## The content of pornography

Anti-pornography feminists have argued that pornography encourages violence against women—it sexualises and normalises inequalities, to 'make violence sexy'. Others argue that there is great diversity in pornographic imagery, that the 'effects' of pornography viewing are neither simple nor deterministic, that viewers interpret representations in complex, selective and ambiguous ways, and that pornography consumption can have positive effects and meanings (Flood & Hamilton 2003, pp. 30-35).

In assessing the relationship between pornography and violence, then, examination of pornography's actual content is critical. *The Porn Report* also involved an analysis of pornography's content, based on examination of the fifty top-selling DVD and video titles in Australia.

Based on their analysis, McKee et al. conclude that violent content is very rare in pornography. Among 838 scenes in the 50 bestselling pornographic movies, only 2 per cent contained violence. However, the way in which *The Porn Report* defines and measures violence is flawed.

In *The Porn Report's* analysis, acts are coded as violent only if they were clearly

intended to cause harm and were met with displeasure or resistance by the target of aggression. Acts where the target appeared to enjoy the harm or aggression, or where there was no active attempt to avoid the harm, were not coded as 'violent' (Bridges et al. 2010, p.1068).

Thus, McKee et al.'s definition of violence requires the absence of consent or pleasure. To put this in simple terms, if she looks like she is enjoying it, then it is not violence. The problem with this is that in pornography in general, actors and actresses typically are shown enjoying all that occurs. This means that it will be very difficult to define any act as violent (Bridges et al. 2010, p.1067).

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## Different definitions, different findings

Compare *The Porn Report's* analysis with another, similar analysis of fifty of the top-selling and top-renting pornographic titles, this time in the USA (Bridges et al. 2010).

This research found high levels of violence in pornography's content. Of the scenes analysed, '88.2 per cent contained physical aggression, principally spanking, gagging, and slapping, while 48.7 per cent of scenes contained verbal aggression, primarily name-calling' (Bridges et al. 2010 p.1065). Aggression was primarily by males, and overwhelmingly against females. Most targets of aggression (95 per cent) responded either pleasurably or neutrally to the aggressive act. The study's authors conclude that, rather than depicting the sexual dominance of unwilling women, what is now the norm in pornography is the 'sexual dominance of willing women' (Bridges et al. p.1080).



*We have significant cause to be concerned about the ... impact on sexual aggression against women.*

## Pornography's impacts

The question of pornography's effects on the practice of men's violence against women is at the heart of debates regarding pornography and violence. *The Porn Report* offers a simplistic and partial account of existing scholarship on pornography's effects. It claims mistakenly that laboratory-based studies on pornography find negative effects only for violent pornography and that even studies regarding this finding are contradictory (McKee et al. pp.86-77). However, meta-analyses across these studies find consistent 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, as I have reviewed elsewhere (Flood & Hamilton 2003, pp. 40-46). A more recent meta-analysis of existing studies of everyday pornography use documents that people who use pornography, particularly violent pornography but also nonviolent pornography, are more likely than others to have attitudes supporting sexual violence against women (Hald et al. 2009).

Other recent scholarship documents that men who use violent 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 (Malamuth, Addison & Koss 2000, see also Malamuth, Hald & Koss 2012).

Relationships between pornography use and sexual violence also are apparent among young people, as a recent and methodologically sophisticated study shows. In a longitudinal study of youth aged 10 to 15, with three waves of data over three years, individuals who intentionally consumed violent X-rated materials were over six times more likely than others to engage in sexually aggressive behaviour (Ybarra et al. 2011).

However, *The Porn Report's* method for assessing pornography's content would fail to label most such acts as violence.

## Conclusion

Although *The Porn Report* offers some valuable data, it is flawed as a source of information about pornography consumers in general, violence in pornography, pornography's effects and significance, children's and young people's relationships to pornography, or pornography scholarship. A large body of other research demonstrates that we have significant cause to be concerned about the content of pornography and its impact on sexual aggression against women. ■

## References

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For example, '93 per cent of consumers of pornography report no negative effects.' (p.97)

<sup>2</sup> A nationally representative study of 20,000 adults aged 16 to 59 years found that approximately 37 per cent of men and 16 per cent of women had watched an X-rated film in the last year. Among men, 37 per cent of heterosexual men, 63 per cent of homosexual men, and 70 per cent of bisexual men had watched X-rated videos. (Richters et al. 2003, pp.186). Therefore, homosexual and bisexual men, for example, are almost twice as likely as heterosexual men to have watched an X-rated film. However, they are only around 3 per cent of the population (Smith et al. 2003, p.138).

**Michael Flood has published a more detailed analysis of *The Porn Report* on the website XY Online [www.xyonline.net](http://www.xyonline.net)**

