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Youth, Sex, and the Internet

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Abstract

For young people, the Internet is a space of both pleasure and danger. On the one hand, the Internet fosters a wide variety of social and sexual interactions, delivers responsible information and advice on sexual and reproductive health, allows the exploration of diverse sexualities, and is a means of sexual pleasure and expression. On the other hand, the Internet has facilitated young people's unwanted exposure to sexually explicit content and increased their vulnerability to forms of emotional and sexual abuse. Research by the Australia Institute finds that three-quarters of 16 and 17 year-olds have been exposed accidentally to pornographic websites, while 38 per cent of boys and two per cent of girls have deliberately accessed such sites. Much of the sexually explicit material available online, like much pornography in general, presents a narrow and distorted view of sex, shows women in sexist and stereotyped ways, and some material depicts and eroticises violence. Government regulation of the Internet has failed to keep pace with its development, and the Government thus far has done little to lessen the potential harms young people face. At the same time, the Internet is proving to be an increasingly important tool in building young people's health. To make the most of the Internet, we need to teach skills in media literacy, produce and deliver youth-focused materials on sex and relationships, and adopt regulatory strategies to minimise the harms associated with young people's exposure to sexually explicit content.

Youth. Sex. The Internet. Each of these three is a site of enormous social change, an area of social policy, and at times, the subject of moral panics and media frenzies. And all three are linked to another issue which also has been the subject of great controversy, pornography. Australian research documents that it is child's play to see pornography on the Internet. Some young people deliberately seek sexually explicit materials online, while many experience routine, accidental exposure to pornography. This exposure is likely to have damaging consequences for young people's mental health. Social and educational strategies will be most effective at minimising the harms associated with exposure to pornography, while regulatory strategies also are desirable.

Youth, Sex, and Media

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 (Heins 2001). 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 (Roker & Coleman 1998: 1). At the same time, as Levine (2002: xxxiii) notes, 'Sex among [Australia's] youths, like sex among its adults, is too often neither gender-egalitarian, nor pleasurable, nor safe.'

The mass media plays a powerful role in the socialisation of children and adolescents (Goldman 2000), and it may be particularly important in shaping young people's sexual knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours given their limited access to other

sources of sexual information. Parents communicate about sexuality-related topics only with difficulty, while school sexuality education often focuses on biology and neglects sexual behaviour, romance and interpersonal relations. Youth are thus forced to rely largely on peers and mass media. Today's children grow up in a cultural environment saturated with sexual imagery and popular sexual discussion, and their exposure to Internet pornography in particular has become an issue of substantial public concern.

For young people, the Internet is a space of both pleasure and danger. On the one hand, the Internet fosters a wide variety of social and sexual interactions, delivers responsible information and advice on sexual and reproductive health, allows the exploration of diverse sexualities, and is a means of sexual pleasure and expression. Young people use the Internet to build both online and offline relationships and communities. More widely, the Internet is an extraordinarily valuable, and indeed essential, educational tool for children and young people.

On the other hand, the Internet brings some dangers. The Internet is a new medium for old forms of emotional and sexual child abuse, including the recruitment of children for sexual purposes, child pornography, and the commercial exploitation of children through online advertising (Stanley, 2001). In addition, exposure to Internet pornography (and other problematic materials) can foster poor mental and social health. This is the focus of the remainder of this discussion.

Paths to Exposure to Pornography

Pornography can be defined as 'sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience'. It includes images of female or male nudity or

semi-nudity, implied sexual activity, and actual sexual activity. 'Pornography' is used here as a neutral term, rather than as a negative term referring to representations which are necessarily offensive, obscene, or harmful.

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 (Thornburgh & Lin 2002). On the Internet, it is easy for children and indeed all Internet users inadvertently to encounter pornography.

According to Australian law, individuals under 18 years cannot purchase or view R- and X-rated films 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.

First, pornography 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). 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. 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.

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' (Thornburgh & Lin 2002).

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.

Australian Youth's Exposure to Online Pornography

There is now Australian data on young people's exposure to pornography. 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, producing two reports in 2003. Youths younger than 16 could not be interviewed for ethical reasons. While the survey produced data also on exposure to X-rated videos, I omit this here.

Eighty-four per cent of boys and 60 per cent of girls say they have been exposed accidentally to sex sites on the Internet. 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 been accidentally exposed. Internet users who have no interest in sex sites thus find it difficult to avoid them.

What Young People May See Online

When a boy or girl views a pornographic website, what are they likely to see? While the Australia Institute survey did not gather data directly on the nature of the materials seen, it is worth noting the typical features of pornographic content.

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). Most pornography presents a narrow 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).

Effects of Exposure to Pornography

What is the likely effect of exposure to pornography on youth's attitudes, values, and behaviours? There is very little direct evidence among youth under 18, because of the obvious ethical difficulties involved. However, there is a literature on the effects of sexualised media content (e.g., in television programs or music videos). 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 their peers are sexually active (Flood & Hamilton 2003a). In addition, numerous studies on pornography have been conducted among young adults aged 18 to 25, with many focused on the potential link between pornography and sexual violence.

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 pornography. In everyday life, men who use hardcore or 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. There is a circular relationship among some men between sexual violence and

pornography, in that men who are higher risk of perpetrating 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)

It is likely that similar relationships between some forms of pornography and sexual aggression exist among teenagers. This association may be particularly strong for the five per cent of 16 and 17-year-old boys in the Australia Institute study who view Internet sex sites and watch X-rated videos every week. Regular consumption of pornography, and particularly violent pornography, is a risk factor for boys' and young men's perpetration of sexual assault. More generally, pornography may help to teach young people sexist and unhealthy notions of sex and relationships.

There have been heated scholarly and political debates over pornography. For anti-pornography feminist writers, pornography sexualises and normalises inequalities and 'makes violence sexy' (Russo 1998). Other feminist and non-feminist authors argue that there is great diversity in pornographic imagery, viewers interpret pornography in complex ways, and claims about media 'effects' are simplistic and overly deterministic (Strossen, 1995). Certainly there are three caveats to my argument here. First, various factors mediate the impact of exposure of pornography, such as the viewer's age, personal development, and their level and nature of sexual experience. 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.

It has been argued too 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. In addition, gay and lesbian pornographies are important positive expressions of non-heterosexual sexualities. But these positive effects should not blind us to other, harmful, effects associated with pornography.

There are three other potential impacts on children and young people of exposure to pornography that should also be considered (Flood & Hamilton 2003a). First, younger children may be shocked, disturbed or upset by premature or inadvertent encounters with sexually explicit content. Second, young people may be troubled or disgusted by images of non-mainstream sexual behaviours. Like adults, they may be disturbed by images of practices which are outside common cultural norms, such as sex involving multiple partners, bondage and sadomasochism, urination and defecation, bestiality, incest, or rape.

Finally, 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 should be rejected, 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. On the other hand, exposure to pornography *can* influence attitudes towards particular sexual behaviours. When adults engage in prolonged consumption of pornography showing non-mainstream sexual practices, their estimation of the prevalence of such practices in the population increases. Of course, this is only a problem if these practices are undesirable in some way, and there is substantial debate over the moral status of different sexualities. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that there is

likely to be a community consensus on children's exposure for example to depictions of violent or non-consenting sex, while more disagreement is likely on other material.

To summarise, pornography is a poor sex educator. Most pornography is too explicit for younger children, most shows sex in unrealistic ways and neglects intimacy and romance, and some pornography is sexist or even violent.

What To Do

So what can be done about this? On the one hand, it is unfair for responsibility for the problem to be placed only on parents' shoulders. We do not broadcast explicit sex or extreme violence on television at all hours and leave it up to parents to regulate. Nor does our regulatory system allow minors to gain access to X-rated videos. On the other hand, it would be inadvisable to seek to prevent access to pornography altogether, whether by children or adults. First, it is very difficult to mount a defensible intellectual or political argument against *all* sexually explicit depictions. Second, pornography is consumed by substantial proportions of the Australian adult population. In the last year, about one-quarter watched an X-rated film and ten percent visited an Internet sex site on purpose (Richters *et al.* 2003). Third, there is majority community support for adults' right to access X-rated materials, as a series of Australian surveys have found.

Rather than trying to ban pornography, we should be seeking to minimise children's exposure to pornography, both accidental and deliberate; minimise the harmful effects of exposure among children when it does occur; and minimise exposure to violent pornography among children and adults alike. The second report by the Australia

Institute proposed a strategy with three components: schools-based education, a national system of Internet filtering, and a more responsible online adult industry (Flood & Hamilton 2003b).

Social and educational strategies

Social and educational strategies are the most effective ones we have to minimise the harms associated with children's exposure to pornography. Three kinds of educational strategy are important: (1) teaching children media literacy and skills in critical analysis of media messages; (2) parental understanding and monitoring; and (3) providing alternative content on sexuality to young people – content that is compelling and educational, and which includes materials on sex and relationships. Such strategies encourage children's ethical development and resilience, they are more effective than technological solutions in the long term, and they minimise the negative effects of exposure when it does occur.

Regulatory strategies

Filters are currently the most popular means of protecting children from exposure to inappropriate material on the Internet. The simplest filters use 'black lists' of inappropriate content or 'white lists' of appropriate content, keywords, and lists of suspect web sites, while more sophisticated filters analyse the text and images on particular web pages. The Federal Government has relied on voluntary filtering by end-users as the main means to minimise children's exposure, but this system clearly is not working.

A more effective method of restricting children's exposure to pornographic web sites is to require all Australian Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to apply filters to all content. Adults could 'opt out' of filtering to receive X-rated and other content. ISPs would be permitted to host pornographic websites on condition that the content had received an X rating and that effective age verification methods were in place. This would represent a system very similar to the one that now regulates X-rated videos. Several objections been raised to this to this proposal. First, internet industry advocates have claimed that a national system of ISP-based filtering is not technologically feasible.

However, the government's own review in 2004 reported that a national filtering system based on blacklists or whitelists certainly is feasible, and would not increase computer response times. The use of more complex filtering technologies is not practical, but will be feasible in a national system by 2006. A fallback option is that ISPs offer default end-user filtering on an opt-out basis. Subscription to an ISP automatically would include an end-user filter, installed on the user's computer, and users could choose not to accept it. An end-user system would allow more sophisticated filtering technologies to be used, and computer users could determine the kinds of content they or their children can see.

A second issue is that the classification of pornographic content is time-consuming and expensive, and it would be not practicable in relation to the enormous volume of adult content on the Internet. One alternative is a site license system. Australian web sites can get a license to host pornography, they must abide by the Office

of Film and Literature Classification guidelines, they are subject to periodic checks, and breaches mean that their license is suspended or revoked.

Critics of filtering point out that all filtering technologies ‘overblock’ legitimate materials and ‘underblock’ inappropriate materials. Filters have blocked materials on breast cancer, contraception, feminism, and so on. Some filters are ineffective, some are based on religious or other criteria that are not obvious to the user, and filters can be circumvented. Any filtering technology must live up to at least the following criteria: (a) effectiveness, (b) transparency, and (c) privacy (in protecting users’ rights to political expression and debate). Finally, filters can be bypassed by peer-to-peer file-sharing. Other strategies are required to address the potential harms associated with youth’s participation in these networks.

A more responsible online adult industry

Finally, the online adult industry must become more responsible. It should adopt further measures to limit minor’s exposure (both accidental and deliberate) to X-rated materials, including stronger age-verification technology, ‘plain brown wrappers’ for Internet sex sites, and instant help functions for children exposed to offensive material.

Conclusion

Substantial proportions of Australian youth are viewing Internet pornography, both accidentally and deliberately. There are two reasons to think that this exposure to pornography may increase. Children are using the Internet at increasingly younger ages and more frequently. And 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. On the other hand, parents have increased their efforts to minimise children's exposure to inappropriate Internet content, through both filtering software and supervision and monitoring (NetRatings Australia 2005: 57-66). The Internet is an extraordinarily powerful educational tool, to which all youth need access. We must take steps to minimise the potential risks of Internet participation. At the same time, protecting youth from sexual harm does not mean 'protecting' them from sexuality in general. In fact, maintaining children's sexual ignorance contributes to poor mental and sexual health. We must foster, and indeed, celebrate, the many ways in which the Internet is a tool for building psychosocial health.

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