

## **Objectionable content?**

### **Young people, online pornography and censorship**

*This article was commissioned for the Media Magazine, which is aimed at students aged 16-18. The magazine is published by the English and Media Centre, an educational charity that provides training and educational resources for teachers of English and Media Studies. The Directors of the Centre seemed uncomfortable with my discussion of the topic, and refused to publish the article. I still think this is a fair, balanced and informative piece about a subject that most 16-18 year olds will already know quite a lot about. I also think my argument has been vindicated by a great deal that has happened since that time. But please see for yourself!*

By the end of 2014, all internet service providers in the UK will be required to apply an 'objectionable content' filter. While parental control filters – and similar software packages – have long been available on an opt-in basis, they will now be mandatory. People who do not wish to use them will be required to inform their service provider.

According to Prime Minister David Cameron, filters are necessary in order to stop children 'stumbling across hardcore legal pornography'. In making filters compulsory, the government is responding to a sustained campaign, led by right-wing newspapers like *The Daily Mail* and by the Christian pressure group Safermedia.

Over the past couple of years, the *Mail* has regularly featured headline stories about children who are 'addicted' to online pornography and thereby 'turned into sex attackers'. It has also condemned as 'soft porn' the performances of artists such as Rihanna and Christina Aguilera on mainstream TV and in music videos – while simultaneously including numerous pictures and clips of their raunchy antics on its own website.

However, it isn't only *The Daily Mail*. The idea that young children are being bombarded, depraved and corrupted by a relentless tide of electronic filth – that they are being 'raised on a diet of porn' – is now taken for granted by commentators of many different persuasions.

While the internet companies were initially reluctant to apply compulsory filters, most have now come into line. This summer (2014), a group including BT, TalkTalk, Sky and Virgin Media launched a major advertising campaign and a dedicated website called Internet Matters designed to raise awareness of online safety – and to ensure worried parents that they are indeed concerned and responsible corporations. Internet safety, it seems, is a highly political issue, but also a commercial one.

## **What's the problem?**

Is there a real problem here, or is it just another exaggerated moral panic? Explicit sexual representations have existed – or have had to be suppressed – in all recorded societies throughout history. Indeed, the term 'pornography' derives from the Ancient Greek πορνεία (*porneia*), meaning fornication or sexual immorality.

However, the internet clearly does allow much easier access to such material; and the production and distribution of pornography has significantly grown in recent years. Access to online pornography is much easier today than it was even ten years ago. Where porn sites used to require credit card information, free access is available to anyone who clicks a button to say that they are over the age of 18. Estimates are fairly unreliable, but some suggest that there are over one million pornographic websites, and that one in eight online searches is for porn.

However, defining pornography is a difficult business. One person's 'pornography' is another person's 'erotica'; and there is a great deal of art and literature that might well be deemed pornographic by some. That old *Simpsons* episode, in which Marge leads a campaign against violence on television and ends up trying to prevent her local art gallery from displaying a nude sculpture (Michaelangelo's *David*), neatly showed up some of the contradictions here. Marge eventually changed her mind.

It's worth noting that David Cameron's concern (in the quotation above) is about *legal* adult pornography. However, in the wider debate there is often confusion between *child* pornography – that is, pornography designed for adult consumption, featuring the sexual abuse of children – and children's consumption of mainstream 'adult' pornography. Child pornography is, of course, illegal; pornography featuring adults, and designed to be consumed by them, is not. In mainstream media (television, film/video, computer games), there are age-based classification systems that are designed to prevent children's access to 'adult' material; although such systems do not generally operate online.

There is the further issue, currently much debated in the news media, of adult paedophiles 'grooming' their child victims through online contact – which again is very different from children (accidentally or through choice) accessing material that is intended for adults.

There is also a frequent conflation between pornography and violence. Campaigners often claim that the large majority of pornography shows sadistic acts of violence against women. Of course, one can debate what *counts* as 'violence', but this is a claim that is actually quite implausible. It should also be noted that the possession of so-called 'extreme' pornography depicting rape or 'life-threatening injury' is illegal in the UK.

Much of the debate about pornography refers to it only in very general terms, as though we all know what it is. This in itself allows campaigners to make all sorts of assertions about it that are difficult to refute – and thereby to make a stronger case for regulation. Yet when we talk about pornography, it is often not at all clear that we are talking about the same thing.

### **What do we know about the effects of pornography?**

When it comes to the effects of pornography, press reporting often suggests that there is a substantial weight of research evidence all pointing in the same direction. In fact, there has been hardly any research whatsoever about the effects of pornography on children. For ethical reasons, almost all the research has been

conducted with adults. Given that we might expect significant differences between adults and children – in terms of their knowledge and understanding about sex – it is obviously problematic to generalize from this research to apply to children.

There is some good evidence about children's access to pornography and about how they feel about it. The key study here is the EU Kids Online research, a massive 25-country project funded by the European Commission. Yet the overall picture here is rather at odds with that of the public debate.

In this research, only 23% of the sample (aged 9-16) reported having seen pornography (in any medium) in the past year; and only 2% had seen anything that combined sex with violence. These figures were higher for older children: the numbers of younger children who reported having done so were very low. 14% of the sample claimed they had seen sexual content online (only slightly more than had done so offline, in other media); and only 4% (and 3% in UK) said they had seen it and been 'bothered' by it. Of the small minority who said they were 'bothered', almost all of them said that they 'got over it straight away'; and participants reported a range of strategies for dealing with such material, including deleting it, reporting it, and blocking the person who sent it.

However, evidence about access is not the same as evidence about effects. Numerous official reviews – including reports by Ofcom in 2005 and 2011, and by the government's Children's Commissioner in 2013 – have found no clear and conclusive evidence that sexually explicit material has harmful effects on children, or even that it makes them more 'promiscuous' or 'callous' in their attitudes.

Of course, it is likely that people *learn* from pornography, in both positive and negative ways: they might learn false beliefs or risky behaviour, but they might also learn useful information that is not so easily available elsewhere – especially if they do not have good sex education. Yet there is very little evidence about *what* they learn; about the *relative significance* of pornography as compared with other potential sources of learning; or about how *long-lasting* such learning might be.

### **The problem with filters**

Of course, a lack of evidence does not mean that there are *no* effects, or only positive ones; but it does suggest that we need to be careful about how we respond. Filtering and blocking will only be effective if we can agree on what needs to be stopped, and if we can be sure that the technology will work.

'Objectionable content' is a very broad category. According to *Wired* magazine (July 2013), users may find that blocks have been applied, not only to porn, but to 'violent material', 'extremist related content', sites on anorexia and eating disorders, suicide, dating and even alcohol and smoking. In some cases, it seems that filters will prevent access to any site that hosts forums or chat facilities.

The filters are relatively crude: they tend to be activated by the presence (either on a site or in a user's search terms) of key words, or even fragments of words. A more sophisticated system would entail detailed ratings of individual sites, and then a

'blacklisting' process; although the enormous expense of such a system would make it very unlikely to be implemented.

As such, the filters also apply to sex education and advice sites, as well as those offering support for victims of abuse. Until recently, BT's parental control filters have blocked access to 'sites where the main purpose is to provide information on subjects such as respect for a partner, abortion, gay and lesbian lifestyle, contraceptives, sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy'; while O2's filters apply to Childline and Refuge (the domestic abuse charity), as well as the gay and lesbian organisation Stonewall.

Meanwhile, tips and techniques on how to evade the filters have already begun to circulate online. A browser extension for Google Chrome called 'Go Away Cameron' – apparently first developed in order to evade government censorship in Singapore – is already available. There is little doubt that tech-savvy young people will find many other undetectable ways of bypassing the controls.

### **The limits of censorship**

Internet activists have long assumed that governments' attempts to censor or control access to the internet were bound to fail. 'Information will be free' is the slogan: networked technology will inevitably defeat any attempt to regulate it.

Struggles over internet censorship are common in totalitarian regimes. For example in China, the government routinely attempts to block websites, and there are reportedly two million 'internet police' monitoring people's online behaviour. While much of this censorship is aimed at political dissidents and those who are seeking to expose government corruption, it also applies to material that is deemed to be morally harmful, including sexual content.

In Turkey, the government recently sought to ban YouTube, Twitter and other social media sites, seemingly on the grounds that people were using them to circulate incriminating recordings revealing high-level government corruption. While the courts have ruled against this – and Google (which owns YouTube) has apparently refused to implement the blocks – the government has remained intransigent.

Even so, in both cases, users have found it relatively easy to evade the restrictions. Google itself produces DNS tools, which allow users to change IP addresses and thereby to browse from another domain system. China has a vibrant social media environment, seemingly despite government controls: users (or 'netizens' as they are often called) find artful ways of evading government controls, and discussing issues without alerting the authorities.

Nevertheless, the requirement to 'opt in' to receive particular kinds of content – as is now required in the UK – will enable the authorities to gather significantly greater amounts of information about individual users. The extent of existing government surveillance has been highlighted by the revelations of Edward Snowden, who exposed the large-scale monitoring of everyday online communications by the US

National Security Agency. Networked technology might enable information to be free, but it also permits the intensive surveillance of users.

When it comes to pornography, this debate about regulation raises some important issues. Does restricting pornography really amount to an attack on ‘freedom of speech’, as some anti-censorship campaigners claim? All societies censor particular forms of communication: in the UK, for instance, there are laws against incitement to racial hatred as well as child pornography and so-called ‘extreme’ pornography. Yet how do we define what it is we want to censor, and whose moral values do we adopt in doing so? And if – as seems likely - censorship is no longer possible anyway, then what alternatives might there be?

### **Pointers for media students**

Despite these attempts to control access to pornography, it is unlikely that it is going to disappear. Pretending that it does not exist – or attempting to block any discussion of it – is not an option. In this situation, people often look to education as an alternative. The recent report for the UK Children’s Commissioner recommended that children should have opportunities to discuss pornography as part of their required sex education classes in schools. This is a positive suggestion, which reflects the realities of young people’s lives – although it undoubtedly presents a complex challenge for teachers.

Pornography is obviously a significant *media* form, and for Media Studies students there are plenty of opportunities here for further study and debate. Personally, I don’t expect that many teachers will be rushing to teach about this, but there are many ways of applying Media Studies ‘key concepts’ in this area.

Pornography is an **industry** that can be compared with other media industries. It is globalised, highly profitable, and operates across a range of media platforms. Like the newspaper industry, it is currently facing the challenges of **new technology**: on the one hand, digital media provide new means of distribution, but the proliferation of free online content – some of it apparently produced by amateurs – is threatening established business models.

Porn can be examined in terms of **representation** – perhaps especially in light of what some critics have called the ‘mainstreaming’ of pornographic imagery, or ‘pornification’. How and why an artist like Miley Cyrus uses sexually explicit imagery is a topic that provokes enormous debate. Are her performances pornographic, or are they just sexy and erotic – and what do these terms mean in the first place? Is she objectifying herself for commercial profit, or (as she claims) is she being ‘empowered’ by proclaiming her sexuality?

Many of these questions come down to our assumptions about the **audience**. As I have argued, many claims are made about the effects of pornography, although the evidence here is very limited. Are audiences – and especially younger audiences – necessarily harmed by exposure to such material, and in what ways? What do they learn from it, and what do they enjoy? And what would count as good evidence of these things?

Meanwhile, the **regulation** of pornography is a topic that invokes much bigger political issues. As with other key **media debates**, for example around media violence, we need to explore how such issues are defined and represented in the public sphere. Who speaks about such issues, in what ways, and how do they attempt to persuade us?

Ultimately, much of this debate is conducted by adults – some of them well-meaning, but some of them with very questionable prejudices about sexuality. Children and young people, who appear to be the main focus of concern, are rarely heard. It's surely time we had a more sensible and open discussion about these issues, in which young people themselves have the opportunity to participate.

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July 2014