

The Naked Truth:

Pornography in a High-Tech World

The Internet will likely remain the single most important technological tool of our era. In a relatively short span of time—roughly the last ten to fifteen years—it has changed the way we communicate, the way we shop, the way we get our news and sports scores, and has even changed the way we go to school. However, the relatively anarchic design of the planet's global computer network has also brought to life some images that most likely only existed in the deepest darkest corners of most people's minds in the past.

The subject of pornography has changed from something grownups used to whisper about, to something almost none of us can avoid. Certainly if you spend a significant amount of time on the World Wide Web, it's only a matter of time before you're presented with pornographic material in one form or another. You may find it in your inbox between the message from Grandma and the message from your bank telling you it's time to pay the bills. Or your son or daughter may stumble upon it while doing research on dinosaur bones.

With the almost unavoidable nature of pornography on the Internet, it's no surprise that this topic is hot in the minds of nearly everyone forced to deal with this previously very private issue. People are shocked, parents are outraged, and the government has found itself pulled between those who want it banned and those who defend its existence as an issue of free speech.

The United States is a country whose core values are based on freedom. Freedom of choice, freedom of expression, and freedom of speech are ideals we all hold dear to our hearts. In spite of that, our culture has a surprisingly stern aversion to pornography or even simple nudity.

The Naked Truth:

Pornography in a High-Tech World

Other cultures that we typically view as having fewer personal freedoms and more restrictive controls often have values that are far more tolerant of human sexuality than are our own. Thumb through a magazine from the UK, for example, and you'll notice that bare-chested women are not at all uncommon. Similarly, in Europe it's not uncommon to see women topless on TV.

Perhaps the United States' apparent value contradiction between freedom of expression and censorship of nudity helps to explain the tensions this issue is causing. In the past, the subcultures and even countercultures that have accepted everything from soft-core nudity to the extremes of child pornography, bestiality, and bondage, have existed out of the spotlight. The Internet has certainly changed all that. According to Parents Online, a full 12% of all Internet sites now contain pornographic material (Parents Online).

Pornographic material on the Internet is a serious issue due partly to its accessibility, but also because it's redefining the nature of the material itself. Years ago, magazines such as *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were what came to mind when one thought of pornography, but sources such as those are considered extremely soft compared to what can be found online today. A study done in the *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, found that Internet Newsgroups—a way for users to share stories and photos—contained an alarming number of tales depicting child pornography, hard-core bondage, non-consensual sex, and a whole host of others that would have been considered taboo by yesterday's standards (Boeringer & Harmon).

Another cultural consequence of this modern technological marvel, known as “the web” to most of us, is that some of the traditional social interactions required by everyday

The Naked Truth:

Pornography in a High-Tech World

life have diminished to a great extent. Shopping can be done online. Communication used to require either meeting in person, or talking on the phone. Not anymore—email takes care of much of that. Even meeting members of the opposite sex and dating has gone high-tech. No longer is it necessary to ask out that girl in the coffee shop. Instead you simply shop for someone electronically. Even school, one of the greatest social experiences anyone can be part of, can now be attended online.

Not surprisingly, this electronic isolation has carried into sexually explicit chat rooms. People who are extremely shy in social situations, now have a way to live out their sexual fantasies with real people, but in complete anonymity. For some, it's a way to live out aspects of their personalities that in the real world would require changes many aren't willing to make. For example, Sociologist Robin B. Hamman discovered in his research that chat room users would often disguise themselves as the opposite sex as a way to live out transsexual fantasies, but without the expensive surgery (Hamman).

With these chat rooms, a new shorthand language and set of symbols has evolved. Emotions, being very hard to convey and interpret through written text, are now displayed using a simple system known as *emoticons*. Emoticons are variations of standard keyboard characters put together to create smiley faces, frowns, and many others. Along with emoticons, a commonly used system of acronyms helps add a taste of reality to this virtual world.

Sociologists have long been concerned with the effects pornography may have on gender stratification. Pornography has traditionally been one-sided. Women are portrayed as objects that exist for the sole purpose of pleasing men. This portrayal of women as objects undermines the equality and respect that are necessary to bridge the

The Naked Truth:

Pornography in a High-Tech World

gender gap in the real world. With the relative ease that pornography can be found on the Internet, the issue of impressionable young boys being exposed is a serious concern.

Some sociologists even suggest that pornography may increase the likelihood that certain men will commit rape. The fear of social sanctions goes far to prevent many would-be rapists from actually committing a crime. However, pornography depicting rape scenes rarely shows the men involved being punished in any way. Diana E.H. Russell suggests this probably has the effect of undermining social inhibitions that would otherwise prevent many men from committing such an act (Russell). Again, the overexposure of such scenes now available on the net makes this an even greater concern.

The question of what can be done about this growing problem seems to have no easy answers. Attempts have been made by the government to control the flow of pornographic material, but civil libertarians have been successful in keeping Uncle Sam at bay. The *Communications Decency Act* (CDA) was unanimously voted into action in 1996 making it a criminal offense to traffic indecent material. However, the ACLU took the law to the Supreme Court where it was unanimously decided the law violated the 1st amendment (Pornography and the Internet).

Globalization further frustrates attempts to control this growing problem. Sociologist Heather Menzies argues that the global nature of the Internet is making it difficult, if not impossible, to control the flow of illegal material. Those who distribute the material are becoming adept at staying out of trouble by placing downloadable material in other countries (Menzies).

This issue is complex. It touches all of us either directly or indirectly. The social implications are extremely broad leaving quick answers difficult to come by. With the

The Naked Truth:

Pornography in a High-Tech World

growth rate of the Internet soaring year after year, the need to find solutions becomes even more important and ever more unlikely. Sociologists, psychologists, women's groups, men's groups, civil rights groups, and lawmakers need to work together to come to some agreement on the best way to handle this. Until then, it's on our shoulders as individuals to use the technology we have available to us in responsible ways.

The Naked Truth:
Pornography in a High-Tech World

References

Boeringer, B. Scot & Harmon, Denna (1997) "A Content Analysis of Internet-Accessible Written Pornographic Depictions" Retrieved July 18, 2003 from *The Electronic Journal of Sociology*: <http://www.sociology.org/content/vol003.001/boeringer.html>

Hamman, Robin B. (September 30, 1996) "Cyborgasms: Cybersex Amongst Multiple-Selves and Cyborgs in the Narrow-Bandwidth Space of America Online Chat Rooms" Retrieved July 18, 2003 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.socio.demon.co.uk/Cyborgasms.html>

Menzies, Heather (1996) "Sex on the Net: Regulation and control of pornography in the new wired world" Retrieved July 20, 2003 from the World Wide Web: <http://arts.usask.ca/policynut/pornnet.htm>

Parents Online (No Date) "Safety Issues: Pornography" Retrieved July 17, 2003 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.parentsonline.gov.uk/2003/parents/safety/>

Pornography and the Internet in the United States (1999) "The legal history of Internet censorship and pornography in the US" Retrieved July 18, 2003 from the World Wide Web: http://www.slais.ubc.ca/courses/libr500/fall1999/www_presentations/c_hogg/unitedstates.htm

Russell, Diana (No Date) "Pornography as a Cause of Rape" Retrieved July 19, 2003 from the World Wide Web: <http://www.dianarussell.com/pornsrole3.html>