

Free to fantasise? Pornography and its harms

Jo Fidgen asks what the hard evidence is for negative effects of pornography on sexual behaviour.



One strange afternoon in 2013, I sat in the office watching porn stars act out a rape scene. Not for my own entertainment, I should say, but because I was researching what pornography does to us for a radio programme, and this was one of the most watched videos on a popular site.

At the start, a warning flashed on the screen. 'This is fiction and these are professional actors. What you see here should not be re-enacted at home.' The plot was slim: a woman visits her estranged husband's house to get him to sign divorce papers. He is angry and forces her to have sex with him in a number of ways. She protests verbally, though doesn't struggle. When he's finished, he signs the papers.

Then the twist. The actors, now out of character apparently, cuddle up on the sofa and the director asks them if they enjoyed themselves. The woman complains that her co-star came in her eyes, which they had agreed he wouldn't do. She makes a show of forgiving him and says she would

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perform with him again. But in the final frame, she looks the viewer in the eyes and says, 'He hurt me, he hurt me.' Cut.

That video bothered me for a long time. Did she mean it? Did the director leave it in because that's what he thought the consumers wanted to hear? And would any of them have heard it anyway? The film was half an hour long; most men spend seven minutes at a time on porn sites. (For women, that rises to 15.)

Presumably this video was intended to be arousing (despite everything) and to that extent could be seen as eroticising sexual violence. That's enough for some to argue that content like this should be banned. But what harm is it actually doing? And would that outweigh the potential harms of suppressing it?

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This well-rehearsed, slightly academic tension between pornography and censorship became real again when figures were released in the UK of the number of rapes reported to police in the year to June 2014. There were 22,116: a rise of 29%, of which nearly three quarters referred to current, rather than historical, cases. That's an extra 10 women every day reporting that they've recently been raped. One other number leapt out: 294 said they had been attacked at knifepoint, a staggering 48% increase.

The statistics don't tell us as much as the bald figures might suggest. The jump in knifepoint rape appears to be real. But overall, it is not clear whether more women are being raped, or whether they are more willing to come forward following the publicity given to offences by celebrities such as Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris. The police have also changed their procedures after being criticised in previous years for wrongly dismissing allegations.

But whichever way you crunch the numbers, there is clearly a horrible problem - with no straightforward solution.

Wait, there is something you can do that will get a great headline: you can outlaw porn that depicts rape, and instead of enabling people to filter out pornographic content from the internet, you can force them to put their names on a list to say they want to receive it. In 2014, both were on the cards in Britain.

And, after all, why wouldn't you do that? At best you're removing a corrupting influence; at worst you're denying a seedy thrill to a dubious human being you wouldn't want to share a train carriage with.

The only trouble is the first is not obviously true, and the second is obviously not fair.

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Back in the 1970s, a psychology student at UCLA, Neil Malamuth, pioneered the use of laboratory experiments to test the connection between pornography and sexual aggression. He is now one of the most widely respected academics in the field. Over the decades, he has conducted many different experiments using different methodologies (see, for example this [paper](#)) - admitting to limitations in all of them. But he says, taken together, there has been remarkable consistency in the results.

'Exposure to pornography,' he told me, 'does not have negative effects on attitudes supporting violence against women, sexually aggressive tendencies, for the majority of men. 'However, such exposure to pornography - particularly more extreme pornography, particularly violent pornography - does have a negative effect on an important sub-set of men, namely those who have other risk factors for committing sexual aggression.'

Those risk factors include having grown up in a violent or abusive home, being promiscuous, having a narcissistic personality or sexually aggressive fantasies. If a man in those categories consumes a lot of violent pornography, there's a greater likelihood that he will commit a sexually aggressive act.

Some campaigners have used this research to claim that pornography leads to violent crime – much to Malamuth's annoyance. He draws an analogy with alcohol consumption. Drinking makes some people more relaxed, and others more violent; to say that alcohol leads to violence is to miss a lot of the nuances.

'Similarly with pornography,' he says. 'The best summary I could give you is that for some people, it appears to enhance their sex lives and may be viewed as a positive aspect of their life and does not lead them in any way to engage in any form of anti-social behaviour. For some people who do have those several other risk factors, yes it can add fuel to the fire and can lead to a greater likelihood of committing acts of sexual aggression.'

It seems unlikely that pornography researchers will ever be able to make a stronger statement about causality than this. To go further and establish whether consumption of pornography leads to certain behaviours would require the kind of experiment psychologists are no longer allowed to do. In the early days of his research, Malamuth was granted permission to expose people in laboratory conditions to violent pornography and observe the effects. That would never get past a modern ethics committee.

Anyone who says pornography causes anything is dressing up opinion as fact.

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So there is not enough evidence, you might think, to warrant making it harder for your average person to access pornography. But perhaps there is another type of harm that justifies action. The argument is that the internet has made pornography so easily accessible, maybe even so hard to avoid, that we are now living in a 'porn culture' saturated with hardcore imagery to the extent that most men's, and pretty much all young men's, attitudes to women and sex are shaped by it. You may not be a consumer yourself, but it still affects you. In the words of feminist philosopher Rae Langton, before the internet 'the question was whether some people could have the option of having pornography. Now we are in the world of pornography, unless we opt out.'

This worry has generated thousands of sociology research papers into the harm caused, and no doubt plenty of heat at universities up and down the country. At a recent workshop organised by Oxford's Free Speech Debate project, tightly argued debates about the cultural harms of pornography bristled with unacademic passion.

How to get a handle on such a torrent of information? I turned to British forensic psychologist Miranda Horvath. Last year she reviewed all the available studies on young people's exposure to pornography - more than 40,000 of them - and drew this conclusion:

'Pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex, beliefs that women are sex objects, more frequent thoughts about sex; and children and young people who view pornography tend to hold less progressive gender role attitudes.' (You can read the full review [here](#))

These are correlational studies, and it has not been established whether it was exposure to pornography that led to holding such attitudes. They cannot prove cause and effect, nor rule out other explanations. Is that a problem? Only if this research is being hijacked to build a case it can't support. But this is what is happening.

Dr Horvath included in her review only those studies which met certain standards, but she told me how shocked she was by 'how many very strongly worded, opinion-led articles there are out there which purport to be producing research, producing new findings when actually it's really based on opinion'.

Dr Ogi Ogas found the same. He is a computational neuroscientist who co-wrote a book called *A Billion Wicked Thoughts* with Sai Gaddam. In his words, 'so many sex researchers are activists as well'. Their study, which has not been peer-reviewed, looked at our online porn habits. They had access to about a billion different web searches, around half a million people's search histories, and some of the internal data from the most popular porn video site at the time.

They found that 4.2 per cent of the million most popular websites were sex-related. 13 per cent of web searches were for erotic content, with the most popular search terms youth, gay, MILFs, breasts, cheating wives. 'Cougar' and 'feet' featured surprisingly highly. (It is interesting that the effects of porn on gay men are rarely discussed, even though they are disproportionately

represented in the search data. Pornography research is concentrated in Women's Studies departments.)

And bear this in mind next time you are in that train carriage trying not to imagine what's going on in the other passengers' heads: the snapshot would suggest that about 80 per cent of men look at online pornography, and on average more than once a week.

But the detail I'm most interested in is this: Ogas says it is a myth that pornography is getting more violent, and that users search for more and more extreme material over time. Most people, he says, search for only two sex acts, over and over again. Fewer than 0.1 per cent have more varied interests, including extreme pornography. They 'jump out of the data', he says, and are often searching for what he calls 'the unholy trinity' of incest, bestiality and 'granny' porn.

When academic-campaigners assert that you cannot go online without stumbling over violent pornography, consider whether they have analysed a billion searches to see what we are actually interested in looking at.

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What excites one person may disgust another. It may disgust the majority of us. But fantasy is surely not a fit target for censorship. What should interest the regulators are our actions, and it is worth considering what harm may be done by attempting to suppress freedom of expression.

Milton Diamond and Ayako Uchiyama made the [intriguing case](#) in the *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* that when pornography became more widely available in Japan, the number of reported rapes fell. Berl Kutchinsky found the rate stayed the same or dropped in Sweden, Denmark and West Germany. Only in the United States did it rise.

What can we glean from this? It does not tell us whether fewer women were raped or whether the proliferation of pornography had made sexual violence more mainstream and victims less willing to report it. But that the United States bucked the trend points to an important consideration. Pornography does not exist in a vacuum. It is produced and consumed in a culture, and the values we bring to it are likely to skew how we respond.

This might help explain the contradictions in so much of the research in this field. For example, one study from the Netherlands suggested that the more adolescents used pornography, the more they confused pornographic and real sex, and considered sex to be primarily physical rather than affectionate. But of adolescents [questioned by researchers](#) in Sweden, a majority demonstrated no difficulty in distinguishing between fantasy and reality, and were not psychologically harmed.

As usual Sweden, that beacon of gender equality, has something to teach us. If your starting position is that women and men are equal, some two-dimensional actors engaging in sexual power

play won't make a dent in that.

Pornography is a mirror to our society: we see ourselves reflected in it. If we don't like what we see, smashing the mirror is not going to solve the problem.

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For anyone who is angry with sexual violence and sexual inequality, pornography is an easy target. But it is not the right one. There is no hard evidence that it causes aggressive behaviour; only weak evidence that it feeds into negative attitudes.

So if not science, what then is providing the momentum for further regulation? We may find a clue in what neuroscientist Ogas observed while researching our online pornographic interests. 'When we look at somebody else's sexual tastes,' he told me, 'if they don't match our own then we biologically react with disgust, discomfort and fear. There's a physical reaction when we look at other people's pornography and it seems to produce a sense that, oh if I'm feeling this uncomfortable, it must be something immoral.'

But moral distaste does not make good law. Public hostility to homosexuality and abortion was used to justify infringing the rights of vulnerable groups. In a liberal democracy it is not the morality of the majority that needs defending, but the free expression of minorities. Until we know more about the effects of pornography, feel free to take offence.

Jo Fidgen is a freelance journalist. She presented a BBC Radio 4 Analysis programme on research into the effects of pornography. This article also draws on a workshop organised at Oxford by the Free Speech Debate project.

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