

## Online pornography and children

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A few years ago an article in a Christian magazine caught my attention. The main thrust of the article was that Christians shouldn't get steamed up over pornography because there is "very, very little evidence at all to support any causal link between violence, sex or sexual violence viewed, and the behaviour of a person".

I have to acknowledge that this is a popular view. People say, "Porn does no harm. If you don't like it, just change channels or switch it off." Even Christians are singing this song - but it's wrong. Governments need to take action against pornographic and violent media, not because a few wowsers don't like it, but because it causes harm.

Switching off *Big Brother* does not protect my children from the sexually assaultive behaviour of other children who *do* watch and copy it. I can install software which blocks porn and violence on *my* home computer, but I cannot protect my family from the actions of others whose parents have not bothered, or do not know how, to install filters on their family computers.

But where is the evidence that pornographic and violent images can change viewers' behaviour?

First - it's common sense. We know that advertising changes people's behaviour, because TV images of products persuade people to buy them. One example is the pharmaceutical firm Merck, which ploughed \$US161 million into American advertising for its anti-arthritis drug *Vioxx* during 2000. This investment reaped a much larger reward - over \$US1.5 billion in *Vioxx* sales that year.<sup>1</sup>

Some parents and teachers are beginning to notice changes in behaviour when teens watch *Big Brother* - on TV, or even worse, as uncensored internet footage on their generation 3 mobile phones so that students can watch the brazen antics of the housemates during school recess and lunch time. Teachers tell me that *Big Brother* has been one of the main topics of conversation in the school yard in recent months. Students gleefully repeat the abusive language and sometimes the actions of their anti-heroes.<sup>2</sup>

The sexual assault on *Big Brother* housemate Camilla by Ash and John at the end of June this year was the last straw. Parents hammered newspaper websites, voting in large numbers in online polls which asked: "Should *Big Brother* be axed?" In the July 3 poll by *The Age* - whose readers normally support left-wing causes and oppose censorship - 69% of 11,990 people voted "YES - axe it!". *The Age* poll result, amazingly, was almost as high as that of the more conservative Melbourne *Herald Sun*, where 74.6% of 5777 people voted YES to the same question on the same day. Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition Leader Kim Beazley were also in full agreement. "Here's a great opportunity for Channel 10 to do a bit of self-regulation and get this stupid program off the air," Mr Howard said.<sup>3</sup> Mr Beazley advised Channel 10: "Make this *Big Brother* the last!"<sup>4</sup>

Are Australians beginning to see a link between what we see and what we do? There

is perhaps a gleam of light at the end of the tunnel - for some of us. But social researchers are less easily convinced. Hard evidence of cause and effect in social research is difficult to obtain because there are so many variables which must be excluded.

Nevertheless, carefully designed studies by some researchers have established a clear link (which is very likely causal) between viewing violent and pornographic images and subsequent behaviour. So when I read the article in the Christian magazine which claimed there was no evidence of such a link, I sent the editor details of some of these studies.

Then I waited ... and waited. The editor then replied, saying he would not publish my comments because the studies I had cited - one in 2003, and others in the 70s and 80s - were "too old". I thought this explanation was curious, given that the editor probably respected the authority of Biblical documents written thousands of years earlier, along with the validity of Einstein's 1905 theory of relativity and even Newton's laws of motion published in 1687.

However I must have touched a nerve with another journalist on the magazine's staff. When the editor moved on, his replacement fished my article out of the bin. It was published, read by someone in the Australian Family Association, and here I am today to tell the tale.

The title of my paper is "Online pornography" - currently an issue of enormous concern inside and outside parliament. However it is important to remember that the only difference between porn on the internet and other kinds of porn is the internet's greater potential for perversity and accessibility. Pornography, in whatever form, is a serious problem - especially for the impressionable minds of children.

### **Study 1 - films and smoking**

The first study I mentioned in my article showed that smoking in films influences teens. On 11 June 2003, newspapers around Australia reported a new *Lancet* online study which surveyed 3500 adolescents who had never smoked, and assessed their exposure to smoking in movies. A follow-up survey some time later found that those who had watched "hard-smoking" movies were up to three times more likely to take up the habit themselves. In response to this finding, health lobby groups called for an "R" rating on all films with frequent scenes of smoking.<sup>5</sup>

This research is one of a long line of studies showing that children copy what they see. Considerable research on media violence conducted in the US and the UK has reached the conclusion that viewing violent material contributes to aggressive behaviour in children.

### **Study 2 - TV and violence**

Dr William Belson, an Australian, conducted a large UK study, *Television and the Adolescent Boy*<sup>6</sup>. He extensively questioned 1,565 London boys aged 13 to 16 and divided them into two groups according to the extent of their exposure to televised violence. The two groups were then matched with a set of 217 variables associated with violent behaviour.

He set out to test, not only if more TV violence was associated with more aggression (it was) - but also the reason. Do boys who are naturally aggressive simply watch more violent TV? Belson found that is not the case - that long-term exposure to televised violence increases the degree to which boys engage in violent behaviour. In other words, TV violence makes naturally aggressive boys become even more violent.

### **Study 3 - TV and criminal behaviour**

US researchers Dr Leonard Eron and Dr Rowell Huesmann did a 22 year longitudinal study on the link between child-rearing practices and adult criminal behaviour.<sup>7</sup> They concluded that there is a significant link between television viewing at age eight and the seriousness of criminal convictions by the age of 30.

Eron and Huesmann found that children reared on a diet of TV violence had a 150 per cent more chance of being convicted for a criminal offence by the time they were 30 than did children reared with little exposure to TV violence. They found that TV violence increases aggression regardless of the initial level of aggression. They found that TV violence is a significant factor, among others, in producing violent responses in children and adults.

Opinion polls suggest that many people agree that violent media cause harm.<sup>8</sup> Sexual content is less likely to provoke concern<sup>9</sup> - even though the principle is the same. Fewer studies have been done on pornography, but those conducted with sound methodology have indeed found that viewing sexually explicit material affects both attitudes and behaviour.

### **Study 4 - pornography and rape**

Professor James Check undertook research for a Canadian inquiry into pornography and prostitution in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> His experimental data revealed that those who had been exposed to degrading non-violent pornography subsequently reported twice the likelihood to rape and to force unwanted sexual acts on women, than subjects who had not been so exposed.

Frequent users of pornography (defined as those who viewed porn videos at least once a month - a strange definition in 2006, when porn addicts link up to the net several times a day) had the most striking inclinations to sexually aggressive behaviour, and were more likely to accept rape myths such as “women who say no really mean yes” and “women secretly long to be raped”.

Under experimental conditions, high consumers of pornography relative to low consumers rated the porn videos as “more exciting, educational, realistic and affectionate” as well as “less boring and offensive”. They had come to accept and endorse the values represented by pornography.

### **Study 5 - pornography and values**

US researchers Dolf Zillman and Jennings Bryant tested the effect of exposure to pornography on social and sexual mores.<sup>11</sup> They found that prolonged consumption - one hour per week for six consecutive weeks - had a powerful adverse effect on evaluations of the desirability and viability of marriage. Among the subjects in the experiment, endorsements of marriage dropped from 60 per cent in the control groups to 38 per cent in the treatment groups.

The most dramatic finding was in the area of desire to have children. Prolonged consumption of pornography reduced the desire for male offspring by 31 per cent, and for female children by twice that amount - 61 per cent.

Indeed, male consumers expressed little desire for female offspring altogether. The desire of females for offspring of their own kind, after consumption of pornography, shrank to

one third of its normal strength.

Zillman and Bryant also found that prolonged consumption of pornography greatly reduced sexual satisfaction and sex-related personal happiness. They said, “Presumably pornography is initially consumed in hopes of increasing sexual satisfaction. But consumers eventually compare appearance and performance of pornographic models with that of their intimate partners, and this comparison rarely favours their intimate partners... The result is dissatisfaction with their partners and perhaps with sex at large.”

Zillman and Bryant also found that consumers of “soft” pornography are likely to seek “harder” forms, including violent and sadomasochistic sex practices, if given the opportunity.

The research by Check and Zillman and Bryant compares well with studies on the link between reported rape rates and the availability of pornography in different communities. Dr John Court, currently a senior lecturer in psychology at the University of South Australia, did some pioneering work in this field in the 1970s. In particular his on-site research in Denmark shattered the still widely believed myth that legalising pornography lowered the incidence of sex crimes. He found that Denmark abolished many minor sex crimes, including the crime of selling pornography, in the late 1960s. Not surprisingly, the sex crime rate went down because many such crimes ceased to exist! However the rate of serious sex crimes such as rape increased.<sup>12</sup>

### **Study 6 - sexual media and early sexual activity**

The most recent study in this area was on the effect on adolescents of exposure to sexual content in four types of media, published in the US journal *Pediatrics* by Dr Jane Brown et al in April 2006.<sup>13</sup> The researchers conducted an in-home longitudinal survey of 1017 black and white adolescents from urban, suburban and rural areas in North Carolina. The teenagers were interviewed when they were 12 to 14 years old and again two years later, using a computer-assisted self interview to ensure confidentiality. Each teen’s “sexual media diet” was assessed by weighting the frequency of use of four media by the frequency of sexual content in each TV show, movie, music album and magazine the teen used regularly. The internet was not included because when the study began in 2001, too few teens had regular access.

The study found that for white adolescents, heavier exposure to sexual media increases the likelihood that they will have engaged in sexual activity two years later - with all the risks early sexual activity entails. The finding held true even after other factors known to increase the likelihood of teen sexual activity had been taken into account.

### **Impact of hard-core pornography in South Australia**

The most dramatic effect was observed in the 1970s in South Australia, after hard core pornography was made freely available under the Dunstan government. Until that time, reported rapes (per head of population) had remained fairly low and stable, with similar statistics in Queensland.

However after hard core porn was legalised in SA, reported rapes soared by 400 per cent. In contrast the Queensland figures rose only slightly.<sup>14</sup>

Some of these studies were published 20 years ago, but human nature has not changed during that time. The impact of hard-core pornography, particularly in the form of X-rated

videos which became available in Australia in the ACT and the Northern Territory in 1984, has had a disastrous effect - particularly visible in outback indigenous communities where television and other media are unavailable.

### **Impact of internet pornography**

The damage caused by internet pornography - available only in the last ten years - has been even more devastating. Cassandra Tinning, a social worker at the Child At Risk Assessment Unit based at the Canberra Hospital, said there has been an alarming increase in sexually abusive behaviour by children - including "oral sex and forced intercourse with other children or forced intercourse with animals". She said her unit worked with children under 10 and had seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of children sexually harming other children - from three per year in the 1990s, to about 70 in the first half of 2003. Some were as young as six, seven or eight. Almost all of them went online to access pornography. Many thought that pornography was the internet's sole purpose, and 25% had had someone else show them how to find pornography on the internet.<sup>15</sup>

### **Pornography's impact on indigenous communities**

The following comment appeared in *Festival Focus SA*, June 2006:

*In May 1990 a group of four Aboriginal pastors travelled to Canberra with an urgent message for the federal government about the horrific sexual abuse of women and children in outback Aboriginal communities.*

*SA Baptist pastor Bob Brown - a member of the Wiradjuri tribe - told Focus (August 1990, p 1): "Pornographic videos are devastating Aboriginal communities, especially in remote areas." Pastor Cecil Grant of Albury NSW said: "X-rated videos are causing the genocide of our people."*

*The pastors told Focus about a government report on Aboriginal violence, based on research by Judith Atkinson who found that pornographic videos, alcohol and alienation were causing the extreme violence affecting 90% of Aboriginal families living in trust areas in Queensland. The government report censored references to porn videos - but did acknowledge: Young men are raping older women. Old men are abusing young girls, who sometimes require surgical treatment ... More women have died in one Queensland community alone than all the deaths in custody in the state.*

*The pastors said the problem had escalated dramatically since X-rated videos were allowed into Australia in 1984. Outback communities could not access TV, so they rented X-videos - homosexual and heterosexual - from the ACT where the videos are legal. A boy (5) was injured internally after two other boys aged 10 and 11 copied what they saw on a pornographic video.*

*Abuse on this scale was unknown in Aboriginal culture before the 1980s. An Aboriginal woman, Mona Ngitji Ngitji Tur (70) wrote a letter to *The Australian* (20/5/06) about her experiences growing up in the Western Desert. She said the sex abuse which plagues her people today did not happen during her childhood. Alcohol, cannabis and porn videos were not available in the Western Desert in those days.*

*The federal government did not listen to the pastors in 1990. Now the situation is so bad that some leaders are calling for Aboriginal children to be taken from their communities*

(The West Australian, 3/6/06).

*Yet white children are also victims of porn. A ban on X-videos and mandatory filtering of internet porn would be an effective first step towards protecting all Australians. Prime Minister John Howard - where are you?*

### **Federal government policy flawed**

Since those words were published, John Howard's government has responded by offering parents and libraries free software to install on their home computers.<sup>16</sup>

However this policy is flawed. Many Australian libraries have indicated they do not want to install such software since they oppose any form of censorship on principle. Many parents do not understand how to install, let alone how to operate such software.

### **Clean-feed filters by ISPs needed**

The only effective protection for all children is clean-feed filtering provided by the Internet Service Provider - a service already available in the UK from ISPs British Telecom and Telenor. The powerful ISP industry in Australia is strongly resisting such a measure here, claiming that filters at ISP level would slow down the internet for everyone. Senator Guy Barnett and others are supporting a current trial of ISP clean-feed service in Tasmania in order to prove that such a service is indeed workable - but Telstra and Optus have refused to participate. So far, sadly, Federal Communications Minister Senator Helen Coonan is listening to the ISPs.

In contrast, the federal Opposition led by Kim Beazley is supporting the protection of children. Mr Beazley is circulating a nationwide petition calling on the federal government to require all Internet Service Providers "to offer a 'clean feed' internet service to all households, schools and public libraries that blocks access to websites containing child pornography, acts of extreme violence and x-rated material".

### **The evidence is in**

The evidence is in. What people see influences their attitudes and behaviour. If we really care about our children, we will take action to protect them before, not after they become victims.

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