

Generation XXX; as Australia ponders tough online censorship laws, research on Internet pornography and teen sexuality suggests the kids might be all right

BY: Leslie Scrivener, Toronto Star
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Ask a teenager what he thinks about the effect of Internet pornography on developing minds, and after the expected awkward silence, his answer is nuanced and thoughtful. The contortionist, multi-orifice displays are "ridiculous" the 17-year-old says. They leave a "tainted perception, a fantasy about what to expect from girls, and that men are always in charge."

There's a danger that, over time, you'd get desensitized, he reckons. "It's a showcase. Being intimate with someone is what I think sex is."

Just what parents and sexual educators want to hear.

In Canada, where the Internet is wide open, not regulated by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, teens and children can view almost anything. (Content is subject to the Criminal Code and human rights legislation.)

For teens in Australia, access may soon be restricted. There, the government is proposing a mandatory Internet filter - a pilot project scheduled for last month didn't proceed, and no future date has been set - to block excessively violent and pornographic material. The scheme has yet to be approved by Parliament.

There's been considerable resistance to the government-proposed "clean feed;" one civil liberties group says it reeks of "condescending paternalism." Ethicist Clive Hamilton's view is different. "We have a generation of boys who have grown up in an environment saturated with disturbing forms of erotic material, and we really don't know what impact that will have," says Hamilton, professor of public ethics at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics, speaking from Canberra.

The mysteries of sex - including the logistics of how it's done, once revealed incrementally - are no longer. Graphic depictions of everything and anything sexual are just a mouse click away.

No longitudinal studies have examined the effect of such material on still-malleable minds. And they aren't likely to be undertaken any time soon. For obvious ethical reasons, social scientists can't expose children to explicit porn for brief, let alone extended, periods in order to compare them with control groups of kids who haven't watched such material.

A 2008 University of Amsterdam study of 2,343 Dutch teens showed that more frequent exposure to explicit Internet porn was related to having a more open attitude to casual hookups, one-night stands and a "recreational" view of sex. These are links, researchers caution, not necessarily cause and effect; teens who are more interested in sex than their peers are going to be more interested in finding sexual content on the Net.

The study, by Patti Valkenburg and Jochen Peter, also showed, not surprisingly, that the teens who'd had more frequent exposure to Internet porn had a stronger notion of women as sex objects. But despite those undesirable gender dynamics, the researchers stated that their findings should not be interpreted as a call to protect adolescents from the Internet, or for greater censorship.

And besides, such measures would be impossible. "The bottom line is that you can't put the genie back in the bottle," says Alex McKay, research co-ordinator for the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada. "Kids in the 21st century are going to be exposed to sexually explicit images, and it's naive to think they won't be."

The better way is to make sure kids are educated about healthy sex and are media literate, he says. "Any other approach is doomed to failure."

Still, he easily lists problems associated with Internet porn. Children viewing the polished, pruned and well-endowed bodies on porn sites get a distorted picture of human physiology and sexuality. Their expectations of what sex could and should be like for them can become completely unrealistic. They can come to see sex as simply a "mechanism of pleasure," an act of the moment, not part of the continuum of a human relationship. Almost all porn is targeted at men and presents sex from a male point of view.

"It can make you feel insecure, because your body doesn't look like that," says Alicia, a university student who says she and her boyfriend use Internet porn to add spark to their sex life and "change it up."

The insecurity doesn't just befall girls. Dan, a 21-year-old student, says that he assumed, having watched porn before he actually had sex, he assumed "that the bigger a guy was, the better it is." Seeing airbrushed porn stars also raised his expectations of what sex would be, he says. "I wasn't disappointed, but I realized that's not really how normal people have sex."

At the same time, there's another body of information that supports the view that children are smart and resilient, and that their values aren't being twisted, nor their sexual health compromised, by exposure to online sex.

According to Statistics Canada, Canada's teen pregnancy rate is at an all-time low, the average age of first sexual intercourse has stabilized at 16 1/2, the number of teens reporting they've had sex is dropping, and the proportion of teens having sex at an early age is declining (12 per cent reported having sex before they were 15 in 1997, compared to 8 per cent in 2005). Teens' use of condoms is greater than 20 years ago, and the percentage of teens with multiple sexual partners has remained stable.

"How can that possibly be?" McKay asks rhetorically. "We're living in an increasingly sexually saturated culture." He goes on to explain that "young people are better educated and more responsible. They are more knowledgeable and literate about their own sexual health than in past generations, and this has coincided with our progressively relaxed attitude to sexuality."

In other words, the kids may be all right.

Younger children who stumble onto sex sites tend not to linger over them, he believes. They quickly move on to something more interesting to them, like dinosaurs or hockey. (Some researchers view this differently, saying the images are stored away in memory, not completely forgotten.) He notes it's true that more kids are reporting having oral sex. (In 1994, 47 per cent of Grade 11 girls in Canada said they'd had oral sex; eight

years later 52 per cent said they had.) "But more adults have oral sex than in the past - it has become normative sexual behavior."

And for other cohorts of teens - gays and lesbians and kids with disabilities - the Internet can be a powerfully liberating force and source of information, he says. "You're free to be who you really are and there's no stigmatization."

McKay is concerned that Internet filters may also block out access to sexual health websites like sexualityandu.ca, some developed by public health departments. A study by the California-based Kaiser Family Foundation, a philanthropic organization that focuses on health-care issues, found that filters set at the most restrictive levels blocked 24 per cent of health information while offering only a four per cent increase in blocking pornographic content.

But there's another view that says there are very strong reasons to be troubled by the images kids absorb on Internet porn sites. Health educators worry that too few porn sites show couples using condoms. Some observers fear that Internet porn sets a distorted benchmark of accepted sexual practices. "We know without a doubt that images you are exposed to impact the way you think about reality," says Gail Dines, a sociology professor at Boston's Wheelock College who studies pornography. "It delivers a message in a crisp and succinct way - in your face, powerful and unambiguous: no morality, no empathy, no emotions outside anger."

It's not just the imprinting of the messages, she says. "Most men understand that it's not real life, but that doesn't mean it doesn't affect them ... They masturbate to it. It's a very powerful delivery. It becomes ingrained."

A 23-year-old university student noted that the demeaning language about women that's common in pornography has seeped into the language of his social circle. "It became part of their everyday language in talking about girls."

Dines believes growing up with porn affects college-aged students' expectations of sexual norms. Some students tell her their boyfriends won't have sex with them if they have body hair. Rear-entry sex appears to be more common than vaginal sex, and ejaculation on women's faces is also standard fare. "It's seen as a form of degradation - you've really been marked. I hear this increasingly from students, (boys) want to do this from what they seen on the Net.

"None of us anticipated it would get so bad, so quickly. It's all because of the Internet. Look at the level of brutality - you used to find it only in pornography that was not mainstream. It's really bad when you look at Playboy as the good old days."

Pamela Paul, author of *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*, warns that pornography is integrated into teen pop culture - especially videogame culture, "which exalts the pornographic." Boys are learning to "sexually cue to a computer, rather than human beings," she told a conference on pornography held at Princeton University last month.

How much porn are teens watching? "Every male between 14 and 30 uses the Internet for adult entertainment and explicit sexual content," says the 23-year-old student.

It may just seem like that. A study released in 2007 by the University of New Hampshire Crimes Against Children Research Center showed that 42 per cent of 10- to 17-year-olds who used the Internet saw pornography in the past year. Two-thirds said exposure to porn was "unwanted," and the incidence of unwanted viewing has increased - up eight per cent in five years.

Another study from the centre indicated that the overwhelming majority of minors looking for sexual images are 14 or older and show a curiosity appropriate to their development. Concerns about extremely young children subjected to an "avalanche" of sexual images on the Internet before they are developmentally ready to process them "may be overstated," the authors concluded.

A study from the London School of Economics showed that parents appear to be out of touch with their children's viewing habits. According to the study, published last year, 57 per cent of nine- to 19-year-olds surveyed came into contact with pornography online, while only 16 per cent of parents believed their children had seen online porn.

Some Canadian research suggests at least some kids in this country are finding their way to Internet porn early on. Canada's Media Awareness Network talked to 6,000 students from Grade 4 to Grade 11 about Internet use as part of an ongoing study, and got some surprising responses. "We had kids as young as 11 saying they've already been through their Internet pornography stage," says Cathy Wing, the network's co-executive director, speaking from Ottawa. That may be in part bravado, she says, but a majority of children surveyed also said they worried about younger children's exposure and felt they should be protected. Experts agree that kids who are living in poverty, have little parental engagement or are exposed to violence are much more vulnerable to Internet suasion.

The notion of a nation-wide filter blocking out pornography does not appeal to Sharon Haniford, a lawyer and mother of two teenagers. "Do I know exactly what my kids are doing? No. Do I have a lot of trust in them? Yes.

"There are more hurtful things out there - hate mongering is one. As long as it's legal, it's up to the parents to control it."