



Pornography--As American As Apple Pie?

America's Repudiation of the Internet Pornography Problem

The United States is largely responsible for a global epidemic. Rather than leading the charge for an effective solution (as our nation normally and appropriately does) the United States is aggravating the problem and holding up movement toward any real solution to the problem.

The United States of America is the largest commercial purveyor of pornography in the world.

In terms of protecting children from Internet pornography the United States is the most immoral and irresponsible nation on the planet.

The Internet exposes children around the world to unlimited and unfettered amounts of pornography every single day. The February 2007 edition of *Pediatrics*, the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics published a study which found that 42% of 10-17 year olds surveyed had been exposed to Internet pornography.¹ If this number holds true across the nation it amounts to roughly 15 million children in the United States alone.

Studies from other nations have produced similar numbers. The Australia Institute, the leading progressive think-tank in that country found

that 84% of boys and 60% of girls had been accidentally exposed to pornography on the Internet.² The London School of Economics released numbers in 2004 which found that 57% of children ages 9-19 in the UK who accessed the Internet at least once a week had been exposed to Internet pornography.³ Millions of children around the world are adversely affected by exposure to sexually explicit material.

In 2000 a trio of Canadian university professors published a comprehensive analysis of 46 published studies, conducted in the United States, Canada, and Europe about the effects of Internet pornography. The analysis found that exposure to pornography leads to a 31% increase in sexual deviancy, 22% increase in sexual perpetration and a 20% increase in negative intimate relationships.⁴ Arguments may be made that other factors may be involved but the truth is incontrovertible – pornography is a catalyst for sexual crime.

The United States is Responsible

Pat Trueman, a former chief of the Justice Department’s Child Exploitation and Obscenity section said that virtually all commercial Internet pornography could be done away with by only prosecuting 20 to 30 companies.⁵

Why is the United States responsible for serving more pornography online from within its borders than any other nation? The simple answer is infrastructure: No other country has the resources and means needed to serve such graphically intense content.

Additionally the pornography industry, particularly Internet pornography, has no liability or fear of prosecution. Poorly crafted laws have been overturned and left us with a self regulating failure. In many places it is illegal to distribute pornography to a minor – a crime for which there is no way to hold anyone accountable on the Internet.

At the heart of the question is the United States’

willingness, de facto or on purpose, to value the rights of pornographers over the rights of children.

Rights of Pornographers

Pornography, adult-content, sexually-explicit material – whatever you call it – is protected under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Rulings by the Supreme Court have found that material not defined as obscene can be legally transmitted and distributed.

Attempts by the United States Congress to address the problem, including the Child Online Protection Act,

have been found unconstitutional or are otherwise held up by the court system. Courts often rule that attempts to regulate Internet pornography are overly broad and place an undue burden on the porn and tech industries. As a result Congress has become tentative about making any further attempts to directly address this issue.

Does requiring industries to ensure the safe and legal distribution of their product amount to an undue

burden? Other arenas like the tobacco, alcohol, food, and manufacturing industries are regulated by law, stipulating how, where, when, to whom, and in what condition their products can be distributed. It follows then that we should extend the same regulations and mandates for responsibility and accountability to the pornography industry.

Allowing Internet pornography to invade every home, irrespective of the occupant’s views or desires, is inconsistent with other laws relating to sexually explicit content. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulates what types of television programming are more appropriate at times when children are more likely to be watching. Pornographers cannot send you unsolicited mail. Children are not allowed to enter adult bookstores or novelty shops.

This inconsistency places a higher value on the rights



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of pornographers and technology versus the rights of children in using the internet. In other words, pornographers have a lobby, contribute money, and vote. Children do not.

Rights of Children and Families

This wacky imbalance of priorities was made clear in a book published by the United States National Research Council entitled *Youth, Pornography, and the Internet*. “Parents must balance their concerns about exposure to harmful things on the Internet against benefits gained from exposure to positive things on the Internet, and the question of how children can learn to handle and defend themselves becomes the primary issue.”⁶

Defend themselves? Where else in society do we demand that children defend themselves, in their own homes no less, against a damaging, potentially life-altering substance? This expresses a deeply-concerning attitude that schools and parents must allow into their home material that they know is harmful to their children. This seems to violate another strongly held American right: the right to privacy. How can the pornography and tech industries dictate what content is accessible in our homes?

What about a child’s right to a safe environment? Schools don’t allow someone selling pornography to wander the halls; however, the Internet brings that person right into the classroom. Parents don’t want unsupervised weapons in their home. Internet pornography is the moral equivalent of handing your child a loaded weapon and telling him or her to be careful with it. Hopefully the child would – but consider the cost if the child isn’t careful with the gun, even just once.

Opponents of Internet pornography regulation argue that parents are to blame. Parents, they say, must deploy filters. Parents, if they are so concerned, should put locks on their computers or not access the Internet at all.

Apparently the people making these arguments have never used a filter or been a parent. Parents do have responsibility and are ultimately accountable for their children. But technology has left them behind and favors the content providers rather than consumers. Proxy websites are readily available to any child wishing to bypass a filter. Parents should monitor their children’s Internet usage,

but to cut it off entirely is unrealistic. Children are often required to use the Internet for homework assignments.

The unwillingness to value human rights over the rights of industries and technologies means that the Internet belongs to pornographers. Why should the most important research and communication tool in the history of the world be dominated by dangerous and unwanted material? It seems rather that the structure of the Internet should be such that it protects access to such content, rather than serving it alongside Disney® and Sesame Street® – often with domain names so close to those sites designed especially for children as to trap the unwary.

What do We Do?

Pornography is not going to go away. It is protected speech and it will take monumental court appointments and decisions to eradicate it. By the same token the hate for pornography and what it does to people’s lives will not go away either.

Instead we should spend our time righting the preposterous imbalance of valuing the rights of pornographers over the rights of children. Yes, pornographers have a right to produce and distribute their product. Those who want it should still be able to receive it. But pornographers do not have a right to beam it directly into the homes, schools, and businesses of millions around the world who don’t want it.



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Allowing consenting adults to access pornography on the Internet is not validating pornography. The Supreme Court of the United States validated pornography. Restructuring how content on the Internet is served is not censorship. It means simply allowing consumers to choose what material and content is available within their privately owned environments.

In its hesitancy to adequately protect its own children and address this problem, the United States has become the gateway to pornography for children all over the world. Ours is a nation that values the institution of the family, champions human rights, and sharply defends the rights of children to grow up in healthy, safe, and productive environments. It is irresponsible as the world's most powerful nation, and immoral as the world's greatest nation to continue to allow this pornographic pollution to ruin our children's lives.

It isn't too late. Yet.

Footnotes:

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2. Flood, M. and Hamilton, C. Regulating youth access to pornography. (2003). The Australia Institute.
3. Livingstone, S. and Bober, M. UK children go online. (2004). Department of Media and Communications, The London School of Economics and Political Science.
4. Oddone-Paolucci, E., Genius, M., & Violato, C. (January 2000). A meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of pornography. *The Changing Family and Child Development*, 48-59.
5. White, M. Anti-pornography activists accuse Justice Department of ignoring porn that hurts children, families. Associated Content.com, (April 9, 2007). Accessed May 23, 2007 online at http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/209417/antipornography_activists_accuse_justice.html.
6. Thornburg, D. and Lin, H. eds. Youth, pornography and the Internet. (2002). *Committee to Study Tools and Strategies for Protecting Kids from Pornography and their Applicability to Other Inappropriate Content*. Computer Science and Telecommunications Board, National Research Council, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C..