

NEWS ANALYSIS

Does Porn Hurt Children?

By David Segal

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Starting late last year, Internet service providers in Britain made “family-friendly filters,” which block X-rated websites, the default for customers. Now any account holder who wants to view adult material needs to actively opt in — effectively raising a hand to say, “Bring on the naughty.”

The initiative, which was conceived and very publicly promoted by the government, is intended to prevent what Prime Minister David Cameron called the corrosion of childhood, which, he argued in a speech last year, happens when kids are exposed to pornography at a young age. In the same speech, he seemed to toss teenagers into the group in need of protection, referring to “young people who think it’s normal to send pornographic material as a prelude to dating.”

And here is where the topic starts to get very murky. It turns out that the research suggesting that teenagers and pornography are a hazardous mix is far from definitive. In fact, many of the most comprehensive reports on this subject come to conclusions that amount to “we can’t say for sure” shrugs. One of the most recent is surely known to Mr. Cameron because it was produced by the office of the Children’s Commissioner for England. In May, the commissioner released a report titled “Basically ... porn is everywhere,” which examined 276 research papers on teenagers and pornography.

After sifting through those papers, the report found a link between exposure to pornography and engagement in risky behavior, such as unprotected sex or sex at a young age. But little could be said about that link. Most important, “causal relationships” between pornography and risky behavior “could not be established,” the report concluded. Given the ease with which teenagers can find Internet pornography, it’s no surprise that those engaging in risky behavior have viewed pornography online. Just about every teenager has. So blaming X-rated images for risky behavior may be like concluding that cars are a leading cause of arson, because so many arsonists drive.

American scholars have come to nearly identical nonconclusions. “By the end we looked at 40 to 50 studies,” said Eric Owens, an assistant professor at West Chester University in Pennsylvania and co-author of “The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research,” published in *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention*. “And it became, ‘O.K., this one tells us A, this one tells us B.’ To some degree we threw up our hands and said, there is no conclusion to be drawn here.”

The absence of definitive answers in this realm seems bizarre, at least initially. An entire generation has grown up with easy access to images and films that once required a photo ID or, for the youthful and determined, a Dumpster dive. And ready availability is just part of it. A lot of online pornography is violent. Much of it merely demonstrates the astounding breadth of sexual appetites out there. Who knew that watching fully clad women try to drive cars out of mud and snow would count as a fetish? It does, apparently, as the surprisingly tame *carstuckgirls.com* proves.

How could the professoriate not know whether viewing this stuff will warp a young mind?

Ethics are a big part of it. The ideal study, say academics, would round up a group of teenagers who had never viewed online pornography, then provide them with a steady dose of it for two to three months. At the end, they would be quizzed to see whether their attitudes or actions had changed. There would be tests for both mental and physical effects.

Let’s leave aside the difficulties of finding porn-innocent teenagers. Exposing them to sexually explicit material is against the law, which means no university would approve of such a study. And what if it turned out that pornography is harmful to teenagers?

“A lot of review boards see this kind of research as a ticking time bomb,” said Rory Reid, a research psychologist and assistant professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, who was a co-author of the paper with Professor Owens. “Universities don’t want their name on the front page of a newspaper for an unethical study exposing minors to porn.”

It doesn’t help that the technology is evolving so quickly. Video now streams efficiently to tablets and mobile phones, which has been true only for the last few years. Any study that looked at online pornography before these technologies emerged would understate the sheer quantity of X-rated material that a teenager can view, as well as where and when that viewing may occur. An iPad gets updated far faster than academic literature.

Simply defining terms in this realm is tricky. Justice Potter Stewart’s famous “I know it when it see it” approach to spotting obscenity isn’t quite rigorous enough for academia. Quantifying “exposure” and “harm” is difficult, too.

This is not to say that the vast body of research in this area is without lessons. Among the most prolific and revered researchers to examine teenagers and pornography is a duo in the Netherlands, Jochen Peter and Patti M. Valkenburg. The pair has been publishing studies about this issue for nearly a decade, most of it based on surveys of teenagers.

They found, as Mr. Peter put it in a recent telephone interview, that “when teens watch more porn they tend to be more dissatisfied with their sexual lives. This effect is not really a strong effect, though. And teens with more sexual experience didn’t show this effect at all.”

The pair also found that adolescents who watch more porn than their typical peers are generally less averse to casual sex.

But almost as soon as Mr. Peter was done summarizing results, he started listing caveats. Pornography can never be described as the sole predictor of an attitude about sex, or any behavior; it’s always part of a constellation of predictors. Further, he said, he and Ms. Valkenburg have limited their surveys to Dutch teenagers, and extrapolating from their experience is not a good idea. Even the questions these teenagers get asked are different than the ones asked in the United States. In the Netherlands, Mr. Peter said, they tend to assume teenagers are having sex and focus on whether it’s safe. In the United States, there is more focus on when a teenager starts having sex, and whether that initiation is earlier because of pornography.

“I would be very cautious saying that what we found in the Netherlands is applicable in the U.S.,” Mr. Peter said. “Our findings are in a country that is pretty liberal when it comes to adolescent sexuality.”

If academia can’t shed a great deal of light on this issue, perhaps teenagers can. Miranda Horvath, one of the lead researchers behind the Children’s Commissioner report, says that the most revealing part of the research came during an improvised debate, where a group of teenagers — ages 16 to 18, both girls and boys — were divided into two camps. One was instructed to argue that pornography had an impact on them, the other that pornography did not.

The pro-impact camp did not lack for fodder.

“They said it had an impact on their body image, on what young people think sex should be like, what they could expect from sex,” says Ms. Horvath, a professor of psychology at Middlesex University in London. “They talked about how if you see things in pornography, you might think it’s something you should be doing and go and do it.”

The no-impact camp could not fill up its allotted 15 minutes. There were more giggles than arguments. After a couple of minutes, the person chosen to speak turned to the rest of the team and asked, “What else should I say?”

Neuroscience tells us that young minds are still forming and thus malleable, and they tend to respond to emotionally charged material in ways that adults don’t. Given that pornography is emotionally charged, it would be shocking if it had no impact.

That may be why every academic I spoke to, even those who acknowledge that little is known for sure on this subject, offer cautionary advice.

“I have a son,” says Professor Reid of U.C.L.A., “and I don’t want him getting his information about human sexuality from Internet porn because the vast majority of such material contains fraudulent messages about sex — that all women have insatiable sexual appetites, for example.”

There are lots of teenagers who will tell you that they know the difference between pornography and sex in real life, in the same way, and for the same reasons, that they know “World of Warcraft” isn’t an actual world. But researchers like Professor Horvath say it’s a bad idea to hope that kids intuit what is fake or misleading about pornography. Young people are still affected by X-rated images and video, she said, and many feel pressure to conform to what porn tells them they should or should not be doing.

“One of our recommendations is that children should be taught about relationships and sex at a young age,” Professor Horvath continued. “If we start teaching kids about equality and respect when they are 5 or 6 years old, by the time they encounter porn in their teens, they will be able to pick out and see the lack of respect and emotion that porn gives us. They’ll be better equipped to deal with what they are being presented with.”

At a minimum, researchers believe a parent-teenager conversation about sexuality and pornography is a good idea, as unnerving to both sides as that may sound. The alternative is worse, according to Professor Reid. Putting a computer in a kid’s room without any limits on what can be viewed, he said, is a bit like tossing a teenager the keys to a car and saying: “Go learn how to drive. Have fun.”

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