

## **The Influence of Technology on Sexual Content in Mass Media in the United States, China, and India**

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Each day around the world sexual content can be viewed on large and small broadcast screens, including computer and iPod downloads. Sexual content is even diffused on CDs and via satellite radio. Sexual content is promoted and exhibited in movies, videos, stage productions and museums and displayed in various print forms. Dissemination of sexual content and expression, however, is not limited to one particular genre, culture or group. Rather, the propagation of sexual content in media is global and created, produced, distributed, and appreciated by worldwide audiences. With particular emphasis on media in the United States, China, and India, this examination will illustrate the globalization and overall effects of sexual content in the marketplace noting the influence of technology.

Dissemination of sexual content and expression in the mass media for entertainment purposes is global and centuries old. "Mass-produced smutty text and pictures began to appear soon after Gutenberg's invention sparked the Protestant Reformation, in the early 16th century" (Roberts, 2006, p. 5). In 1874, a London pornographer was arrested for possessing 130,000 sexually-explicit photographs and later the 8 millimeter camera, which was invented after World War II, introduced home-made movies featuring sex scenes that began showing up in camera stores for rent or purchase. And had it not been for sexual content in interstate commerce in the 19th century there would have been no passage of the Postal Obscenity Statute enacted by Congress in 1873, at the urging of Post Office Inspector Anthony Comstock. The Comstock Act, named for the inspector, prohibited the mailing of any lewd, obscene, or lascivious matter, or any information or article related to contraception or abortion (Pember, 2008).

More recently, sexual content is created, distributed, produced and appreciated by worldwide audiences and has proven to be an extremely lucrative business. In fact, the growing markets for sex in the mass media seem limitless, as the adult entertainment sector continues to attract massive audiences and vast amounts of revenue. According to recent statistics, every second worldwide \$3,076 is spent on pornography; 28,258 Internet users view pornography; and 372 Internet users type adult search terms into search engines (Family Safe Media, 2009).

This examination specifically explores the use of pornographic media in the United States, China, and India, and reveals how consumer use of technology continues to grow at astounding rates in various markets as a consequence of this form of expression. This research also addresses how individuals are affected by the growth of pornography in mass supply.

### Sexual Content in Major Media Markets

According to Family Safe Media (2009), a reputable source for pornography statistics, in the United States alone more than \$13 billion was made from sexually explicit adult entertainment in 2006. The number one revenue producer was adult video sales and rentals, which totaled \$3.62 billion, followed by Internet pornography, which amassed \$2.84 billion. The third leading revenue-producing United States market of sexually explicit content was cable/pay-per-view/in-room/mobile and phone sex sales, which amounted to \$2.19 billion in 2006, an increase of more than 50% over the previous year. But as lucrative as the adult entertainment industry has proven to be here in the United States (14%/\$13.3 billion), it still ranked fourth in the world in revenues behind China (28%/\$27.4 billion), South Korea (27%/\$25.7 billion), and Japan (21%/\$20 billion). India was not ranked.

Additionally, Family Safe Media reports that the “pornography industry is larger than the revenues of the top technology companies combined: Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo!, Apple, Netflix and EarthLink...[and] U.S. porn revenue exceeds the combined revenues of ABC, CBS, and NBC” (2009, p. 2). Internet search engine requests using keywords: “porn,” “XXX,” and “sex” revealed Elmhurst, Illinois as the number one U.S. city with the highest average number of monthly visitors in all three categories. Louisville, Kentucky had the fourth and fifth highest average using the search terms sex and porn, respectively (Family Safe Media, 2009, p. 4). Just recently, the search term “free porn” returned 75, 100,000 Google “hits,” and the term “pay-per-view sex” found 326,000 “hits.” If one Google’s “sex,” 106,000,000 “hits” appear.

### Sexual Content and the First Amendment

Expressly, the term “pornography” does not appear in the United States Constitution and is often misused in its description of both protected and unprotected sexual material. “The term ‘indecent’ has only a narrow legal meaning and refers to sexual expression inappropriate for children on broadcast radio and television” (Trager et al., 2007, p. 384). However, the United States Supreme Court clearly defined “obscenity” in the landmark case *Miller v. California* (1973), which remains unchanged today. Briefly, the facts of the *Miller* case are as follows:

Marvin Miller sent brochures in a mass mailing to advertise four adult books and a film. The brochures included pictures, drawings, and text “very explicitly depicting men and women in groups of two or more engaging in a variety of sexual activities, with genitals often prominently displayed,” the Supreme Court said. Many of the brochures were mailed to people who had not requested the information. The manager of a Newport Beach, California restaurant opened the mail one morning with his mother standing at his side. Five of Miller’s brochures slipped out of an unmarked envelope for both to see. The manager called the police. A jury convicted Miller of violating a California statute that forbade knowingly distributing obscene materials. Miller appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Before the Court could decide

if Miller's brochures were obscene, it had to define obscenity. (Trager et al., 2007, p. 387)

The Supreme Court did not decide on Miller's guilt or innocence; it reviewed the constitutionality of the California statute and remanded the case. But prior to remanding the case to the lower court, the high court devised a three-part definition known as the *Miller* test to define obscenity. To find material obscene, the Court said the following must be considered:

- (1) Whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interests;
- (2) Whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and
- (3) Whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value (*Miller v. California*, 1973).

The Court said that, to find a work obscene, the government must prove each part of the test. Therefore, if it fails to meet all three parts, the work is not considered obscene and is protected by the First Amendment. The high Court rejected a plea for a uniform national standard to describe the terms "prurient interest" and "patently offensive." Rather, the Court held that these terms would instead be measured by contemporary community standards. What one community determines to be obscene, another community may not.

Although *Miller v. California* (1973) defined obscenity, because of the disparity in community standards it may be difficult to draw a line to determine protected and unprotected speech. Clearly, material that is obscene is not protected by the First Amendment, but some indecent material is protected. It is occasionally complex to compartmentalize adult entertainment into either category, particularly with the emergent global use on the Internet.

#### Sexual Content Across Cultures—China, India and the United States

According to comScore, a provider of global Internet consumer behavioral marketing information to companies around the world, the number of worldwide Internet users just passed the one billion mark. China (17.8% of users) surpassed the United States (16.2%) with the largest number of users while India (3.2%) ranked seventh (comScore, 2009).

The pornography industry has been at the forefront since the development of the Internet as it exploits a valuable media channel to its audience that is ripe for instant gratification. Even the industry knows there are two sides to its business—one, a legitimate depiction of sexual expression (indecent) and the other (obscene) with "women participating in pornography that seems violent, degrading, and intimidating" (Janning, 2002, p. 79). There is even debate within the industry of where to draw lines of acceptability.

Whatever the level of acceptability, sexual content in mass media continues to impact technology. The technologies initially adopted and developed by the adult entertainment industry were insufficient to keep up with demand. Camcorders, VHS, DVD, pay-per-view,

satellite movies, Internet and e-business all grew rapidly, financed by the pornography industry. Now mobile content is being used heavily by the industry as consumers want porn on the go (Arlidge, 2002). Pornography is a force that controls its own destiny, and as this examination shows, pornography and its consumers find their way to each other.

#### Sexual Content in China

China has a well-known reputation for policing the Internet and the “Chinese government broadened its recent effort to limit pornography on the Internet by criticizing 19 Internet companies by name...including the two market leaders in China, Google and Baidu” (Bradsher, 2009, p. 1). The State Council Information Office threatened the Web sites with “stern punishment” if they did not block and remove pornography from the Internet (Treble, 2009). China’s government appears to be ratcheting up the pressure against pornography as the Chinese government announced that its agencies are working “to purify the Internet’s cultural environment and protect the healthy development of minors” (Bradsher, 2009, p. 1).

The Chinese government has close oversight of Internet communications as the Congressional Executive Commission on China states publishers of any electronic content must first obtain government authorization. According to Article 6 of the Interim Provisions on the Administration of Internet Publishing (2002. 08. 01), “Engaging in Internet publishing activities may only be done through permission. No unit or individual may engage in Internet publishing activities without permission. No group or individual may interfere with, hinder or disrupt Internet publishing entities in engaging in Internet publishing activities in accordance with the law.” However, despite the Chinese government’s best efforts, sexual content remains plentiful on the Internet, including an abundance of pornography, and China is the frontrunner in worldwide pornography revenues (Family Safe Media, 2009).

#### Sexual Content in India

Although a democracy, India, much like China, tries to control pornography with its laws but experiences the same problems associated with the prevalence of pornography on the Internet. Like the United States Constitution, there is no express language relating specifically to pornography in Indian law, therefore the offense falls under obscenity in their penal codes.

Even the owner of a cyber café may be considered a facilitator in violation of obscenity under Indian law. This is a serious problem since 37% of India’s 45 million Internet users log on from Internet cafés. Obviously these public places would make the viewing of pornography quite different than surfing from the privacy of one’s own home.

From the Internet’s introduction in their country, the Indian government tried to control the communication channel. In the 1970s and 1980s, in response to economic crises the Indian government implemented a set of economic reforms. The realization that information and computing technologies (ICT) constitute a critical part of the economy of modern states was an important element of these reforms (Wolcott, 2005).

In 1995 the government totally controlled the Internet and the service was only available in a few major cities and the connection was very poor (Indax, 2000). Only one in 20 dial-ups

actually made connection and the users that established connection were frequently cut off. Even by 1998 only about 150,000 users had an Internet connection (Indax, 2000). But the lure of global information and the transactional power of the Internet was more than the government could control. At the same time, India's English-speaking work force attracted global companies that outsourced their data service to cheap Indian labor. This in turn caused the middle-class to grow rapidly and soon demand for the Internet was more than the government could stop.

Sleaze was widespread in India (Bansal, 2007) and the market was saturated with pornography. Also, people began to secretly film sex acts to sell (Padmanabhan, 2001); and hotels and private bedrooms became film studios oftentimes without the knowledge of the sex partners (Nanda, 2005). India rapidly became one of the world's largest consumers of pornography; however, statistics are unavailable to compare their usage with that of the United States and other nations (Nanda, 2005). India became so wild for pornography that the government decided to allow adult content on television at night. Harbaksh Singh Nanda writes:

To satiate the lusty feelings of the Indian viewers, the federal government has announced an autonomous content regulator that would regulate the downlinking norms, time slotting of adult films, music videos and advertisement norms. (2005, p. 1)

It is also interesting to note that some studies found that although men enjoyed their pornography, they thought their wives and daughters watched too much fictional television such as soap operas. Upon hearing the patriarch's complaint in a qualitative interview the women just smiled (McMillin, 2002).

The daughters have their own way of learning about sex through Western romance novels. The small paperback books (acquired in the back sections of local stores, small libraries, book sellers and private clubs) were easily concealed from the public (including their parents). The young women's behavior and reputation had to be protected, including the monitoring of movements, the clothes they wore, and leisure activities (Parameswaran, 2002).

#### Sexual Content in the United States

By far, the most open society discussed in this study dealing with sexual content in mass media across cultures belongs to the United States. Porn stars become so celebrated and renowned in the mass media that they become prominent enough to run for public office. Stormy Daniels of Louisiana, a prospective candidate and porn star said, "Politics can't be any dirtier of a job than the one I'm already in" (Callebs, 2009).

Does politics make strange bedfellows? Unfortunately, some people become so addicted to sex and pornography in the media that they require rehabilitation. As reported by CNN's Elizabeth Landau, "While sex can be healthy for a relationship, some people develop an addiction to porn, affairs, and other behaviors...Some recovering addicts join support groups

requiring that members only have sex with their partners, even prohibiting masturbation” (2008, p. 1).

The porn industry has become so brash and unabashed that it publicly asked for a \$5 billion economic bailout from the federal government (Brown, 2009). But because sex in the mass media is such a lucrative business, could it be that the government wants a part of the pornography action? Washington State Democratic Representative Mark Miloscia proposed an 18.5% sales tax on porn to fund social programs while attorneys for two strip clubs in the state argue against the constitutionality of the House Bill. Miloscia said, “[T]ax should be levied against *Playboy* and other adult magazines, as well as pornographic photographs, movies, videos, cable-television services, telephone services, audiotapes, computer programs and paraphernalia....For me, it is a no-brainer” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 1).

Although general criticism exists, the adult entertainment industry is mostly scrutinized for child pornography, which gets no constitutional protection. What one does in the privacy of one’s home is considered a protected right so long as it does not involve minors and does not inflict harm on others. But the protection of children is a more complex problem than it may seem on the surface. What do you protect children from and where are lines drawn? Brian Simpson argues that the social boundaries cannot be defined except through parental control, as follows:

The rationale for many groups that advocate greater controls over Internet content goes beyond the protection of children from the dangers of Cyberspace; the reasoning is also to construct a notion of the ideal family. Yet it is further argued that this construction of the Internet as dangerous and its content as harmful to children is inextricably intertwined with that broader objective of defining the ideal family, for—at least for some—that family is heterosexual, patriarchal and one in which children obey and respect their parents. There is no room here for alternative constructions of the family and in this regard the Internet does indeed represent a real danger to this worldview as it is difficult to control; but it provides highly accessible, space that offers many opportunities to discuss, challenge and transgress traditional boundaries with respect to family life. (2006, p. 17)

Many have suggested the filtering and blocking access for children as a viable alternative. If filtering would work then spam would be dead, but anyone that has an e-mail account knows spam finds a way to get through; and when junk mail filters are used, legitimate e-mails are sometimes captured unintentionally. Many argue that filtering out pornography for children turns the state into a censor that violates the First Amendment or reduces all content to what is deemed appropriate for children (Smith, 2000), having the effect of proscribing the rights of adults.

For men, pornography promotes male bonding as a social use in early adolescence but changes to private use as they grow older. Once a real-life relationship is started, men generally do not consider pornography as part of a healthy relationship. Men often worry that pornography may spoil their real relationship (Hardy, 1998), yet they visit pornography web sites at three times the rate of women—72% men to 28% women; moreover, every 39

minutes a new pornographic video is being created in the United States (Family Safe Media, 2009).

Studies show that feminism seemed to have made a strong impact on women's disdain for pornography, calling it harmful; however, most women did not advocate censorship of pornography except to protect their children (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). Young men used pornography for education about the female body and for sexual technique; yet, young women were ambivalent to pornography. It is also interesting that the mass media affects young people but sends mixed signals that sex is desirable but dangerous (Attwood, 2005). One topic often overlooked, because it is a taboo subject (Coopersmith, 1998), is the historical link between communication technology and pornography. Technology can help drive the popularity of pornography in society.

#### Sexual Content and Technical Determinism

Italian Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) made his living selling pornographic sonnets 50 years after the invention of the printing press (Allen, 2000). The printing press allowed Aretino to distribute his pornographic works faster than ever. Allen has concluded that the printing press and every communication device since then has helped spawn pornography. Throughout history, Allen argues that "Repeatedly, pornography has helped establish a new a market for new technologies. Then the mainstream follows" (2000, p. 1). To prove his point, Allen cites that when photography was first invented in 1826 (Harry Ranson Humanities, 2004), dirty pictures soon followed. When the 8 millimeter camera became popular after World War II, providing consumers with the ability to make home movies, camera stores began renting stag films. His observations are related to the concept of technical determinism.

Technical determinism argues that technology drives changes in society (Rogers, 2002). Improvements in the technical performance of the cassette tape, for example, forced society to adopt those devices over the 8-track tape and vinyl records, which were not portable and could only play music. With the cassette tape, one could record and play music, and one could carry it around (Theberge, 2001). Another example of technical determinism can be seen in how colleges and universities throughout the country are removing landline phones from dormitories, thereby saving money in a tight economy. Students are using cell phones, instead (Radzius, 2009).

Technical determinism is also the framework from which to study the link between new communication technology and global popularity of pornography. Consumers are hungry for digital cameras, digital camcorders, camera phones, digital editing suites for PCs, and Apple computers. They are also eager to build web sites and blogs so they can share digital stills and video on the Internet. For a few hundred dollars, anyone can buy a digital camera and set up a web site to produce, distribute and exchange pornography on a global scale, where professional and amateur producers and distributors of smut generate \$1 billion in yearly revenue (Thornburg & Lin, 2002). Coopersmith (1998) observed that were it not for the subject matter, pornography would be praised for its ability to diffuse and help society adopt new communications technology.

For a few hundred dollars, anyone can buy a digital camera and set up a web site to produce, distribute and exchange pornography on a global scale, where professional and amateur producers and distributors of smut generate \$1 billion in yearly revenue (Thornburg & Lin, 2002). While online adult pornography is one issue of concern, Western countries seem to be more concerned about the world-wide production and distribution of child pornography, on and off the Internet. Ministers representing the Group of Eight world powers, France, United States, Britain, Italy, Canada, Japan and Russia, condemned child pornography, and backed efforts for the creation of a blacklist of web sites containing child pornography (Final Declaration, 2009). The G8 also called for increased international cooperation among law enforcement authorities to crack down on the sexual abuse of children.

While technology drives pornography, the reverse is also true. As Roberts (2006) notes:

Porn has played an increasing role...as a driver of early consumer adoption of the VCR, desktop computers, DVDs, the Internet, Web hosting, e-commerce, viral marketing, online payment, digital rights management, broadband connectivity, cable, satellite and digital TV, Webcams and streaming video. (p. 1)

Rogers (2002) called this phenomenon social determinism, where society forces changes in technology. Pushers of pornography want the best technology so they can produce and distribute porn faster, cheaper, and easier. Another factor fostering the growth of pornography via the use of new communication is the anonymity that the Internet and these new devices provide porn consumers and producers, professional and nonprofessional. One can produce porn and place it on the Internet within the privacy of one's home without the neighbors knowing anything about what one is doing, as long as there is Internet access and a computer (Coopersmith, 1998).

The marriage of new communication technology and pornography continues to evolve, with no end in sight. One of the latest fads is the effort by wireless companies to provide adult entertainment (still pictures and video) on cell phones. As Arlidge (2002) noted: "Sex is the fastest-growing area of third-generation mobile telecommunications research and development" (p. 1).

#### Effects of Sexual Content in the Mass Media

The fact that sex sells "is scarcely a startling discovery. What is striking, however, is how analysts and executives are acknowledging—for the first time—how important it is when it comes to driving technological advance" (Arlidge, 2002, p. 1). So the question emerges: Did technology drive and influence pornography or vice versa? Whatever the case, it is the opinion of these authors that the effects of pornography in the mass media are immeasurable.

Children are exposed to pornography on the Internet as early as 8 years old (most while doing homework); those aged 7-17 freely give out home addresses on the Internet, and many young teens freely give out e-mail addresses (Family Safe Media, 2009). One researcher found that "The influence of exposure to media with sexual content on teenagers' sexual

activity differs for white and black youth, according to results of a longitudinal study of 1,017 middle school students in North Carolina” (Brown, Pardun, & Jackson, 2006). According to the study, the top quartile of white adolescents exposed to sexual content between the ages of 12-14 were 2.2 times more likely to have sexual relations during the ages of 14-16. Another study found that music lyrics prompted teens to have sex (DeNoon, 2006).

An evangelical leader, skeptical of survey findings of pornography usage in the mass media surveyed his own congregation and found that 60% had looked at porn within the past year, and 25% within the past 30 days (Morgan, 2008). Timothy Morgan further says:

Porn is gaining a stranglehold on mainstream American culture. One reason is the false message that porn viewing is harmless and socially acceptable for the sexually frustrated. One reason it is not harmless is the number of casual porn viewers who end up sexually addicted. The term sexual addiction is only 25 years old. But it describes the very real problem of extreme sexual behavior that is destructive to self and others. (p. 7)

Finally, with regard to the small screen, “there is no simple consensus on the nature or strength of the effects of viewing sexual television content, although a growing body of empirical research suggests that viewing sexual television content affects viewers’ behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes” (Taylor, 2005, p. 130) toward sexual addiction.

### Conclusion

This study has addressed the growth of sexual content in mass media and some of the global effects, particularly noting its widespread use in China, India and the United States. With continued innovations in technology and accessibility to more and more households, it seems that the adult entertainment industry will continue to flourish. Whether taxes will be levied on the industry to pay for programs or initiatives is yet to be seen; but from the looks of it, the industry has made significant profits and may be well positioned for taxation. Although the Internet appears to be a giant Pandora’s box for the Chinese government, many argue the Internet is nevertheless changing the social and political landscape of China for the good. China may have to loosen some of its oversight grip as some, including Taubman (1998), argue that non-democratic rule and the Internet cannot coexist. Whether China loosens its grip or India tightens its grip, indeed the Internet is “unwittingly ushering in an age of startling social change” (Barboza, 2006, p. C1). The United States is not the worldwide leader in revenues from pornography—China, South Korea, and Japan are the top three leaders; but the United States is the number one major producer of porn. And with Vivid Entertainment, Hustler, Playboy, Wicked Pictures and Red Light District leading the pack, it seems America is positioned for first place for quite some time. Whereas sexual content in the mass media is created, produced, distributed and appreciated by worldwide audiences, India remains one of the top pornography banning countries.

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