
PORN IS A BUSINESS MODEL

How the porn industry hacked our brains

Pornography is not a marketplace of free choices. It is an industry built to hack the brain's reward system, and the last fantasy it sells is that the user is the one in charge.

By Robert Jessel

Co-author of *Pornocracy*

“When I watch gay porn, I can tell by the ecstasy and love on the performers’ faces that they’re having a genuinely joyous experience.”

We were upstairs at the UnHerd cafe in Westminster, proposing the motion “This House believes all pornography is a threat to humanity”, and facing an uphill task. The initial vote showed a firm majority against. Jo and I would have to speak out of our skins to win them round. And then our opponent, the 74-year-old campaigner and former national treasure Peter Tatchell, rose to share his fantasy.

As the audience’s gasps and groans subsided, I replied icily: “It’s called acting, Peter,” before recounting how I put my own am-dram experience to use when I was a teenage rentboy.

We won the debate, but I wince at my hypocrisy, because I once indulged in the same self-soothing denial as Peter does today. Sure, when I masturbated to gay male porn, I never kidded myself that the ecstatic moans were any more real than the flimsy sets and tissue-thin plots. Instead, my fantasies were all about keeping the shame at bay. I told myself that unlike in heterosexual pornography there was no inherent power imbalance, and therefore the moral quandaries of consent and objectification somehow melted away.



The biggest lie of all, the one shared by everyone who uses pornography, isn't thinking that what we see on screen is real. It's the illusion that we who watch are in control.

The pathology of pornography

I still get the urge to use porn. Not often — maybe half a dozen times a year. It bubbles up when I'm anxious or run down, emotions that used to lead me to the laptop in darker times. The craving is over almost as soon as I notice it, because acting on it isn't an option. Not since I started researching *Pornocracy*.

Swearing off was easy. One motivation was the need for clean hands, so to speak, if I were to criticise the porn industry. But the prohibition didn't kill the desire. What did was diving into the books and articles for the chapter "How Porn Changed Our Brains". Within a week of swimming in neuroscience and addiction literature, I began to understand how the porn industry hacks the brain's reward system to keep its users hooked and coming back for more.

Porn is hardly unique in this regard. Only last month, whistleblowers at Meta and TikTok told the BBC that senior management pushed engineers to allow more "borderline" harmful content, including misogyny and conspiracy theories, as they battle for supremacy in the attention-span arms race.

Pornography has a crucial edge over these other forms of limbic capitalism: its ability to stimulate men's sex drive, stripped of its relational dimension. While there's no evolutionary need for lolcats or conspiracy videos, we're hardwired to seek sexual stimulation and, in certain contexts, novelty. It's called the Coolidge Effect, and — humans apart — it's most easily observable in rats. Put a male in a box with a female, and he'll shag himself to exhaustion. Pair him with a fresh partner and he'll immediately get his mojo back.

Human sexuality is much more complex than the rutting of rats, of course. It entwines itself in our most intimate relationships, and these in turn are the basis of society. As I said in my little speech at the launch of *Pornocracy*, the bedrock of a civilisation isn't laws. Beneath everything, there's love.

That's what pornography threatens. Because it's a "superstimulus" — an abundance and intensity not found in nature — it supplants men's real-life partners as the focus of our sexuality. Moreover, we cement our new 'relationship' every time we ejaculate to porn, thanks to the vasopressin and oxytocin we secrete. These neurotransmitters are meant to make us bond with our sexual partner. The more you direct your sexuality towards pornography, the likelier you are to fall in "love" with it.

That's why the sole goal of the porn industry is to keep us from closing the laptop. Its biggest fear is that users grow desensitised to what they watch, which explains the sheer volume, variety and extremity of online pornography. More variety means more arousal, longer looking at videos (and ads), and more likelihood of paying for premium content. That means subtly pointing him to something more extreme each time he visits.

Behind the scenes, engineers like Dylan Rice work hard to keep users from growing bored, nudging them towards new genres and even shifting their sexual orientation. Rice, a scriptwriter at Pornhub parent company Aylo, explains how it works:



“Push stuff that’s less accepted, like putting a trans male or a trans female in a scene... Test it out, see if you can get a bigger audience with it. See if you can convert somebody.”

DYLAN RICE, SCRIPTWRITER, AYLO (PORNHUB)

Then, when the algorithm notices your engagement with so-called “tranny porn” drops off, it might slip something with a bit more edge into your “suggested videos” — some brother-sister incest, say.

Rice and his colleagues are hacking the brain’s “seeking” drive, which provides a bigger stimulus for hunting a reward than it does for enjoying it. That’s why many users, presented with an inexhaustible array of scenarios, continue scrolling and searching long after the pleasure’s palled, their jaded sexual interest drawing them ineluctably towards the extreme.

This is the pathology of pornography: a universe where addicts are given the illusion of choice and control. At the most extreme end are the Gooners, who dedicate every waking second to the pursuit of permanent sexual arousal; for millions of others, it’s what turns a quick wank into a multi-hour pursuit of the perfect scene.

Jo was initially sceptical about including a chapter on neuroscience, because ‘addiction made me do it’ is a standard excuse for male violence against women. Yet the more we learned about porn’s effects on the brain, the more it explained its stranglehold on society.

Jo is brilliant at showing the ramifications in the wider world: how it sets our sexual scripts, wrecking relationships when men bring their porn-sex into the bedroom; how it can fuel gender dysphoria; how it turns ‘ordinary’ people into paedophiles, and drives the sexes further apart than ever. But I believe it all comes back to the brain’s reward system — and that’s where we find a glimmer of hope of a fightback against pornography’s almost total victory.

The pornsick generation

Pornhub is a household name, but it will soon seem as quaint as back numbers of *Razzle* and *Escort*. Right now, the next generation of pornography is coming on stream: a range of hitherto unimaginably immersive and realistic experiences, ranging from AR/VR that enables users to feel they're actually taking part in the scene, to parasocial platforms like OnlyFans which give the illusion of real relationships with performers. Then there's generative AI, with the ability to turn any innocent face pic into ultra-realistic pornographic videos – the degree of degradation limited only by the (ab)users' imagination.

These technologies are emerging just as we're beginning to understand the impact of free, on-demand tube sites. Aside from the havoc they'll unleash on users' reward centres, there's the downstream damage on sexuality and relationships. The risk to the future men of Generation Alpha is not that they will inflict their porn-written scripts on partners, but that they won't feel the need to have relationships at all.

This dystopia is described with almost admirable candour by David Levy in his 2007(!) book *Love and Sex with Robots*. Levy enthused over a future where masturbating into an animatronic doll would fulfil men's sexual needs without the 'baggage' of a relationship:

“You don't have to buy it endless drinks, take it to the movies or on vacation... it will expect nothing from you, no long-term (or even short-term) emotional returns... they provide all the benefits of a human female partner without any of the complications.”

DAVID LEVY, LOVE AND SEX WITH ROBOTS, 2007

Is there a better illustration of how technology travels at light speed while evolution moves at a bellycrawl? Just as Web 2.0 atomised us into increasingly exclusive bubbles, porn's future portends the irrevocable divorce of sex and love.

Or does it? It's easy to be defeatist in the face of its relentless advance, but the revolt against porn might come sooner than any of us expect. According to the UK's biggest ever survey of Generation Z's attitudes to pornography, 18–29-year-olds are starting to sicken of smut.

— GEN Z IS TURNING

1 in 3

admit feeling guilty
after watching porn

2 in 3

acknowledge it has
changed their
sexual tastes

1 in 4

say they "frequently"
need more extreme
content

THE UK'S LARGEST SURVEY OF GEN Z ATTITUDES TO PORNOGRAPHY, 18–29-YEAR-OLDS

At the end of *Pornocracy*, I suggest shame has a central role in defeating pornography's grip on society. Unlike drugs, porn has no discernible "hangover" — unless you accept that shame is a liminal signal telling us we're harming ourselves and those we love.

If Gen Z are starting to acknowledge they've lost control, it's cause for cautious hope; shame, meanwhile, is the first crack in the fantasy that we need to deny our responsibility for porn's realities.

For decades, feminists campaigned for men to acknowledge that pornography denies the basic humanity of performers. Depressingly, it may be men's self-interest that causes them finally to turn their back on it. Porn will wither when we realise that we've been manipulated all along; that porn uses us and not the other way around; and that an orgasm alone in front of the laptop is as superficial and meaningless as the smiles on the performers' faces.

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