

Putting Porn Studies (Back) Into Porn Literacy

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In June 2020, as part of its online safety provision, the New Zealand government released a one-minute film in which a naked couple arrive at a family home to tell a mother that her son Matt has been watching online porn. The astonished mother is joined by her son as the porn performers, Sue and Derek, outline the differences between porn and “real life.” Explaining that pornography is a performance and that the male star would “never act like that in real life,” they also suggest that porn stars “just get straight to it” because consent is an off-camera matter. Sue and Derek remind mum that it is important to talk to Matt because “he’s just a kid” and “might not know how relationships actually work.” As they leave, mum turns back into the house advising herself, “Okay Sandra, stay calm. You know what to do here.” The film has garnered more than 3 million views on YouTube and was approvingly re/tweeted as “brilliant,” “honest,” “funny,” providing a “perfect” promotion of “porn literacy and online safety.” The broad message, that parents should try to converse with their kids about porn and sex more generally, is welcome.

The advert joins a range of broadcast initiatives intended to tell “the truth” about pornography for young people. Telling the truth about porn could be considered the synopsis of myriad numbers of non-fiction documentary exposes, including those focussed on particular stars such as E!’s *Linda Lovelace* (2000); on



Figure 1.

Sue and Derek outline the differences between porn and “real life.” New Zealand government, “Keep It Real Online—Pornography,” internet safety PSA, 2020. www.keepitrealconline.govt.nz.

a specific film, for example *Debbie Does Dallas Uncovered* (2005); the labour-related specials such as *Hot Girls Wanted* (2015), *After Porn Ends* (2012) or *Hardcore* (2001). My focus here is on the aspects of porn literacy that underpin documentaries aimed at the youth market, such as Channel 4's *Porn on the Brain*, the BBC's *Porn: What's the Harm?* (2014) and, specifically, my example in what follows here, *Porn Laid Bare* (BBC 2017).

Porn Laid Bare (PLB) sent six young people with different attitudes to pornography

“to visit Spain to explore its sprawling adult film industry. Meeting producers, performers, whistleblowers and the police, the group immerse themselves in one of Europe's biggest pornography production hubs where they...confront ugly truths and complex dilemmas. They...discover who makes porn; how they make it; why they make it; and who makes the money. Can the group reconcile what they see with their own values and ethics?” (Goldbart 2019)

Produced by the Connected Set and distributed by Banijay Rights, the three-part documentary was sold into various territories including Italy, Estonia, Poland, Australia, Finland, Canada and Norway (Parker 2019). In this essay, I analyse aspects of this documentary series as a mainstream educational tool, in order to explore some of the limitations of current discussions of “porn literacy.” Porn literacy has been offered as a key means of lessening pornography's supposed harms to young people but, as I will go on to argue, there is little that is very literate in the proposed interventions. Not least because conceptions of porn literacy generally have little relation to the considerable and developing bodies of research and understanding emerging from a dedicated porn studies approach. Perhaps that is something porn scholars ought to be worried about.

Learn to Do Porn Literacy Like a Pro: *Porn Laid Bare*

In what follows I suggest that the narrative made available to viewers of *Porn Laid Bare* is a public form of porn literacy. Obviously a short documentary series cannot be expected to provide a properly educative experience, but television has long played a role as a private resource for education, nowhere more so than on the UK's public broadcaster. The BBC has a particular history of providing education, information and entertainment to its viewers (Nicholas 2014), and its online channel BBC3 (which commissioned and broadcast *Porn Laid Bare*) has particular remit “to bring younger audiences to high quality public service broadcasting” (BBC 2013, 1) and “to knowledge-building factual content by tackling relevant topics in ways that feel different, original and interesting to them” (4). In her book length study, Woods notes how far the image of British youth presented in Youth TV is “framed by a liberal humanist agenda and shaped by emotional engagement” seeking to “present social, political and health-based concerns outside of traditional educational spaces and without showing its institutional hand” (Woods 2016, 146).

That delicate balance is achieved by placing young people and their views at the centre of “emotion-led storytelling” while supplementing the entertainment

by further educational materials on the BBC's interactive online platforms. Drawing on the confessional and diary modes of "intimate, first-person storytelling" (Woods 2016; Dovey 2013) and with its punning title promising to lay bare both the truth of porn and the innocence of our investigators, it might be easy to dismiss *Porn Laid Bare* as just another instance of what Jane Arthurs labelled "docuporn" or "cheaply produced 'investigations' of sexuality" (2004, 94) which reproduce the exploitative elements being "investigated" while providing voyeuristic thrills. However, its intimate address to its target audience (16–34 year olds) viewed as in need of education means the series can be used to illustrate some of the inadequacies of current understandings of porn literacy, precisely because *PLB* is motivated by the same assumptions we see in policy interventions.

The Documentary

Porn Laid Bare follows BBC Three's tried and tested formula for "peer presenters" including three women in their early 20s: Anna describes herself as feminist and never watches porn for ethical and political reasons. Neelam (described as a Former Heavy User) confesses to overconsumption of porn which meant she experienced physical symptoms of addiction. She is also critical of the representation of minority ethnic groups in porn: "As a woman of colour, I feel like I've been fetishised in the porn industry." Nariece describes Pornhub as her "best friend" and is considering leveraging her amateur filming into a career as a porn performer. The young men comprise Ryan, identified as a Pornstar Superfan who has attended conventions and has met over 300 porn performers; Drew is described as a frequent porn user and enjoys the possibilities that porn offers for exploration of sexuality; Cameron is more ambivalent about his interests in porn—he has understood that porn "isn't really proper sex and [that he] shouldn't

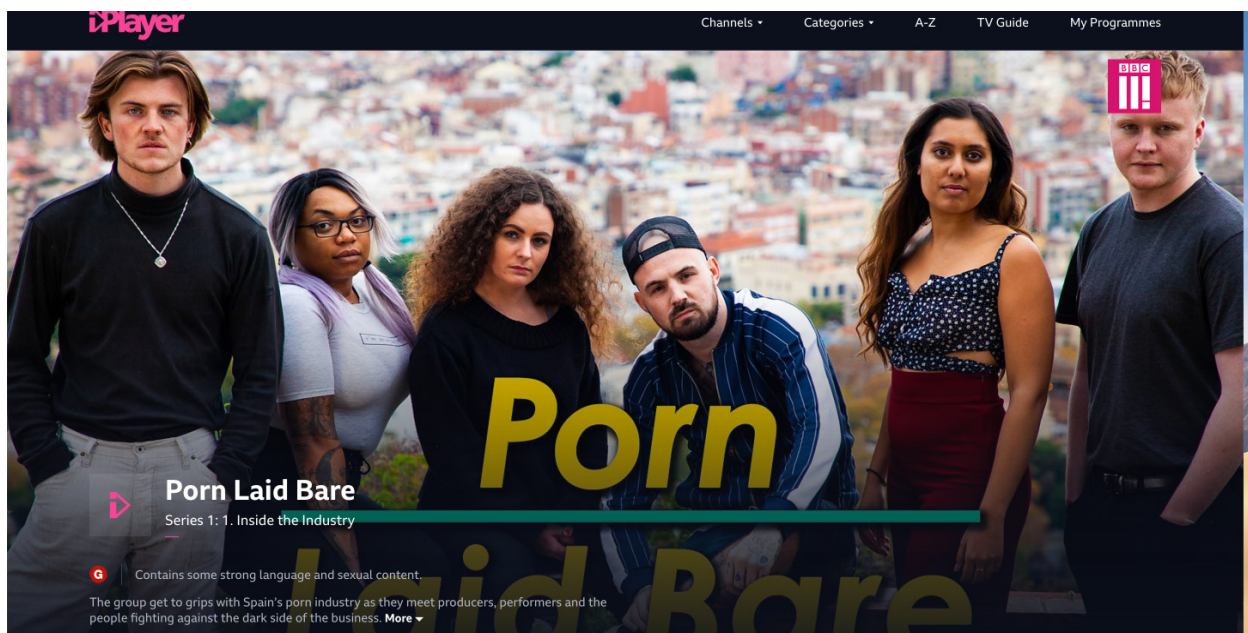


Figure 2.
Six go investigating in Spain, *Porn Laid Bare*.

use it to teach himself about sex”. Thus the six “ordinary” twenty-somethings, with their varied experiences, act as proxies for the BBC Three youth audience and as trusted peer advisors.

In the first episode, “Inside the Industry” the group visit a Cumlouder porn set; meet with a French porn producer and watch filming on a beach; they also visit a porn performer’s home; and, finally, debate the impact of pornography on real-life relationships with an academic. The second episode “Porn on the Brain” takes the group to meet a neuroscientist who tests their levels of arousal to pornography; some of them visit a surgeon to meet a young man having his penis enlarged to emulate the porn star “look”; while Drew and Cameron go to a gay porn set with director Macho Serge. Ryan talks with a psychologist about how porn has “conned him” and the others meet with a porn addict who has joined the No Fap movement. The final episode, “Is This the Future?”, sees the group sit in on a radio interview with feminist anti-porn campaigners. The campaigners introduce them to the Public Disgrace video series and so they return to some of the studios they’d visited previously to ask searching questions about the ethics of some productions. The group also meet Erika Lust to find out what is “ethical porn.” An academic tells them that pornography cannot be improved, but their experiences meeting with a couple, Eze and Jowy, who share videos of themselves on the internet, are described as “beautiful”. Finally, meeting producer Irina Vega, the group is invited to create their own film. Unwilling to participate in actually making a film, Anna proposes attending a march in Madrid to protest violence against women. The group of six amicably splits and just Drew, Ryan and Nariece take part in the porn production, while the others join the march. The episode ends in a series of to-camera explanations of each presenter’s individual sense of growth.

The presenters are, then, witnesses and investigators, off on an adventure in which they will also be investigated—finding out about each other but also about themselves. Positioned in this way as amateur investigators, dressed in their civvies and relating everything to their own experiences, the six are offered to the audience as “just like you,” they are the “guide from the side” rather than the “sage from the stage” (Gray and Bell 2013, 33). This is a strategy for enabling the sense of personal investment in the subject matter, which becomes ever more important as they learn about their own issues, understanding their own growth through examination of the apparent problem of porn. Yet there is little that is particularly new about the approach to understanding pornography underpinning the documentary’s narrative arc. While they engage with different producers whose work appears across analogue and digital platforms, there is little acknowledgement of how dynamic media landscapes have brought change to porn texts nor how that might impact porn consumers (cf. Jenkins 2004, 2). Moreover, the narrative is firmly invested in getting our intrepid reporters to recognizing only the problems of pornography—its bad lessons about sex, and its risks.

In documenting the “sprawling adult industry,” *PLB* introduces us to a number of stock figures, men as producers, women as “casualties”—even where we are



introduced to women who have other positions in porn production, there is little sense that their stories align with or alter the overall narrative of an industry beyond repair. Erika Lust is introduced with scare quotes around her ethical and feminist credentials, and she is asked if she can be trusted. The narrative effectively sidelines a significant number of its protagonists/interviewees in favour of the perception that porn is populated by male producers preying on individual nameless victims, which is amplified by a whistleblower's accounts of rescue. The gay porn set is recognized as "friendly" and the shibari demonstration in Eze and Jowy's home is "beautiful" because of its intimacy, but otherwise the motivations of the people they meet are hardly acknowledged. We see performers' professional work through blurred images of their sexual congress, but viewers are not invited to understand them as either belonging to networks of professionals, nor as possessed of ambition or motivation for their work. Each film set visited is presented as an event at which unrealistic content is being created, motivated only by an interest in capturing novelty for profit.

As an exercise in understanding the porn industry, the documentary series fails on almost every count. Indeed, from the off, it fails to explain what is meant by "The Porn Industry," compounded as the show progresses to the reduction of *all* pornography as a mode of production and body of texts with a singular political attitude. To illustrate this more concretely, episode one introduced viewers to Rob Diesel at Cumlouder studios—the group really like Rob, responding very positively to everything he has to say about wanting to foster intimacy with his partners in a scene, appreciating his warmth and friendliness, and later joining in enthusiastically on the fringes of the shoot. But in a later episode, they are

Figure 3.
Having fun on the Cumlouder porn set.



horrified to learn that Rob's filmography includes scenes shot for the online website Public Disgrace. Two campaigners show Anna, Cameron and Neelam scenes filmed in Madrid's famous Puerta del Sol and Plaza de España in which Rob humiliates his shooting partner as part of, or as a precursor to, sex-in-public. One of the campaigners gesticulates to the families using the square and remarks upon the romance of the setting, then asks the young people "do you think that is right [to film/have sex] in a public space?" Gesturing back to the mobile phone on which the video is playing, she then asks "is this sex?" The guys are in agreement it is not. When they later return to question Rob about his role in the videos, his justifications are silenced by Anna's insistence that *she* would never ever want to be treated like that. If Rob had a riposte, it doesn't make the final cut of the documentary. The point has been made...this is a business populated by tricksters.

Yet what do we actually learn about the content Rob is producing or starring in? There is evidently no need to ask Rob about the storied dynamics of the Public Disgrace scenes, because, as has been made clear throughout the documentary, porn has no storyline, no intent to tell a wider narrative. Focusing on the presenters' visceral responses—the stock in trade of reality TV—their disappointment and disgust in discovering that nice Rob participates in not-nice filming is all that seems to matter here. The juxtaposition of the "bad sex" with families and the romantic setting is then just a matter of our presenters recognising the moral/ethical failings of Public Disgrace. *PLB* certainly isn't interested in any kind of exploration of the ways in which Public Disgrace might be a meditation on shame or punishment, nor how its narratives might be complexly gendered. A more critically invested

Figure 4.
Discovering Rob isn't as nice as he seemed.

investigation of Public Disgrace—a long running series produced by the team at Kink.com, trading in the erotics of humiliation and shame—might reveal the politics and histories of the sequestration of sex to the private sphere and their role in fomenting stigma that in turn have produced the models of “degradation,” that then translate into illicit pleasures that can be filmed. And, for all the show’s claims to conduct a deep dive into the industry, there is seemingly no interest in why a US-based production house is filming in Spain. It is through these lacunae that the documentary offers a narrative of continuity between different kinds of productions, to illustrate that all porn production tends towards the grand scheme of “The Porn Industry.”

“The Porn Industry” is of course a selective fiction with no history—its invocation is always accompanied by “key figures” (the Porn Star, the Pornographer) chosen opportunistically, activities selected without regard to establishing typicality or representativeness nor with any particular indication of their objective significance to specific cultures or practices of porn production or consumption. In these modes of uncovering, learning about pornography is dependent on forms of sloppy revelation and amateur exploration of what is a very complex phenomenon. This personalised approach, involving young people visiting workspaces, offers no possibility for an active confrontation of sexual politics and practice. Instead we see that apparently agentless force—“The Porn Industry”—at work, with no sense of the individual or collective struggles over sex that pornography, as text, practice, and the individuals who work within it, has contributed to.

Let’s examine briefly the location for laying porn bare. Spain has been chosen—according to the opening titles of the documentary—because it is a porn production hub. Apparently, in this ‘deep dive’, that is all viewers need to know. Yet there is, of course, a broader and more interesting story which could be told. In Franco’s Spain (1936–1975) porn was illegal. Censorship was relaxed after the dictator’s death, and nudity and sex became ubiquitous in the nation’s cinema. As Daniel Kowalsky reminds us, sexual scenes are so entangled in historical, political and social issues such that nudity and sex “reveal what was always simmering under the surface of *Franquista* repression” (2005, 194) contrasting “sex-in-the-sun breeziness” with “the darker side of sexual obsession, jealousy and dysfunction” (200), and playing “a significant role in the sexual catharsis of a society just released from forty years of dictatorship.” (203) The introduction of the X rating in 1983 saw the further development of pornographic production. And since then, Spain has been central to the development of an alternative pornographic sensibility, even constituting a tradition of production—post-porn,¹ which has attempted to rework pornography in order to de-naturalise sex, “de-centre the spectator” while recognising media and technology as inseparable from sex (Gregory and Lorange 2018, 137). Two key names in the Spanish post-porn movement, Diana Torres and Itziar Ziga, are members of a broader queer trans-feminist movement who emphasise the breaking of public/private boundaries through explicit performance (see Torres’s 2011 manifesto *Pornoterrorismo*). I am not suggesting that all production occurring in Spain has connection to the post-

porn movement but, like the history of fascist censorship and its relaxation, post-porn is a backdrop to the activities examined in *Porn Laid Bare*.

Moreover, there are important questions to ask about Spain's attractiveness to the Swedish Private Media Group, and to British porno-emigres who sought refuge from the UK's tighter laws on production and distribution (Voss 2015). These do have links to the ways in which both Barcelona and Madrid were centres of struggle over sexuality, sexual freedoms and expression. None of this is worthy of inclusion in *PLB*'s deep dive. For *PLB*, people working in porn are simply ciphers—tourist attractions to be gawped at. Who cares what they might want to say about sex and politics, porn production or its audiences? As *PLB*'s story builds to a climax, stories of prostitution and sex trafficking are introduced, a policeman offers anecdotes of “losing the fight” against the pornographers, and thus is the State cast in the role of benign arbiter of what constitutes good sex and good sexual practice.

Are You Sure You Want To Do This?

In a further set of scenes, three of the group travel at night to meet with Torbe—the self-proclaimed “King of Spanish porn”—and to view his porn studio. Torbe shows them around, explaining the intricacies of *bukkake*, demonstrating the glory-hole, then inviting them to view the filming of a gang bang. These scenes most clearly display the voyeuristic impulses of *PLB*, as viewers are treated to a montage of short clips of the naked lower halves of various men, men in balaklavas and masks, milling around in the studio space as they wait for the young woman who will be at the centre of their gang bang. These are also the scenes where



Figure 5.
“You say you’re okay...”

the programme's reductive stance on "understanding pornography" through the emotional responses of the presenters becomes most problematic. Anna speaks to camera to tell us that the men are getting impatient, while Ryan and Cameron pace about exclaiming how horrible the space is, that there is cum everywhere—their disgust is palpable, and I invite you to reflect on the usefulness of that emotion for cueing appropriate audience responses.

Eventually the female performer appears—the presenters ask her how old she is, how has she gotten into this, how long has she been making pornography. Anna asks her directly "Are you sure you want to do this?...Are you absolutely sure?" The young woman assures them she is fine and the gangbang proceeds: long-shots of the action are intercut with close ups on our presenters, recording their emotions as they view. Ryan and Cameron comment that the gang "Doesn't look fun" and that this "is not the environment for a 19-year-old." As time passes Anna makes an intervention, she asks to see the young woman's documentation and she voices her concern that the actress is scared.

Torbe interrupts shooting. The actress says, "Don't bother us with this nonsense" and asserts direct to the documentary camera "I like it!" Then she and Anna have a conversation:

Anna: It's just um...

Actress: It's okay. I like it.

Anna: You say you're okay but I'm just worried that maybe...as a young woman, I'm just worried that em...when we leave you're here and you're the only woman and there's all these men and I'm just worried about you.



Figure 6.
"I'm really worried."

Actress: No, it's okay.

Anna: Is it?

Actress: Yeah! No worry! Don't worry for me!

Anna begins to cry.

Actress: What's up? [Putting her arms around Anna] What's up? No. Don't cry. It's okay. Don't worry.

As she returns to the gangbang, the actress tells the waiting men that "She is worried about me." The documentary camera cuts back to Anna's tearful face and in this way, Anna becomes the drama. I am sure Anna's empathy and her worries at the time of filming were genuine, but in the context of the documentary and its place in that narrative, her solicitude becomes performative, and her tears become the show. As the boys also begin to cry, viewers are offered what Jon Dovey has termed "embodied intimacy" (2000, 57) and to feel their empowering journeys towards the cognitive goal of seeing porn differently, and the behavioral goal of watching less.

As is all too standard in this kind of documentary, the porn performers' words and perspectives are rendered secondary to the hurt felt by those who are observing on viewers' behalf. Torbe's filmset may well be exploitative but these scenes bring their own exploitation of the young Russian woman. As Claire Potter observes, the realities of porn labour are generally rendered invisible: "work on porn sets is usually self-regulated, nonunionized, and without benefits or enforceable industry standards for wages and intellectual property" (Potter 2016, 113). Such a combination of invisibility and opaqueness facilitates exploitative practices while the stigma connected to porn work "makes it difficult for people who are exploited to speak up" (113). There is no doubt that *PLB* allows some performers and producers to speak on their own behalf, but the ways their scenes are presented feeds the stigmatization of both porn labour and the labourers of porn. As Anna, Cameron and Ryan leave Madrid, talking of their "horrific" experience, viewers are left in no doubt that the gangbang scenes are to be read as an investigative exposé of "The Porn Industry"—the dark heart has been revealed. Shot from the presenters' point of view, our view of the young actress is an objectifying one and, even as she speaks and refuses their rescue, she remains an object of pity and concern.

This exploration needs to end here although there is certainly more I could have drawn attention to: how the "educational journey" narrative (re)produces homeostatic paradigms of male vs female sexuality, and particularly good vs bad girls, while at the same time claiming to be progressive and inclusive; or how "experts" and statistics are used to give a veneer of evidence. But I think I have probably said enough about *Porn Laid Bare*, its disposition and outlook, to give context to the final section of this essay in which I turn to the idea of porn literacy and its uncomfortable negotiations of changing mores and resistance to that change.

Porn Literacy—What Does Porn Studies Have To Do With It?

Albury (2014, 173) identifies two quite distinct discourses of pornography and learning. First, there is “pedagogy about pornography” (critical media literacy skills) and second, “porn as pedagogy” (what pornography teaches about sex and sexuality). The first is problematic because while it encourages young people to critically reflect on porn messages, it does nothing to address why pornography might be exciting or thrilling to consumers, nor does it challenge the heteronormative or gendered elements of sexual cultures (youth or adult) (Albury 2014; Hancock and Barker 2018). And the second highlights that “while many commentators and scholars have acknowledged the educational qualities of pornography, there is no universal consensus as to *what* porn teaches its consumers and *how* it works as an educator” (Albury 2014, 172).

I want to first address that second role—porn as teacher. That pornography offers information to young people is widely accepted (Horvath et al. 2013; Wright et al. 2018), even as debate about the desirability of such information is heated. How far pornography influences the development of young people’s interests in, beliefs about and values towards sex, gender and sexuality is not so well understood (Brown and L’Engle 2009; Byron 2008; Smith 2013; Ybarra, Strasburger and Mitchell 2014). This shouldn’t come as a shock given that, despite the headlines, we have little to no real data about young peoples’ consumption of sexually explicit materials.² While there have been numerous large scale population surveys of young people regarding their use of online environments (for example the UK’s Information Commissioner’s Office/Ofcom report in 2020 and EU Kids Online 2020 are useful explorations of young people’s experiences online), their surveys of young people’s experiences of pornography and what they might acquire from those experiences are not definitive. We also have little robust data on the accessibility and impacts of high-quality sex education. In this context it is difficult to know precisely what young people are learning about sex and from whom.

Research conducted with Irish 18–24 year-olds by Dawson et al. (2019b) found no direct relationship between using pornography as a source of sexual information and satisfaction with school-based sex education or learning about sex. Instead, they found participants dissatisfied with the sex education they were offered; other research in educational settings has also found that sex education as currently taught often fails to enable young peoples’ interrogations and appreciation of intimacies, consent, communication and pleasure regarding not only pornography but also their own experiences of intimate relationships (Fields 2008; Gilbert 2014; Moran 2000). There are numerous practical objections to offering frank sex education for young people and a variety of legal and ethical as well as practical reasons for avoiding discussion about young people’s engagements with pornography (Goldstein 2020; Hancock and Barker 2018; Allen 2011).

Yet the landscape for young people is changing fast—technological developments have changed the ways individuals communicate and connect, as well as new opportunities for intimate practices using technologies. Sex is

increasingly mediated (Plummer 2008, 10) and engaging with porn, whether professionally/amateur or self-produced, takes place as part of a broader set of shifting online practices. No longer identifiable as an entirely separate practice, engaging with porn can encompass a wide range of activities, not just viewing but also producing, sharing, broadcasting and starring in intimate content (Attwood et al 2018; McKee 2016; Tiidenberg & Van der Nagel 2020; Tziallas 2016). Although the pleasures of porn are often considered obvious, audience research indicates that engaging with pornography can be about more than just wanting to get off, young people look to sexually explicit content to communicate about sex and relationships; searching for information and advice; creating, accessing and circulating sexual content online, through social media and through apps; and through each of these exploring their own interests, emotional, physical and sexual (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson 2010; Mulholland 2015; Smith et al. 2015; Attwood et al. 2018).

While young people regard pornography as socially accepted and part of everyday life, (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson 2010; Mulholland 2015) politicians seem to prefer the kinds of inquiry where sexualised imagery and particularly pornography are described as having an inordinate amount of power over young people,³ and in which the youth exposed to such images become products of the environment rather than understood to be actively choosing or rejecting pornography. Evidence to support these concerns is limited, largely based on quantitative studies using cross sectional data which may show a correlation between certain practices and other characteristics or outcomes (see Peter and Valkenberg 2016), but are not able to establish a causal link (or if there were a causal link, its direction) (Orben and Przybylski 2019; Marston 2018). As well as calling for further legal regulation and control of sexualised media, educational interventions are being suggested, particularly forms of porn literacy.

What Is Porn Literacy?

The quite detailed and comparatively measured report from New Zealand's Office of Film and Literature Classification 2018 suggests more research and forms of literacy or awareness education for young people, noting that "[such] programmes teach young people to critically analyse porn as part of a broader programme tackling consent, relationships and sexual violence prevention." (2018, 58) While calls for critical pedagogy around pornography are presented as entirely practical and necessary there is little real sense of what such porn literacy might *actually* entail. The most recent UK Government guidance for teachers offers the following advice for schools with regards to pornography:

Schools should...cover the following content by the end of secondary: pupils should know that specifically sexually explicit material e.g. pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners. (2019, 28)

That one brief paragraph in a fifty-page document offers the UK's Department for Education's understanding of porn literacy, as if the lessons to be learned *hardly*

need to be spelled out because they are so obvious. As is implied in the guidance above, porn literacy is most often imagined as a form of inoculation—success defined in terms of pupils’ abilities to apply knowledge about what is “real” and what is “fake”; the critical pedagogy predicated on the kinds of research that emphasises “first exposure,” “heavy” consumption levels, “attitudes,” “expectations,” rising rates of depression, failed relationships and difficulties maintaining proper bodily function (Crabbe and Flood 2021; Rothman et al. 2020; Rothman et al. 2018). While some commentators see porn literacy as a “subset of media literacy,” there is rarely any suggestion that porn literacy will include consideration of the ways pornography is a form of media, with its own aesthetics, performance-styles or storytelling.

While some sex education programmes include sessions on pornography, it is unlikely that any school will wish to study sexually explicit materials in depth. Online, more and resources are being made available—some are not bad, some are extremely poor. In the weakest of those programmes, literacy is offered through a combat approach—the need to fight the new drug or to rewire the brain. Alongside the intentions to get kids off pornography, there are some programmes which seek more cognitive outcomes, producing “better consumers of porn”—a more activist consumer position, where they might recognise “ethical,” “fairtrade” or “non-sexist” pornography, able to recognise more appropriate content, and to critique elements of “The Industry” (see the reporting in Jones 2018).

Interestingly, we have been here before (at least in the UK). For some time, media literacy has been declared an important counter to “bad” media messages (whether in mainstream media, videogames or, more recently, fake news), but as David Buckingham has pointed out, such literacy is “more of a rhetorical gesture than a concrete commitment.” (2019, 20) Indeed as the UK government presses forward with its Online Harms agenda, media literacy has been eroded such that it now mainly confined to teaching online safety than exploring and understanding media. And porn literacy shows every sign of taking the same route. Which brings me back to the title of this paper to ask how it has been possible to advocate for porn literacy without recourse to the growing body of work that approaches pornography as a complex media form?

I can’t actually answer that question here! But as I hope I have shown in the exploration of *Porn Laid Bare*, young people learning about pornography is envisaged as a particular kind of learning. And it is not one in which young people are expected to engage in debate, discussion or significant analysis. Instead they are expected to learn a form of public health message which is offered as self-evident and simple, which sees pornography as a text to be transparently interpreted such that the aims and objectives of porn literacy can be achieved in getting students to answer whether what they see in porn is real or not, to confirm they perceive its exaggerations (not all men have big dicks and tits come in all sizes, big and small) and that they’ve understood porn is not a great way to make money. In seeking rejection of porn, or at least awareness that it isn’t realistic, young people are supposedly evidencing critical thinking. Perhaps most striking about some calls for porn literacy are the way they *close down* explorations and

explanations, needing nothing more to be said.

In phrases common to porn literacy presentations—for example, “remember, watching porn isn’t inherently shameful” or “porn changes attitudes towards women”—we see compressed claims whose steps are not specified. People rarely feel the need to add “because...”—the point they are making is to them self-evident. Yet these do in fact need spelling out, not just (but certainly particularly) for young people, because the messaging is confusing. If watching porn isn’t inherently shameful why are kids told that the first issue about pornography is its illegality, or that it has negative impacts? There is a broader and wider set of issues at stake here: adding in a range of comparisons such as “porn sex isn’t real sex” or attempting to distinguish between “true desire and fantasy,” pointing out that ordinary men have smaller penises or that vulvas come in different sizes speaks to sets of concerns that remain unspoken. One is a sort of universal principle: “that all representations are untrue...”. A variant on this hints at porn’s uniquely deceptive characteristics: “young people can’t see beyond the excitements of porn...”. Third, that actions might follow from their naïve engagement with pornography: “they’ll believe this is the way to behave...”; “that they will try out...”, or that “they will fail to establish good, lasting relationships...”. That last points to a longer, overall failure of proper emotional and sexual development because indeed, porn literacy depends quite heavily on the sexual hierarchy of the monogamous relationship (Rubin 1983).

And these are significant and political issues. “Is that real sex?” is a political question—the boundary marking and definition(s) of real sex vs porn sex are purposed towards shaping what young people *ought* to think about sex, not how young people actually *are* in relation to sex; the teaching here is a struggle to control young people and their perceptions of the world. What is the “real sex” that young people are encouraged to assess porn sex against? If sex isn’t meant to be like it is in porn, is that a comment on the raw unpleasantness of sex outside of “properly intimate” relationships, or a condemnation of pornography for including it? Is it a comment on the unlikeliness of pleasure in sex? Or of enthusiasm? What story is being told about “real sex”? It can vary, and there doesn’t seem to be any immediate discursive clues to distinguish them—because of the closure effect of reference to reality—sex is just not like porn.

Literacy programmes are intended to build resistance to influence, to empower young people, to instil responsibility, but are not intended to recognise young peoples’ interests in knowing about sex, or that young people might themselves have experiences and knowledges of pornography that contradict anticipated learning outcomes. Young people are not invited to discuss what must surely be shared practices of pleasure seeking, or to articulate how they might find representations of sex and sexuality as in any sense creative or meaningful beyond messages (McKee 2016). In the UK guidance quoted above there is no sense that there may be any positive impacts or engagements with pornography, instead skills can be measured in how far there is recognition of distortion, damage, and negative behaviours. Exploring what young people are seeking, what they find arousing or pleasurable might reveal how sexual subjectivities

develop and whether/how pornography might act as a resource for framing and articulating subjectivities. Goldstein has suggested that “critical media literacy” is unlikely to get to grips with the complexities and social contingencies of young people’s engagements with pornography (Goldstein 2020), nor is it likely to deliver the “protection of innocence” so desired by anti-porn campaigners. It is not enough to know *what* young people might be viewing, we need to understand the complexities of their developing understandings of sexual subjectivities, particularly but not exclusively in relation to gender, and recognising how the taken-for-granted heteronormativity of public discussions of sex education plays significant role in both the stories about pornography and the stories it tells (Goldstein 2020).

What Could Porn Studies Contribute?

How pornography is named and described is crucial—we have ample proof that it is difficult to move beyond the harms paradigm, worries about unhealthy sexual attitudes or of porn addiction which dominate the headlines. Yet studies of the social and cultural significance of pornography are hardly new. Theories of media representation, production and consumption have all been deployed to analyse and contextualize pornographies in relation to other media genres (Albury 2009; Attwood 2017; Barcan 2002; Jones 2020; McKee 2016), forms and aesthetics (essays in Kerr & Hines 2012; Mercer 2017a, 2017b; Powell 2019; Tiidenberg and Paasonen 2019), exploring production histories (Carter 2018; Newton and Stanfill 2020; Strub 2019), interests among different sexual communities/orientations (Asman 2020; Gilbert 2020; Neville 2018; Robards 2018; Waling et al 2020), and in relation to cultural regulation (Freibert 2019; Stardust 2014) and value (Barker 2014; Ding 2020; Vörös 2015). Porn studies have found that porn is indeed often formulaic, sometimes ritualistic; its characters, events, locations, actions, interactions are often repetitious (Maina and Zecca 2016; Mercer 2017; Williams 1989; Zecca 2017) but recognising that also means recognising the insider knowledge possessed by those who consume porn. It also points to various tastes in pornography, how and why do individuals like different forms of porn: what are they looking for, what conventions speak to their interests? What sparks pleasure, what sparks excitement in viewing, what sparks disgust, or boredom.

The digital age also means being cognisant of the changing ways in which pornography is encountered. While groups like Exodus Cry identify Pornhub as the major source of pornographic content, it is also clear that pornography exists in other spaces and in various forms (Brennan 2018; Hester et al. 2015; Keen 2016; Saunders 2019; Tziallas 2016). How are consumers targeted in different spaces? How often are they watching content that is generated by users? In which case, what are the meanings and pleasures being generated in digital user-generated productions (TikTok, GIFs, etc.)? With the increasing importance of sites such as OnlyFans, and the forms of intimacy they offer, it is useful to consider how conceptions of authenticity/realness etc. circulate in mainstream media cultures as well as pornography. Examinations of the “infrastructures of intimacy” (Paasonen 2018) afforded by digital/mobile technologies are at the centre of

debates about “de-platforming” of sex in academia (Tiidenberg and Van der Nagel 2020), the media (Dickson 2021; Holmes 2021), as well as those communities of sex workers, artists and activists directly affected (Blogger on Pole 2020). “Deplatforming” is not just about sex (for instance, Twitter’s recent deplatforming of Donald Trump) but has been deployed against sex (as practice, as pleasure, and as work) by conservative campaigners. Young people certainly need to acquire and develop critical understanding about how pornography might work, but this is no different to their need for critical understanding of all activities online.

Of course it is difficult to bring pornography into the classroom (Allen 2006), particularly as young people are not legally permitted to view porn (Albury 2014) but there are other means by which the significances of adult material can be explored. For instance, young people could be invited to think about the contexts of sexual representation, recognising that pornography is not a separate sphere of representation but belongs to a continuum of image-making in which bodies and movement, sexual feeling and dramas of desire are performed (Arthurs 2004; Attwood 2017). They could be encouraged to explore how pornography is defined, represented and debated in public spaces, and by whom? (Cole 2014; Jones 2016; Needham 2018; Paasonen et al. 2019) What kinds of regulation are promoted and who might benefit from that, who might not? (Nair 2010; Petley 2014; 2016; Pilpets and Paasonen 2020; Stardust 2014; Tiidenberg and Van Der Nagel 2020) How might existing audience research illuminate the significance of sexual representations in everyday life (Asman 2020; Attwood et al. 2018; Macleod 2020; Scarcelli 2015; Smith et al. 2015) and what conversations might such work spark for young people regarding their own interests? Getting students to think about the controversies ignited around some forms of representation over others, and how those play into particular political and cultural worries in order to challenge assumptions about content, contexts, working practices, etc. Media studies has long asked difficult questions about working practices in the creative industries but does so without homogenising entire areas of production as all tended towards a singular outcome, similar engagements with the production contexts of pornography might be usefully attempted (Berg 2016, 2021).

Young peoples’ interests in pornography (indeed everyone’s interests in porn), their attitudes and habits of use are developed outside of educational settings. The kinds of education that focus on abstinence from porn or on rejecting its enjoyment are unlikely to impact on anyone already engaged in viewing porn. Understanding pornography—as texts and as practices—is a dynamic process (whether you are a researcher or a teen encountering sexually explicit imagery for the first time), reducing it to “facts” to be learned is not at all helpful, except to fuelling the stigma already so well entrenched in culture. Indeed, research by Dawson et al. suggests that young people want porn literacy interventions to “center on reducing shame” (2019c, 10)—not increase it!

Porn literacy requires understanding how pornography relates to mainstream culture, gender and sexual politics, recognising industry practices, histories, aesthetics, performance styles are neither unitary nor transparent. Creating educational resources will require reflexive and ethical approaches which

crucially engage with a broad range of experiences from within porn production. Engaging with audiences or consumers of porn requires recognising that we are not simply determining the effects of their consumption—literacy is not about simply seeking evidence or signs that audiences of porn have been only adversely affected by what they have seen. Calls for education about pornography based on those concerns should be avoided—porn literacy will not deliver self-regulation, it won't lessen the appeal of porn as fun, disgusting, escape or as a form of sex education. It won't deliver better attitudes towards women, or see a decrease in anal sex, it won't lessen the incidence of rape or violence against women. Porn literacy needs to be conceived of as more than a behaviour modification therapy. The task will be difficult and complicated, young people need to understand their own interests in sexual representations, how those interests and representations knock up against other orientations and motivations, and how representations of sex circulate within the wider spheres of entertainments. We need to give young people the tools to think more complexly about the experiences, practices, codings (and moral codes) of mediated sex, on-and offline, and how they, themselves, participate in those spaces.

Notes

1. The post-porn movement originated in the USA during the mid-1980s and has been particularly active in Europe throughout the 1990s and 2010s. See Tim Stutgen, ed. (2010). *Post/Porn/Politics*. Berlin: B books.
2. One project estimated that as much as 83–100% of male and 45% to 80% of female adolescents' have viewed pornography—although frequency of viewing could vary from only once ever, to daily (Horvath et al. 2013); while another found that 71% of male and 40% of female adolescents had seen some form of pornography (Valkenburg and Peters 2006). The problem is that we haven't actually learned very much in either of those—how many view daily? How many have only ever encountered pornography once? Did they make conscious decisions not to engage again? What are the forms of porn these teens have seen?
3. The preferred mode of research for policymakers seems to be the Rapid Evidence Assessment. At least twenty such reviews of the extant literature on young people and media have been undertaken in the past fifteen years, considering topics including pornography and sexual content, sexualisation, and commercialisation (see APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls 2007; Bailey 2011 [and the critique in Barker and Duschinsky 2012]; Papadopoulos 2010; Horvath et al. 2013; Buckingham et al. 2010; Livingstone and Mason 2015). These are areas in which values often drive the research agenda and it matters very much for whom and why the review has been commissioned.

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