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FORUM



A new diagnosis for old fears? Pathologizing porn in contemporary US discourse

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Pathologizing sex is anything but a novelty in the West. Since the nineteenth century, fostered by the rise of psychology, various forms of sexual behaviour or development – such as hypersexuality, homosexuality, or intersexuality – have at some point been diagnosed and treated as medical conditions; later officially classified as disorders in the *International Classification of Diseases* and/or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Therefore, it hardly comes as a surprise, but rather seems a logical continuation, that pornography is now also being framed as a public health issue: warnings of ‘porn addiction’ or the ‘porn epidemic’ are all over the media, and throughout the past year several US states have passed resolutions that officially declare porn ‘a public health hazard’.

In many ways, the current pathologization of porn parallels earlier instances of the medicalization of sexualities, first and foremost in its attempt to present moral judgement as scientific fact. In April 2016, the *Washington Post* ran an article by anti-pornography activist Gail Dines titled ‘Is Porn Immoral? That Doesn’t Matter: It’s a Public Health Crisis’ (2016). This headline is indicative of how mainstream discourse suggests that understanding porn as a pathology is not in fact a moral assessment – and that as such, it goes beyond the so-called ‘porn wars’ debate, which appears to be locked in a stalemate. Obviously this is misleading, since deciding who is ‘healthy’ always entails defining what is ‘normal’ and so constitutes an ideological process. On a temporal axis, the discourse surrounding porn follows the typical pattern of sin–crime–disease that has already been observed with regards to the framing of, for example, homosexuality (Conrad and Schneider 1992, 172). Whether put in moral, legal, or medical terms, however, it remains a designation of deviance that still carries with it the normativity of a former understanding as sinful. The language of behavioural health can never be an entirely neutral one: through marking certain kinds of behaviour as ‘sick’, medical authorities, no different from the church or the law, execute a form of social control. In other words, any pathologization of sex in general, and of porn in particular, is and always has been a moral panic in the guise of scientific objectivity.

What is peculiar about today’s medicalization of pornography, however, is its target. Up until recently, the discourse primarily targeted female porn performers. The popular ‘damaged goods’ hypothesis claims that the decision to go into porn and perform what are considered ‘extreme’ sexual activities (promiscuity, bisexuality, anal sex, etc.) is inevitably rooted in poor psychological health, stemming primarily from childhood sexual

abuse (Griffith et al. 2013). Reflecting a long history of fears about the female sex drive, it is a perfect example of how ideology can play out as pathology. During the past decade, however, the focus has shifted from the production to the consumption side and, at the same time, from a female to a male target: the framing of porn consumption as an addiction puts the white heterosexual man at the heart of this contemporary sex panic. For this reason, it can hardly be understood as a marker of deviance or a means of stigmatization in the way that previous medicalizations have often been utilized. It diagnoses the mainstream rather than an already socially marginalized minority group. Given the patriarchal, heteronormative world in which we live, this raises the question as to why those in power have allowed, or even helped, such a discourse to blossom? What is its function? Who benefits from it? Why is it so powerful? And why now?

The idea of addiction to pornography is not entirely new. It first came up in the late 1970s, became increasingly visible during the 1990s, and spread like wildfire in the past decade (Voros 2009, 244). The mere fact that, within the last five years, at least three major Hollywood productions – *Shame* (2011), *Thanks for Sharing* (2012), and *Don Jon* (2013) – have brought porn addiction to the big screen and together grossed almost \$30 million in US cinemas both reflects and multiplies the ubiquity of this discourse in mainstream American culture. Clearly, the timing is related to the advances of digital online media, which has made pornography easily, and often freely, accessible. One reason why the narrative of porn addiction is so successful arguably lies in the fact that it combines age-old cultural anxieties surrounding sexuality with the new-born moral panic about the internet; the latter being rooted, of course, in yet another long tradition of humankind's recurrent fears about technology and new media (Drotner 1999).

The internet has not only increased the availability of porn, however, but has also made visible its immense popularity. At a time when the overwhelming amount of traffic received by tube sites such as YouPorn and Pornhub makes it impossible to maintain the idea that porn's audience is just 'a few perverts in raincoats', there are basically only two options for public reaction: one, to finally normalize porn; or two, to find an explanation that preserves the condemnation of the consumed good without degrading its consumer along with it. One way of looking at the current discourse, therefore, is that the pathologization is employed less as a means of exclusion and more as a form of excuse. The porn addiction narrative frees consumers from moral judgement – it is compulsive, what can they do? – and puts the blame on the product, porn proper. According to this logic, a porn addict is a 'normal' person who has become intoxicated by a dangerous, exploitative medium; reminiscent of how US psychiatrist Fredric Wertham (1955) once warned about the *Seduction of the Innocent* through comics, and later television. This of course plays into the hands of anti-porn activists who – following a long history of protectionism against new media (Beaty 2005) – have continued to press for bans and censorship for more than 40 years.

So, we may wonder: is the current re-framing as addiction just a new rhetoric to sell old fears about porn, after all?

Ignoring female porn consumers, the current discourse frames porn addiction as an explicitly and exclusively male problem. *Man, Interrupted* (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2016), which may be considered representative of the bulk of popular scientific self-help literature currently mushrooming on the topic, starts out from the hypothesis that

we are living in a world in which ‘young men are getting left behind’. It goes on to outline how America’s male youth are ‘failing’ academically, socially, and sexually, and lists porn addiction alongside ‘the rise of women’ and ‘patriarchy myths’ as causes for this deficiency. Such masculinist argumentation opens up an additional dimension: could the narrative of porn addiction also be read as a backlash against third-wave feminism? It hardly seems a coincidence that it is gaining ground at a time when right-wing populism is on the rise and the ‘common man’s’ cry for attention can be heard across the western hemisphere.

While it is difficult to pinpoint the motives of the various interest groups behind it, an equally interesting question is why this new rhetoric is so effective. Decades of anti-porn feminists’ concerns about women – allegedly being objectified, abused, raped, forced into sex work, trafficked, and so on, in or because of porn – could not provoke such widespread awareness and calls to action; but now that men’s health seems at stake, the public is all alert. One cannot help but be reminded of the current panic surrounding opioid addiction in the United States which, as a concern for African-American communities, has been neglected for years, but, now that it visibly affects White America, creates a public outcry. Through re-framing its consumption as pathology, the cultural narrative about porn has effectively been changed from ‘women need to be protected from men’ to ‘men need to be protected from porn’ – just like the public was once successfully convinced that soldiers needed to be protected from STI-spreading prostitutes (Levine 2003) and, as ‘sex-hygiene’ movies from both World Wars put it, ‘the dirty woman’ (Eberwein 1999, 63). America’s Achilles’ heel, it seems, is gendered.

Whereas sexologists and behavioural scientists are still researching and debating the effects of pornography as well as the applicability of the addiction model (Prause and Fong 2015), resolutions are already being passed, screening tests made, therapies prescribed, pills swallowed, porn-blocking software installed, support groups formed, and many other measures taken. On top of alarmed parents, partners, and wives, a tendency towards self-pathologization has already been observed (Voros 2009, 245), with men self-identifying as porn addicts and consulting doctors in panic over their habit of bimonthly masturbation (Prause and Fong 2015, 432). The discourse has, in short, already been tangibly translated into action. Beside ostensibly morally motivated religious, conservative, and anti-pornography groups, an immense financially motivated treatment machinery has developed as a driving force and profiteer of the porn addiction discourse. Together they form a powerful lobby across the country that does not hesitate to use any means necessary to silence potentially contradictory research (Prause and Fong 2015, 439). It is currently under discussion whether porn addiction should be included in the new *DSM-6*, which would further cement the pathologization of porn. However, the discourse has already proven a successful tool of social control, impressively and appallingly demonstrating how language can shape reality.

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