

## Chapter XXXIII

# The Ethics of Gazing: The Politics of Online Pornography

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter situates the current debates on pornography in the virtual realm and its ethical and legal implications for users and researchers. It examines the ethics of gaze and politics of looking and how these acts of consumption can pose new moral and ethical dilemmas for societies and communities. Debates on online pornography have to integrate and reconcile dialectical elements and values such as aesthetics, privacy, rights, taboos, private pleasures and community standards while acknowledging the intrinsic features which define the Internet as a liminal space between the private and public and between individual consumption and infringement of societal norms. Beyond the legal and ethical paradigm, the chapter explores the issues of empowerment associated with online pornography as well as the epistemological and ontological problems which can face researchers.*

### INTRODUCTION

How we look at or consume the Internet often draws us into a moral space where the act of gazing can subvert or reiterate offline power arrangements, deviance and social norms. The Internet can bring both private pleasures and communal engagements. The dialectics between private pleasures and public needs raises various dilemmas especially in the domain of the erotic and aesthetics. These are relative and abstract terms

which can vary from individual to individual. However, in the public spaces of the Internet, the need for community standards of decency and acceptability often drag many of the debates about the Internet into a legal space despite its description as a virtual sphere and the libertarian endeavours to keep it free from government and organizational control. The need to subject and apply the laws of the physical jurisdiction into the Internet has consumed much of the rhetoric of the Internet since its inception. While the Internet is a global resource it is often ruled through

the laws of its physical embeddedness, and the global nature of the Internet also means that it is consumed and assessed through the differing cultural practices and norms that prevail all over the world. The Internet as a communication and information platform is then subject to varying codes of conduct by different communities whether online or offline.

The convergence of various technologies on the Internet has transformed it from a discursive space to one that accommodates sounds and images. The emergence of gaming culture and the simulation of reality through the design of gaming technology raises the age-old issues about image and representation and the effects it can have on our cognitive senses and how these can as a result affect or mediate our ability to reason and engage with interactive technology. These questions become ever more salient with regard to online pornography or sexually explicit material. The distinctive elements about online porn are its use of multimedia, its ubiquity and consumer access to it. Due to the anonymity of the Internet and the difficulties in regulating this transnational and anonymous medium, transgressive forms of entertainment including pornography have flourished online. According to Spencer (1999: 242) the Internet is structured at one level around the economics and politics of consumption, at another level around the politics of individuality and at another around communitarian concerns. Online pornography has been acknowledged as a relatively new form of pornography. Authors Stack, Wasserman and Kern (2004) point out that there were about 900 pornography sites on the web in 1997 and just a year later the figure had burgeoned to between 20,000 to 30,000 sites with revenues reaching US\$700 million by the 1990s. Its growth has been attributed to the 'Triple A-Engine' of accessibility, affordability and anonymity (Cooper and Griffin Shelly 2002: 11). Fisher and Barak (2001:312) agree that 'spectacular growth in availability of sexually explicit material on the Internet has created an unprecedented opportunity

for individuals to have anonymous, cost-free, and unfettered access to an essentially unlimited range of sexually explicit texts, moving images and audio materials.' This increased accessibility and convenience as well as the exploiting of e-commerce by pornographers means that the Internet makes it easier for individuals to come into contact with porn. Some suggest this has enabled the normalization of practices which may have otherwise been stigmatized in traditional markets leading to a mainstreaming of cyber porn through its visibility and presence (See O'Toole 1998; Cronin and Davenport 2001:35).

A report by the research and policy group Third Way based in Washington highlights how this accessibility and presence can present new problems for Internet users, particularly children (cf. Whitehead 2005). According to the report only 3% of more than 450 million individual porn web sites ask for proof of age. Additionally, the majority of these websites don't carry any warning of adult content and nearly three-quarters display free teasers of pornography images on their homepages and it is likely children may accidentally come across a porn site while doing homework or surfing the web. Whitehead (2005: 18) contends that unlike offline pornography which can be curbed through measures imposed by the community such as zoning laws and curfews, the politics of pornography has been altered through technology where online can be seen to be 'everywhere and nowhere.' This, Whitehead (2005) argues, has meant a loss of power for parents to control what their children come to contact with.

In this sense, the Internet is a cultural artefact that can convey the varying norms of disparate audiences, consumers, citizens, societies, cultures and civilizations, and how we decide on what is ethical, legal or illegal can sometimes be a daunting exercise. The use of the Internet for various activities ranging from e-commerce to social activism means that the medium assumes various guises and can equally be used for social and political empowerment and agency as well as for crime

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