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Free pornography is ever more plentiful online. The right response involves better sex education

Sep 26th 2015 | From the print edition



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IN THE 1990s, when the internet was for nerds, as many as half of all web searches were for sexually explicit material. That share has fallen—but only because everything from home-buying to job-hunting has moved online. Pornography still accounts for more than a tenth of all searches. The number of porn pages is estimated at 700m-800m; one of the biggest sites claims to get 80 billion video views a year.

Whenever pornography becomes more available, it sparks a moral panic. After the advent of girlie magazines in the 1950s, and X-rated rental films in the 1980s, campaigners claimed that porn would dent women's status, stoke sexual violence and lead men to abandon the search for a mate in favour of private pleasures. Disquiet about the effects of online pornography is once more rising (see [article](#)). Most of it is now free. As commercial producers fight over scarce revenue, their wares are becoming more extreme. Because of smartphones, tablets and laptops, hardcore material can be accessed privately by anyone. The result is that many teenagers today have seen a greater number and variety of sex acts than the most debauched Mughal emperor managed in a lifetime.

Too little is known about porn in particular and sexuality in general to judge what effect this will have. Prudishness and fear of controversy mean that funding bodies often shy away from sex studies. A survey in 2013 by British researchers found more than 2,000 papers related to the effects of porn on teenagers. Only 79 based their conclusions on solid evidence.

These papers offer some comfort to those worried about anti-

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porn campaigners' most alarming claim. Online porn is not producing a generation of zombies unable to relate to the opposite sex, and porn addiction, if it exists at all, is very rare. And the worriers' fears were not borne out in the past: since the 1950s women's status has improved; rape has become rarer; and couples have continued to meet and fall in love. But there is some evidence that porn's newfound ubiquity is shifting sexual mores. Researchers who have listened to teenagers talk frankly report that, for many, porn is the main source of sex education. Even those who have not viewed it have heard plenty about it from friends. It is shaping their expectations of sex—and what they go on to do.

In an attempt to stem the tide of smut, parents and governments are turning to porn-blockers. Britain's government wants internet-service providers to activate them as the default. These will help stop younger children from stumbling across porn. But many older ones will seek it out, and most will find it, no matter what obstacles are put in their way (if you do not know what a VPN is, ask a teenager). A better approach would be to take a long, hard look at what is out there—and then start to talk about it.

Kevin, we need to talk

Research funders need to pay for methodical studies of pornography and of sex more widely. Schools need to debunk porn myths: some Danish sex educators have started to discuss pornography in the classroom, using it to get youngsters thinking about issues such as body image and the meaning of consent. Above all, parents need to educate themselves about pornography—and to talk candidly to their children about how little justice it does to one of life's great pleasures. That will be difficult for many. But the best weapon against misinformation is the truth, not an embarrassed silence.

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