An interview with Alan McKee

Feona Attwood

How did you come to study porn?

I think the fact that I grew up gay in 70s and 80s Scotland, with Section 28 among other profoundly homophobic institutions around me, makes a difference. Apart from John Inman, Quentin Crisp, and Steven Carrington in *Dynasty*, there was no representation of homosexuality in my formative years. Neither John Inman nor Quentin Crisp was very sexual. And Steven Carrington never kissed another man, and then turned out to be bisexual, and kissed a woman instead. There was no mention of homosexuality in the family, or in school … when I discovered gay porn at the age of 16, it was the first representation I'd seen of the fact that I exist as a sexual being. Thomas Waugh's work in *Hard to Imagine* (1996) ~~(Waugh, 1996)~~ provides a wonderful, scrupulous account of how important porn has been in identity- and community- formation for gay men. And I think it makes it easier to study porn, being gay. Despite the arguments of anti-porn activists like Christopher Kendall that gay male porn is misogynistic (because it teaches gay men to eroticise inequality in power relations, I think?), most people don't see gay porn as oppressing women. It would be harder, I suspect, to be a straight man studying straight porn when the narratives of how representations of sex harm (white, straight, middle-class) women have become so powerful.

And then, as a researcher working in a publicly-funded sector, I've always been interested in using my training in Film Studies to address issues of interest to the public. Pornography was a topic of hot debate twenty-five years ago when I began my academic research career ("'Will porn videos destroy a generation of young men?"') , and it remains so today ("'Will porn on social media destroy a generation of young men?"').

Can you talk us through the development of that interest, and how for example, you've moved from *The Porn Report* which you published in 2008 and your latest book, *What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography After Fifty Years of Academic Research* (2022)?

I should start with a call-out to my co-researchers on the *Fifty Years* project. Paul Byron was trained as a sociologist with a queer bent. His primary interest is in digital intimacies, particularly queer friendships, but he was generous enough to help with the porn project, even though it isn't his first love. Katerina Litsou is a sexologist and psychologist ~~and psychologist , trained in the methods and traditions used by psychologists researching sex~~ – which was invaluable, because the gap between psychology research about porn, and the rest of the academic world's research about porn is a gaping chasm, and Katerina was committed to helping us breach that. And finally Roger Ingham is a proper, serious, Professor of Health and Community ~~and Community~~ Psychology, with the cheekiest sense of humour of just about anyone I've ever met. He made the project possible.

My first publication on porn was in 1997. About a gay porn video. Porn has changed a lot since then – although perhaps some porn research hasn't changed quite as much …
That first book was very much exploratory – production, content and consumption of porn in Australia. After many years of working I began to realise that simply producing facts about how porn works doesn't help with changing public views or policy – politicians and activists don't listen to facts. Instead they engage in rhetorical arguments. I wrote in 2010 about how trying to engage with the arguments of sex-negative journos, activists and politicians is like clay pigeon shooting:

In my report, I went through each of the eight separate arguments I had identified in the report [about sexualisation of children] and in public discussions, briefly addressing concerns in that area. Given the sheer range of topics being canvassed by commentators, it was not possible to do more than gesture towards each one. It felt less like rational argument and more like clay pigeon shooting. Every time I started to engage with an argument, it would vanish and another one would pop up from a different direction, demanding different forms of evidence and argumentation … But, looking back now, I'm ambivalent about having done this. I worry that, in a way, in responding to these scattergun attacks about 'sexualisation of children in the media' I became as much part of the problem as those commentators who were making the claims. By this I mean that it is more useful to see these claims as the rhetorical strategies they are, and refuse to try to engage in rational dialogue with them. That misunderstands their status. The arguments put forward are, I would suggest, less interested in the protection of children than they are in using the figure of the helpless child to advance a particular political agenda (McKee 2010, 137). ~~(McKee, 2010, p. 137)~~

For example, our data in that early book showed that porn consumption wasn't a good predictor of attitudes towards women, but there's a whole other series of variables that are related – age, political orientation, urban/rural, level of formal education. But that fact wasn't of interest to the journos who interviewed us because it didn't match the stories they wanted to tell.

I remember an interview with a journalist, telling them that our data from three years previously showed that young men are more feminist than previous generations – not more violent, as the journalist thought. Their response: "'but that was three years ago – maybe today they're more violent"'. It will never be possible to provide the data that satisfies anti-porn journos, politicians and activists …

So my later work has been more about mapping out those arguments in order to see where we might be able to make useful interventions. ~~Which brings us to …~~

One of my favourite things about your work is the way that you show how discourse around porn works - there's a paper where you demonstrate how all kinds of concerns are bundled together around sexualization, elsewhere you've unpicked the claims of porn effects researchers to show how moralistic these often are, and other recent papers have shown how how exceptionalizing porn ~~(eg~~ as a form of industry, or in terms of its particular platform identities ~~(~~ becomes a sleight of hand for reorienting concern away

from sex workers. ~~*nb not sure what the question is here!~~Are there any significant patterns you identified across those different groups, whether in their arguments or their concerns?

This is what brought me then to the interdisciplinary work in *What Do We Know About the Effects of Pornography* – why is it that psychological research on pornography is so powerful in the public sphere? Why is it so different from research in other disciplines? Roger Ingham said during the research project:

One of the reasons why policy-makers ask psychologists (as opposed to humanities researchers) to work towards developing policy might be because they know that they will get some suggestions – even if they are way off beam and/or just plain wrong; their audience probably won't know they are wrong. On the other hand, asking 50 humanities researchers and getting back 51 answers will not help the policy-makers to sleep at night, even if these researchers had a whale of a time in devising their suggestions (McKee and Ingham 2018, 39). ~~(McKee & Ingham, 2018, p. 39)~~

Engaging with porn research means engaging with the forms of public debates about porn. *What Do We Know* was an attempt to engage with that by talking to psychologists about porn research outside of psychology. Firstly, just to let them know that it exists. And then to let them know the content of that other research.

After completing the survey of existing porn research across disciplines, I think that we've identified a fundamental block to interdisciplinary discussion, which is fundamental disagreement about how people should be having sex. Which is why the starting point for that book is~~, on page 3~~:

There are many different ways in which you can have a happy, healthy sex life. You can be married in the suburbs with two kids having sex once a week with the lights off. Or you can be single, going out dancing, picking up strangers and having enthusiastic, sweaty fun in the toilets of a nightclub. You can be in a committed threesome; or an extended network of polyamorous fuckbuddies and ~~friendswith~~friends-with-~~-~~benefits. You can enjoy spanking or roleplaying or being wrapped in cellophane and suspended from the ceiling. A healthy sex life can involve oral sex or anal sex or vaginal sex or many other body parts. Or maybe you've decided that sex isn't really your thing and what you really want is a life of cuddling and boardgames. All of these can be examples of sexually healthy lives (McKee et al. 2022, 3). ~~(McKee et al., 2022, p. 3)~~

My approach to trying to drive change is always to find the best place to stick the crowbar into the machine so that it produces most disruption with least effort. I think this is the key point of difference. A lot of psychological porn research works on the unstated assumption that the ideal form of sexually is normative – Gayle Rubin's ~~"~~'charmed circle~~"~~' (1992) ~~(Rubin, 1992)~~ – although they never say that explicitly. But the research is committed to find ways to make people's marriages last longer, to reduce the amount of kinky sex, casual sex, etc. By starting off with this issue – what is healthy sexuality – it puts it all up front, the debate that we need to be having. So if psychological porn researchers don't agree with this

starting point, there's no point in talking any further. Pornography is, it turns out, a distraction – it's really research about policing the correct forms of sexuality.

And that's not something you can really debate. There are various philosophical questions that don't admit to being answered – they're questions of attitude rather than facts. These include questions like, is this good? And, Is this important? Questions that can't be finally settled, but which it's vitally important to keep discussing.

For example, there's an emerging strand in psychological sex research that's opposed to "objectification". But objectification includes, for these researchers, having casual sex, having sex without love. If we're not going to agree about whether casual sex is good or bad, there's not much use in getting into debates about how pornography represents casual sex. But we can at least acknowledge that the point we disagree on is a moral one about the kinds of sex people should be having. Identify the point of difference, agree to disagree.

Your approach to studying media is notably positive - you've emphasized entertainment pleasure, health, fun, and the discrimination of audiences in many of your publications, and yet you've also chosen to engage with debates which focus on questions of harm, effects, dangers, violence. What is it like to work with both of these approaches and how do the different kinds of work inform each other?

We have to acknowledge the positive and negative aspects of all forms of culture. And we can identify negative aspects of any form of culture – Shakespeare promotes teen sex and teen suicide! It bothers me that with some forms of culture (high culture) we focus only on the positive; and with entertainment we too often start by looking for the negative. Things brings us back to my writing you mentioned above on the exceptionalist approach to culture. Let's set our criteria for what we're looking for in culture, and then consider all forms of culture against those criteria. Which is why, early in my porn research career, I led a project to define healthy sexual development (McKee et al. 2010) ~~(McKee et al., 2010)~~ – so we could then apply those criteria to all forms of culture. This ties back to my point above about the pornography research that sees long-term, coupled, sex for the purposes of expressing love as the ideal to which researchers are aspiring.

It's important to acknowledge the ways in which pornography can be improved: it can be racist, it can be exploitative of talent, it can show most women having orgasms simply from having a penis put in their vagina, which is WILDLY unhelpful if taken as an instruction guide … but refusing an exceptionalist approach to pornography notes that these things are not unique to pornography, but are more broadly problems in culture. Indeed, in some areas – eg, showing a variety of different female body types as being beautiful – porn is significantly better than other areas of culture, such as television newsreading. But as Carole Vance's phrase "pleasure and danger" (Vance 1992 (1989)) ~~(Vance, 1992 [1989])~~ emphasised – just because there is danger does not mean that we must reject or ignore pleasure.

In your most recent book, you argue that actually we know very little about porn. It's astonishing really, given all the concern, the ink, the endless replaying of debates that so little meaningful research has been produced. Do you have any idea ~~s~~ why so many

academics and youth educators are caught up in this repetitive and unproductive kind of work?

The line that we know very little about porn is the headline sentence from the book, used in the press release and the media interviews that are an important part of research translation. In order to explain our findings to non-academics who have their own jobs and expertise and haven't spent decades training in our particular specialism we have to find the simplest possible message to communicate. (this is what stupid people call "dumbing down". Anyone who uses the phrase "dumbing down" doesn't understand how communication or knowledge work. Please stop it).

It would be more nuanced to say that we know little about the relationship between porn consumption and healthy sexual development. There are two broad strands of pornography research. On the one side there's research emerging from the various branches of social, clinical, personality psychology, etc. This is by far the more populous area – there are literally thousands of articles published in this space. And what we found in our research is that psychology research doesn't address healthy sexual development as sexual health researchers understand it, or as I understand it; rather psychology research into pornography overwhelmingly tries to understand the relationship between pornography consumption and conservative sexual ideals: are porn consumers more likely to have casual sex? To be polyamorous? To have kinky sex? These things are all presented as negatives to be avoided.

And then even within that research we found that much of the psychology research – in some areas, the majority of it – then confuses correlation and causality. Summarising the psychology research, my headline sentence (again – the one-line take away for someone who hasn't spent their lives researching this area) is that we know that people who are more sexually adventurous are more likely to enjoy pornography. Much of the psychology research then mistakenly reports that pornography makes people more sexually adventurous – and that being sexually adventurous is a bad thing.

And then on the other side, there's the more humanities-style research, emerging from film studies, gender studies, queer studies, cultural studies, history, cultural geography .. – the kind of work that we publish in *Porn Studies*. And that has typically not been interested as much in healthy sexual development as it has in questions of power, politics, identity, economic systems and aesthetics. So we've kind of ceded the discussion of healthy sexual development and porn – which is what journalists, moralists and politicians are typically interested in – to the psychologists.

Is there any porn research that you think has had real value or impact? What have been the key developments and wins from the past 10 or 20 years in terms of developing research on pornography, in building porn studies?

There's been so much brilliant work in so many different disciplines, but much of it doesn't talk to each other.

In terms of work that the readers of *Porn Studies* might not already be familiar with, the work of Joshua Grubbs on porn addiction is fascinating, and I think does very similar work to what we've been doing by bringing together different disciplines (Grubbs et al. 2015; Grubbs et al. 2018, Grubbs et al. 2019) ~~(Grubbs et al., 2015; Grubbs et al., 2018; Grubbs et al., 2019)~~. While Joshua still works very much within a rigorous psychological research tradition, he's asking slightly different questions to the majority of psychological porn research, and his questions are informed by a less heteronormative approach to sexuality. That proves really productive. By examining large data sets, he shows that one of the best predictors or whether or not people say they're addicted to pornography is how religious they are. He uses the term "moral incongruence" to explain why people say they're addicted to porn – the disjunction between your pleasures (I like wanking to porn) and your moral values (the church tells me that wanking to porn is evil).

In the humanities, as you know, we're very suspicious of discourses of addiction and the way they're used to police behaviour. Rather than making that argument, which many psychologists simply don't accept (I know, I've tried), he identifies a variable in the data which demands explanation (all good psychological method), and the explanation he uses then takes the same approach as the humanities work critiquing the discourse of addiction.

Psychologists don't really get into the idea of discourses, that our language and culture shape our experiences and realities. For months now I've been shopping an article around psychology journals called "Treat the culture", arguing that in cases of self-identified cultural addiction (pornography, games, social media, etc), rather than treating the individual we need to "treat the culture" – ie, change the institutions and discourses that make people feel bad about experiencing pleasure. It's been desk-rejected eight times now; went to referees once and was rejected with a sense of total bewilderment. So Joshua's approach, working entirely within the language and approaches of psychology, does my job much better than I do.

I've become interested in how academic disciplines fit together, where they don't fit together, and why. As Katerina, Roger, Paul and I worked on the *Fifty Years* project we discovered a whole series of things where we had different assumptions – how to develop a research question, what counts as data, how to analyse data, whether replicability or originality is a key value, the structure that articles should take ...

I think there are what we might call cognate disciplines – groups of disciplines that take similar approaches and so can talk to each other relatively easily – for example, social psychology, public health and the more social-science end of communication studies can have straightforward conversations. Similarly, queer theory, cultural studies, gender studies are mostly quite porous. But then there are what we call "incommensurate disciplines": sitting down a health psychologist with a psychoanalytic film theorist and asking them to agree on what we know about pornography is much less likely to lead to consensus. And that explains a lot, I think, about the current state of pornography research.

I should make clear that I'm not hankering after a Grand Unified Theory of pornography and healthy sexual development. Indeed, working across disciplines in this project has made clear to me that there are aspects of the paradigms that are irreconcilable – as noted above, the question about whether causal sex is negative is a fundamental axiom in both approaches, and a psychologist isn't going to be able to convince me that casual sex is unhealthy, or vice versa. But I think we could benefit from talking to each other a little bit more; with a focus on the human element of communication that involves. As we wrote in our article about p"Productive disagreement during research in interdisciplinary teams":

it is not surprising that, as we noted above, a number of human qualities have been identified as being useful for facilitating interdisciplinary work—good communication, mindfulness, and "'warm sympathy."' We would add that having a sense of humor can be very useful, too. Disagreements such as the ones we have been discussing mean arguments and setbacks are guaranteed when people are working within an interdisciplinary team. Laughing about them can help researchers come to a point of agreement – or even an agreement to disagree – and move on (Litsou et al. 2021, 120-121).
~~(Litsou et al., 2021, pp. 120-121)~~

Your work over the last few years has established very clearly the extent of the evidence base around porn consumption and how a range of stances and methodologies have worked to structure and limit what we know. It's the ideal starting point for a big project on porn audiences; if you were given really generous funding to draw on what this knowledge as a basis for a research project, what would that project look like?

Funny you should ask. I just submitted a large grant application with Catharine Lumby, Jennifer Power and Catherine Page Jeffrey to the Australian Research Council called "'Digital Sexually Explicit Material and Sexual Health in Australia"'. Here's how we describe the project in the application:

This project aims to theorise digital sexual literacy in Australia and identify useful interventions aimed at increasing this literacy. We will map the ecosystem of digital Sexually Explicit Material (SEM) in Australia, identifying the ways in which Australians both consume sexual images and represent themselves as sexual beings in digital contexts. This data will be used to theorise digital sexual literacy, including both the "reading" and "writing" of sexual representations. The data will inform the formulation of useful interventions to

One of the real strengths of your work has been the way you've drawn on academic research to make helpful resources for young people - I'm thinking of your 'Girlfriend Guide to Life' (2014) which you developed in partnership with *Girlfriend* magazine. You are unusually clearsighted about the importance of style and format in creating resources - for example, taking into account young people's suspicion of anything that looks 'scientific' and the importance of humour and entertainment. What are your top tips for educators who want to work with young people on issues around porn literacy and sexual health?

I think we can learn a lot from commercial entertainment producers, because those are the people whose key skill is to understand and reach an audience. Unlike education there are no carceral institutions involved in the distribution of entertainment to force people to engage with their work. Unlike art there are no institutions that value-add with cultural capital to entice people to attend, eg, ballet performances that they might personally hate but know it's good to be seen it. Commercial entertainment producers live and die by whether or not they understand how to reach their audiences.

A key lesson we can learn from them is to know which audience you're trying to reach. "The public" is a useful fiction, but in practice trying to design a message that reaches "the public" will never work. It will always speak more to older people, or younger people; to queers or to straights. Health promoters are embracing this with research into different demographic and psychographic audience segments.

Then use the language of your audience. Know what your target audience cares about and thinks is important and speak to that as a way to reach them. This is a long-running problem for sex education in schools, for example. We've known for decades that young people want to know how to have pleasurable sex; while formal sex education teaches them about the protein coating of the HIV virus (McKee, Watson et al. 2014). ~~(McKee, Watson, et al., 2014)~~

In this context, we ran a project specifically trying to reach young heterosexual men with sexual health information. Our research showed that for many of them their main source of information about relationships and sex was using vulgar comedy, so we got male comedians to tell filthy jokes about various aspects of sexual health. It worked really well, but it also raised a number of challenges about the ways in which the institutions of education and public health struggle to speak the language of their audiences. If you want to reach audiences, you can't be worthy or preachy – which we often struggle with. You have to embrace vulgarity – which can be a challenge for a very middle-class sector of researchers and educators who see swear ing as not just offensive, but sexist towards women. And – perhaps the most challenging aspects– we have to embrace ambiguity:

entertainment products … can lead young people to work things out for themselves: they 'encourag[e] viewers to make their own judgments, rather than simply commanding their assent' (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 168). ~~(Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 168).~~ This engages young people and encourages deep learning. But, the challenge of these forms of communication is that the more they engage young people, the less likely they are to have a single clear 'message that all viewers will agree on. The soap opera stories that the young people in Buckingham and Bragg's research (Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 174) were most engaged by, remembered best, and discussed with most passion also led to disagreements between them about what message they actually communicated (as with the example of the character of Quagmire from *South Park* in our focus groups, where participants couldn't decide if he was meant to be challenging political correctness by saying what everybody is thinking - (McKee, Walsh, & Watson, 2014)). ~~(Buckingham and Bragg 2004, 174). (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 174).~~ This point bears some emphasis for it is a key challenge for health communicators: the very characteristic that makes a text powerful for pedagogy – the fact that it offers grey areas for discussion – also means that its message must be less clear cut (less 'preaching'). As health communicators we can feel the urge to ensure that

young people only receive the correct information. But this doesn't allow them to make up their minds for themselves, and runs the risk of being seen as preaching and as a result, less effective, or indeed, totally ignored (McKee, Walsh et al. 2014, 133). ~~(McKee, Walsh, et al., 2014, p. 133)~~

I've also learned a lot in this area from working with Paul Byron. He taught me about listening to young people, who are commonly ahead of educators and researchers in understanding digital sexuality. In our article critiquing current practices of porn literacy - which often set out simply to tell young people that porn sex is "unrealistic", for example, Paul noted that

When we pay attention to the data gathered in the articles reviewed, we find that young people have a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how pornography works—perhaps a greater sense of porn literacy than many researchers. For example, several participants in these studies discuss their preference for 'real bodies' and how these are available through DIY and amateur porn (Byron et al. 2021, 798). ~~(Byron et al., 2021, p. 798)~~

One of the emphases in your work has been on healthy sexual development. Often 'health' has become code for 'morals' or 'normality' in relation to sexuality. How do we guard against moralistic or normative views of healthy sexual behaviour/development? And what's the basis of 'health' if it isn't about normality or being 'good'?

I talked above about trying to find the best place to stick the crowbar into the machine to create maximum disruption. Strategically I think that discourses of health are a great way to do that around pornography – and around sexuality more generally. I absolutely agree that historically discourses of health have had a strong moral component. I also think that they are among the most powerful discourses currently available to us to drive social change. We can reclaim the terminology and make it work for good. I think we've seen that happen, for example, with the current World Health Organisation definition of "sexual health" (2022):

Sexual health, when viewed affirmatively, requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. ~~(World Health Organization, 2022)~~

Of course we can critique aspects of this – for example, "respectful" sexual relationships is too often taken to mean "respectable" relationships (no casual sex, no blood play). But the fact that sexual pleasure is brought into the realm of sexual health allows for really interesting possibilities.

Your question "And what's the basis of 'health' if it isn't about normality or being 'good'?" is exactly the reason that we ran the multidisciplinary project defining healthy sexual development – to show that rejecting the traditional heteronormative charmed circle doesn't mean that "anything goes". Our group of researchers from very different background were able to identify fifteen points we agreed on – that sex should be consensual, informed, open to the possibility of pleasure, aware of public/private boundaries, that sexual learning is lifelong, and so on. Of course, every one of those points

is open to further discussion – after we wrote it, sex work researchers pointed out to me that there are good reasons to have sex that isn't physically pleasurable – for money, for example. But still, I would argue - we can do things with it.

Many, many years ago I encountered the phrase "'strategic essentialism"' in Linda Nicholson's collection *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Nicholson 1990){Nicholson, 1990} and it's stuck with me since as a way to think about how to continue doing political work and attempt to drive social and change while acknowledging that our ways of seeing the world are always, and will always be, partial, malleable and open to challenge. I say, let's reclaim the world "'health"' as we've reclaimed queer, whore and all those other great words.

I'm not sure you've spelt this out in your work, but I think you have a strong sense of religion being a key underpinning problem in the way that pornography and also sexuality are viewed? Could you say something about that?

Some of my best friends are religious. I don't think religious people are a problem. We had a national vote in Australia about whether gay men and lesbians should be allowed to marry and the majority of Catholics voted yes, for example. But religious institutions are a different story. If you were to try to map out the key function of religious institutions in Australia and America particularly, based on their public campaigns and pronouncements in the last two decades, you'd come to the conclusion that their main mission statement is to stop women accessing reproductive care, and to ensure that queers don't have equal rights. I was a born-again Christian from ages 14-19, and I would argue that if you read the Bible – particularly the New Testament, which is – after all – the one that has Christ in it (Christians? Christ? Should be quite important, you know?) without knowing what churches are currently fighting for, and were asked to predict what would be the most important issues, controlling people's sexuality wouldn't come out top of the list. I think you'd be quite surprised to see what the churches have become …

In short: the public discourses of Christian institutions about how sexuality should be controlled definitely contribute to the heteronormative ways in which debates about pornography are conducted. Not helpful.

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