SEXUALITIES

Not Safe for Work? Teaching and Researching the Sexually Explicit

Feona Attwood
Sheffield Hallam University, UK
I.Q. Hunter
De Montfort University, UK

This special issue of *Sexualities* emerged from a day school in May 2007, organized by the editors and hosted jointly by De Montfort University and Sheffield Hallam University, on 'Researching and Teaching the Sexually Explicit: Ethics, Methodology and Pedagogy'. Featuring presentations by Martin Barker, Brian McNair and Clarissa Smith, the day provoked valuable discussion about the challenges of academic work in this area at a time of media panics about 'pornification' and restrictive legislation about sexually extreme material. This resulting special issue brings together contributions from the UK, Australia, the USA, Finland and Hong Kong to reflect on shared concerns in a field transformed by new paradigms for understanding sexuality, in a context where the media seem increasingly important in the construction of sex and 'discourse around sexuality at many social levels has focused more and more on visual representations' (Kleinhans, 2004: 71).

Don't do it without tenure

As Peter Lehman notes, there are 'special issues surrounding the academic study of porn' (2006:1), which arise mostly from its status as perhaps the most despised cultural form. The emergence of 'porn studies' in academic institutions has been met with widespread ethical and political opposition, even more so than the study of horror films. Sex media, rather like horror films in fact, are often seen as intrinsically obscene and harmful, effecting real changes in behaviour and attitude, and therefore potentially damaging to researchers and students. It is difficult to envisage many courses where academics feel it prudent to ask their students to sign consent forms, or

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fields of study where it is forbidden to access research material on university premises. And though this is an area of academic interest with great potential for integrating theory and creative practice, the two are almost always kept rigorously apart. Linda Williams recounts how in her early pioneering of porn studies she allowed students to create pornographic screenplays, a decision she later described as a mistake, not least because 'it can only bring oneself and one's institution, bad publicity' (2004: 21). The newspaper headlines resulting from teaching students to produce pornographic films, videos and websites can easily be imagined, and would, in Britain at any rate, only further confirm the press's contempt for media and film studies as 'soft' options leading to 'Mickey Mouse' degrees.

A scholarly, albeit distanciated approach was once an important means of legitimating speech about sex and dignifying access to sexually explicit media, as Kendrick describes in *The Secret Museum* (1987). Gentleman-scholars and curators of museums of forbidden texts were instrumental in cataloguing and categorizing sex media and so producing the term 'pornography' as we understand it today. This process was underpinned by beliefs in, first, the dispassionate nature of academic study and, second, a natural hierarchy of media 'effects' that meant only middle-class men were capable of the appropriate unmoved response to obscene cultural forms. Today the study of sexual representation is much more complicated. Because of 'the demystification of academe and its genteel cult of disinterestedness' (Ross, 2008: 44), universities have become more accessible and democratic sites, while disciplines such as media studies habitually question singular readings and meanings and recognize diverse political responses to sexually explicit media, responses that may even include approval and enthusiasm. Since the days of secret museums, however, sexually explicit media have become increasingly 'overburdened with significance' (Segal, 1992: 65). Pornography has come to signify men's brutalization, women's exploitation and the dangerous power of the media – and more recently, commodification, individualism, neo-liberalism and a backlash against feminism. Pornography, seemingly so marginal a genre, has somehow emerged as central to understanding the dynamics of culture itself.

Pat Kirkham and Beverley Skeggs (1996) describe a range of challenges presented by bringing sex media into the university – the cocktail of responses (bored, fearful, excited, aroused, curious, embarrassed) that emerge from examining pornography in a scholarly context; the unsettling of notions of what's normal, natural, authentic and perverse; the problems of establishing an accepted language to describe what is been studied (and indeed the term 'pornography' is itself notoriously slippery); the complex politics of race, gender, sexuality and religious sensibility; and the relations

of power, authority and care that exist between teachers and students and academics and their institutions. If the sexually explicit is as important as its detractors insist, then academics are surely entitled to research and teach its meanings and implications. The question is how to do so without, as it were, making the teaching environment unsafe: pornography, even in homeopathic quotation, remains uncompromisingly pornographic. As Karen Boyle (2006) notes, engaging with these kinds of texts involves us in a process of intense self-reflection about questions of boundaries, power, safety, respect, difference and tolerance; and about issues of value, the place of affective response in academia, the importance of viewing context in constructing meaning, and the way media images are regulated in public and educational contexts.

Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that it has become increasingly difficult to strike a 'proper attitude' towards sexually explicit media since Linda Williams wrote about this in her classic text, *Hard Core* (1991: xi). Engaging with sexually explicit media is a risky business. As Henry Jenkins notes, educators have had 'their reputations destroyed, lost their jobs, and faced legal sanctions for teaching or researching porn' (in Church Gibson, 2004: 2). Despite the establishment of 'porn studies', sex media continue to be regarded as unpleasant or ridiculous or, most frequently, boringly obvious in their meaning and pernicious effects. Researchers report leg-pulling, awkwardness, suspicion, derision, hostility and even harassment (Attwood, forthcoming). Moreover, academic work based on media and cultural studies approaches is still routinely ignored in public debates in favour of the scientistic discourses of psychology or psychiatry. The US APA report on sexualization (APA, 2007) framed its discussion within an uncomplicated view of popular media as corrupting and oppressive, while the UK Justice Department commissioned a 'Rapid Evidence Assessment' on the 'harm' of 'extreme pornography' (Itzin et al., 2007) on the basis of a set of theoretical and methodological approaches to media consumption that are obsolete in media studies (Barker, 2007). As a result, academic work on sex media is visible in public debate only when it sensationalizes them as a social problem in need of urgent diagnosis and cure, rather than as cultural products widely integrated into many people's lives. Like soft and hard drugs, soft and hard pornography gets discussed in terms of use, harm, supply and control, by experts who would seemingly never dream of touching the stuff. As Alan McKee notes in this issue, this tends to rule out certain lines of research *a priori*, such as whether porn use benefits its enthusiasts or correlates with progressive social attitudes.

Furthermore, the study of other once unrespectable genres, such as horror and SF, and new media, such as video games, now benefits from the perspectives of 'aca-fans', who combine theoretical rigour with insider

knowledge of media use. This is much riskier in porn studies. With very few exceptions (Dyer, 1985; Burger, 1995), researchers identifying as 'users' of pornography, let alone as fans, might be constructed as politically suspect and ethically compromised.

Since the 1990s an 'orgy of publication and commentary' on sexually explicit media has surged through academia, 'intellectual journals, magazines, journalistic debates, television opinion shows and independent filmmaking efforts' (Wicke, 2004: 176). This is part of a more general shift in which some forms of speaking about sex have become 'more self-conscious and reflective' (Plummer, 1995: 135). Discussions about teaching and researching sexually explicit media have also emerged (Curry, 1996; Kirkham and Skeggs, 1996; Kleinhans, 1996: Attwood, 2002; Jenkins, 2004; Williams, 2004; Reading, 2005; Boyle, 2006; Lehman, 2006) and established scholars such as Linda Williams, Chuck Kleinhans, Constance Penley, Peter Lehman and Henry Jenkins have reflected on their own approaches and experiences. In an early discussion of porn teaching at the Society for Cinema Studies workshops in 1995, several participants reported that they had taught pornographic material without encountering significant difficulties, though it was argued that graduate students and gay and lesbian faculty might be at risk, and that it might be inadvisable to teach porn without tenure (Curry, 1996).

Yet even for established scholars, teaching porn is not without problems. Henry Jenkins notes how a journalist 'simply made up vivid details' about his porn teaching, and he was accused of 'putting people at risk' of addiction and working towards increasing sexual violence (2004: 1). Constance Penley's course was publicly denounced as a 'new low in humanist excess' by the right wing evangelist, Pat Robertson. She argues that it was teaching porn as film genre that made it possible for her institution to support her as a film scholar and an expert with 'the authority over what is taught' (in Curry, 1996). Penley also took the precaution of choosing students with experience of film studies over others who were interested in registering for it. This framing of pornography within a reasonably respectable discipline such as Film Studies may not be an option for all academics however, and while it helpfully positions sexually explicit media *as* media rather than social problem, it might obscure porn texts that cannot be dignified in this way, as well as downplaying important social and political issues.

This risk is avoided by foregrounding the political as Linda Williams did by combining the study of porn as genre with discussion of feminist arguments about porn (though she found that students were not especially interested in the latter). Williams notes of her early experiences that the reason students most frequently gave for wanting porn on the curriculum was that it provided a 'fruitful forum for the discussion of sex and

sexualities', issues not addressed openly elsewhere, and that students were particularly interested in 'finding ways for talking about sex' (2004: 20). Henry Jenkins lists a number of compelling reasons to include sex media on courses about gender, sexuality and popular culture: because the 'public policy debate about pornography is a central issue in media studies'; because legal and political discourse on porn is simplistic and needs complicating; because porn has been 'a driving force behind the technological development and deployment of almost every media'; because it is 'a key area for feminist scholarship'; because it 'is an enormous economic force'; because it 'poses powerful questions about the relationship between form, content and ideology', 'the nature of fantasy' and 'emotional investments'; and because 'we need to teach students about how . . . categories operate to police taste and to impose ideological constraints' (Jenkins, 2004: 2–3).

New directions and dilemmas

All the issues that Jenkins raises acquire new significance and force in the changing landscape of sex and media use. Since the mid 1990s there has been a massive proliferation of pornographies and enormous shifts in their accessibility and reach. Loosening censorship and a widespread preoccupation with sexual desirability in mainstream culture has blurred the distinction between mainstream and obscene categories of representation, while the emergence of a range of cultural intermediaries identified with hedonistic approaches to sexuality have helped to promote a view of porn as cool. The entwining of media and communication technologies with sexual practice has elided distinctions between representation and practice, and to some extent normalized sex media within a repertoire of everyday sexual practices.

Yet panics about sexually explicit media go on unabated. Since sex education and media literacy remain underdeveloped and often contested, it is no surprise that misconceptions about sex media flourish in academic work, public debates and legislation. In particular, there is a new – often fearful – concern with the image in the age of the internet, when media of all kinds have been more accessible in the home and the workplace. This has manifested in two major ways: first, anxieties about the mainstreaming and normalization of sexually explicit representations, as seen for example, in the APA report and in popular books on sexualization such as Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), Pamela Paul's *Pornified* (2005), Carol Platt Liebaus's *Prude* (2007) and Patrice A. Oppliger's *Girls Gone Skank* (2008); and, second, the demonization of the internet as a conduit of perverse imagery and sexual deviation, as reflected in the prolific literature on cybersex addiction (see Cooper,

2000 and Young, 2001) and the UK legislation in January 2009 against 'extreme' pornographies.

These responses re-articulate quite familiar concerns around the loss of childhood, commodification, technology, representation, and desire, though they are entirely contemporary in focusing on addictive behaviours, women's collusion with their own objectification, adults preying on children, and the blurring of boundaries between genres such as porn and horror that depict the body *in extremis*, all of which suggests that we are 'desperately uncertain in confronting the complexity of contemporary mores' (Weeks, 2007: 124). These are clearly crucial issues for research and it is important that academia meets them fearlessly and without compromise.

But there are worrying signs. In a special 'In Focus' section of *Cinema Journal*, Katrien Jacobs notes that academic publishers, mindful of mainstream distribution, are actually now more uptight about sexually explicit imagery than mainstream retailers (2007: 127). Chuck Kleinhans argues that we are operating under a new set of conditions, 'expanded control under intellectual property, attempts to restrict fair use, new legislation, and politically charged enforcement by administrators courting favour with ultraconservative and fundamentalist constituents' (2007: 96). The resulting restrictions on publishing images – ironic in a context where sexually explicit media have never been more accessible – pose serious problems for scholars, particularly in the area of textual analysis. Jon Lewis, the editor of *Cinema Journal*, notes that the production of the special issue itself demonstrates the problem – a willing publisher could not be found for its explicit illustrations and they had to be distributed in an accompanying CD (2007: 96). These problems may be exacerbated in a climate where casualization makes academic life more precarious (Ross, 2008: 44), making it much more difficult to 'do it without tenure'. Martin Barker has described 'people's experiences of a steady change in the climate in many institutions, which is making it harder for some kinds of research important to our field to obtain ethical clearance', particularly those which are 'sensitive or difficult areas' (2008). Researching the topic at all is difficult in universities because accessing sexual material is usually restricted or forbidden. Moreover, universities may take a dim view of staff offices with shelves of porn DVDs and other contaminants of the educational space.

This special issue takes up the story of studying sex media under the conditions of contemporary academic life. We begin with an account from Brian McNair, an academic who has documented many of the recent changes in the way sexually explicit media signify. McNair discusses his experiences as a student and teacher of pornography in the UK from the late 1970s to the 2000s, against a backdrop of feminist politics, the rise

of gay rights, the emergence of porno-chic, and the impact of the internet on the accessibility of porn. He concludes that teaching porn is much less dangerous than it once was, though porn remains a 'zone of contradictions and paradoxes' and an important area of teaching and research. Clarissa Smith develops this theme, discussing her experiences of integrating the study of the sexually explicit into undergraduate Media Studies teaching. She notes the importance of attending to the dramatic changes in how sex media now permeate our culture and our lives, drawing on a wider range of texts that might have been studied in the past. She also shows how important it is to involve students as participants in the production of knowledge, using student responses as the basis for discussion. Learning and teaching must be a joint activity between teachers and students, and responses – including those of pleasure – should become part of the way we generate critical understanding.

The two articles that follow demonstrate the importance of studying sexually explicit media in their local and national contexts. As Susanna Paasonen argues, academic publishing on sexually explicit media has been dominated by accounts from the USA and the UK with an emphasis on a history of effects research and the feminist 'sex wars'. Her account of porn history in Finland shows a different set of contextual features: the firm popularity of porn among media consumers, women included; public discourses of good and healthy sex; and the broad acceptance of porn studies as a worthwhile academic endeavour. In the same way, Katrien Jacobs' experiences as a teacher and researcher of sex cultures in Hong Kong make sense only in the context of Chinese culture, where sex media and sex talk are heavily censored and frequently seen as western imports, yet where a hidden sex market is booming and DIY porn cultures are flourishing.

As Paasonen argues, thinking locally offers a useful means of thinking beyond the dualistic divisions that have dominated the sex wars of the UK and USA. Porn simply does not signify in the same way in other cultures, distant from parochial religious and political debates. Acknowledging that definitive transnational definitions of 'porn' are impossible is vital to studying not only porn but local and historically specific articulations of the erotic and the obscene. Jacobs too shows how studies of local context can illuminate and motivate porn studies. A celebrity sex scandal in 2008 not only marked a change in the sexual culture of Hong Kong, but provided an 'unusual opportunity for emotional engagement' and a great deal of discussion of that change. Jacobs argues that academics can work with these to help students draw on and contribute to the grass-roots perspectives that are growing up around new forms of sex media.

The next three articles take on questions of generic and disciplinary boundaries in the study of sex media, and the conditions within which we

construct knowledge. Steve Jones and Sharif Mowlabocus discuss the new problems faced by researchers studying 'extreme' pornographies that blur the boundaries between porn and horror, in the light of new regulations, which make their possession illegal in the UK. They argue that if extreme images are indeed becoming more common, they should be a focus of study, but the new legislation inhibits this by making academics vulnerable to prosecution. Extreme and shock images open up porn studies to a broader set of issues about how corporeality and the limits of life are understood in late capitalist societies at a time of very real concerns with terror, pain, suffering and dehumanization.

Alan McKee explores differences between humanities and social sciences approaches to the study of pornography, and shows that these differ in their views of appropriate language and of the status of standard approaches and innovation, which leads to some very different starting points and modes of academic expression. He argues that working across disciplinary boundaries might inspire humanities researchers to relearn the value of empirical work, and to swap 'endless theorizing' for mapping the links between the pornography that people consume and their beliefs and actions. Social science meanwhile might learn to pursue new ideas rather than repeating the same predictable experiments, not least by adopting the humanities' insistence on the importance of the meaning and context of consumption.

In a similar vein, Kath Albury discusses the problem of 'paranoid' readings of porn where the close reading of a sexually explicit text is followed by the exposure of its 'real meaning' and its evaluation in moral terms. This, she argues, ignores the fact that many pornographies now represent a diversity of sexual experiences and identities and articulate more contemporary ethical standpoints. Drawing on Foucault's view of an ethical sensibility as 'care for the self' and 'care for the other/others' (1997) provides a more helpful starting point for analyses of porn that focus not on whether an image or practice is 'demeaning', but on whether it is produced and consumed in an ethical context.

The final article returns to the classroom to consider the use of sexually explicit images, new media and the development of sensual learning in courses on sexualities. Dennis D. Waskul argues that although traditional means of knowledge privilege mind over body, text over feeling, and intellect over sensation, perception and feeling are also ways of knowing and understanding, and many students see them as necessary for their learning. In sexualities courses, developing forms of sensual learning may enable students to understand the connections between academic knowledge and everyday life.

Although teaching and researching sexually explicit media has become an established part of the study of sexualities, academics working in the

field face problems ranging from legal restraints and threats, out-of-date and restrictive frameworks of understanding, limited political perspectives and a new squeamishness about explicit imagery. All of these have an impact on both institutional organization and access to academic publishing. Relatively few academics document and analyse sexual media in ways that do not promote unreflective 'paranoid' readings of the texts or simply reiterate political and moral dogmas of the past.

As the contributors to this special issue argue, it is possible to push against these restrictions and limits, to think beyond 'effects' and 'sex wars', to refuse dispassionate forms of scholarship, to pursue questions of context and meaning, and to question outmoded assumptions about sex and the media. New communication technologies are now central to our understanding of the sexual, which is 'increasingly lived in worlds of mediated forms' (Plummer, 2008: 10). It is time for scholars to insist, clearly, confidently and to the widest possible audience, that researching and teaching sexual media is more important than ever.

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