

Has Porn Really Become a 'Public Health Crisis'?

The *Washington Post* ran a blaring headline last week: IS PORN IMMORAL? THAT DOESN'T MATTER: IT'S A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS.

Gail Dines, a professor of sociology at Boston's Wheelock College, said [the science is settled](#):

After 40 years of peer-reviewed research, scholars can say with confidence that porn is an industrial product that shapes how we think about gender, sexuality, relationships, intimacy, sexual violence and gender equality – for the worse.

It's an article worth reading, largely because of some of the crazy statistics and headlines Dines shares. Apparently porn sites get more traffic than Netflix, Twitter, and Amazon. *Combined*. In 2013 one site, YouPorn, streamed six times the bandwidth of Hulu. And then there is Pornhub, which streamed 75 gigabytes of data *per second* in 2015, enough to pack the hard-drives of 175 million iPhones.

I found the information crazy, if not surprising. I've long heard that porn is a bigger "industry" than the NFL, but I don't know if I fully believed it. This is stunning, but it's really astonishing when one considers that in most Western nations porn is basically free to anyone with an internet connection and a phone or computer.

So on the porn consumption front, not much new here. The question on whether porn is harmful, however, is more interesting because the research is so divergent.

Case in point. Dines tells readers the following:

Extensive scientific research reveals that exposure to and

consumption of porn threaten the social, emotional and physical health of individuals, families and communities, and highlights the degree to which porn is a public health crisis rather than a private matter.

It's a serious charge. Dines links to various studies that suggest if men view porn they are [more likely](#) to commit rape or sexual assault, likelier to [sexually harass](#) their peers, and are more prone to violence and violence against women ([here](#) and [here](#)).

I can't say I read each study cover to cover. Some were paywall protected; others were, well, really long. But I imagine most of the information is compelling stuff. The problem is that there is an arena full of experts and studies saying that there [is no scientific evidence](#) that porn is harmful. Via Rewire:

David Ley, a clinical psychologist, told Rewire in an email, "Saying that porn is bad ... is a sad example of very poor thinking and worse, an attempt to manipulate through fear."

Nicole Prause, a researcher at University of California, Los Angeles, told Rewire in an email: "Scientists, including myself, have demonstrated that porn activates reward processes in the brain. This is like cocaine. It is also like viewing chocolate, cheese, and puppies playing." But the parallels with drug addiction end there. Prause explained: "Sex film viewing does not lead to loss of control, erectile dysfunction, enhanced cue (sex image) reactivity, or withdrawal. Missing any of these would mean sex films are not addicting."

A few takeaways from all this. First, it seems easier for people today to say, *This is harmful*, than, *This is wrong*. I say this only to highlight that the 21st-century mind, particularly those of the intellectual class, seems to recoil

at defining anything as immoral or moral.

Two, I think if Dines was going to punt on the question of the morality of pornography, she at least could have made a more persuasive scientific argument. The best information in her story was the headlines cited above—pulled, from all places, *Huffington Post*. The possible exception to this might be the study showing the troublingly high volume of films (88 percent) that feature content that can be described as “physical aggression” (i.e. hard spanking, gagging, choking, or slapping).

The facts show we are ingesting pornography at a rate that is alarming if Dines’ thesis—that it’s harmful—is correct. But she doesn’t make a compelling case as to why the research she cites is better than the research that says otherwise.

Third, assuming porn is harmful, the solution offered—public education—seems a rather weak counter-offensive. One could argue, in fact, that good old fashioned shame—*This is wrong, and you should not do it*—might resonate better to young people than, *You don’t want to get erectile dysfunction some day, do you?* But in a world suffering a moral identity crisis, that simple argument is one we seem virtually incapable of making.

Alas, if you believe porn is ~~wrong~~ harmful, I guess you have to start somewhere, right?

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