

Porn not to blame for public health issues

November 1 2017, by Rebecca Sullivan And Valerie Webber



Ovidie is a French feminist who published a book about the ignorance of pornography. Her documentary Pornocracy is an exploration of porn's multinational corporations and their exploitation of performers. Credit: Pornocracy

The recent attempt by Conservative MPs to label porn a [public health crisis in Canada](#) is part of a web of attacks against gender and sexual minorities—and a diversion from necessary policy debates on ending sexual violence. Luckily, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health didn't go for it.

It's a good thing because there a number of [public health](#) issues which need to be addressed. Children receive insufficient and often scientifically inaccurate sexual education and women cannot access reproductive and sexual health services. [Queer and transphobic attacks remain the highest-rated violent hate crime](#), [sex workers are denied the right to work with security and dignity](#) and shelters are turning away people fleeing domestic violence.

None of these issues relating to public sexual health have been addressed by the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health this year.

Instead, they debated [M-47, a motion to study "the public health effects of online, violent and degrading sexually explicit material of children, women and men."](#)

Just the title creates confusion. For example, separating out the social and sexual differences between children and adults would be a Herculean task. Then there is the fraught problem of defining "violent and degrading."

Faced with such an unwieldy framework, the committee [decided to focus on peer-reviewed research](#) to help them understand the issue prior to releasing the report and making recommendations.

Remarkably, Canada decided not to follow in the footsteps of the United States and the United Kingdom in blaming porn for a wide range of medical and social ailments, from erectile dysfunction to divorce. Instead, the report acknowledged that while pornography use may correlate with some unhealthy and anti-social behaviour in some people, there is no credible evidence that pornography of any kind *causes* that behaviour.

Moral panic

The decision to emphasize evidence over moral panic is a hopeful sign that we are done with excusing abusive behaviour by men against women with false diagnoses like sex addiction or porn addiction.

As noted sex therapist David Ley, author of both [*The Myth of Sex Addiction*](#) and [*Ethical Porn For Dicks*](#), has said: "It's possible to be an ethical, responsible person and treat oneself and others with dignity and integrity, AND to watch hot, no-holds-barred sex on screen."

Anti-porn advocates will remain unconvinced, as is clear by the dissenting opinion submitted by Conservative members of the committee. Why do some people cling to the notion that porn is a destructive force on the health of the nation?

Uncovering the answer reaches into the darkest corners of sex shaming, stigmatization, ignorance and fear that continue to characterize Canada's sexual culture.

Does porn cause public health issues?

The majority of the briefs submitted (20 out of 23) to the House of Commons Committee argued vociferously that porn causes major public health issues, usually citing a personal experience as proof. We co-authored [one of the few briefs submitted that emphasized rigorous peer-refereed research](#).

Instead of personal stories of porn horror, we explored the difference between causation and correlation and the heteronormative bias in anti-porn research. We also looked at the slippery definitions often provided for "violent" or "degrading" pornography —especially when consent isn't considered a factor in the evaluation process.

We discussed [the lack of any standardized \(much less proven-effective\) diagnosis](#) of "porn addiction" and the lack of standardized treatment protocols. As we read through the briefs advocating for labelling porn a public health crisis, we noticed an assumed ideal of a monogamous, heterosexual, romantic couple.

Over one third of the briefs insisted porn use contributed to relationship breakdowns. Increased interest in sexual experimentation and casual sex were also frequently listed as a public health concern.

Not one of the briefs acknowledged lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer or Two Spirited (LGBTQ2+) sexual expression. Some of them even listed "anal sex" as a violent-and-degrading consequence of porn. The deep-set homophobia of such an argument cannot be understated.

M-47 came on the heels of a spate of legislation, particularly in the United States and United Kingdom, to curtail access to pornography. The U.K. passed the [Extreme Pornography Act](#), a draconian intervention on privacy rights that blocks pornography sites with national-based ISPs if they depict acts considered "extreme."

Critics note that [many of the acts defined in the law target women's pleasure](#), including face-sitting and ejaculatory orgasm.

That law was followed by the Digital Economy Act. The U.K. now requires age verification checks for all porn sites and increased web blocking for any U.K.-based sites.

Politicians argued these measures were necessary to protect children —a simplistic statement to silence criticism. However, no real evidence supported their position. They also ignored the [fallibility of digital age verifications](#).

Meanwhile, in the United States, the Republican Party and eight states have already [declared porn a public health crisis](#). What might appear at first as absurd political grandstanding can have significant consequences on how sexual health is publicly supported, including sexual health curricula, access and privacy rights, research support and professional training.

What is so laudable about Canada's House of Commons report is it refutes the oppressive and harmful assumptions contained within the "public health crisis" argument. In recognizing the spectrum of gender and sexual diversity, and the critical factor of consent in defining both "violent" and "degrading," the committee has set Canada on a long-overdue path to [developing a sexual health promotion strategy](#) "that would include, but not be limited to, sexual identity, gender equity, gender-based violence, consent and behaviour in the digital age."

Porn ground rules

To be sure, the House of Commons report recognizes there are "possible risks of exposure to online violent and degrading sexually explicit materials." This is fair and correct, as there are risks to individuals of any age who are pre-disposed toward gender or sexual violence due to a host of social influences that breed intolerance for gender and sexual diversity and equity.

For example, research indicates that [self-diagnosis of porn addiction](#) occurs mostly in white, married, wealthy men. [Religiosity is also highly correlated](#) to expressing self-damaging attitudes and behaviours such as shame, guilt and fear that their pornography viewing habits will be discovered.

Thus, as we enter this new stage of the oft-battled-but-never-won porn wars, we would like to see more research on how the negative impacts of

porn consumption could be mitigated by a more inclusive sexual ethic. Is there perhaps a way for spiritual and sexual communities to work together for sex positivity?

We are cautiously optimistic. The Religious Institute, a multi-faith organization that advocates for sexual [health](#), education and social justice in faith communities has created a [Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing](#):

"Grounded in respect for the body and for the vulnerability that intimacy brings, this ethic fosters physical, emotional and spiritual health. It accepts no double standards and applies to all persons, without regard to sex, gender, colour, age, bodily condition, marital status or sexual orientation."

Their statement shares a lot in common with the growing international network of feminist and ethical porn producers to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for establishing the ground rules for consent-based sex.

Performers and producers like [Ovidie are drawing attention to serious labour problems](#) within the global network of Mindgeek/Pornhub. [Stoya bravely spoke up about relationship abuse](#), and experienced a repugnant backlash by anti-porn activists who suggested her work in porn was the cause of the violence. [Shine Louise Houston](#), an ethical porn producer and director of the award-winning film *Snapshot*, runs courses and workshops on using explicit sex in film to educate about everything from diversity to safer sex practices.

If ecumenical societies and ethical porn networks can share the same sexual values, the opportunity to develop a dynamic [sexual health](#) strategy has never been better. Canada can become a global leader in fostering healthy sexualities through consent-based education, sex worker support and gender and sexual inclusiveness.

The diversion into [porn](#) fear-mongering has resulted in not much more than a few cheeky, clickbait headlines. Now that we've had our laughs, it is imperative that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health return to the commitment made in their report.

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