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The internet and the rise of porn

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ON THE Thursday before Christmas, a judge sentenced a Melbourne man convicted of raping a woman to 11 years' jail. The judge, Damian Murphy, said the perpetrator, Andrew Bowen, 20, had used the internet to access hardcore pornography and to learn how to avoid leaving evidence at a rape scene. Judge Murphy said Bowen had "sought to depict a (sexual) fantasy" seen in downloaded material from the internet.

Bowen stalked his victim before he broke into her house, tied her hands together and repeatedly raped her.

The case highlights the link between pornography and violent attitudes and behaviour towards women.

Pornography is not new, but the development of the internet has contributed to a marked shift towards more extreme and more violent sexual imagery. Materials that would not pass Australia's film and television classification system are freely available — to young and old — on the internet.

Images of rape, coercion and abuse are commonplace. Even when the acts portrayed are not so abusive, the images are degrading and humiliating. The vast majority of portrayals are of men doing things to women for men's indulgence.

These are more than just pictures on a screen. They are images that are ripe with meanings about men and women, what they like and about how they ought to treat each other. They are images that impact on the perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of those viewing them.

Research suggests a clear link between exposure to or consumption of pornography and male sexual aggression against women. This connection is strongest when the imagery is violent. But it is also relevant to non-violent pornography, particularly for frequent users. Exposure to sexually violent material increases male viewers' tolerance of sexual violence and reduces their empathy for victims of violence, including rape.

The exposure of young people to pornography, including violent pornography, is particularly disturbing. Adolescence is a time in which young people are working out who they are and how they will interact with the world around them. It is a critical stage in the development of personal and sexual identity.

Young people are turning to internet pornography at the same time as they undertake this important developmental task. According to a 2003 Australia Institute study of 16 and 17-year-olds, 38% of boys (and 2% of girls) accessed internet sex sites deliberately. Twenty-two per cent of boys used internet sex sites at least every two or three months. These young men risk being captured by the intoxicating mixture of sexual and violent images and the physical rush that often accompanies it. Inequality and violence are eroticised.

Nor is it only those young people who intentionally seek out sexually explicit websites that consume internet pornography. The Australia Institute study found that 84% of boys and 60% of girls had been exposed accidentally to sex sites on the internet. This reflects the aggressive marketing of internet pornography, including through the use of involuntary and persistent "pop-ups" and games that become increasingly sexually explicit as young players progress through levels.

Pornography is now mainstream. Advertising and the media hard-sell on soft porn, regularly portraying women as sex objects to be looked at and used. Pornography takes this further: women are mere bodies for men's sexual gratification. The internet has provided a vehicle for easy, anonymous access to a vast array of sexually explicit material. It is material that is produced from all over the globe and that depicts all kinds of sexual activities. In the real world, according to child psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg, young women are performing sex acts on and for young men that are common only on internet porn sites.

The attitudes and behaviours that pornography — whether it be hard or soft — promotes and normalises are reflected in the attitudes and behaviours of many young men and women. This is alarming in view of rates of sexual assault in our community. Australian research suggests that nearly 20% of women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15. Young men are disproportionately more likely than other sections of the community to be the perpetrators of sexual assault.

Even if our children do not become the victims or, like Andrew Bowen, perpetrators of sexual assault, there is reason to be concerned about the pornofication of our culture. While the use of pornography is common, it does not have to be passively accepted. Young people — and young men in particular — need to be equipped with the conceptual frameworks and skills to reject a sexuality that eroticises degradation and violence. To fail to do so is to sell our young people short. It is to accept a situation where they are having images planted into their heads and attitudes into their hearts that undermine healthy and fulfilling intimate relationships.

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