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Footballers pay a penalty but our X-rated culture must share the blame

*The insidious growth in porn has blurred the line between normal and deviant, leaving many young people sexually confused and morally adrift, writes **Richard Eckersley***

If there is a moral in the sordid sex scandal enveloping rugby league, it is that in extending the range of what is regarded as 'normal' sex, we are also blurring the boundaries between the normal and the deviant. Pornography is an ingredient in this process. While little mention has so far been made of porn in this sorry saga, it has almost certainly played a part; some of the scripts and dialogue could have come straight out of a porn movie.

Pornography tends to be overlooked because it has become an established part of our culture, something to which almost all of us are exposed these days, in one form or another, willingly or not. It is cool to treat it lightly, as just another form of media entertainment. And it is not a critical issue in determining the facts of individual cases of alleged sexual assault.

So, for example, porn did not emerge as a factor in the heavily publicised trial and conviction in 2002 of the young men who took part in a series of gang rapes in Western Sydney - crimes whose public impact was intensified by the ethnic differences between the perpetrators and the victims. However, Margaret Cunneen, the senior crown prosecutor in the case, says that the rapists consumed a steady diet of internet porn.

Even accepting that most porn users don't rape, it is hard not to suspect that the men's exposure to porn influenced their attitudes, expectations and behaviour. Cunneen says her personal belief is that pornography 'had the effect of contributing to a belief that Western women are always amenable to debauched sex with multiple partners'.

There is growing evidence of the way pornography is shaping young people's notions of sexuality and relationships. A recent French survey estimated that almost half of the country's children had seen an adults-only sex film by the age of eleven. By seventeen, more than 80 per cent had seen one or more porn films. Claude Rozier, the researcher who led the survey, says hardcore porn has become 'the principal vehicle for quite young children's understanding of everything to do with love and sexuality, sometimes their only point of reference'.

Increasingly the children's language is that of the porn world: sodomy, group sex, gang rape, bondage. A French philosopher and psychologist, Michela Marzano, says it is difficult not to relate children's growing exposure to pornography to a surge in teenage gang rape cases. In one recent case, eleven boys, most aged 14 and 15, took it in turns on a Saturday afternoon to rape a 15-year-old classmate in an alley not far from their school.

Marzano says pornography will lead many young consumers to construct a world where sexual relations are those of these films. 'When they discover the real world, some of them will inevitably be disappointed and decide to stick to porn. Some will accept reality. And some will refuse the real and react in the way pornography has taught them: with sexual violence.'

In response to growing concern in France about media violence and pornography, the government asked a panel of experts, headed by philosopher Blandine Kriegel, to provide an accurate and dispassionate diagnosis of the problem. The panel concluded that television violence and pornography affected young people's behaviour, including 'the undifferentiated and ill-defined increase in violence and delinquency in every sector of our society'. Its recommendations are modest, reflecting a principle of 'testing the water' before any drastic measures are taken, and it emphasises responsibility rests with all parties, including parents and teachers. But the panel also says that where there is a clash between the principle of creative freedom and the principle of protecting children, 'the right of children' should be given priority.

The French survey prompted the Australia Institute, a progressive think-tank, to commission a similar survey here. It found most boys and many girls aged 16-17 had watched X-rated videos or had seen internet porn sites. The institute's report notes that porn, especially internet porn, depicts a wide range of extreme and deviant behaviour including group sex, rape, bondage, sadomasochism, urination, defecation and bestiality. It says the available evidence provides grounds for serious concern about children's exposure to particular types of pornography, notably that involving violence and extreme behaviours. It calls for more concerted action to minimise that exposure.

There may be a case for distinguishing non-violent from violent porn in terms of their role in violent behaviour, but non-violent porn has other effects, says American social psychologist Dave Myers. These include distorting people's perceptions of sexual reality, decreasing the attractiveness of their partners, priming men to see women in sexual terms, making sexual coercion seem more trivial and providing mental scripts for how to act in sexual situations. In other words, the difference may not be categorical and absolute, but one of degrees, of points on a scale.

Another key issue is the relationship between the mainstream and the margin. Even if we regard explicit sexual images as relatively harmless, our experience suggests that, unrestrained, it leads to the portrayal of more extreme and degrading forms of sexual behaviour. For example, the history of porn in Scandinavia shows it was only a matter of years before images of nude women became images of consensual sex between adults and then images of very young children being penetrated by adult men – to the concern of some of those who had championed sexual liberation. Conversely, the explicitness at the margin tends to influence what is acceptable in the mainstream. What was once confined to porn movies seeps into mainstream cinema, as illustrated by the French film, *Baise Moi*, controversially banned in Australia, which uses real sex in the depiction of sexual violence.

Of course, we can attempt to interrupt these flows of influence through regulation – as we do with child porn, for example – but we need to be more aware that this is, at a social level, like attempting to control a car by braking with one foot while the other has the accelerator flat to the floor. It may be true that we have always been fascinated by these aspects of human nature - thrilled by violence and titillated by sex – but this hardly justifies the sheer frequency and intensity of our exposure.

The issue here is not just a question of personal freedom of choice, but of the powerful cultural promotion of particular values, attitudes and behaviours. And this promotion is closely linked to transferring to the commercial mass media liberties that were initially intended to free us in our private lives. There are good reasons for keeping the public and private domains separate.

Social norms and etiquette define how we should behave; far more pervasively and subtly than the law, they set limits on our behaviour. And laws work better, and can be lighter, when they are used to direct, not check, the flow of social life – when they reflect and reinforce norms, rather than attempt to restrain what the norms encourage. Put another way, life is smoother when there is a fairly wide buffer zone, defined by notions of civility and decency, between what is encouraged, what is permitted and what is illegal – not just the ‘thin blue line’ of law enforcement.

So my point is not necessarily to call for stricter censorship, although regulation has its role; I think the issue is too subtle and complex for such a crude tool. A lot of behaviour carries risks, especially when taken to the edge. Driving cars kills and maims, as does drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. But we don’t ban them. We do, however, educate people, especially the young, about their risks and try, through regulation, to contain the hazards of excess.

So we do need to provide people – especially children and youth (and many top footballers are emotionally if not physically still boys, the parts of the brain responsible for self-control, judgement and emotions still developing) - with alternative, healthier frames of reference and models of behaviour. This role falls mainly on families and schools, but also other institutions. The greatest damage comes when they fail to do this, and even reinforce the dangerous and destructive messages, as appears to be the case with rugby league, and perhaps professional sport more generally.

At the same time, families and schools have enough pressures to cope with, so we shouldn’t let porn off the hook. It is part of the complex pattern of causation behind the events that have put sport on the front page for the worst possible reasons.

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