

Prepared Testimony of Professor James B. Weaver, III
U. S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation
Hearing on “Protecting Children on the Internet”
January 19, 2006

Pornography: Understanding Some Consequences for Children and Youth

The issue of pornography has undergone a dramatic change over the past four decades, one that shifts the definition, increases the complexity, and requires a new level of discussion. With the advent of the digital age, the pornography marketplace has rapidly transitioned from one tailored to a subculture of connoisseurs, with access typically restricted to adult bookstores and movie theaters, into a mass market offering prolific content availability and diversity.¹

Cable television, the Internet, DVDs, and other new technologies have made sexually explicit media content widely available, particularly to children and youth. And the content of pornography has become increasingly abusive, coercive, degrading, and violent. Contemporary pornography is, at best, a distant cousin of the artistic portraits of human female nudes common 20 years ago. Instead, the pornography industry today is dominated by sexually explicit videos that commonly portray the domination and humiliation of women for the purpose of arousal.²

The Pornography Industry

And today pornography is big business. One recent forecast projects 2005 revenues for the adult entertainment industry of \$12.6 billion³ with nearly \$4.3 billion, or 34%, generated by the sale or rental of DVDs and videocassettes and another 20%, or \$2.5 billion, collected through Internet marketing⁴. By channeling sexually explicit content into millions of homes and hotel rooms, pornography producers and corporate America profit together. Direct TV, which is owned by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation – the parent company of the Fox TV networks – earns over \$20 million per month from pornography. AT&T generates similar income distributing pornography via its broadband Internet services. All of the top 50 U.S. hotel chains, with the exception of Omni Hotels, offer pornography to their guests with sales accounting for nearly 70 percent of their in-room profits; as much as 10% of the annual profits of these hotel chains are derived from guests viewing pornography.⁵ In short, the production and distribution of pornography has rapidly evolved from a “cottage industry” to a stable and well-refined mass-production enterprise.

“Pornography is Just Good, Clean Entertainment, Right?”

Perhaps most troubling, however, is how the marriage of pornography producers and corporate America is perceived by the general public. Basically, the profiteering from sexually explicit media content by mainstream companies has helped to legitimize pornography as “normal” and “commonplace” for millions of Americans.⁶ While, at the same time, most voices that might speak out about the potentially harmful effects of viewing the distorted images typical of contemporary pornography have become taciturn and muted. Basically, in a culture where we put warning labels on everything from hair-dryers to coffee-cups to music CDs to theatrical release movies, essentially no one provides consumers with any warnings or information about pornography. The consequence of this is reflected in a question posed to me recently by a student who asked: “That means pornography is just good, clean entertainment, right?”

Pornography Distorts Our Perceived Reality about Sex

Pornography today leaves nothing to the imagination. In hundreds of thousands of movies streamed over the Internet or piped into homes and hotel rooms pornography presents vivid, salient, and graphic images of human sexuality, in general, and female sexuality, in particular. And these are not images where affection and emotional intimacy are well integrated. Instead, women are consistently and repeatedly objectified as sexually immodest and indiscriminate; as, to use a phrase coined by a feminist writer, “anonymous panting playthings.”⁷ Women in pornography are not valued for their intellect or strength; they are not valued for their talents as doctors, teachers, musicians, entrepreneurs, mothers, and scientists. No, the unequivocal message of pornography is that women are valued only as objects for male sexual gratification. This is the redundant and unchallenged stereotype projected onto our society by pornography.⁸

Pornography and the Sexual Socialization of Children

This is particularly problematic, I believe, for young people. Today, the near omnipresent mass media plays more of a role in the socialization of our children than ever before.⁹ As the values and standards of pornography and the sex industry become mainstreamed, it is these distorted images and ideals that our teens draw from as they come to understand what it means to be men and women and how they should treat themselves and each other. Socially acceptable and socially desirable behaviors have been redefined, particularly in the realm of sexuality. There are many facets of teen culture that reflect these changes.¹⁰

Some of the most obvious demonstrations of the sexual socialization of today’s teens can be found in their closets. Clothing is an important part of teen culture. It serves as a means of self-expression or a sign of affiliation with a particular social group or set of values. Parents and teachers have long been aware that “porn fantasy” fashions and “stripper chic” styles have filtered down to younger and younger girls. Many critics now fear that mass-market pornography has begun operating as a kind of social ruse for young women: They are encouraged to embrace the objectified female sexuality depicted by pornography based on the misguided notion that it provides “liberation.” Some evidence speaks to the potential breadth of this trend: According to a *Time* magazine report, in 2003 girls between 13 and 17 spent about \$152 million on thong underwear.¹¹

One of the saddest consequences of the pornographic sexual socialization of American youth concerns what has become socially acceptable, even socially desirable, sexual behavior in teen culture. An article in *The New York Times Magazine* explored the increasingly mainstream phenomenon of teen “hook-ups” -- which are strictly casual sexual encounters occurring between teenage boys and girls. While teenagers having sex has been of significant concern for many years, the degree of deliberate and self-professed detachment manifest in these “hook-ups” is startling.¹²

The legitimacy of this hook-up phenomenon within popular teen culture was exemplified on the CBS TV program *Judging Amy*. In an episode entitled “Consent” (#604, originally broadcast October 24, 2004) Judge Amy Gray heard the case of a male teen (Brent) who was accused of forcing a teenage girl (Caroline) to perform oral sex during a party. Judge Gray was asked to decide if the sexual behavior was sexual assault or the result of peer pressure. In a key scene of the episode Brent testifies “that’s what the parties are for.” He explains:

the girls have bracelets to show what they are into. Black- all the way, blue- oral sex, orange-only kissing. Caroline had on a blue bracelet. (She denied it meant

anything.) He says the older boys bullied him into getting oral sex from Caroline. They pulled off his pants and shoved him forward. He felt he didn't have a choice to back out.¹³

As this episode illustrated, separating sexuality from emotion -- something typical of pornography -- is now defined as cool, liberating, and empowering.

What the Social Science Research Reveals

This fundamental consequence of exposure to pornography has been unambiguously demonstrated over the last 20 years by an extensive body of social science research.¹⁴ The findings are surprisingly consistent and clear: Watching pornography negatively impacts our most basic attitudes, beliefs, and values about sex, intimacy, and family. Frequent consumption of pornography, for example, leads to (1) an overestimation of almost all sexual activities performed by sexually active adults. Some writers refer to this as the “pornucopia” effect. (2) Consumption of pornography fosters exaggerated estimates of the incidence of pre- and extramarital sexual activity -- as well as increased assessments of male and female promiscuity -- and leads to perceptions of dishonesty and distrust among intimate partners. (3) Consumption of pornography spawns doubts about the value of marriage as an essential social institution and about its future viability. It also diminishes the desire for offspring within marriage. The strongest effect of this kind concerns the aspiration of female viewers for female children. (4) Consumption of pornography creates and enhances sexual callousness and trivializes the criminality of sexual assault and abuse targeted at both adults and children.

Taken together, the research at hand establishes that consumption of pornography is a significant contributing factor in the creation of perceptions, dispositions, and behaviors that reflect sexual callousness, the erosion of family values, and diminished sexual satisfaction.¹⁵ Generalizing from these findings, we can anticipate that pornography should produce adverse consequences for individual consumers, their families and coworkers, and the broader community.

Pornography Facilitates Sexual Aggression

Consideration of the pragmatic implications of the research evidence suggests, first of all, that the distorted messages of unrestrained human sexual promiscuity conveyed by pornography could be, as others have argued, a potent catalyst for abusive behaviors such as domestic violence and rape. Watching pornography, it must be remembered, has been shown to result in both a “loss-of-respect” for female sexual autonomy *and* the disinhibition of men in the expression of aggression against women. Extensive research evidence shows that these two factors are prominently interwoven components in the perceptual profiles of sexually abusive and aggressive individuals.¹⁶

Pornography Fosters Misogyny

A second implication concerns the extent to which pornography-induced misogynistic perceptions negatively influence the welfare of women of all ages in everyday, nonsexual circumstances. Exposure to pornography, the data reveal, fostered acceptance of the notion that women are subservient to men and promoted an adversarial, distrustful relationship between the sexes. Many voices have suggested that the most damaging consequences of prolonged consumption of pornography are evident in the ill treatment of women (e.g., employment discrimination, economic exploitation) simply because of their gender.¹⁷

Pornography as De Facto Sex Educator

Third, there is reason to suspect that pornography -- with its seemingly factual, documentary-style presentation of sexual behaviors -- has usurped most other socialization agents to become the de facto sex education for children and adults alike. Thus, the likelihood persists that the main messages of pornography have a stronger influence on the formation of sexual dispositions, including coercive disposition, than alternative forms of sexual indoctrination.¹⁸

Pornography Threatens the Family

Fourth, it appears that the major consequence of consuming pornography is not the probability or possibility of committing a serious sex crime (though this can and does occur), but rather the disturbance of the fragile bonds of intimate relationships.¹⁹ This is where the most grievous pain, damage, and sorrow occur. Pornography perpetuates stereotypes that promote both exaggerated expectations about sexual behaviors and interpersonal distrust. Against this backdrop, there is considerable evidence suggesting that pornography can interfere with or even destroy healthy love and sexual relationships among long-term bonded partners. At the 2002 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, for example, two-thirds of the 350 divorce lawyers who attended said the Internet played a significant role in divorces in the past year, with excessive interest in online porn contributing to more than half of such cases. "This is clearly related to the Internet," says Richard Barry, president of the association. "Pornography had an almost nonexistent role in divorce just seven or eight years ago." Consumption of pornography also appears to threaten the welfare of children by creating economic instability for many families. Increasingly, U. S. businesses are imposing disciplinary actions, including termination, on employees because of inappropriate pornography use within the workplace.²⁰ One can only speculate how these Internet pornography threats to the nuclear family impact children.

Possible Courses of Action

It is against this backdrop we must now grapple with the question of how we, individually, and as a national family might best respond to pornography, in general, and pornography on the Internet, in particular.

We must acknowledge, however, that this discussion involves what may be one of the most complicated challenges of our time – how to reconcile the conflicting interests of promoting free speech, free thought, and free enterprise without abdicating our larger societal role to insure that parents have the freedom and resources necessary to raise and socialize their children as they see fit. Further, we must accept the fact that no single solution for protecting children from Internet pornography whether technical, legal, economic, or educational will be sufficient.

Within this framework, some recommendations can be offered for contemplation. First, we must give full consideration of the desirability of pornography as a rudimentary “educator” about sex for children and adults alike. “The promotion of social and educational strategies that teach children to make wise choices about using the Internet and to take control of their online experiences” has, as noted in the National Academies’ National Research Council report *Youth, Pornography, and the Internet*, been “largely ignored in the present debate.”²¹ This, it seems, is a trend that urgently needs correction.

Towards this goal the Federal government could support research initiatives (1) to more clearly document the incidence and prevalence of pornography use on the Internet by children, (2) that would better illuminate the impact of pornography use on the economic and relational stability of the family, and (3) effective strategies to counteract the distorted, redundant stereotypes perpetuated by an industry designed to sell sex as an entertainment commodity.

Comprehensive educational strategies should also be developed and offered to educators for adaptation to their local community needs. And, clearly, these curricula should not be conceived of as “sex education” class; but, rather, as media literacy programs. As recently demonstrated at a Midwestern high school²² our ongoing national strategy concerning pornography has produced a difficult paradox: Despite our developing recognition of the adverse consequences that pornography can have on individuals, families, and our society, many of us remain afraid to engage in public discourse on the issue because it pertains to sexual behaviors. We proclaim, in other words, that pornography is “bad” but shy away from explaining why leaving it to the curiosity of children and young adults to discover for themselves what all the fuss is about. Simply said, we must develop educational and social strategies that will tarnish the luster of the “forbidden fruit” of pornography and equip the American public with the resources needed to make informed decisions about the role of this type of media content in their lives.

Of course, initiatives such as these are not inexpensive and, given current budgetary constraints, it seems that innovative funding solutions must be explored. Personally, I’ve found the ideas expressed in the “Internet Safety and Child Protection Act of 2005” (S.1507) sponsored by Senator Lincoln and others very provocative and hope that this bill will be expeditiously given full consideration.

Another, more immediate, consideration that should be explored concerns the current, seemingly universally applied, definition of pornography as “free speech.” Specifically, one can argue that the current practice of many Internet pornography vendors of offering “free samples” of sexually explicit images and videos as part of their marketing ploy involves the use of pornography as “commercial speech.”²³ Research suggests that websites attempting to lure consumers with free content typically incorporate no age verification mechanism and often feature explicit “gonzo porn” that depicts sex between multiple partners, involves physically abusive behaviors, and avoids safe sex practices. Many images – especially those depicting incest or involving teenage and/or amateur female performers, for instance – appear inconsistent with current child pornography laws. Further, these samplers websites often include the serialization of full films, providing the viewer with several one or two minute segments each week, thus encouraging the consumer to develop the habit of returning for more free content but always offering the opportunity to view the complete film for a fee. Taken together, these marketing practices raise the question: Does the use of sexually explicit images as part of a commercial transaction represent “commercial speech” and thus mitigating the degree of constitutional protection typically accorded pornography?

Conceptualization of pornography on the Internet as commercial speech would offer the opportunity to scrutinize the appropriateness of other common, but deceptive, marketing practices. A recent web site survey, for example, found that searches of keywords such as *sex education*, *sexual health*, and *sex advice for teens* yielded a preponderance of pornography web pages. Specifically, 63% of 1,556 compatible web pages were categorized as pornographic.²⁴ This raises the question: Does this distorted use of terminology that most reasonable people would normally not associate with the commercial distribution of sexually explicit images constitute deceptive advertising and are their mechanisms available to correct this practice?

And, finally, we must recognize that our society is on the verge of an era when anyone with a cell phone will be able to watch sexually explicit videos anywhere. One can only wonder what mechanisms are being developed to provide protection to children with the newest distribution technologies such as video streaming to wireless telecommunication devices.

James B. Weaver, III
 Professor of Communication and Psychology
 Shanks Hall (0311)
 Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University
 Blacksburg, VA 24061

References

- ¹ Weaver, J. B., III (November 18, 2004). Testimony before the U.S. Senate. http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/testimony.cfm?id=1343&wit_id=3913.
- ² Brosius, H. B., Weaver, J. B., III, & Staab, J. F. (1993). Exploring the social and sexual "reality" of contemporary pornography. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 30, 161-170.
- ³ Mun, A. (December 13, 2005). *Adult Industry Generates \$12.6 Billion in 2005, AVN Estimates; State of the U.S. Adult Industry Report Highlights Diverse Products and Delivery Options*. http://home.businesswire.com/portal/site/google/index.jsp?ndmViewId=news_view&newsId=20051213005951&newsLang=en.
- ⁴ Arnold, T. K. (January 9, 2006). *Adult biz hot for home video*. <http://www.bizreport.com/news/9599/>.
- ⁵ CBS News 60 Minutes (September, 2004). *Porn in the U.S.A.* <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/11/21/60minutes/main585049.shtml>;
 PBS Frontline (August, 2001). *Interview Dennis McAlpine*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/porn/interviews/mcalpine.html#hotel>;
- Thompson, M. (April 13, 2004). *Porn profits go mainstream*. <http://moneycentral.msn.com/content/CNBCTV/Articles/TVReports/P80813.asp>.
- ⁶ Paul, P. (January 19, 2004). The porn factor. *Time*, 163(3), 99. <http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,993158,00.html>; Paul, P. (2005). *Pornified: How pornography is transforming our lives, our relationships, and our families*. New York: Times Books.
- ⁷ Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against our will: Men, women, and rape*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- ⁸ United States Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970). *Report of The Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*. New York, Bantam. Over 30 years ago the Commission reported essentially the same observation noting that "It is often asserted that a distinguishing characteristic of sexually explicit materials is the degrading and demeaning portrayal of the role and status of the human female. It has been argued that erotic materials describe the female as a mere sexual object to be exploited and manipulated sexually. One presumed consequence of such portrayals is that erotica transmits an inaccurate and uninformed conception of sexuality, and that the viewer or user will (a) develop a calloused and manipulative orientation toward women and (b) engage in behavior in which affection and sexuality are not well integrated."

- ⁹ Cantor, J., Mares, M., & Hyde, J. S. (2003). Autobiographical memories of exposure to sexual media content. *Media Psychology*, *5*, 1-31.
- ¹⁰ Boies, S. C., Knudson, G., & Young, J. (2004). The internet, sex, and youths: Implications for sexual development. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *11*, 343-363. Greenfield, P. M. (2004). Inadvertent exposure to pornography on the Internet: Implications of peer-to-peer file-sharing networks for child development and families. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, *25*, 741-750; Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., Wolak, J. (2003). Victimization of Youths on the Internet. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, *8*, 1-39; Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2005). Exposure to Internet pornography among children and adolescents: A national survey. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *8*, 473-486.
- ¹¹ Wallis, C. (October 6, 2003). The thing about thongs. *Time*, *162*(14), 94.
<http://www.time.com/time/archive/preview/0,10987,1005821,00.html>.
- ¹² Denizet-Lewis, B. (May 30, 2004). Friends, friends with benefits and the benefits of the local mall. *The New York Times Magazine*.
<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F60713FA3C5A0C738FDDAC0894DC404482>.
- ¹³ *Judging Amy* (October 24, 2004) Consent (program #604). Episode synopsis at <http://judgingamy.tvfans.org/amy/episode/a604.htm>.
- ¹⁴ Weaver, J. B., III (1994). Pornography and sexual callousness: The perceptual and behavioral consequences of exposure to pornography. In D. Zillmann, J. Bryant, & A. C. Huston (Eds.), *Media, family, and children: Social scientific, psychodynamic, and clinical perspectives* (pp. 215-228). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- ¹⁵ Schneider, J. P. (2000). A qualitative study of cybersex participants: Gender differences, recovery issues, and implications for therapists. *Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity*, *7*, 249-278; Stack, S., Wasserman, I., & Kern, R. (2004). Adult social bonds and use of internet pornography. *Social Science Quarterly*, *85*, 75-88; Mulac, A., Jansma, L. L., & Linz, D. G. (2002). Men's behavior toward women after viewing sexually-explicit films: Degradation makes a difference. *Communication Monographs*, *69*, 311-328.
- ¹⁶ Oddone-Paolucci, E., Genuis, M., & Violato, C. (2000). A meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of pornography. In C. Violato, E. Oddone-Paolucci, M. Genuis (Eds.), *The changing family and child development* (pp. 48-59). Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing; Malamuth, N. M., Addison, T., & Koss, M. (2000). Pornography and sexual aggression: Are there reliable effects and can we understand them? *Annual Review of Sex Research*, *11*, 26-91; Shope, J. H. (2004). When words are not enough: The search for the effect of pornography on abused women. *Violence Against Women*, *10*, 56-72.
- ¹⁷ Russell, D. E. H. (1998). *Dangerous relationships: Pornography, misogyny, and rape*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- ¹⁸ Beauregard, E., Lussier, P., & Proulx, J. (2004). An exploration of developmental factors related to deviant sexual preferences among adult rapists. *Sexual Abuse: Journal of Research and Treatment*, *16*, 151-161; Fisher, W. A., & Barak, A. (1989). Sex education as a corrective: Immunizing against possible effects of pornography. In D. Zillmann & J. Bryant (eds.), *Pornography: Research advances and policy considerations* (pp. 289-320). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum. Häggström-Nordin, E., Hanson, U., & Tydén, T. (2005). Associations between pornography consumption and sexual practices among adolescents in Sweden. *International Journal of STD & AIDS*, *16*, 102-107; Smith, M. Gertz, E., Alvarez, S., & Lurie, P. (2000).

- The content and accessibility of sex education information on the Internet. *Health Education & Behavior*, 27, 684-694.
- ¹⁹ American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers (November 14, 2002). *Is the Internet bad for your marriage ?*
<http://www.expertclick.com/NewsReleaseWire/default.cfm?Action=ReleaseDetail&ID=3051>
- ²⁰ Greenfield, D. N., & Davis, R. A. (2002). Lost in Cyberspace: The web @ work. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 4, 347-353 ; Griffiths, M. (2003). Internet abuse in the workplace : Issues and concerns for employers and employment counselors. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 40, 87-96.
- ²¹ The National Academies (May 2, 2002). *No single solution for protecting kids from Internet pornography.*
<http://www4.nationalacademies.org/news.nsf/isbn/0309082749?OpenDocument>; Committee to Study Tools and Strategies for Protecting Kids from Pornography and Their Applicability to Other Inappropriate Internet Content, Computer Science and Telecommunications Board, National Research Council (2002). Thornburg, D., & Lin, H. S. (Eds.), *Youth, pornography and the Internet*. Washington: National Academy Press.
- ²² Townsend, Angela (January 14, 2006). School gets lesson on porn : Don't bring it up in classroom. *The Plain Dealer.*
<http://www.cleveland.com/news/plaindealer/index.ssf?/base/cuyahoga/113723103675680.xml&coll=2>
- ²³ *U.S. Constitution - Analysis and Interpretation* (pp. 1020-1187). Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office via GPO Access.
- ²⁴ Smith, M. Gertz, E., Alvarez, S., & Lurie, P. (2000). The content and accessibility of sex education information on the Internet. *Health Education & Behavior*, 27, 684-694.