**Week 5**

**Censorship**

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**Panel 1:**

**Teacher:** This textbook is soft on communism!

**Student:** What's communism?

**Panel 2:**

**Teacher:** It's a totalitarian form of government that controls what people can read and...

**Panel 3:**

**Teacher:** Won't let them think for themselves!

**Teacher:** What're you going to do about the book?

**Panel 4:**

**Teacher:** Ban it!
SNATCHED

These are the stories of four women who have extensive experience of appearing in sex magazines or X-rated films. I'm not claiming they're representative of all women in pornography – no such small sample could ever claim to be representative. No doubt there are women who would have very different stories to tell. But when there are women like these four, who chose of their own free will to be involved in pornography, and can explain intelligently and articulately why they did it, it must be accepted that porn can be a career choice – and not necessarily a bad one.


THE EVILS OF PORNOGRAPHY
Is It Really that Bad?

‘Deep Throat seemed just another small chapter of my life, but I hated to see it end.’

From Ordeal, by Linda Lovelace

In 1982, two researchers at the University of Indiana, Dolf Zillmann and Jennings Bryant, carried out a study. They took 160 male and female university students and split them into four groups. Over the course of six weeks, one group was shown pornographic films, the second was shown a combination of pornographic films and non-pornographic films, a third group was shown non-pornographic films and the fourth group was shown no films at all.

At the end of the six weeks, all 160 participants were asked to recommend a prison sentence for a rapist. According to Zillmann and Bryant, those in the group
that had seen only pornographic films recommended a shorter prison sentence for the rapist than those in other groups. This and other findings led them to conclude that massive exposure to standard pornography results in a loss of compassion towards women as rape victims and towards women in general.

In the twenty years since this study took place, it has been quoted frequently by anti-porn campaigners as one of the most compelling pieces of evidence that porn is harmful.

There's just one problem. Other researchers repeated the experiment and didn't get the same results. A 1988 study by Edward Donnerstein, Daniel Linz and Steven Penrod at the University of California split test subjects into four groups and showed them either R-rated violent 'slasher' films, X-rated non-violent porn films, R-rated 'teen sex' films or no films at all, then tested their attitudes towards rape. Those who had watched the R-rated 'slasher' films were less sympathetic towards the rape victim, but the subjects in the other three groups showed no difference in attitude.

At this point things begin to get awkward. Quoting from the vast body of university research on pornography is a little like quoting from the Bible - you can find a bit that will say whatever you want it to say. That doesn't mean that this bit is representative of the whole.

For example, a 1989 American study compared the attitudes towards women held by 184 psychology students and twenty adult-theatre patrons. The study found that the adult-theatre patrons had more favourable attitudes towards women than either male or female psychology students. This study, taken alone, could be cited as compelling evidence that pornography has a positive influence on those who watch it. But it's just one study.

With any study, questions can be raised about methodology and possible conscious or unconscious bias of researchers. It's also important to remember that a study only tests the attitudes of the small number of people involved, not society generally. That's why it's dangerous to place too much weight on any one study.

The US-based Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, taking an overview of four decades of research into sexually explicit material, says sexist attitudes are promoted more by sexually suggestive, violent R-rated material than by explicit X-rated material. They say sexist attitudes and violence towards women are often depicted in 'everyday television fare', seen by even younger audiences. 'Clearly, young people acquire beliefs and attitudes about men, women, sexuality, and relationships from this material,' they say. 'To the extent that our society views these attitudes as undesirable or harmful, there is reason for concern about such material.'

When it comes to the issue of whether pornography leads to aggression against women, the society says that when people have been exposed to material showing both aggression and explicit sex, material showing aggression, and material showing only sex, the results suggest that it's exposure to aggression that triggers
aggressive behaviour. Exposure to material containing only sex doesn’t increase aggression towards women. ‘For most people, aggression and sex are incompatible,’ they say. ‘For a small percentage of men predisposed to aggression toward women, however, combining sex and aggression does stimulate arousal and aggressive responses.’

Dr Paul Wilson, chair of criminology at Bond University and former director of research at the Australian Institute of Criminology, says he’s not worried about non-violent erotica. ‘As a criminologist and a forensic psychologist, I don’t believe that (non-violent erotica) is responsible for causing antisocial behaviour or crime. I am more worried about the violence and sex mixed together that is increasingly available over the Internet because I think there is some empirical research to show that with people who are predisposed to mixing sex and violence together, it can act as, if not a catalyst, at least a reinforcement to their predispositions.’

He’s also concerned about violence in the media generally. ‘I’ve generally taken the position that violence in the media, whether it be the Internet or in the standard media, is not a major contributor to violence in outside society, or to real violence on the streets, if you like. However, I think that the widespread dissemination of violence—not only Internet but also traditional media—has the danger of making all of us desensitised to using violence to solve our personal and social problems.’

Keeping in mind that violence is banned in X-rated films in Australia, and sexual violence has been banned in that category since 1984, if anti-porn campaigners were truly concerned about the welfare of women, they’d be actively encouraging men to watch X-rated films in preference to violent M- and R-rated films.

The other thing to keep in mind with research into the effects of porn is that laboratory experiments are of limited value. The subjects who were made to watch aggressive and sexually explicit material didn’t attack the first woman they saw. At the very most, they scored higher on laboratory tests of aggression taken immediately afterwards. Out in the real world there are so many other factors involved—laws, social taboos, respect for other people’s feelings. What’s recorded as an increase in aggression in a laboratory may equate to no change in behaviour in reality.

Numerous attempts have been made over the years to link the availability of pornography with the rate of sex crimes. Claims have been made on both sides: that porn increases the rape rate, and that porn reduces the rape rate. Before any claims are made, careful analysis of statistics is needed, taking into account any increased reporting of rape (as opposed to actual rape), as well as comparing the rate of rape with the rate of other types of violent crime over the same period. Beyond that, proving a causal link—that the availability of pornography is directly responsible for the increase or decrease in sex crimes—is even harder to do.

Dr John Court, a psychologist who was closely involved with the Festival of Light morals group in South Australia, attempted to make a link between pornography...
and sex crimes in the 1970s. But his statistics didn't stand up to scrutiny and his research has been dismissed by authorities around the world, including the Williams Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship in the UK.

More comprehensive research was carried out by Dr Berl Kutchinsky, professor of criminology at the University of Copenhagen. The Danish parliament decriminalised pornography in 1969, after consultation with criminologists, educators, psychologists and psychiatrists. Child pornography remained illegal, along with the sale of porn to anyone under the age of sixteen. The public display of porn was also banned. Pornography was similarly legalised in Sweden in 1970 and in West Germany in 1973.

Dr Kutchinsky studied statistics on rape and other sex crimes in these three countries, plus the United States, over two decades, making comparisons with statistics on other violent crime. He was able to exclude, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the availability of porn leads to an increase in sexual violence. In fact, he found some decreases in sex crimes in that period, including serious sex offences against young children in Denmark.

Dr Wilson says there have been literally thousands of studies, but he thinks the facts still support Kutchinsky. 'I think the evidence still is, again talking professionally as a criminologist and a forensic psychologist, that most of the violence out on the street - in the real world, if you like - is not contributed to by pornography, or non-violent erotica. The other causes would overwhelm any contribution that non-violent erotica might make.'

As many people who have been to Japan have noticed, Japanese films and publications, especially comic books, contain high levels of sexual violence, often involving S&M. Yet this hasn't resulted in high levels of real sexual violence in the country. Dr Wilson says it's instructive to look at countries like Japan and its relatively low rate of sexual crime, although it is only part of the picture. 'The problem with country comparisons is that the history and the cultural background [of Japan] is so vastly different from say Australia, [the] United States and Western democracies. So you have to be careful with comparisons, although I think it does help neutralise the view that somehow pornography will automatically cause a rise in antisocial behaviour and sex crimes.'

Dr Wilson says there are many urban myths about pornography, such as the one about Ted Bundy, who murdered more than thirty women in the United States, being motivated by his love for porn. He says it's clear to anyone who has analysed the Bundy case in any detail that this isn't true. 'I was in the United States at the time when Bundy was very active and I was working with the research institute that had something to do with trying to profile him, but it was quite clear to me and to many others, and I think there's a lot of literature about this now, which shows that Bundy was not motivated by pornography at all. He used it as a last-minute excuse to try and delay his execution. So there are a lot of myths like that which are used by people who say that pornography is responsible for crime and antisocial behaviour and especially sexual crime, which are profoundly wrong.'
Continuing to point to pornography as the major cause of rape, despite any convincing evidence, doesn't help women. It's a distraction from the real causes of sexual violence, and dismissive of the experiences of all the women raped in eras when porn was virtually non-existent and in cultures where porn is banned.

So why do morals campaigners continue to battle against non-violent erotica instead of fundraising for women's shelters or running self-defence classes for schoolgirls? The answer could be in one of the other supposed effects of pornography cited by Christian ethics groups such as the Melbourne-based Salt Shakers: that it undermines the institution of marriage. Some researchers have claimed watching pornography fosters a lack of respect for social institutions such as the family and for traditional sex roles. In other words, it may give women the idea that there's more to life than getting married and having children.

Candida Royalle, with her background as a pioneer woman of adult film making in America, says the Bush administration is threatening to crack down on America's adult-film industry at the same time that more and more young women are speaking out about sex, porn and their desire to view and create what they'd like to see. 'It's my opinion that one of the driving forces behind the efforts to censor adult entertainment in countries like the US and Australia is the fact that women are becoming consumers,' she says. 'As long as it was only men it wasn't a threat to the family morality thing. I believe the fear is that sexually liberated women

will mean the ultimate end of morality and the family unit.'

This lack of respect for social institutions might worry minority moral conservative groups with the word 'family' in the title, but it's hardly new or threatening. It's what most young women today would take for granted, largely because feminists battled for decades to give women the freedom to choose to do what they want with their lives - to have choices beyond simply 'wife and mother'. And it's what makes it so bizarre that so many feminists have joined forces with morals campaigners on the issue of porn. If there was real, compelling evidence that increased availability of porn led to a rise in sex crimes, it would be understandable. But continuing research over the years has consistently failed to prove a link.

The anti-porn feminists who came to prominence in the 1980s were never representative of all feminist thinking - and since then, other feminists have put forward very different views on porn. But Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon and other staunch campaigners against pornography still have many supporters, and their influence can be seen in censorship attitudes and institutionalised terminology (such as 'demeaning') in Australia. They're probably also at least partly responsible for the vague discomfort with pornography that many otherwise liberal-minded people have today.

'Pornography is the theory, rape is the practice' was the slogan, coined by feminist writer Robin Morgan, that summed up much of the feminist opposition to porn. It was simple, catchy and wrong.
Implicit in that slogan was the belief that pornography is inherently about violence against women. Susan Brownmiller wrote in 1979 that ‘standard pornographic fare’ is ‘the presentation of the female body being stripped, bound, raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered’. This wasn’t ‘standard pornographic fare’ back then, and is even further from the ‘standard pornographic fare’ of today.

Most pornography depicts women taking part in all forms of sex with great enthusiasm. Whether the actresses in porn films are genuinely experiencing multiple orgasms isn’t the point—they’re actresses being paid to play a part convincingly. The point is, they’re acting as if they’re experiencing multiple orgasms. The typical man who sits down to watch a porn film isn’t getting off on a rape scenario—he’s getting off on a sex scenario. The fact that the vast majority of pornography—even without legal restriction—depicts women enjoying sex says something positive about male sexuality. It says most men want to imagine sex with women who want it and enjoy it as much as they do.

If pornography is the theory, then it’s sex with extremely enthusiastic women capable of multiple orgasms that is the practice. Or, more accurately, masturbatory while fantasising about sex with extremely enthusiastic women capable of multiple orgasms.

Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon credited pornography with a huge amount of power. To MacKinnon, pornography had made the world ‘a pornographic place’, and its harm could not be discerned

because it is so much of “what is”. Dworkin saw pornography as ‘the material means of sexualising inequality; and that is why pornography is a central practice in the subordination of women’.

In 1983, Dworkin and MacKinnon, who were teaching at the University of Minnesota Law School, proposed to the Minneapolis City Council that an ordinance should be brought in to regulate pornography, defining it as sex discrimination and a violation of women’s civil rights. In their view, pornography was, in itself, a form of violence against women, and so shouldn’t be protected by freedom of speech laws.

The city council found their arguments so compelling that it passed an ordinance that would have seen those involved in making, distributing and selling pornography liable for damages claims of all kinds. The ordinance was later vetoed by the mayor, and a similar ruling in Indianapolis was struck down by the Supreme Court as being unconstitutional, but it shows how seriously Dworkin and MacKinnon were taken.

To blame sexual inequality on pornography is to ignore the experiences of women who live subjugated lives in societies where pornography is virtually non-existent. It’s a theory that simply doesn’t stand up to analysis. In fact, a 1990 American study looking at the relationship between circulation rates of soft-core porn magazines and gender equality in fifty American states found that, contrary to what researcher Larry Baron had expected, gender equality was higher in states that had higher circulation rates of pornography. Baron suggested
that pornography and gender equality both flourish in politically tolerant societies. Closer to home, New Zealand manages to have a high number of women in positions of power – including the last two prime ministers – while at the same time having porn available for rent in local video stores.

Obviously, sexual inequality existed long before pornography as we know it was created. If anything, pornography is a reflection of how men see women, rather than the other way round. Sexual inequality has deeper, far more complex causes than adult magazines and videos.

This is the single most baffling thing about the anti-porn campaigners: those arguing from the moral conservative perspective will say that porn destroys the heterosexual marriage-based social structure with traditional gender roles (‘the family’), while those arguing from the feminist perspective will say that porn maintains the heterosexual marriage-based social structure with traditional gender roles (‘the patriarchy’). Although they’re on the same side of the argument, the two groups are arguing the opposite thing.

Both are attributing way too much power to pornography. Society has undergone massive changes in attitudes towards gender roles and sexuality over the past few decades. Increased availability of pornography is one result of that. Porn has not brought about those changes – or stopped them from occurring.

MacKinnon and other anti-porn feminists of the time relied heavily on the testimony of Linda Lovelace, star of the 1973 porn classic *Deep Throat*, who claimed in her 1980 autobiography *Ordeal* that she had been forced into making the film by her husband, Chuck Traynor. Lovelace appeared at the hearings in Minneapolis which helped pass the ordinance. She also testified at the 1986 Meese Commission on pornography.

What the feminists ignored was that Lovelace’s experiences of making *Deep Throat*, as related in *Ordeal*, were generally positive – that acting in the film was a welcome break from the abusive relationship she was in.

‘Something was happening to me, something positive. It had to do with the fact that no-one was treating me like garbage,’ she writes of the beginning of filming. She talks of joking around with the other actors and finding the lines funny: ‘I hadn’t laughed, really laughed, in so long that my face had to carve new smile lines.’ And even though she was having to be ‘involved sexually with an actor or two’, her final analysis is: ‘*Deep Throat* seemed just another small chapter of my life, but I hated to see it end.’

She hated to see it end? On the basis of this, pornography was being condemned and legislated against?

Lovelace says in *Ordeal* that it wasn’t her choice to make *Deep Throat*. Women in abusive relationships may be forced to do many things against their will. Lovelace says she made a porn film against her will. What should be condemned here is the abusive relationship. It was not the makers of the porn film who coerced her into being in it, it was her husband. It is not the filming of *Deep Throat* that she writes of in horror, it is the beatings she
received from her husband at night. She even says one of the people working on the film offered to help her to escape from her abusive relationship, but she didn’t believe him.

According to Lovelace’s story, the person who committed the crime was her husband, and yet the porn industry ended up being blamed for it.

Those who saw Lovelace headlining the fight against porn in the 1980s might have been a little surprised to see her on the cover of the Category 1 fetish porn magazine *Leg Show* in January 2001. The pictorial inside – ‘the original sex star’s first photos in twenty years!’ – had her posing in corsets and stockings. ‘Nobody forced me to pose for *Leg Show,*’ she says in the accompanying article. ‘Money was my motivation.’ She also talks of her disappointment with the women’s movement. ‘I think the feminist movement got a good start on what they wanted to do because of me, but they haven’t really helped me. They’ve made a lot of money off me.’ She complains that feminists advised her against trying to get money owed to her from the release of *Deep Throat* because they said it was ‘dirty money’.

This, one of the last public statements of the most famous ‘victim’ of pornography – who died in 2002 – gets closer to the truth of porn than most morals campaigners and anti-porn feminists ever will. For many of the people involved, it’s simply a business; something they do as a way of making money.

For anti-porn feminists, porn was something concrete they could fight. It was a battle that could be won. With

the powerful forces of the moral conservatives on the same side as them – for once – they had a good chance of getting laws passed to restrict porn. It’s just unfortunate that their efforts didn’t go towards something more useful.

There are many other perceived harms of pornography. When the New Zealand OFLC ran a community consultation on sexually explicit videos and asked participants about possible harm from the video they’d just seen, at the top of the list was ‘creates or reinforces inaccurate stereotypes and gives men the wrong message about women’.

As one person wrote, ‘Implies that all women like rough sex and lots of it, all men are large etc. Creates a false impression of sex and how much people enjoy its variations.’

Veronica Hart, who produced *Shayla’s Web,* one of the videos shown in the New Zealand community consultation, believes that people who criticise porn films for their lack of realism should pick different targets: ‘I think they would have a much better time going after mainstream sexual images and how they affect young girls rather than how looking at sex is going to affect a fully formed adult, who are supposed to be the only people who are seeing these films.’

Porn films are adult fantasies, just like action films, where one good man manages to single-handedly blow away an entire gang of baddies, and romance novels, where a woman ends up living happily ever after with a devilishly handsome French nobléman who is madly in love with her.
SNATCHED

If a man’s going to fantasise, why shouldn’t he be able to fantasise about a woman who loves sex and all its variations? Why should he have to watch a film with a woman saying, ‘I don’t want to put that in my mouth,’ or ‘haven’t you finished yet?’ Similarly, why shouldn’t a woman be able to enjoy watching a porn film with a man who has a huge penis and can have sex for hours?

No-one’s knowledge of sex is formed entirely by porn films. Friends, partners, family members, teachers, work colleagues, newspapers, TV, radio, magazines and books all carry messages about sex and what women want or don’t want. Within the context of that, porn films can be seen for the fantasy they are. Of course no man believes that all women are instantly ready to have sex of any kind with any man who asks them. If that were the case, there wouldn’t be any need for porn films.

Pornography is also criticised for the unrealistic images of women it presents. While there certainly is an oversupply of skinny blondes with silicone-enhanced breasts in adult films and magazines, the same could be said of mainstream films and magazines.

What’s rarely recognised is the role some porn magazines play in making women feel better about their bodies. A vital part of The Picture magazine is the ‘readers’ wives’ section, known as Home Girls. Women of all ages and all sizes send in nude photos of themselves, and none of them are knocked back for not being attractive enough. This section of the magazine is so popular that it has spawned its own magazine, 100% Home Girls.

There’s an unwritten rule at The Picture to never criticise a woman’s appearance, no matter whether she has sagging breasts, stretch marks or cellulite. So size twenty women who’d never make an appearance in most women’s magazines – except in ‘before’ shots for weight-loss products – are praised for their huge breasts, gorgeous smiles or lack of sexual inhibitions.

Contrast this with magazines aimed at young women that will only show a model who is bigger than size ten in a special ‘fashion for real women’ feature; will only run slim, attractive women in ‘real-life’ stories; and will have articles advising which sex positions are best for disguising flabby arms or big stomachs.

The Picture has an unwritten rule of being positive generally about women. Says former editor Tim Scott: ‘I think that our whole approach basically is that sex is fun, nudity is fun, nude women are a good thing; women who like sex are a good thing, and that’s where it ends.’

Another frequently raised concern about pornography is whether the women involved are being coerced or badly treated. As Veronica Hart and Sharon Mitchell have outlined, the adult film business in America is huge and working conditions vary. There are movies where actors are treated well and the sex is safe, and movies where this isn’t the case.

In fact, many responsible makers of adult films in America are angry with the irresponsible ones who give their industry a bad name. ‘I think a lot of these film makers are bringing the wrath upon all of us with their over-the-top depictions,’ says Candida Royalle. ‘A little self-regulation can go a long way.’
SNATCHED

As far as the adult-film industry in Australia goes, there aren’t really enough films being made to make generalisations. Take, as an example, the most high-profile Australian porn film of the past decade: Buffy Down Under, released in 1998. The film attracted an enormous amount of attention, due not so much to the star, American actress Kristi Myst, as the producer, David Haines, having been Australia’s former deputy chief censor.

Haines had been working as a consultant on censorship issues, and had several clients in the adult industry. One of them had approached him and asked if he would help produce a film with Myst while she was visiting Australia as a guest at Sexpo in Melbourne.

In the end, Haines says, he ended up doing everything, from writing the ‘extremely unremarkable’ script to casting, hiring crew and even holding the camera when one of the professional cameramen he’d hired began shaking uncontrollably.

Buffy Down Under was shot in the ACT, the only place in Australia where it’s legal to film sex for profit. The actors were found by advertising in newspapers. About thirty people – including six women – responded, and the film was cast from there. In the eighteen months between Buffy Down Under and the next adult film Haines made, Revenge Aussie Style, he received more than 10,000 applications from men keen to be porn stars, and around 200 enquiries from women. Among them were married couples and single people from a vast range of backgrounds, including merchant bankers and teachers.

THE EVILS OF PORNOGRAPHY

‘No one in our films was there because they were made to do it,’ says Haines. ‘I did have a couple of people later on who were clearly on drugs come forward, wanting to be in them, but I wouldn’t use them. I didn’t use anyone who was under about twenty-two or twenty-three, absolute minimum. And even then I was at pains to explain to them that they were in fact laying themselves open to problems in the future, with family and so on. I tried to make them aware of that.’

He says he’s already had one ‘rather sad’ case. ‘A young man called me up and said, “Look, my fiancée’s just discovered I was in one of the movies and she wants to break off the relationship. I’m trying to show her that this happened before I met her. Can you please tell me when we did it?”’

Haines admits he himself has suffered from his involvement with porn, with a ‘very radical’ shift in the attitude of many of his non-adult industry clients after the release of Buffy Down Under.

‘However, everyone chose to be involved in the films of their own free will. “No one was coerced into anything,” says Haines. ‘I had no way of coercing them. They were there for a variety of reasons, either because it was something that gave them a bit of a buzz or they were hoping to go places with the adult industry.’

Safe sex was practised on the film set. All actors had to be tested for HIV and other STDs – and, unless two actors in the same scene were already in a relationship with each other, they had to wear condoms. The process of putting on condoms was also made a part of the film.
SNATCHED

'They didn't just magically appear,' says Haines. 'They were seen to be rolled on, and sometimes comments were made: "If it's not on, it's not on" kind of thing, without pushing that too hard. We did think that it was at least a responsible approach to setting an example. Likewise in the treatment of the women by the men, we tried to make it a bit more sensitive.'

He says they were trying to make films that were a bit more like real life. 'Women don't scream from beginning to end. Well, some do, but we're not all the same. And I don't believe endless sessions of hard thrusting intercourse are the norm. Neither do I think that a fairly large number of women like that. They prefer a more erotic approach, I suppose.'

He remembers, though, that his views on this were challenged by a female journalist who visited the film set. 'She said, "Oh, no, I don't want any of that bullshit leading up to it. I don't want any foreplay. I just want to get in there for the tight gynaecological shots." Which quite took me aback. It made me think, "Well, yeah, why aren't women allowed to have the same variety of responses to this material as men obviously have?"'

Even though Buffy Down Under and Revenge Aussie Style weren't huge financial or critical successes, they were good examples of how adult films should be made. Haines believes that with more funding, Australia could have a successful adult film industry. He says there are 'several recognised scriptwriters' wanting to be involved with scriptwriting, and he thinks that if they had been able to offer actors a reasonable amount of money,
SNATCHED

The Senate voted with Harradine, and against the Australian adult film industry. Once again, reason lost out to emotion. All the decision meant was that instead of more adult films being made in Australia – where working conditions can be regulated – they’d be made overseas. And Australian industry would suffer, with X-rated videos being imported rather than exported.

Another criticism of porn is that it promotes unsafe sex practices. In fact, National Party MP De-Anne Kelly was so concerned about this that in March 2000 she proposed that doctors should watch porn films and ban any that show unsafe sex practices.

For every person who dies in Australia from AIDS, 100 die from heart attack or stroke. If we’re going to introduce new laws into the media to improve public health, they should focus on the biggest health problems. Maybe we should ban cooking shows on TV with recipes that use cream or other ingredients high in fat. Maybe we should ban shows like The Royle Family where the characters spend every episode sitting on the couch, watching TV, smoking, drinking and eating fatty foods.

Or maybe we should just give people some credit, and assume that any ideas they pick up from TV or films will be tempered by the public health messages they receive from other sources – eat a low-fat diet, exercise regularly and wear condoms when having sex.

Many adult film-makers are now employing safe sex practices anyway. Veronica Hart says the company she directs for, VCA Pictures, is one of about five major companies where actors wear condoms. ‘The rest of the little guys don’t care,’ says Hart. ‘And they’ve got to compete, so that’s one of their things, no condoms.’

Sharon Mitchell, the former porn star who’s trying to improve the sexual health of the adult film industry, isn’t getting any help from the government. ‘I run a clinic that has 700 clients per month, which is probably more than any other clinic in the United States for people that are at as high risk as the people that walk into my facility, and I cannot get federal funding, because it’s called Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation. It’s always turned into a moral issue.’

So is porn bad? Not inherently. It’s a natural human reaction to get aroused by watching other people having sex, and porn films are just a way of using modern technology to capitalise on that.

Sure, a lot of them have poor production values, but that’s hardly a crime. Some are made without much regard for the health and wellbeing of the people involved, and this is why extra regulation of the industry would be a positive move. Some don’t set a great example in how human beings should treat each other, but you could say the same of a lot of mainstream movies, especially action movies, where minor characters are regularly blown away without a thought.

Porn isn’t inherently exploitative and misogynistic, although it’s easy to find examples of porn films that are. It’s also easy to find examples of porn films that are made with care and professionalism, and those that are targeted at female viewers as well as male.
SNATCHED

Pornography shouldn't be regarded as a bad thing just because some of it is. After all, we don't dismiss democracy just because a few bad politicians get elected.

MERE DETAIL

The Censoring of Vaginas

... it's not suitable for six- or seven-year-olds to see at newsagents'.

OFLC director Des Clark, talking about photos of vaginas

In late 1998, Yolanda Corduff was flicking through the girlie magazines in her boyfriend's bathroom when something struck her as odd. The models' vaginas didn't look like hers. She grabbed a hand mirror to check. Yes, she decided, there was definitely something wrong. She was a lot more 'lippy' than the models.

Corduff went up to her boyfriend, took off her underwear, and held up the magazine. 'Is it me or is it them?'

Her boyfriend was able to reassure her that she wasn't too 'lippy' – that the vaginas in the photos had been airbrushed. Corduff investigated the matter, and
A MATTER OF COARSE

Why We Don’t Mind Language

‘Coarse language? That’s amazing. There was a “shit” and a “fuck”, and that was it.’

Comment from a member of the public on an OFLC community assessment panel

Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me was one of the big movie releases of 1999. It was preceded by a massive publicity campaign. Ads were everywhere. Children, middle-aged businessmen and elderly ladies sat next to the huge advertising posters inside bus shelters. The movie – its title a play on the James Bond film The Spy Who Loved Me – was a hit with audiences young and old, who giggled their way through the double entendres and Swedish penis enlarger jokes.

Around this time, People magazine bought some topless shots of the movie’s female lead, Liz Hurley. The editor at the time, Simon Butler-White, wrote this cover-line to go with the photos: ‘Spy Who Shagged Me star nude’. This line wasn’t going to appear in any massive advertising campaign, simply on the covers of magazines in newsagencies.

Butler-White was told by the OFLC that the word ‘shagged’ couldn’t be accommodated in the Unrestricted category because it was a euphemism for the sexual act.

‘I said that Blind Freddy could see that if the movie was being advertised on TV, on the sides of buses, on fifty-foot billboards and on T-shirts worn by ten-year-olds, there was a high degree of acceptance of the word and that it was non-offensive,’ says Butler-White. ‘I was again directed to the OFLC guidelines.’

What this illustrates is the gap between what the community generally feels is acceptable and what the OFLC feels is acceptable for the community.

There is no doubt that Australians are becoming more accepting of what would formerly have been considered ‘foul language’. In 1999, New South Wales Magistrate David Heilpern, in Dubbo Local Court, dismissed an offensive language charge against an eighteen-year-old man who allegedly told a police officer to ‘fuck off’ when the officer held on to the bars of a bike the man was riding.

‘The word “fuck” is extremely commonplace now and has lost much of its punch,’ said Heilpern in his judgment. ‘If your children like Triple J and listen to it in the morning, one cannot help but be assailed by the word “fuck” with regularity through mouthfuls of toast. We
live in an era where federal ministers use the word over the telephone to constituents and are not charged.'

On TV, words such as 'fuck' are being heard without causing a scandal – unless it's in an unexpected context and without warning, such as bowler Shane Warne calling a batsman a 'fucking arse-y cunt' during a live cricket telecast.

Network Ten's senior program classification officer, Dr Sally Stockbridge, says it's only fairly recently that they've started to leave in some coarse language, in appropriate timeslots. She says until 1999, Network Ten used to cut out every single use of the word 'fuck'.

'At that point we decided that it was ridiculous, because feature films invariably have a fair bit of [coarse] language in them,' she says.

Dr Stockbridge says language is left in if it's naturalistic and vernacular, or if it's crucial to the movie – as in *The Usual Suspects*, where it's in the sentence that the line-up of criminals has to read out to the police.

Network Ten wasn't the first to change its policy on 'fuck'. Dr Stockbridge says other TV stations were already leaving 'fuck language' in. It was the Nine Network who let the word 'cunt' go to air in an episode of *Sex and the City* (although this word was bleeped out in regional Australia).

Dr Stockbridge says Nine's classifier made the decision to leave the word 'cunt' in *Sex and the City* because that's what the whole episode was about – an artist who painted pictures of women's genitals. 'Either they dropped the episode or they ran it as it was,' she says, 'Given that it was an MA, given that it didn't start until 9.30 at night, I think he was justified.'

Dr Stockbridge said the first time she let the word 'cunt' through on Ten was in a program called *British Sex* that ran at 10 pm. It was spoken by a woman who ran a sex-toy business. 'She had this extraordinary dildo with the two parts, and she said, "This one goes in your arse, and this one goes in your cunt." It was just the way she spoke. And because it was just the way she spoke, I left it in.'

The Commercial Television Industry's Code of Practice from 1999 says in MA programs – which can only be shown between 9 pm and 5 am – the use of very coarse language must be appropriate to the storyline or program context and not overly frequent or impactful. Very coarse language that is aggressive and very frequent is considered not suitable for television.

Dr Stockbridge believes people have relaxed a bit about language. 'I think the audience is growing up. The people who complain about language tend to be female and tend to be older.

'The other group that complain about language are those who have children who think the language is coming on too early at night, so they're not necessarily complaining about language per se but they're complaining about their children hearing it. But, generally speaking, although it needs to be tested, I think the audience as a whole has relaxed a bit about language. Not about lots and lots of language, or really aggressively used language, but ordinary street-vernacular. I think they're
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much happier to have it if it's a reasonable product that they're looking at in the first place, like The Sopranos, or Sex and the City, or a feature film."

In mid-2002, Network Ten decided to put The Osbournes to air largely unedited, even though the fly-on-the-wall series featured rock star Ozzy Osbourne and his family saying 'fuck' dozens of times each episode.

Even the OFLC has had to face the fact that people aren't as bothered by coarse language as they used to be. Between 1997 and 2000 an independent consultancy commissioned by the OFLC, Keys Young, held community assessment panels in Sydney, Brisbane, Wagga Wagga, Perth, Adelaide and Bendigo. Each panel had at least twenty members, representing a range of ages and socio-economic backgrounds. The six panels watched, then discussed, a different set of three films over three days.

According to Keys Young's report on the Perth, Adelaide and Bendigo panels, language was not regarded as an important element in relation to the films watched. One panellist was surprised that the OFLC mentioned coarse language in its report on The Third Miracle: 'Coarse language? That's amazing. There was a "shit" and a "fuck", and that was it.'

In general, the panels placed less importance on language than the board did. It was considered inappropriate for G and PG films, but once into the M classification it drew little comment. The only exception was in A Walk on the Moon where a child used the word 'fuck' and his parents didn't show disapproval.

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One of the most pointed comments on coarse language in recent years came in the movie South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut. On its release, the movie attracted controversy for the frequency of its swearing. According to the website run by the ChildCare Action Project: Christian Analysis of American Culture, 'The most foul of the foul words was clearly spoken "by the children" at least 131 times and many other times in a muffled or garbled way. The three/four-letter-word vocabulary was used at least 119 times. God's name in vain was used 11 times without the four-letter expletive and six times with it.'

The movie is about a group of children who watch a Canadian film that contains coarse language. The film influences the children to swear, which upsets the parents so much that they mount a massive violent protest against it. The children, meanwhile, end up being exposed to real, physical dangers. The moral is that parents need to take responsibility for raising their children – and there are more important things than swearwords to protect them from.

This message seemed to pass straight over the heads of the movie's loudest critics – including the reviewer from the ChildCare Action Project, who must have been too busy counting the number of times the 'most foul of the foul words' was used in this 'celluloid developed in the fiery pits of Hell'.

The South Park film makers have a point. Certainly some words are still taboo in some sections of society. But when it comes down to it, they're only words.
Censorship guidelines are supposed to be about protecting minors from material likely to 'harm or disturb' them. But can swearwords actually harm children, in the way that they could be harmed by being told 'you’re fat' or 'we never wanted you'? And do swearwords really disturb children — or just their parents?

A 1994 Australian Broadcasting Authority report on children and television found fifty-five per cent of children surveyed said they had left the room or changed channels because something on TV had upset them. When asked what upset them, fifty per cent of children talked about violence — most often, animals being hurt or killed, or people being killed. Twenty-nine per cent gave ‘real life’ incidents, such as war, starvation and ghosts. Sex and nudity were only mentioned by eight per cent of children, and swearing by only two per cent.

As for teenagers, they’re so comfortable with what adults consider coarse language that a magazine like Australian Skateboarding — with the majority of its readership under the age of eighteen — will happily use a word like ‘shit’ on the cover, because it's speaking to readers in their own language. It can get away with it, too, because it doesn’t need to get the approval of the OFLC before it goes on sale.

And while the government tries to limit teenagers' access to music with explicit lyrics, a quick glance at the track listing on recent Triple J Hottest 100 CDs turns up titles like ‘I Sucked a Lot of Cock to Get Where I Am’, ‘Mutha Fukka on a Motorcycle’, ‘Every Fucking City’ and ‘Turn That Shit Up’. It’s obvious that the ABC’s youth radio station listeners don’t mind songs with swearing — in fact, there are so many that make it into the Hottest 100 that you have to wonder whether the ‘youth’ audience has a preference for songs with swearing.

The truth is, if anyone's going to be disturbed by coarse language, it’s the older generation. As Dr Stockbridge, who sees every complaint made by a viewer of Network Ten, points out, it's generally women over forty-five who complain about language — or parents worried for their children. If any publishers or filmmakers are going to be restricted in the use of coarse language, perhaps it should be those whose material is aimed at women over the age of forty-five.

At the same time as we’re getting used to hearing ‘fuck’ regularly on TV, this word, used in combination with ‘slut’ or ‘bitch’ in an X-rated film, is enough for the OFLC to decide that no adult in Australia should be allowed to watch the film concerned. Under the new guidelines, which came into effect in 2000, ‘sexually assaultive’ language is banned. This means that films where a woman is called a ‘fucking slut’ or a ‘fucking bitch’ will be refused classification. Distributors will have to do a sound edit before the movie is allowed to be released for sale.

The OFLC’s attitude to coarse language on magazine covers has altered slightly over the past few years — perhaps even since the ludicrous Spyn Who Shagged Me decision mentioned at the beginning of the chapter.

During the 1990s, the OFLC had a list of words that
weren’t allowed to appear on magazine covers. Reading a bit like a toilet wall at a primary school, here is one version of the list, taken from a June 1995 OFLC release to publishers: ‘arse, blow job, beaver, cunt, cock, cum, dick, fart, frig, fuck, fucker, hooters, horny – hornbag, etc, jerk off, lezzo, miff, norks, nunga, nympho, piss, prick, pubes, pussy, root, screw, shit, shag, slut, smoof, tits, titties, turd, twat, wank.’

In the release, then-director John Dickie warned, ‘This list is not exhaustive or comprehensive but it gives some idea of what is not considered acceptable on Unrestricted covers. Sexually suggestive combinations of words which do not appear on this list may be considered offensive. It should be borne in mind that context can render even an innocuous word offensive.’

This kind of list has been compiled at different times around the world. For example, in 1978, the United States Supreme Court upheld a ban against airing seven words when children might be listening: cocksucker, cunt, fuck, motherfucker, piss, shit and tit.

The OFLC’s list was far longer – including, as previously mentioned, a word from the title of a popular film (shag), the name of a chain of American restaurants (Hooters), a hit song of the late 1990s (‘Horny’ by Mousse T), and several other words it’s hard to imagine many people being offended by, such as fart and turd.

Some of the other words on the list, such as smoof and nunga, would probably be completely meaningless to most people. That’s because the OFLC’s list, unlike other lists of its type, covered not just commonly accepted swearwords, but words that would have only been familiar as sexual terms to readers of specific magazines. The Picture, and, to a lesser extent, People and Sextra, have, over the years, been a fertile source of new expressions for breasts, genitals and sexual intercourse. As staff writers have had to continually produce stories about women’s bodies and keep them interesting and humorous, they’ve needed to be inventive with language. The other advantage of new words is that they’re free of the negative implications of existing words like cunt.

‘Smoof’ is a Picture term. After a reader used it in a letter, it was adopted by the magazine as its favourite word for vagina. It would only hold meaning as a sexual term for people already familiar with the contents of The Picture. In that sense, it’s unlikely to offend anyone walking through a newsagency whose eye should happen to fall on the word on the cover of the magazine.

‘Nunga’ was invented by entertainer Ignatius Jones when he was deputy editor of Sextra, a magazine from the same stable as The Picture and People. As Sextra was making the move to become more explicit and show vaginas, the editor, Pat Sheil, was keen to promote this on the cover. Knowing they couldn’t use words like cunt or smoof, Jones came up with the coverline: ‘fifty pages of hot aching nunga’.

‘I just went, “Fantastic!”’ remembers Sheil, ‘because at that stage anything we could get past the censor was cool as far as we were concerned.’

Nunga is a South Australian Aboriginal word for Aborigines, but Sheil says neither he nor Jones was
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aware of that meaning at the time. To them, nunnga simply had an ‘overt sexual’ sound, especially with ‘hot aching’ in front of it.

Even though nunnga wasn’t on the banned list, Sheil was told by the OFLC that he couldn’t use it. “We don’t know what it means, but we know what you want it to mean.” That was the OFLC’s point of view,” Sheil says.

Nunga was soon added to the list, and Sheil and Jones gave up inventing words.

Obviously the list system wasn’t ideal. But one thing in its favour was that at least it offered publishers certainty. Most of the time they could be sure whether or not the words they used on a cover would be acceptable.

That changed with the introduction of the new guidelines in September 1999. The list was abandoned, with the new guidelines saying instead, ‘Mild coarse language may be acceptable but should not be emphasised. Coarse language that is strong, aggressive or sexually detailed is not permitted.’ The definition of ‘coarse language’ in the glossary reads, ‘Mild coarse language might include “bloody” or “bugger” and infrequent use of words such as “shit”.

Publishers expected that, as a result of the new guidelines, the banned words would still be banned, and other coverlines that were previously acceptable could also be knocked back.

However, coarse language does seem to be one area in which the OFLC has proved less restrictive. Former editor of The Picture Tim Scott says by early 2001 they were getting away with words that once wouldn’t have.

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been allowed. ‘It used to be that the only words you could use were boobs or bosoms or breasts, but now we’ve been getting away with hooters,’ he says. ‘A big no-no was tits, but now I think you could probably get away with tits as well – as long as it [the type] wasn’t too big.’

But he’s not confident that this signifies a general easing-up. ‘I think it’s more just an inconsistency thing.’

Once again, magazines that aren’t submitted to the OFLC, such as Cleo and Cosmopolitan, frequently have far more explicit coverlines, talking about sex acts such as fellatio, anal sex and masturbation.

‘Those sort of oral sex things that they get away with we wouldn’t even try because they just wouldn’t get through. At all,’ says Scott.

A Penthouse cover was knocked back not long ago by the OFLC for using the expression ‘blow jobs’. Editorial manager Graham Brown tried to find out from the OFLC what expression he could use instead. ‘I said, “What about ‘head jobs’?”’ remembers Brown. ‘They said, “You could try it, but I can’t guarantee anything.”’

It’s the problem that comes up over and over again. Magazines that are submitted to the OFLC for classification and have a ‘M (Mature) not recommended for readers under fifteen years’ logo on their cover aren’t allowed to be as explicit as magazines like Cleo and Cosmo. Yet Cleo and Cosmo come without an age restriction warning on the cover, and frequently have their advertising posters displayed out the front of newsagencies. Is this the way to protect minors from
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‘material likely to harm or disturb them’, or to protect everyone from exposure to ‘unsolicited material that they find offensive’?

Des Clark says the reason why these coverlines are permitted on magazines such as Cleo and Cosmo is because they’re not submittable publications. So what would they have to do to become submittable publications?

‘They would have to, within the meaning of the act and the guidelines, go beyond the point in their content and the application of the guidelines to, in the view of the board, be submittable and I would then make them submittable,’ he says. ‘At this stage they’re not because they’re basically broader lifestyle magazines with a broader range of content than a magazine which specifically and almost exclusively deals with sex.’

This response won’t mean much to the mother of the child standing outside the newsgacy who reads a poster for Cosmo and asks, ‘Mum, what’s anal sex?’ A child isn’t going to read that phrase on the cover of The Picture or any magazine that ‘specifically and almost exclusively deals with sex’.

Interestingly, in America, it’s the Cosmo-type magazines with their explicit coverlines that are coming under fire. Since 1999, supermarkets have been changing the display of these magazines in response to pressure from groups such as the American Decency Association and Morality In Media, as well as complaints from customers. At least three supermarket chains have put Cosmo in blinder racks, so that the coverlines (like ‘Sex Tricks He’s Never Seen Before: The outrageous “rock”

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...technique and 21 other moves that will make his thighs go up in flames’) are obscured and only the masthead is visible.

‘The checkout counter should be a safe haven,’ Bill Johnson, president of the American Decency Association, was reported in salon.com as saying. ‘Somebody has to speak out guarding the hearts and minds of our young ladies.’

Back home in Australia, inside the covers of magazines, the major problem isn’t with coarse language, but with the detail in descriptions of sex. This affects the stories most adult magazines run — whether Forum letters in Penthouse, the ‘my first/ funniest/ femme fuck’ stories in The Picture, or the erotic fiction and readers’ letters that appeared in Australian Women’s Forum. Despite the stereotype that men would rather just look at pictures than read about sex, erotic stories are popular with men as well as women.

According to the guidelines for Unrestricted magazines, ‘Realistic descriptions of sexual activity involving consenting adults should not be gratuitous or very detailed.’ In the glossary, ‘gratuitous’ is defined as ‘material which is unwarranted or uncalled for, and included without the justification of a defensible storyline or artistic merit’. This one definition calls for three separate value judgments: ‘unwarranted or uncalled for’, ‘defensible storyline’ and ‘artistic merit’. It sounds like the OFLC board have a difficult job there, but fortunately, it can be simplified. An erotic story is aimed at sexually arousing the reader, and therefore no description
of sex in this context can be ‘unwarranted or uncalled for’.

Like so many of the terms in the guidelines, ‘very detailed’ is enormously subjective. A sex act can be summed up in two words, or it can be described over a dozen pages. Virtually any description can be made less detailed or more detailed, so who is to say where ‘very detailed’ begins?

As well, the guidelines say that ‘the stronger the theme, the more discreet the treatment’. So, for example, a kiss would be allowed to be described in more detail than anal sex.

There’s a magic invisible line out there, and anything within an Unrestricted magazine that crosses that line – a girl in a certain pose, a sentence, an image next to a word – needs to be pulled back. Unfortunately it’s a line that only OFLC board members have the power to see.

To explain what is ‘very detailed’, or to even show examples, is difficult. A magazine will submit page proofs to the OFLC, and will be given a classification: either Unrestricted, Category 1, Category 2, or RC (refused classification). If a magazine misses out on an Unrestricted classification because the language is ‘very detailed’, the OFLC will only say which story is a problem – not which words, which lines or even which paragraphs. The editor then needs to make changes and submit the magazine again.

The way *Australian Women’s Forum* operated, by that stage in the magazine process, there was no room for second chances. Because of time restrictions, the

magazine would have already been printed by the time we resubmitted it. If it had missed out on the Unrestricted classification a second time, we would have had to face tearing a page out of each issue or sealing the magazine in a plastic bag, which would have been financially disastrous.

Because the OFLC would never say which words or lines were a problem – it may have been one expression, such as ‘his thickly veined cock’, or it may have been a dozen sentences spread throughout the story – I usually played it safe and removed anything I thought they could possibly object to.

While many magazines now resubmit to the OFLC before going to print, missing out on an Unrestricted classification always causes difficulties. There’s the expense of resubmitting the magazine for classification (*Australian Women’s Forum* used to pay $630 for the OFLC’s fee alone, which was approximately the cost to us of a major feature story) and the risk of missing the on-sale date. So it’s vital for editors to be able to guess what the OFLC might not like and remove it before resubmitting.

When it comes to detail, editors have picked up two main areas that are likely to cause problems with the OFLC: adjectives and bodily fluids.

‘They get caught up in adjectives,’ says Tim Scott. ‘You can have the word pussy or whatever, but when you have slippery in there, that’s when they start.’

The OFLC were more lenient with *Australian Women’s Forum* than with men’s magazines. Nouns were often allowed one adjective, but not two: ‘slippery
pussy’ may have been permitted, but not, ‘steamypussy’.

‘Or they get very caught up in bodily fluids,’ says Scott. ‘They have a real problem with those. That’s just too much. You really have to wonder about what kind of sex these people have, if they ever do have sex.’

Because, of course, sex does involve bodily fluids. Enjoyable, exciting, adventurous sex involves lots of bodily fluids (and adjectives), from lubrication to ejaculation.

The most serious implication of leaving out detail is that detail can educate. Erotic fiction shapes people’s knowledge of sex as much as educational articles (keeping in mind that educational articles, on subjects such as cunnilingus, aren’t exempt from being censored either). For example, many women ejaculate when they orgasm. It’s not widely talked about, and it would probably be good for women to read about other women ejaculating, for reassurance that they’re normal. But it’s the kind of thing that magazine editors are likely to delete from stories, in the expectation that the OFLC would knock it back.

There’s a lot to learn about sex – and the further away you progress from the missionary position, the more there is to be learnt. Being well-informed can make a sexual experience pleasurable rather than painful or dangerous. The more detail that is given in descriptions of sexual practices the better. And yet, under the ‘stronger the theme, the more discreet the treatment’ guideline, the OFLC is likely to be less tolerant of detail in descriptions of less mainstream sex practices.

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- From the OFLC’s perspective, the educational aspect is just a side issue. The real reason detail has to be removed is to make descriptions of sex less arousing. Of course, this completely defeats the purpose of erotic fiction.

While I was editor of *Australian Women’s Forum*, if I found that I was getting aroused by a piece that I was reading, that was a sign that it was unlikely to be approved by the OFLC. Take this excerpt from a reader’s letter: ‘She gasped as his dick moved inside her, deep and hard against the very core of her juicy cunt. He groaned as she rocked her pelvis against him, riding him to orgasmic ecstasy, rubbing her clit against his pubic bone and crying out his name.’

- Before being submitted to the OFLC, it was toned down to this: ‘He groaned as she rocked her pelvis against him, riding him to orgasmic ecstasy, rubbing her clit against her pubic bone and crying out his name.’

The OFLC classified the letter Category 1, so the excerpt was toned down again to this: ‘He groaned as she rocked against him, riding him to ecstasy, crying out his name.’

It was then judged suitable for publication.

Here’s another: ‘I could feel his hard cock gently at first as I lifted my legs and opened them wider. I moved my hips, urging him faster. He moved his hand to my pussy, using the hot sticky come from us both to massage my clit again. As he thrust faster he flicked my clit faster.’

This was toned down to: ‘I could feel his hard cock, and I moved my hips, urging him faster. He moved his
so turned on by the scene that she started to masturbate. Then his father walked into the room and he was so shocked by the whole thing that he had a heart attack and they had to call an ambulance. It was done tongue-in-cheek and it was absolutely brilliant. Not a problem at all.'

As well as the more outrageous letters like that one, Abraham says there were also ones involving 'conventional missionary position sex'. Contrary to popular belief, the letters weren't generally made up by staff at the magazine. They came from a wide range of writers - not just men.

'We always looked forward to receiving letters from women,' says Abraham. 'A large percentage of our Forum letters came from women. They were far more interesting, articulate, erotic and emotional. Women are far better at writing about sex than men.'

The next decade saw increasing restrictions placed on Forum letters. In 1999, Penthouse stopped running Forum letters in its national (Unrestricted) edition. What it could publish had become so limited that the editor gave up on them altogether.

'They got toned down and toned down, so it just was easier not to do it,' says current editorial manager Graham Brown.

The following year, Penthouse decided to reintroduce Forum letters in the national edition - but only one per issue, and the letter had to be very soft. Brown wrote the first one. 'It was about a guy meeting a girl in a park, and him thinking that she was really sexy. And she said,

"Do you ever walk your dog here?" because she had a dog, and he said "Yeah," and she said, "Well, why don't you bring your dog down one time?" So then he had to go and look for a dog, because he didn't have a dog. So he spent the rest of the letter looking for a dog.'

In a guide Brown compiled for the magazine's staff on what Forum letters can contain - based on his own experiences of what the OFLC let through - he says one-on-one sex 'where both partners are consenting and language is floral and romantic (rather than wham-bam descriptions of the sex act)' is suitable. Threesomes, anal sex, any form of fetish or kink are considered unsuitable, as well as words such as 'cunt'. Suitable terms for the genitals include 'womanhood' and that romance novel classic 'manhood'. 'That's what they're doing to us,' says Brown. 'They've turned us into Mills and Boon.'

The Category 1 versions of Penthouse - sealed in plastic bags, restricted to people over the age of eighteen and banned in Queensland - have more variety in their Forum letters (anal sex, threesomes, some mild fetishes) and detail, while Black Label Category 2 - available only by mail order - goes even further.

The idea of Forum letters in Penthouse is that readers write in and share their experiences - or, as any regular reader would be able to tell, their fantasies. But the letters currently being published in the national edition don't bear a lot of resemblance to readers' fantasies, by the time Penthouse staff have toned them down enough to pass the scrutiny of the OFLC.
hand to my pussy, using the hot sticky come from us both to massage my clit again. As he thrust faster he flicked my clit faster.' Then, after the letter was classified Category 1, it became, 'I could feel his cock, and I moved my hips, urging him faster. He moved his hand to my pussy, massaging my clit again.'

The excerpts above are taken from readers' letters in a single issue, February 2001. In that issue, the OFLC objected to four out of five of the readers' letters, even after a certain amount of toning down had already taken place. Admittedly, it was rare for the OFLC to object to so many readers' letters. Coincidentally, that same issue, February 2001, was the one that featured a story critical of the OFLC's policy on genital detail.

Material is only supposed to be banned from an Unrestricted magazine if it 'offends a reasonable adult to the extent that it should be restricted'. The guidelines also say that when classifying a publication, the OFLC must take into account 'the person or class of person to or amongst whom it is published or is intended or likely to be published'. Australian Women's Forum was a magazine for women who liked reading about sex. The readers' letters were written about sex for other women. And yet the OFLC was deciding that they were too explicit, that women shouldn't be writing those things - regardless of whether they'd actually done them or just fantasised about them.

The letters appeared in a magazine with an 'M (Mature)' logo on the front, and a warning that it was 'not recommended for readers under fifteen years'.

There were pages of full-frontal nudity to flick through before getting to the letters. It's doubtful anyone would have been shocked to find explicit descriptions of sex there. Certainly no-one ever complained about them while I was editor.

Despite all the toning down of letters that went on at Australian Women's Forum, we were still better off than Penthouse and other men's sex magazines, which were judged far more harshly when it came to erotic writing. Letters that appeared in Australian Women's Forum would have needed to have even bigger chunks of detail hacked out of them before the OFLC would have let them appear in Penthouse.

The situation got so bad that at one stage, Penthouse dropped Forum letters entirely from its Unrestricted edition.

Forum letters hold almost iconic status, with the classic opening, 'I always thought these letters were made up, until ...' having become the adult equivalent of 'It was a dark and stormy night ...'. The letters became known for being inventive as well as arousing.

Former Penthouse editor Phil Abraham says back in the 1980s, they didn't have to censor Forum letters at all. We dealt with subjects like bestiality - humorously. The Footy Franks letter was an absolute classic. It involved a bloke. He was sitting at home, he got the Hutton's Footy Franks out of the fridge and inserted one in his anus and he started to masturbate at the same time. Then his dog came in and was eating the Hutton's Footy Frank, and then his mum walked into the room and got
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So who’s losing out? Readers, because they’re not getting what they want. Penthouse, because they can’t give readers what they want. And people writing to Penthouse, who want to see their fantasies published.

‘Half of our writers of Forum letters are women,’ says Brown. ‘And it’s the only regularly published forum for any sort of erotica. Half the stuff is women because it’s a way of expressing yourself in a very safe environment.’

The OFLC would argue that they’re not stopping magazines from running very detailed descriptions of sex – publishers can simply put out the magazines as Category 1. But this ignores the commercial reality: once you take out Queenslanders, fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds, people who are too embarrassed to buy ‘dirty’ magazines sealed in plastic and people who like to be able to flick through a magazine before buying it, the number of people left is so small that few magazines will find it worthwhile publishing to this market.

The big question is this: have community standards changed that much since the mid-1980s? Have we really turned into a society that believes erotic writing has to be sealed up in plastic bags to stop Queenslanders and older teenagers from getting to it?

We know that, in the past decade, community standards have relaxed when it comes to coarse language. We know that from legal precedents, from community assessment panels, and from TV programs, where what goes to air depends on what the viewing public will accept, rather than what the OFLC will accept.

It seems odd to think that community standards...
Exposing and opposing censorship: backfire dynamics in freedom-of-speech struggles


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Abstract

Censorship can backfire because it is usually viewed
The Sun-Herald

Sunday Life
How the #*@ are you?

David Astle
2,167 words
24 October 2004
Sun Herald

Society

No longer the social taboo it once was, the F word is out there - on the street, at home and in the workplace. In fact, swearing lies at the heart of language, writes David Astle. At the Sydney Fish Market, a fishmonger is bellying for all the world to hear, "Damn fish, damn fish for sale!" Blush?

I almost faint. I can't believe the depths to which society has sunk. I approach the sole trader on my high horse and say, "Hey, watch your tongue."

"What's your effing problem?" asks the vendor. (Effing wasn't exactly his adjective but will have to suffice on these pages.) "Me brother caught these effing fish in Warra-effing-gamba Dam so that makes 'em dam effing fish, doesn't it?"

True enough. I get off my horse and apologise.

In future, I'd expect Sydney Fish Market to issue a homophone warning. In the meantime, I shall out $15 for some dam fish for the family.

At home, I quarter limes. I parcel the fish with tamarind in foil. I let them bake for 12 minutes and lay them on the table, steaming in their juices, Hawaiian style. The kids tuck in. The evening is going swimmingly. "How do you like the dam fish?" I ask Jasper, 9, whose eyes light up. "The damn fish is fine, Dad. It's the effing tamarind that tastes like shit."

Such a remark costs Jasper 30 cents of his pocket money, being 20 cents for the F word and 10 cents for the S. (We've given up on "bloody" and "bugger"). The family cuss box is a takeaway tub that my daughter, Tess, 7, a poty-mouth of note, has decorated with those little swirls and planets you associate with swearing. Every year, we blow the cuss fund on a family excursion to the movies - with change left over.

Not that you can escape cussing at the cinema. Au contraire, mofo. Take Jurassic Park: The Lost World, a PG-rated romp with 17 dirty words sprinkled throughout its script. (Not bad considering Janisse Moore and Jeff Goldblum spend the best part of an hour with raptors on their tails.) These days, a prudent parent can tap into the Australian advocacy group for kid-friendly media (at www.younimedia.org.au) to scope a film's saltier outbursts. Jennifer Garner's recent film Suddenly, I learn in advance, has several "Oh, my God's", a few "bitches" and a reference to ball-squeezing for good measure. Either way, you're damned if you check and damned if you don't.

Switch your gaze from silver to small screen and the cussing accumulates. Volunteers for the Parents Television Council last year had their senses assaulted by 135 naughty words across four episodes of 29 reality TV shows, specifically Big Brother 3, Survivor and Meet My Folks. Such profanity marks a 2.7 per cent increase since a similar study in 2002, which is a bloody big increase in anyone's language.

You, me, fishmongers - we're swearing more. Shopping And F**king is a West End play. Four Weddings And A Funeral kicked off with four fantabulous f---. Sports stars cuss on replay.

SMS codes incorporate the F word ATT (all the time). On the radio, Triple J announcers spend half their shift issuing token language warnings for songs. UK clothing company French Connection continues to plaster its FCUK logo all over town in a bid to engender shock - but shocked we are not.

Car ads are regular culprits. Toyota's "Bugger" campaign shares the airwaves with the "Drink, drive, bloody idiot" push for road safety in Victoria. Linguist Ruth Wajnryb couldn't believe her ears when her two-year-old son was having trouble clicking Lego together, inspiring him to yell, "Bloody Volvo drivers!"
Wajnryb is the author of Language Most Foul, to be published next month, a passionate rave on this impulsive habit of ours. Her book includes such chapters as "Shit Happens", "The Wild Thing" and "A C— Of A Word". Wajnryb's work identifies the dirty dozen - from the namby-pamby "hell" upwards - and examines the rules and roles of each. The f word is the most flexible, covering eight forms of speech. As the least offensive, the C word carries the highest taboo. Shit is the happy universal in between.

"I've always been a big swearer," concedes Wajnryb, the daughter of Polish Jews who grew up in the cuss-cauldron of Sydney's Campbelltown. "I can get away with it more easily now. There's more tolerance these days. People used to be shocked and horrified when I swore in lectures or at social events. Because I'm now older, you'd expect them to be even more horrified but they're not."

Of course, there are forces afoot to stifle the filth. New on the US market is the TV Guardian (TVG), a puritanical piece of software that pledges to filter the verbal trash from pre-scripted shows. According to the literature, TVG will either bleep the gutter talk or swap such words as "f--" for "ass", "n--" for "bitch" and "hugging" for "sex".

Also in the US, the Cuss Control Academy (at www.cusscontrol.com) offers 10 tips on taming your tongue, including "Cope, don't curse" and "Practise being patient". My personal favourite? "Use alternative words: instead of BS (c-- for bullshit), word choices range from lies, fabrication, nonsense and exaggeration to bunk, baloney, drivel, malarky, hokum, hogwash and balderdash. They might not give you satisfaction at first but they will eventually."

To counter the soap brigade, other sites have appeared online, including the massive Swearsaurus that spits out curses in 164 languages at www.pseudonomer.com or the Swear-o-Tron that banks filth at the twitch of a cursor. On the activist front, the Society to Highlight Ingrate Terms (or SHIT) was established by loose-lipped lobbyist Chip Rowe because "sometimes a good f--l or sh!t provides the release I need."

Wajnryb describes this primal urge to curse as the toe-stubbing function: we yell to lighten the neural load. Swearing has been around, believes sociologist Richard Dooling, since the first caveman bumped his head on the way out the door. Or cavewoman. The habit is quickly losing its stag elitism.

Nowadays, women are as liable to curse as the best of the blokes. For Jane Austen and her sisters, the classic pressure valves were swooning and tears. While crying remains cathartic for many of us - women, in particular - there seems little doubt that yesterday's swooner is as likely to be today's swearer.

"We now know that while men show a statistical tendency to swear more than women, the issue of gender variation is nowhere near as clear-cut as folk linguistics would have us believe," Wajnryb writes in her chapter "Son Of A Bitch". "A recent study of men, women and language asserts that the only solid evidence to emerge from the research is the abiding belief ... that women ought to speak differently from men. But 'ought' tells us more about prescriptive beliefs than actual speech patterns."

Comic Judith Lucy uses F words like Nigella Lawson uses butter. In Crackerjack, Lucy's film debut in 2002, her character begins with "F-- off!" and finishes with "You're f--ed". It's what the actress describes as "the full emotional journey."

In the workplace, too, swearing is alive and kicking - especially in the larger firms - as a survey conducted by recruitment company Talent2 discovered earlier this year. Among the 1000 participants - all sexes, both sexes - roughly a fifth reported potty-mouthish in the ranks, with a lesser percentage admitting stress or discomfort with the fact. Statistically, human resources staff cop the brunt of our #@%!!, followed closely by IT personnel. But it's certainly true to say that swearing can also be a social function that emphasises interpersonal ease.

For his part, Ben Hudson, human resources manager at Hudson Global Resources in Victoria, has seen the relaxing of language within popular culture reflected in the workplace. "Especially the softer swear words," he says, meaning everything except Messrs F and C. The lead, he emphasises, is for senior management to establish.

"When a company has a language policy, which is typically written into more general policies on behaviour, it doesn't stipulate which words are OK and which aren't. The S word is a grey area. If I'm sitting in a management meeting and someone uses the S word, I don't believe that would be entirely inappropriate. However, if the same team were doing a presentation to broader business, it may be entirely in appropriate."

Hudson also warns about relaxing your tongue at corporate functions. "Christmas parties don't offer a get-out-of-jail-free card. But he adds, "If swearing is reciprocated and consensual, it's usually appropriate but you've got to balance that with not creating a culture that tolerates bad language across the board."

While it may be acceptable to swear at the office desk, the same doesn't always apply at the school
desk as Adrienne Ryan, mayor of Ku-ring-gai in NSW, discovered when she gave a talk to hundreds of high school students in August. After she dropped the F bomb (as well as the lesser "bloody" and "dick"), she was besieged by angry parents and the talkback lines went into meltdown. "I was trying to speak to the students as their equal," she told The Sydney Morning Herald before apologizing. "I believe it was appropriate for the circumstances."

By necessity, the history of swearing is furtive. Before Big Brother was invented, the English hot pot pot were given to a pastime of flying, essentially a swearing contest in tavern backrooms, much like a rood-rage barney with ringside seals and a clap-o-meter. Meantime, in 1788, a Poor with the God-given name of Francis Grose coined the typography of f*%K in his seminal work A Classical Dictionary Of The Vulgar Tongue. In the same period, it's argued that Captain Cook bestowed "Goddamn" on the peoples of Hawaii, taking home the new English word "tabu".

At this point, we need to differentiate between cussing and cursing. To cuss is to yell, "Shit!" while to curse is to holler, "Eat shit and die!" (present company excepted). The first is secular; the second infers a higher force. When God exerted a greater presence in society, humans were far more inclined to paint the town blue with oaths and evil fates rather than with your average sexually charged cuss. In her book, Wajnyb cites curses from around the world, including the perverse little Jewish wish, "May you marry a raving beauty, live next door to the officers' club and travel 10 months of the year."

Like it or lump it, swearing lies at the heart of a language. Expats feel at home as soon as they can swear in their new tongue. Master the art of exotic sledding and you're as good as native. Despite what hygienists think, the business of swearing has complex rules (you can't say "fan-f*%k-bloody-fic", for example) and a subtle emotional register - from "goodness knows" to "God knows" to "Christ knows" - and each demands a context to itself.

Darren Lehmann probably curses the day he was overheard mumbling "black c—s" when walking off the Gabba, the victim of a Sri Lankan run-out last summer. The Australian batsman was suspended for five matches under a code violation. Nobody doubts the racially loaded nature of the remark, but Wajnyb asserts in a politically correct world, it was as much the B word that condemned Lehmann as the other.

"Ethnic slurs are regarded as taboo," John Ayto, the editor of The Oxford Dictionary Of Slang, told The Guardian in 2002. "I think if a politician were to be heard off-camera saying "f—", it would be trivial. But if he said "nigger", that would be the end of his career."

"Taboo is the other side of the coin to swearing," adds Wajnyb. "As long as you've got a taboo, you'll have swearing. But taboos change over time. Once it was taking the Lord's name in vain and then it was sexual function. Now it's making deprecatory noises about the specific - height, race, age."

Stand-up comics know every four-letter word in the book - and not a few personal slurs to boot. But it's the pooh-bah of social snipers, Lenny Bruce, who puts the whole f—ing thing in the clearest light. "If we were taught [screeving] was a sweet Christian act of procreation, it was the nicest thing we can do for each other, you'd use the term correctly and say, 'Uncle, you, Master!'"

Document SHA000002004124e000000d

Read this article which raises a variety of issues around censoring of language, in particular, swear words.
1. What point is Astle making about the relationship between what is "taboo" and what words are considered offensive? 
2. How does context impact on the offensiveness or otherwise of particular utterances? Consider the example mentioned of cricketer Darren Lehmann or maybe more recently, Timana Tahu and Andrew Johns.
3. Have certain words become less offensive due to overuse or are they still inherently offensive?
4. Why do you think epithets relating to bodily functions and sex are considered 'swear words'?
Secrets of obscenity: the classification riddle

By Nick Ross

Updated Wed Jun 29, 2011 4:46pm AEST

Australian classification laws are in the process of being overhauled, an overhaul which may see their powers increased. But few people know exactly what is currently banned in Australia.

As it turns out, much adult content (one of the most popular subjects on the internet) is banned or bannable. There seems a real gap between what is notionally prohibited and what Australians regularly consume.

This picture is made all the more baffling by the secretive nature of Australia's obscenity guidelines.

Classification laws are among the most powerful in the land and underpin Customs importation laws and Senator Conroy's proposed mandatory internet filter which will start to be implemented next month.

Discussion of what might or might not be excluded by an internet filter hits a road block when it comes to "Refused Classification" or "RC" - a term that is at best vague. We are told that the promised filter will be set to catch RC content. However, few people (including some of the legislators) actually know what RC means.

"Refused Classification" is also the basis for the term "illegal pornography", a description now appearing on Australian airport landing cards. All travellers must declare potentially-RC items when arriving in Australia. However, because neither the Classification Board nor Customs publish their guidelines, no-one knows what might be potentially-RC - until they are told that they have broken the rules. The penalties for breaching these invisible regulations include fines, deportation and imprisonment.

The official classification Code initially echoes the Australian Constitution by opening with the phrase "adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want". However, the succeeding 21 pages are spent qualifying this statement. You can read it in full, here.

It is generally believed that the Classification Board decides upon what's acceptable using common sense and experience. Board members are, according to the Code, the definers of "the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults". However, the board's internal Guidelines are very specific and the Board members' main job is to match submitted content with what appears in its Guidelines. With every borderline decision, the Guidelines have become more prescriptive.

The Board briefs Customs on these Guidelines and periodically gives scaled-down presentations to adult publishers in order to clarify the broad, grey, contradictory area that the Code defines. But other than that, no-one knows what they are in detail... until they get caught flouting them.

One adult publisher has sought to document the official Guidelines, based on briefings by the Board and noting over time the reasons given for submitted content being Refused Classification. According to a former Classification Board member, this document accurately reflects the official but unpublished Guidelines.
No depiction of violence, sexual violence, sexualised violence or coercion is allowed in the category. It does not allow sexually assaultive language. Nor does it allow consensual depictions which purposefully demean anyone involved in that activity for the enjoyment of viewers.

Fetishes such as body piercing [and tattooing], application of substances such as candle wax, 'golden showers', bondage, spanking or fisting are not permitted. As the category is restricted to activity between consenting adults, it does not permit any depictions of non-adult persons, including those aged 16 or 17, nor of adult persons who look like they are under 18 years.

While a ban on the sexual depiction of minors will have strong community support, there's a much greyer area involving adults or even animated characters who look young. Most adult movies (online or DVD) come from America and carry official government statements guaranteeing that all participants are over 18. These cut no ice in Australia. Furthermore, Hentai Manga (Japanese sexual comics) are so popular in Japan that they are freely available for browsing in 7-11 convenience stores and read openly on trains. But they are RC in Australia - potentially a rude shock for Japanese tourists visiting with such comics in their luggage.

Note too, that over the past year, the Classification Board has started using breast size as a criterion in defining child pornography: a less than precise indicator.

Beyond questions of age and appearance, some of the guidelines are what you might expect: Depictions of bestiality, necrophilia, incest, drug use, paedophilia, detailed instruction or promotion in matters of crime, high-impact violence and cruelty are all grounds for an RC rating.

However, things get less obvious when it comes to violence associated with sex:

Violence: rough or injurious physical force, action, or treatment. This includes actual violence (shooting, punching, pushing, throwing a person, etc), implied violence (gunshot sound effect, news article, mugshots), aftermath of violence (person with injury, dead body), threat of violence ("I'll kill you"), and violent behavior (woman holding gun while engaged in sex with man). Note down ANY and ALL violence, even if it looks contrived or unrealistic (plastic swords, etc). Depictions of dead people are also not permitted.

The implied violence comment is so strict that it renders virtually all crossover drama/porn films (those that ape cop shows, fantasy films and drama, but with added full sex scenes).

Adult videos have for instance been Refused Classification for showing a gun on a table or for showing a headline in a newspaper describing a murder. One video was refused classification because it was about people looking for a friend that had been kidnapped - even though the kidnapping was never shown. Another was rated RC because a character simply had a black eye. Another was rejected because of a scene showing a doctor putting on a pair of rubber gloves.

Sexual Violence: Spanking, choking, pinching, stepping on the face, hair pulling (either as a violent act or consensual fetish act), rough or 'man' handling, face slapping, and general rough play are all prohibited;

General rough play is a description that could be attributed to virtually every film that features sex. Only one spank (as in a slap on the bum) is allowed at any one time. And that can't be very hard. All BDSM is banned.

Sexualised Violence: being sexually aroused by violence or using violence with the intent to arouse; is also out of bounds, with an apparently very literal interpretation being adopted.

Language is another tricky area.

Sexually assaultive language - a tone of voice or language that is demeaning and disparaging. Eg. Calling someone a whore or slut, or telling them to do something demeaning in a disparaging way. This does not include 'dirty talk'.

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person is objectionable. Female ejaculation or 'squirting' is considered to be golden showers. The latter is controversial with medical discussion suggesting female ejaculation is a minority but normal sexual response. Beyond questions of what is and isn't refused classification there's the issue of enforcement.

With over 20 million visitors coming through Australian airports every year, and with many carrying smartphones and laptops, the chances of people breaking Australian law without realising it are very high. However, the amount of content involved renders searching for violators practically unpoliceable. Customs told us, "Customs and Border Protection made 1,373 detections of objectionable material in the 2009-10 financial year, across all cargo and passenger streams. Of these detections, records indicate 50 per cent were made in the passenger stream.

"54 cases were prosecuted, including 47 cases involving child pornography. Penalties ranged from $200 to $20,000. Sentences included good behaviour bonds ranging between five months and two years, to imprisonment ranging from six days (time served) and three years and nine months."

These figures are miniscule when compared with quarantine and other-contraband smuggling infractions. It does not appear as though Customs is too fussed about searching for "illegal pornography".

Travellers do not know the Australian definition of objectionable pornography and are likely to believe that world famous 'porn stars' such as Belladonna, Rocco Siffredi, Cytheria, Guage, Angel Long are legal, even though each is renowned for practices that are considered "offensive" in Australia.

Nevertheless Porn is still one of the most searched for and consumed content areas of the internet. And if everything mentioned above is considered RC it would subsequently need to be placed on Australia's internet filter blacklist and censored. However, there are reckoned to be some 600,000,000 adult-oriented, sex-related pages on the internet (with many new ones appearing daily) so investigating and blacklisting them all would seem impractical at best.

Given the secrecy around the classification detail, it's hard to judge whether this is an approach truly in line with community standards. Is this what the Australian public wants? And is it a standard Australians want applied to an internet filter?

Nick Ross is the ABC's technology and games editor.

Tags: community-and-society, pornography, information-and-communication, censorship, australia

First posted Wed Jun 29, 2011 3:43pm AEST

Read through this blog article and discuss the following questions in relation to the aim and effectiveness of internet censorship.

1. One comment said with respect to this article: "It is never explained what informed people to commit acts of violence, sexual aggression or to partake of sexually 'deviant' behavior in all the centuries before there were photographs, moving pictures, 'first person shooter' video games or even the written word." Do attempts at Internet censorship merely allow govt to appear to be doing something or is it an appropriate response to what is regarded as "inappropriate material" on the net?

2. Another comment said: "The clandestine nature of censorship in Australia, and the manner in which it is permeating across different media, is an incredibly disturbing indication of the Orwellian nanny state this nation has become." Do you agree?

30 Jun 2011 8:35:59am

All censorship has as its basis a ruling elite seeking control over those regarded as their inferiors. Australia's censorship regimes are also deeply rooted in the British class system.

In so called representative democracies it is sold as protection for the 'mainstream' from a deviant underclass.
Music and Suicide

Suicide is a theme that is found in the lyrics of many genres of music, including traditional/folk, pop-rock, heavy metal, country and opera.

- Content analysis of country songs reveals several themes that can foster suicide, including marital strife or dissolution, alcohol abuse, financial strain or being exploited at work, and social isolation (Stack & Gundlach, 1992: 212).

- Harewood (1976) describes the plots of 306 operas in which there are 77 completed suicides among principal characters (Feggetter, 1980: 552). In an interesting reversal of real-life statistics, there are more suicide deaths among female characters and more attempts among male characters.

- A search of the Mudcat Cafe database of traditional songs using the keyword "suicide" found 27 hits. 20 of these have lyrics about suicide, murder or murder-suicide. http://www.mudcat.org

Even though suicide is a theme found in most genres of music, few have to be defended against allegations of actually causing suicide. However, in the case of heavy metal there is an ongoing belief, based in anecdotal evidence, that there is a direct link between listening to this music and adolescent suicide.

Heavy Metal Music and Suicide

Heavy metal is a subgenre of rock that has grown in popularity, especially among younger males. Metal bands usually include a heavy bass guitar and extreme volume. The theme of metal is chaos, on an individual or societal level, and is what most clearly distinguishes metal from mainstream rock. Heavy metal carries on traditional countercultural concerns with social problems, but it departs from earlier rock music in that it does not offer hope, or solutions, for solving such problems. (Stack, Gundlach & Reeves, 1994: 16).

It has been alleged that heavy metal lyrics, with themes of alienation and despair, have acted as precipitants to suicide among vulnerable adolescents. But it should be noted that:

- Lyrics have been taken out of the context of an entire song to support arguments that heavy metal music incites suicide.

- The way in which an adolescent interprets the lyrics may be the opposite of what the artist has intended. A well-known example of this is the Ozzy Osborne song Suicide Solution. This song does not advocate suicide but is a statement against alcohol abuse.

- Many young people who listen to heavy metal also listen to other types of music (Lester & Whipple, 1998: 70). These may also have lyrics concerning suicide, despair or isolation. It would thus be difficult to pinpoint a specific genre as being the direct and sole cause of suicide.

SIEC would like to thank: Dr. Norman Farberow, Dr. Tim Rogers, and George W. Lyon for their assistance with questions relating to this Alert.

Some Research Findings on Adolescents, Heavy Metal Music, and Suicide


- Heavy metal music more often seems to become a problem for adolescents who are already disturbed and struggling with feelings of alienation. These adolescents may also lack positive role models, come into repeated conflict with authorities, abuse alcohol and drugs; and have a family history of violence and/or suicide (Litman & Farberow, 1994: 497-498).

- Far from placing adolescents at risk of suicide, heavy metal music may have protective functions for some:
  - 54% of a sample of male heavy metal fans who were interviewed said that their music served a purgative function, that is it helped to relieve feelings of anger. The music mirrored the emotional volatility brought on by the usual crises and conflicts of adolescence (Arnett, 1991: 83, 96).
  - Rock lyrics, including those said to advocate destructive acts, may in some cases provide a medium for dealing with issues of death and for managing the anxieties these issues create (Wass et al, 1991:204).

Centre for Suicide Prevention
#320 1202 Centre St. S.E.
Calgary, Alberta
Canada T2G 5A5
phone: (403) 245-3900
tax: (403) 245-0299
web: www.suicideinfo.ca
Read through this brief summary of some of the research into the relationship between song lyrics and suicide.

1. Should we censor certain lyrics or language which may be offensive, either literally (swear words) or by virtue of what is being said? Singer Brian McFadden was recently castigated for lyrics which supposedly condoned drug rape?

2. Do you think that music has the power to incite violence or other anti-social messages? If so is this a reason to censor the music?

3. Do you think that people who have anti-social tendencies prefer certain types of music or that the music (lyrics, image, beat) incites anti-social tendencies?

4. As with Michael Moore's argument with respect to the connection between Marilyn Manson and the shootings at Columbine High School in the 90s, are there larger issues in question for which music is an easy scapegoat?
In the long run Wikileaks strengthens democracy

By Brian McNair
Posted Tuesday, 7 December 2010

When Wikileaks released its footage of a US helicopter massacring Iraqis from the air in Baghdad the White House was embarrassed. The images and sounds of airmen gleefully mowing down a group of suspected insurgents which turned out to include Reuters journalists and children was deeply disturbing to anyone who saw it, and there was little mileage for the US military in blaming the messenger.

When Julian Assange's online site released hundreds of thousands of military dispatches from the front line in Afghanistan and Iraq there was official indignation, and the suggestion that Wikileaks was putting the lives of informers and collaborators at risk. It's hard not to have sympathy with that argument, though no evidence of any casualties arising from the leaks has been produced.

Now, as a flood of leaked diplomatic cables reveal what those in power really think about others in power, there is panic, and fury, far more intense than anything seen in previous waves of Wikileaks mischief making. In the US, in some quite influential and senior circles, they want Julian Assange dead, executed, assassinated. They go on Fox News to denounce him as an information terrorist, who should be treated as an enemy combatant.

And even if we discount the rabid statements of right wing loons and Canadian politicians, or the efforts of some in the Swedish judiciary to set him up for rape in a bizarre sub-plot reminiscent of a Stieg Larsson novel, who will doubt that Assange's life is in danger from any number of security agencies and secret services? Someone characterised the calls for Assange to be killed, taken out, prosecuted for treason, as a kind of fatwa.

Letting Sarah Palin or Mike Huckabee at him would be pointless, of course, because he is merely the embodiment of a fundamental shift in the dynamics of power in the digital age. Yes, he is uniquely talented, and fearless, but if it were not Assange it would be someone else. If not Wikileaks, some other band of networked tech-heads with liberal consciences using digital technology would be blowing apart all the rules and dirty tricks by which authority and power have been controlled and managed for centuries.

He is not the first whistle blower, and he won't be the last, but he is the first to have so clearly exposed the loss of control of information which global digital networks bring. For that reason, he is loathed by power, which depends on such control for its survival.

What we see in Wikileaks is the result of the dissolution of boundaries which hitherto kept information secure within nation states, within governments and their agencies, secret from all but a powerful few. Digital technology and the internet have eroded those boundaries, accelerated the flow of information beyond the capacity of any institution to contain it for long, and dramatically increased its accessibility. Hundreds of millions, soon to be billions, of people with access to a computer and a broadband connection can access unimaginable quantities of data.

Is this a good thing? Yes, if you believe that information is power, and the abuse of power is nearly always founded on the control of information. Erode that control, and power begins to leak away. Honest, well-intentioned, democratic leaders have nothing to fear from truth and transparency, even if they may at times be embarrassed by it. As the great Bill Clinton discovered, after the online Drudge Report blew the whistle on the Monica Lewinsky affair, the public do not mind flaws in their leaders, because we are all flawed, after all.

Assange's spectacular demystification of how global diplomacy works is subversive and shocking because it is so skilfully targeted on what he calls the "conspiracies" that make the abuse of power possible. By this he means the invisible networks and communications which keep power secure, because they are unknown to us. The leaked cables expose those mechanisms to the scrutiny of global publics; to citizens who already have democracies but want them to work better, and non-citizens of despotisms who seek
freedom. Power's capacity to lie and obfuscate is weakened, everywhere, and that is a good thing, if you believe in democracy. Just see how mad they all are, from Tehran to Washington, and Beijing to Moscow. At last Obama and Ahmadinejad agree on something.

After the fuss dies down, these leaks will strengthen good government. Yes, it may be embarrassing for Kevin Rudd's past views on China to become public knowledge, but he was only stating the obvious. Many of the leaked cables have this quality, making explicit what most informed observers believed to be true in any case. Compared to Italian news coverage of Berlusconi's antics, the leaked cables about his "tiredness" are the soul of discretion.

More important than their mildly anarchic dismantling of the pomposity and secrecy of western leaders, the leaks may well contribute to the slow, but unstoppable demise of the dwindling number of dictatorships for whom the control of information, and relentless lying, are essential tools of oppression. Gaddafi is no joke to the people who live under his rule, but the news of his botox and his Ukrainian "nurse" make him look like a fool, and that will hasten his end.

For all these reasons, and because he has so defiantly put his life and liberty on the line, Assange is a courageous agent of cultural chaos, a true pioneer of digital democracy, and he should be defended and protected from the danger he is now in, not least by his fellow Australians. Let's hope that the newspapers who have published the leaks, and the readers who have enjoyed reading them, and been thus strengthened in the belief that power is fallible, stand up to be counted when the police come knocking on his door.

Brian McNair is Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication at Queensland University of Technology, and the author of Cultural Chaos: journalism, news and power in a globalised world (Routledge, 2006). Read his blog - Kelvin Grove - at www.brianmcnair.com

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1. What arguments is Brian McNair making about the impact of Wikileaks?
2. Do you think that there is a case to be made (as is being made by the US govt) for some documents being kept secret? If so, what sort of documents and why should their release be censored?
3. Do you agree that in the end these leaks will strengthen good government? Why/why not?
Declare 'game over' on video violence degrading our kids

Date: March 14 2010

Australia is one of the only Western nations without an adults-only classification for video games. Eamonn Duff discovers why an R18+ rating needs to be introduced.

PETER BAEB enters a popular Sydney department store with trepidation - he wants to buy a video game which, by law, he's not supposed to have. Peter is 14 but aware he looks younger than his age.

Not that the shop assistant cares. Ignoring the red "Restricted" warning sticker on the front of the game box, the assistant takes $100 from the boy without question.

Peter walks out of the store with a violent game that the law says should only be bought by those older than 15 and accompanied by an adult or guardian.

"I'm shocked how easy it ended up being," Peter says later.

With the permission of his parents, Peter conducted a video-game shopping survey around Sydney's CBD on behalf of The Sun-Herald. He visited six retailers, picked out games with an MA 15+ classification, then strolled up to the counter.

Five out of six shops handed him graphic games involving murder, mass shootings, stabbings, drug dealing, sexual violence and child abductions.

The results of our investigation outraged family lobby groups, who say not enough is being done to crack down on the practice.

"Our biggest concern with the proposed R18+ rating is children are going to get their hands on these products regardless and there's nothing parents can do about it, no matter how responsible they are," says Barbara Biggins, chief executive of the Australian Council on Children and the Media.

"The shops are being derelict in their duties. If the respective state governments don't come down hard on this, what message does it send? What's the point if the enforcement end of the spectrum isn't working."

Interactive Games and Entertainment Association chief executive Ron Curry agrees that obligations must be fulfilled at the point of sale - "and, more widely, that everybody is educated about the rating system in place."

Mr Curry said if an R18+ rating - for adults only - was introduced, there would be "less confusion." The absence of the rating has seen 74 video games banned in Australia since 1995.

"If you'd told me you'd been into six specialist games shops and they'd sold the games, I'd be very surprised," Mr Curry says.
"When it comes to mass merchants, there can be a high turnover of staff [and] employee moves between departments, and there is potentially a lack of continuity in terms of education and knowledge of what the classifications actually mean. That said, there is no excuse."

Peter says he has mates his age who play the same restricted games he bought.

"Games like these are becoming more and more lifelike," he says. "If you play this sort of stuff regularly, the violence, the killing, the drugs and everything, I guess it just becomes normal."

Research suggests exposure to violent games makes people more aggressive, less caring children - regardless of their age, sex or culture. A review of 130 studies on the subject - covering more than 130,000 young gamers worldwide - found exposure to violent video games was a causal risk factor for increased aggressive thoughts and behaviour and decreased empathy.

Lead researcher Craig Anderson, from the Centre for the Study of Violence at Iowa State University, says such effects are neither huge nor trivial.

"If you have a child with no other risk factors for aggression and violence, and if you allow them to suddenly start playing video games five hours to 10 hours a week, they're not going to become a school shooter," he says.

"[But] it's a risk factor that's easy for an individual parent to deal with - at least, easier than changing most other known risk factors for aggression and violence, such as poverty or one's genetic structure."

NSW Attorney-General John Hatzistergos has warned retailers that selling restricted games to minors is a criminal offence.

Those caught selling MA15+ computer games to someone under the age of 15 face fines up to $5500 for sole traders and $11,000 if trading as a company.

Selling RC (Refused Classification) games to minors carries a maximum of two years' jail or $16,500 fine for sole traders, or a $33,000 fine for a corporation.

"The government takes breaches of classification compliance laws seriously and has given police full authority to enforce laws dealing with this offence," a spokeswoman for the Attorney-General says.

"Members of the public who witness retailers selling restricted games to minors are encouraged to report this criminal activity to police. A national review of computer game classification laws is currently in progress and work is also under way to develop proposals to improve compliance by retailers."

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Class Discussion Questions & Activities

1. Read Case study 2.5 from page 49 of your textbook titled ‘Political correctness vs freedom of speech’. Answer the questions that follow.

2. Given fear of terrorism-related activities in recent years, are we justified in imposing controls on what people can see and hear? Are we in danger of turning into an Orwell-like society (think ‘1984’ & ‘Animal Farm’)? How might this be reflected in the current issues related to WikiLeaks?

3. To what extent is formal censorship (such as film classification) a true reflection of public opinion and to what extent is it a political reaction to minority hype reported in the media? Have notions of “acceptable standards” changed over the years? Are we becoming more or less conservative? Check out the trailer for the recent Australian documentary Not Quite Hollywood http://www.notquitehollywood.com.au/video/?videoId=trailer. Are the various OFLC classification categories useful guidelines?

4. Does “seeing” (eg images on film) or “hearing” (eg language or lyrics in music) necessarily mean “doing”? What are the underlying assumptions for adults about this argument? Is this a simplistic argument (think of Michael Moore’s argument in ‘Bowling for Colombine’).

5. Class and Portfolio Exercise: There are several short articles on aspects of censorship in the preceding pages. In groups of 4-5, spend 15 minutes reading and discussing one of the articles and the questions posed at the end (each group should choose a different article). Discuss the answers with the rest of the class. Write up your group’s response in 250 words and include it in your portfolio. These articles can also be downloaded from the POPC website.