

CHAPTER EIGHT



The Global Structures and Cultures of Pornography: The Global Brothel

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The pornography industry is a most successful global media industry: its products have a universal appeal; increasing demand fuels an innovative and intensified means of supply; its cost-effective production mode makes it versatile, tapping into new resources around the world; it addresses the needs and caters to the interests of a wide range of consumer groups; it is a fierce adopter of new technologies, has a most efficient distribution system, boasts staggering income figures and is increasingly gaining political clout in various regions across the world. The pornography industry has been studied and analyzed for over thirty years for its interindustrial links and its effects on its audiences. Its very nature has caused waves of regulatory intervention, which itself becomes the object of endless contestation across the world. Currently the universal culture and language of its products, combined with the industry's most sophisticated distribution methods, seem to have brought international authorities to a standstill, being unable and unconvinced about the best ways to tame this phenomenon. Yet it has not been considered a priority matter for study in international communication scholarship.

This chapter addresses questions that contemporary IC scholarship must tackle, further explore, and research. It looks at the pornography industry as a global medium which operates through networks and international distribution systems of the global media, impressively demonstrates a one-way flow of meanings and

labor in terms of content control and production, and utilizes an almost universally understood language, despite its diverse and fragmented audiences around the globe. The chapter therefore argues that IC scholarship needs to urgently consider the *modi operandi* and the cultures and effects of the pornography industry in ways that identify and challenge its links to the state, its violation of human rights, and its gender inequity and exploitation, as well as its domination of patriarchal culture, which further colonizes public spaces and cultural attitudes and affects the ways that policy is perceived and implemented. IC scholarship can address the field much in the ways it has gazed at global media, but with the substantial benefit of three decades of enormous interdisciplinary feminist research on the subject. It also needs to look at the complex nexus of the production, consumption, and representation of pornography.

Money Makes the Porn Go 'Round: The International Political Economy of the Industry

The pornography industry—or “adult” industry as its producers prefer to call it—is estimated to be worth approximately \$60 billion in 2007, or, put in a comparative context, equal to Hungary’s foreign debt or Thailand’s total sum of exports. The world leader in the pornography industry is the U.S., which spends \$12 billion annually on porn—more than it spends on Hollywood and the same as on foreign aid. Each week, over two hundred films are produced, on the smallest possible budgets (Williams 2004). In 2002, porn films brought in nearly half as much as Hollywood’s \$9 billion at the box office, with 11,300 hard-core titles, 70 percent of them being produced in Los Angeles, compared to Hollywood’s 470 film releases annually (Keegan 2003).

Australia appears to be the second revenue hub for the sector’s A\$1.5 billion (in 2002), with Queensland’s A\$16 million holding the lead, estimated to increase to A\$35 million a year, given the recent legalization of X-rated material (Cassrels 2002; Dodd 2002), though Sydney, in New South Wales, is often described as the sex capital of the country and is home to an estimated 10,000 workers in the industry (Brace 2004). These figures make the pornography and sex industry in Australia second only to its tourism and pine products. Nevertheless this revenue comes from consuming—rather than producing—pornography. Perth-based AdultShop.com controls a major part of the legal adult media and products. AdultShop owns Axis, the country’s biggest distribution outlet, which sells approximately 750,000 X-rated videos to customers on its mailing list; it also owns the Barbarella chain, as well as other smaller distribution outlets. The company is worth A\$67.2 million (Dodd 2002). Italy, with its approximately A\$1.5

billion pornography industry, is also a serious player, while Canada is seen as a favorable production location, due to its currency exchange rate and highly skilled workforce. As of 2004, there were more than twenty companies in the lower mainland of British Columbia producing porn movies, largely on commission for U.S. Internet companies (Williams 2004).

These figures are careful estimates, as precise information on the revenue of the industry is hard to come by. The industry is largely organized around networks, especially as far as the independent producers and companies are concerned, with more business opportunities being offered through the use of decentralized production and distribution technologies most successfully applied on the Internet. The rise of amateur websites claiming the exploits of small groups or one central character, as well as those encouraging the posting and publication of homemade movies and pictures, appear as independent enterprises, although there are links to each other that would indicate some form of commercial collaboration, if not coownership.

The Internet provides the illusion of anonymity (although Internet traffic can generally be traced back to servers and individual terminals), and it provides a forum for the exchange of information and access to peer-to-peer file exchange systems. However, it mainly offers instant gratification, also the main characteristic of consumer culture in the metropolises of the Western world. The porn industry has been quick to utilize the Internet as a new distributional technology of narrow/individual-casting. Indeed it has proved to be a continual innovator of technological adaptation and in particular of those technologies that are designed for practices of private consumption, as opposed to those involving mass and public viewings—the video versus film, and now computers or iPods. Its themes and its drive toward the lowest possible costs, as well as the need for flexible use of re/camcording technologies led producers to work their way through video first, and then digital media. The porn industry is said to account for the greatest growth of content on the Internet and to be driving the demand for broadband technology. It is estimated that there are currently over 15 million Web pages with pornographic content, while in 1999 there were estimated to be only 66,000 websites. In all, porn accounted for an astonishing 69 percent of the total pay-per-view Internet content market, thereby outpacing the news, sports, and video games market (Forgione 2005).

Despite this decentralized character of the sex industry, changes are taking place, such as increasing ownership concentration, growth of chains, and a shift toward large capital investment. Moreover, the boundary between pornographic material, understood as electronic and print images and words, and what is conventionally understood as prostitution—sex for money—is increasingly blurred. So are attempts to classify porn and distinguish violent and degrading content

from simulated content. These characteristics point to an accelerated development of the pornography industry toward the production of content that addresses niche markets, creating and reinforcing demand for pornography in general and for certain forms more specifically. One of the strategies for the creation of new markets and therefore access to wider audiences is the cross-sectional operation of the industry. The intraindustrial collaboration with other global media industries signals not only the mainstreaming of pornography but also the recognition of a lucrative business model for bringing profits to the otherwise respectable media. The contractual agreements between porn portals and content providers of pornography and all main telecommunication operators across the globe are one aspect of this link. French operator Orange provides pornographic video clips on mobile phones from the company's wireless portal. As much as a quarter of all videos accessed from its portal are erotic—the equivalent of about 3,330 hours of viewing each month (Bryan-Low and Pringle 2005). The collaboration of Vivid (a major porn content provider) with Vodafone through the EroTrix games attracted 30,000 downloads in the first two months in Germany, Greece, and Portugal monthly traffic. PhoneErotica.com (a UK-based website) generates over 300 million hits per month (Tanner 2005). Playboy licenses pictures and videos to European mobile phone users. So well integrated is content provision and mobile use that there are predictions that \$4 million will be spent on telephone downloads alone and that the numbers will grow with the improvement of mobile technology. Indeed, third-generation manufacturers count on pornography to drive the new media.

The industry's spread, however, is much broader. A prominent beneficiary is the hotel industry, with adult movies bringing over US\$200 million through cable channels in the U.S.; 80 percent of in-room entertainment derives from consumption of pornography (J. Williams 2004; Devaney 2002). Behind them stand the respectable General Motors (with subsidiary DirecTV) and AT&T. Pornography is carried through cable channels, Internet service providers, and magazine distributors, while large chunks of the industry are maintained by media conglomerates that also own family-oriented channels. Pornographic images and messages are also routinely and increasingly included in women's magazines, advertising in public spaces,¹ daytime TV, and also in the press in a nearly ritualistic manner² (Itzin 1992). These profitable links to other media and culture industries have contributed to the acceptability of pornography, through the accessibility of the sexualization of the female self across a range of instances, contexts, and borders. The pornography industry utilizes the same avenues and largely follows the same routes for its survival and expansion. It is no different than any other industry.

Or is it?

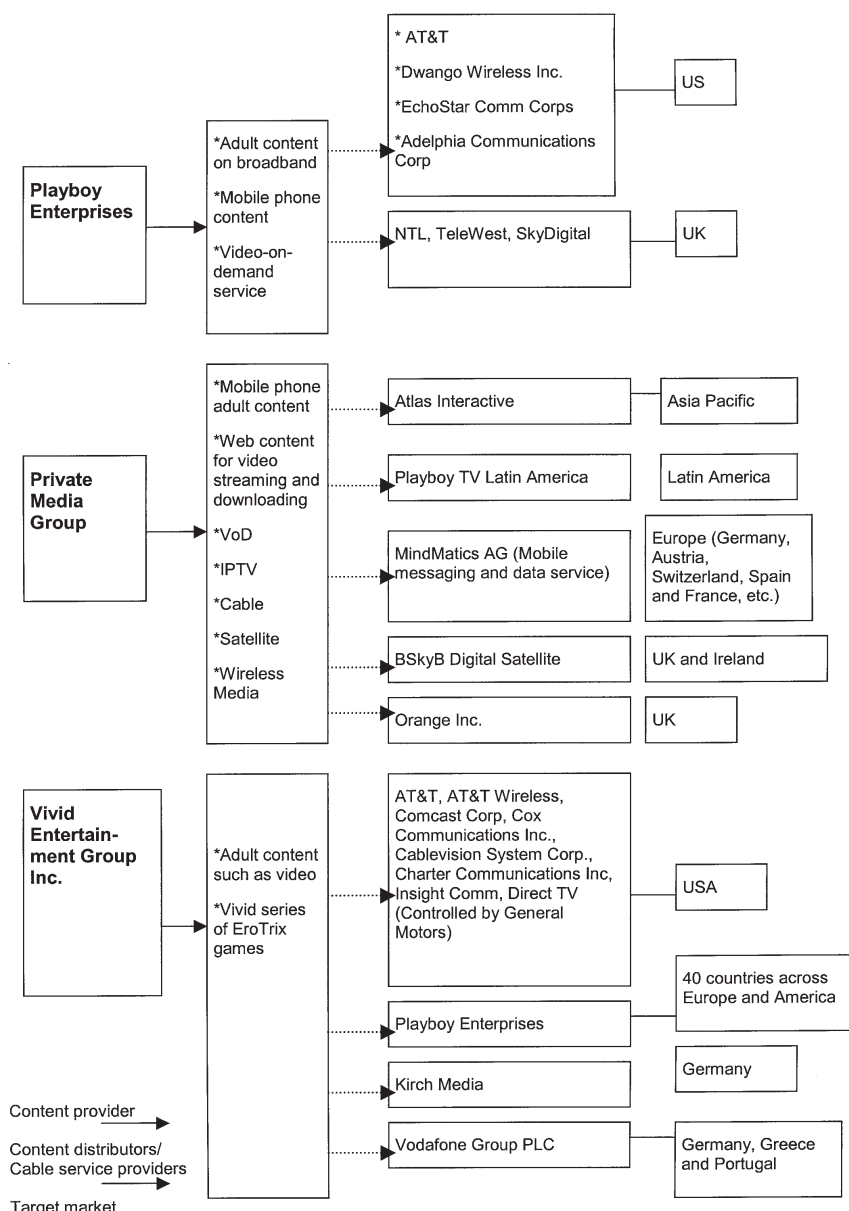


Figure 8.1. The Transnational Distribution of Porn Content

[Compiled from different sources]

Geographies, and Modes, of Production: The Demand-Supply-Demand Machine

Despite the newly respectable and often glamorous face of the porn industry and its successful cultural mainstreaming, the essence of the industry—its genre, representations, and mode of production—are deeply problematic. So too are its direct links with human trafficking and prostitution and the violation of human rights worldwide. It is often argued that the porn industry is one of the few industries where women have a privileged position—occupying “star” status and being rewarded better than men. But far from the glamorous show of conventions and advertising, laboring in the porn industry involves no protection from either trade unions or the state. The working conditions in the industry have not improved in the past three decades, as women’s career spans become shorter, their income depends on the number of scenes they perform, there are no social or welfare benefits, such as sick pay or maternity leave, and there is no possibility for accessing state benefits, such as unemployment after the termination of a contract. True to the spirit of globalization, women, far from being the valued commodities of the industry, constitute the most flexible, replaceable, and unprotected workforce. Only a handful of leading actresses earn \$100,000 a year; while most are paid \$300 to \$500 for a scene.

As we know from testimonies of producers and industry workers, the nature of these scenes also determine wages, popularity, and career, with actresses being classified according to their availability for different acts, which vary from conventionally understood sexual intercourse to scenes of violence and humiliation.³ The lower the status of the woman’s representation, the shorter her projected career track in the industry. The production of amateur or home videos has further lowered pay rates. The image of the innocent, fun-loving home video is shadowed by testimonies about the exploitation of women’s images without their consent or knowledge.⁴ The pictures, videos, and files live on long after the women are gone. The profits made throughout the life of the film never reach the laborer—whose pay is incomparable to revenues.

Technologies not only ease the consumption of pornography and its production: they are also used to further control women’s bodies and impact upon the direction of extremity the industry is following. For example, the production of material that aims at portraying women as young, looking like the girl next door, and unsuspected—but deeply insatiable—becomes the inspiration for new generations of producers. Digital manipulation allows a variety of choices over the presentation of images, from the construction of images of underage girls from women, to the (comparatively) low-tech *retouche* of performers to resemble teenagers.⁵ Companies create specific markets for young/teen-next-door images in a directed and systematic way. “This pursuit of the ‘quality girl’ not only

reflected the GGW brand's name brand, what Leist called 'the ones you wouldn't expect to do it' but also influenced new amateurs hoping to become producers themselves" who, having the means of affordable and mobile technology, can achieve that easily (Mayer 2005). The recent move toward the use of high-definition technology polices women's bodies even further: producers, disturbed by the appearance of body marks (scars, cellulite, body imperfections), push women to undergo even more cosmetic surgery and tell them to "cut their carbs" (Richtel 2007). The financing of such undertakings, besides the emotional damage that the context of disapproval has on women in an industry that leaves nothing to imagination, creates further dependency on finding and sustaining work in the trade. The pursuit of images of unrealistic and infantilized female bodies is the norm.

New geographies for the production of porn are created, with outsourcing and the shifting of production to countries with more favourable economic conditions. According to reports, the Philippines has emerged as the major provider of pornographic materials, including photographs, films, and live sex acts. That country is also considered to be a leading source and producer of child pornography and cyberprostitution. The exploitation of workers is transferred into new territories, in particular in the countries of the former Soviet Union, with Hungary becoming the biggest center for pornography production in Europe, through its supply of women, surpassing "established" rivals such as Amsterdam and Copenhagen. Excruciating and humiliating acts are paid \$200 or \$300,⁶ a third of the fees in 1988 (Anonymous 1998). Even the few available "stars" have seen a drop in their wages. A number of studies and a few serious and rarely available documentaries have exposed the labor conditions of women in the industry, showing how forced performance and rape are not occasional events but largely the norm among "respectable" porn conglomerates as well as among those companies considered "sick" or extreme by mainstream pornographers.⁷ Evidence indicates that women are forced and coerced to participate in acts, pushed to their limits, and constantly pressured for more extreme performances. Moreover, the line between choice and force is becoming provocatively unclear.⁸ Boyle argues that "such material is not *only* fantasy, but also a representation of sexual acts, authenticated by the signature shots of genitalia, penetration and ejaculation. This is significant not only in view of the varying conditions of production, but also in relation to the conventions of mainstream and pornographic sex and how these position consumers" (2000, 189). Conditions of crude abuse but also inherent pressure, through the use of indirect threats (of unemployment, unpopularity, insult, guilt feelings toward the production team) have little in common with the projected image of pornography as "fantasy" for the consumer and "choice" for the laborer. As Dworkin has poignantly observed: "Essential to this gratification on some

level is the illusion that the women are not controlled by men but are acting freely” (1984, 136). Women working in the industry are more likely to be physically and mentally abused, held against their will, and threatened. Macrae (2003) argues that there is substantial evidence of women having been killed or murdered during shoots.

Furthermore, the links between pornography, trafficking, and prostitution are strong, contributing to a complex system of exploitation that fuels the global sex industry. The increasing use and growing accessibility of ICTs have paved the way for sophistication in these areas. Pimps, traffickers, stalkers, and users have adopted new technologies to further their abuse and exploitation (Hughes 2002). The global sex industry is a multibillion-dollar industry. According to an estimate in the *Economist*, the trafficking in women and girls, in particular for prostitution purposes, yields a staggering \$20 billion (United Nations 1999). UNICEF estimates that some 2 million children, most of them girls, are exploited in the commercial sex trade annually.⁹ The value of the global trade in women is estimated to be between \$7 billion and \$12 billion.¹⁰ Overall, the mainstream sex industry claims one quarter of the 4 million people trafficked each year (Hughes 2000). Apart from being channelled into domestic prostitution, women and children are coerced into posing for pornography, which increasingly is trafficked internationally (Leifholdt 1999). Pornography is by far the most prevalent form of sexual exploitation in cyberspace (Umali 2005). With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Soviet republics including Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, and Russia have emerged as major suppliers of women to be trafficked into the world. The Netherlands and Germany are the most popular destinations for trafficked women, due to their relaxed laws on prostitution. Trafficked women find themselves in a multiple trap, as they are forced to become part of the sex industry in their effort to migrate as economic immigrants (Hughes 2000).¹¹ The economics of trafficking has always been explained through the focus on the supply side in the sending countries. However, the complete equation can only be understood if factors on the demand side are also examined. An important factor is the organized crime network that finds trafficking and prostitution the most lucrative business opportunities, which expands to the control of pornography.¹²

Pornsocialization Cultures

The industry itself admits that porn is becoming grosser and more extreme. The use of amateurs—not well-established, well-known workers—not only drives production costs down but also gives a more authentic flair to the violence taking place in pornography: Scalisi, the owner of 21 Sextury Video explains: “Amateurs come across better on screen. Our customers feel that. Especially by

women you can see it. They still feel strong pain.”¹³ The unlimited supply of images is pushing the normative threshold of acceptability lower, as it normalizes the depiction of violent behavior (Macrae 2003; Simonton 2004). There is evidence to suggest that most women in prostitution are involved in pornography at some point in their lives. The effects of their work are manifest in physical and emotional damage as well as in routine drug and alcohol abuse (Baldwin 1989; Gittler 1999; Farley 2003).

The content generated in the industry derives under sweatshop conditions, as far as women’s rights, dignity, and safety are concerned. It is achieved through a dehumanizing process, accompanied by language and acts that expect women to perform tasks harmful to their physical health and damaging to their emotional balance, without the right to compensation or the power or means to improve their conditions. Despite the assumed consent and values of professionalism, largely based on the argument of pay and free choice when entering and working in the industry, the fundamentally individualistic focus on a worker’s negotiating power is typical of neoliberal market ideology. Linked together with universal patriarchy, this sophisticated and versatile system of exploitation of women and children is driven by an increased demand for images that is further reinforced and maintained through popular culture.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the pornography consumer is becoming younger: children as young as nine years old are socialized through consumption of porn films, images, and lyrics. The link to popular culture, whether through the trivialization of consumption of pornographic material or through the colonization of public spaces and infiltration of children’s fashion through sexualized images, is crucial to the shifting attitudes of young people: girls internalizing such norms¹⁵ and boys in acting upon them. Pornography is available everywhere; the sexualization of women’s and girl’s bodies, indeed their disposability, is an everyday experience. But perhaps even more disturbing, violent pornography and its glorification leads to the enacting of scenes by young children and teenagers, as a way of socialization and connection to everyday experience. Child abuse and the grooming of children and young teenagers for sexual exploitation also takes place through pornography.¹⁶ Among young people, porno rap (music with lyrics about rape, violent sex, and degradation of women) has become very popular, while porno rappers have become role models, propagating a way of life that feeds off the direct connection of images and texts and their translation into teenagers’ actions.¹⁷

Pornography is imagery and textual representation of power relations and well-defined domination. “The primary domination/subordination dynamic eroticized in pornography is, of course, gender” (Jensen 2004). It is difficult to contest women’s personal accounts and narratives that demonstrate the relationship between pornography and sexual violence (Macrae 2003). In one

study, 73 percent of two hundred street prostitutes reported having been raped. Out of these, 24 percent reported that their rapists had made reference to pornography.¹⁸ There have been a variety of arguments concerning the effects of consumption of pornography on men's sexual behavior. However, research methods are scarce that could provide conclusive data on a direct casual link between pornography and sexual violence in a traditional science model (Jensen 2004). For all its inherent flaws owing to difficulties with defining pornography, with measuring behavior, and with the artificiality of the laboratory setting, some relatively consistent findings indicate that exposure to violent pornography does increase, or is at least associated with, callousness toward women as well as an increased propensity to violence (Shaw 1999). Moreover, the consumption of violent pornography, similar to that of violent video games, requires a learning process. Violence is something one learns. It requires the desensitization of the consumer, and his or her emotional distancing from the humanity of the persons involved. Pornography is construed upon the fragmentation and deduction of the female body into parts. The impact of violence and force on real bodies (even if depicted in their parts) and on the large-scale and long-term understanding and interpretation of sexuality as violence is certainly a social question that cannot be answered through laboratory tests. In these terms, the cause-and-effect debate—as understood through the conventional ways of testing claims—is a misplaced attempt to guide policy making¹⁹.

International Policy Regimes and the Disarticulation of Responsibility

While the pornography industry enjoys the luxury of having a global market ranging from the most socially conservative societies to the most liberal, it is not freed from challenges posed by its opponents. These range from totalitarian authorities and regimes to international organizations and religious groups. Feminist theory and activism have raised the issue of pornography as a matter of domination and power, for its derogatory approach toward and objectification of the female body and its long-term effects on the socialization of violence. This approach addresses women's rights to equality and life free from violence and objectification as human rights. The motivations of other actors do not necessarily focus on women's rights but rather on claims of morality problematized through sexual explicitness, promiscuity, or sexual expression.²⁰

Interestingly, the industry too has developed ways to tackle these challenges, facilitated by its strong industrial foundations in countries like the U.S., its close relationship to politicians, and of course technology. Increasingly bureaucratization and a growth in business associations, lobbyists, and formal means of interacting with the state are the new strategies.²¹ The industry's relationship to

governments is entering a new era characterized by a culture of “business as usual,” moving away from the stigma of filth, immorality, or illegality—an important cultural transformation (Bretns and Hausbeck 1999). In Britain, for example, the news that the Labour Party has accepted funds and has been associated with a UK-based major pornography corporation (Richard Desmond’s empire of porn magazines) was controversially met with endorsement by some Labour MPs.²² Australian Left Labour consults with lobbyists from the sex industry on issues of human rights (Wu 2004). In other cases, governments have leased—intentionally or otherwise—their domain names for porn, such as Tuvalu (tv), the small African islands of Sao Tome and Principe, or the island of Niue (nu).

The dominant approaches of governments are centered around two axes: questions of decency and obscenity and harm to minors. The first kind of legislation is formulated in terms of morality (and immorality), is based on subjective interpretation of what constitutes obscene or indecent material, and is vague. Moreover, given the rapid pace with which the industry adapts and uses technologies as well as changing consumption habits, such laws are increasingly difficult to implement. The censorship of material on the basis of morality leaves vulnerable material addressed at marginalized sexualities—even when this material is neither degrading nor violent, such as home-erotic content. As Itzin explains, “Historically it has been used to censor art and literature, to suppress homosexuality and to control women’s reproduction. In practice it protects pornography, permitting the increased production and circulation of . . . ‘pornographic’ pornography.” In Canada and Ireland, such laws have been used to censor information on birth control and abortion, while in the UK such legislation has been used to tackle politically subversive literature (1992, 401, 408). In Britain, the law governing obscene publications is found principally in the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. Commercial dealings in obscene items or their possession is an offense. With or without a prosecution, the items can be seized under a magistrate’s warrant and, after a hearing to determine whether they contravene the statute, can be forfeited.²³

The second arm of legislation refers to the exposure or access of minors to pornographic material (predominantly as a matter of corruption) and in terms of actual minors being abused for the production of pornography.²⁴ Underlying these legislative responses is the conflictual discursive relationship between free speech and censorship. Although neither adequately or successfully provides a normative framework that can address the multifaceted issues raised by the production and consumption (and indeed culture) of pornography, as discussed here, they have dominated, and continue to do so, the legislative debate around pornography.²⁵ Moreover, legislation surrounding the context of the sex industry is also inadequate, further precipitating exploitation, human insecurity, and abuse, through trafficking, labor in the sex industry, and pornography.