

IS PORN THE NEW SEX EDUCATION?

Over the past 15 years, internet pornography has become the predominant channel through which young people learn about sex, not just in the developed world, but increasingly in developing countries too. In many developing countries, traditional gatekeepers of sex education, such as governments, religious leaders and parents, still attempt to keep sexuality out of the public sphere. But they are mainly effective only at preventing sex education in the classroom, leaving young people to learn about sex online. There, genuine sex educators compete for their audience against widespread amateur and professional pornography and the new gatekeepers such as Facebook enforcing self-determined censorship, banning even simple information including guides to breast self-examination. To develop a comprehensive sex education strategy for young people that aims to reduce maternal and child mortality, unwanted pregnancy, sexual violence and includes the realities of sex and pleasure, policymakers and sex educators need to engage with new and traditional gatekeepers, porn distributors and young people themselves.

Recognising the sexual health needs and rights of young people

Understanding and negotiating sex and relationships are extremely important to young people. Many countries that restrict modern formal sex education have traditionally provided education on sexuality and relationships through some form of indigenous cultural institution. In Sierra Leone, women's secret societies passed on sexual knowledge and norms to adolescent girls. In Uganda, extended family members such as *ssenga* (paternal aunts) and *koja* (maternal uncles) performed the same function in group chats with boys and girls. But such institutions have weakened, disappeared or become commercialised, while there has been a tremendous growth of internet access among young people.

Parents, governments and policymakers are well aware of the significance of sex and relationships and the socioeconomic problems that are caused by unwanted and early pregnancies. The evidence of the benefits of comprehensive sex education in reducing maternal and child mortality, reducing sexually transmitted infections and improving sexual health is overwhelming. However, many governments have been unable or unwilling to implement statutory sex education in public schools or other formal settings, including in the UK where Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education (incorporating sex-and-relationship education) is not compulsory in all schools.

Into this gap have stepped online sex educators. Digital sex education platforms have sprung up in countries on every continent. Love Matters is present in Kenya, India, Egypt, China and Mexico. Argentina has #ChauTabú (#ByeTaboo'). Bangladesh has Maya Apa, a 24/7 web and mobile app help service. Some sex education platforms are run by non-governmental organisations, others were launched and funded by the state, and one is a private women-led technology company providing a social service. Some, such as Love Matters India, are mostly visited by men. Others, like #ChauTabú, draw predominantly female users. Some find it difficult to host discussions on topics that are politically or culturally sensitive in their countries, such as same-sex relationships or abortion. But they all aim to provide evidence-based sexual health education, including information on anatomy, disease prevention and family planning. They all report sessions with millions of young users, and operate transnationally at a scale that was never feasible for interpersonal or traditional sex educators. Research on the impact of online sex education is mostly very positive, [with studies showing digital interventions for sexual health to be as good as face-to-face interventions](#) and having a positive effect on sexual behaviour. It fulfils a clear need for information on the part of millions of young people.

Competition between sex education and porn?

Despite sex education platforms attracting millions of users, they are dwarfed by the traffic drawn by commercial porn sites. Pornhub, for example, ranked the 22nd most-popular website in the world (by the internet traffic measurement service Similar Web, between 10 and 13 October), has 1.3 billion visits per month – 650 times more visits than the 2 million visits per month to the number one sex education

site Scarleteen.com. Researchers estimate that anywhere between 4 per cent (Ogas and Ogi 2011) and 25 per cent (Watson and Smith 2012) of the million most-visited websites are dedicated to pornography, defined as material created with the explicit purpose of sexual arousal. Yesterday's arguments over whether the erotic carvings on [India's Khajuraho temples](#), a UNESCO World Heritage site, should be considered pornographic have given way to disputes over whether pornography includes self-produced material like nude selfies and 'dick pics'. In any case, the chances are that a curious young person entering sex-related keywords will be directed to a porn site rather than a sex education site. And this is far from a first-world problem. Young people are watching large amounts of porn not just in the UK (Horvath *et al.* 2013) but in Ethiopia and India, and are finding creative ways to avoid parental supervision (Ganesh 2010) using homemade fake phone apps to cover what they are looking for and viewing.

Porn and young women

There is a long-standing assumption that consumers of pornography, whether on- or offline, are overwhelmingly male. If this were ever true, it no longer is. A survey by Love Matters of 5,000 young people in India found that 92 per cent of mostly 18–24 years old had watched porn, with only moderate differences between men and women. 84 per cent of the women surveyed and 97 per cent of the men had watched porn on the internet. Many produced their own porn and sexually explicit messages, 50 per cent had 'sexted', and about 28 per cent had sent or received a dick pic. Yet, these averages hide some of the power imbalances between men and women in digital porn production, consumption and dissemination. With amateur and revenge porn on the rise, research and media reports suggest that women all over the world are being pressured by their boyfriends to take pictures of themselves, or are being filmed during sex without consent. This is as true in Africa and Asia as it is in Europe and the Americas. The UK and European countries are increasingly aware of the problem of such [digital gender-based violence](#) with policies being put into place to address it. Educators and activists have also developed innovative [tools to give witty responses](#) to male pressure for sexy pictures. But in conservative patriarchal societies such as Uganda or India, where pre-marital sex is frowned upon, young girls have trouble finding informal or formal support to defend themselves against this new pressure to expose themselves.

Understanding the digital pathways to, and relationships between, porn and online sex education platforms is important for sex educators. They need to know how young people reach their websites and what key search words young people use when seeking sex education, in order to improve access in a porn-dominated digital environment. But this is extremely difficult to do. It is not always clear whether visitors to a sex education site are looking for sex education or porn, or how to tell the difference. Drawing the distinction is important not just in order to improve the user experience, but for legal reasons. Sexually explicit messaging and porn are illegal or socially unacceptable in many countries. In countries such as India (Rajak 2011) watching porn (apart from child porn) is legal, but distributing it is illegal. Sex educators work within national legal contexts and must respect the law. Many sex education websites try to avoid legal pitfalls by requiring users to certify that they are 18 or older. But because the age of first sexual contact is several years under 18 in most countries, this restriction (if users observe it) is a serious hindrance to their educational mission.

Recognising porn: do we know porn when we see it?

The first task for sex educators who want to understand young people's online search behaviour and avoid a run-in with obscenity laws is to be able to distinguish porn from sex education. Yet, defining the limits of pornography is notoriously difficult, as proven in the 1964 United States Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v Ohio*, and other countries have fared no better at establishing consistent definitions.

The first American law to try to regulate obscenity on the internet, the 1996 Communications Decency Act, would have banned depictions of 'sexual or excretory activities or organs' that were 'offensive' by community standards. This could have restricted many educational and medical communications and the Supreme Court ultimately struck down that part of the law (*Reno v ACLU (1997)*). By the same token, almost any seemingly innocent object or activity may be the focus of a pornographic subculture somewhere. In the words of the popular meme 'Internet Rule 34': 'If it exists, there is porn of it. No exceptions'.



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The spillover between pornographic and non-pornographic subject matter renders it difficult for online sex educators to draw boundaries between their platforms and porn sites. It also makes it hard to analyse what their users are seeking to learn and whether the initial searches were targeting porn or sex education. Love Matters and IDS are carrying out ongoing research on keywords employed in searches by internet users that led them to the Love Matters educational platform.

For example, what is a user who searches for the keyword 'penis' looking for? What does the question 'are all women born virgins' mean? Does the user find this sexually arousing, and is possibly looking for porn? How can sex educators use keywords to distinguish between users looking for arousal and those seeking anatomical or health information, or counselling? What if users want both?

Our research has found it almost impossible to classify porn and porn searches (on a large scale). On the Love Matters sex education website we analysed 471,000 individual search terms from Kenyan users that brought them to the Love Matters website from 16 July to 16 December 2015.

After removing connector words like 'to', or 'the', the five most popular search terms are 'sex' (7.9 per cent), 'love' (3.2 per cent), 'how' (3.0 per cent), 'penis' (2.8 per cent), and 'HIV' (1.17 per cent). What's promising from a sex educator's perspective is that the word *how* is in the top 5 most popular search terms, which indicates that the audience on a sex education website is looking for educational material.

To gain more insight into the keyword search patterns of users who are (presumably) looking for porn, we analysed the search data of major online porn provider Pornhub. This only compounded the confusion as the most common keywords entered by users in developing countries, on the Pornhub website, did not refer to sexual activities or attributes. In 2015, 'love' was the most commonly featured word in comments on Pornhub, while 'lesbian' was the most searched term on the site. Looking at keyword searches and comments on Pornhub shows that users may have a lot in common with users of platforms like Love Matters or dating sites.

Censorship of porn and sex education

Given the difficulty of defining the boundaries of pornography, it is not surprising that many national anti-pornography and obscenity laws are barely enforced. Attempts to do so, such as a call in Kenya to stop [talking about sex on the radio between 22:00 and 05:00 in order to protect children in Kenya](#) or the Government of [India blocking](#) 857 pornographic websites in 2015, are usually short-lived. However, the censorship rules of Google and Facebook do affect sex educators, who often use social media to attract users to their campaigns. For example, an advert with the question 'Is sex painful first time?' with a picture of a hand picking up a bed sheet was blocked. A picture of a dog wearing sunglasses, featuring the caption 'Doggy-style: Are all men dogs?', on the website of the Indian chapter of Love Matters, is another 2014 ad campaign that was censored by Facebook between 27 December 2015 and 16 July 2016.

Because Facebook and YouTube censor images of female nipples, [Argentinean activists used an overweight man with large breasts](#) in YouTube videos on breast examinations for cancer detection.

Unclear censorship policies by these new gatekeepers effect access to sex education sites. Between December 2015 and July 2016, Facebook rejected 24 per cent of the campaign posts created by Love Matters India, 27 per cent of those created by Love Matters Hablemos in Mexico/Venezuela, 6 per cent of Love Matters Arabic's posts and 8 per cent of those by Love Matters Kenya. Given the average ad reach over the time period, Love Matters estimates that 500,000 visits/sessions to Love Matters have potentially been missed as a consequence.

Working with porn producers and gatekeepers

Sex educators, social media channels, search engines, porn producers and parents need to deal with an uncomfortable reality where revenge porn is widely distributed while breast examination campaigns, sex education campaigns, modern art or historical pictures of the [Vietnam War are banned](#).



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It is clear that online sex education platforms do fulfil an unsatisfied demand for authoritative sex education. However, we do not know whether young people would access sex education sites using search terms that lead them to porn, or whether porn would still end up being the predominant mode of sexual education. This means that sex educators and policymakers have to think about if and how they can use the power of porn to reach audiences with comprehensive sex education and/or how responsible porn promoting respectful, equal and pleasurable roles for all genders could be produced.

There are potential risks – including reputational damage – of working with the porn industry and with development funding declining and development aid being contested, donors might be very wary of entering into these debates. Not entering these debates risks leaving the difficult decision-making to emotions or algorithms and depriving millions of young people from accessing information that is vital for their sexual and reproductive health.

It will be important to work with young people to develop new types of realistic, evidence-based and non-judgemental digital sex education environments. The creative energy that is now going into developing ways to hide digital sexual activity could be harnessed to develop and update digital sexual literacy skills. The gender and power dynamics underlying the production and distribution of porn – both commercial and amateur – also need attention if we want to reduce revenge porn and other forms of digital violence. Young people need help in learning to critically examine the sexual messages they are getting in their digital environments. This is true both of the pornography they view, and of the riskier, more participatory digital sexual activities they engage in, such as the production and distribution of amateur porn. Sex educators cannot build competitive comprehensive sex education environments until they understand how to engage with porn. And policymakers, practitioners, parents and opinion must deal with the realities of sex and sexual desire – including porn – if they want their sexual and reproductive health programmes aiming to reduce maternal, child mortality and rates of sexually transmitted infections to work.

Recommendations

- Policymakers and researchers should engage with porn producers, social media companies, internet engines, messaging services and sex educators around unintended effects of censorship on access to vital public information including, but not limited to, sex education.
- Politicians and policymakers need to address censorship by private companies of public goods to prevent legitimate online sex education from being blocked. Examine what can be learned from collective arrangements with mobile phone companies on emergency numbers.
- Conduct action-research with young people on gender and power dynamics underlying the production and distribution of online gender-based and sexual violence – including revenge porn.
- Develop youth-led interventions to reduce digital violence and improve digital literacy.



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Further reading

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Credits

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