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Book Review: When Technology Hurts. How Pornography Harms: What Today's Teens, Young Adults, Parents, and Pastors Need to Know by John Foubert

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**BOOK REVIEW: WHEN TECHNOLOGY HURTS
HOW PORNOGRAPHY HARMS: WHAT TODAY'S TEENS,
YOUNG ADULTS, PARENTS, AND PASTORS NEED TO KNOW
BY JOHN FOUBERT
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IT IS OFTEN SAID, “the world is a different place.” Indeed, it is. We currently live in what Robert Jensen (2007) refers to as a “post-*Playboy* world,” one in which women are degraded, objectified, and physically hurt in pornographic media through means few people could possibly imagine. The bulk of today’s pornography cannot be construed as erotica. In other words, most of it does not feature “sexually suggestive or rousing material that is free of sexism, racism, and homophobia and is respectful of all human beings and animals portrayed” (Russell, 1993, p. 3). Rather, pornography is monopolized by what the porn industry coins as “gonzo.” Gonzo “depicts hard core, body-punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased” (Dines, 2010, p. xi).

A routine feature of contemporary gonzo videos is painful anal penetration, as well as brutal gang rape and men slapping or choking women or pulling their hair while they penetrate them orally, vaginally, and anally (DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2016). Consider Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, and Liberman’s (2010) study of 304 scenes in 50 of the most popular DVDs available at the time they did their research. Nearly 90% contained physical aggression (mainly spanking, gagging, and slapping), and roughly 50% included verbal aggression, primarily name-calling. Not surprisingly, males constituted most of the perpetrators and the targets of their physical and verbal aggression were “overwhelmingly female.”

As demonstrated in John Foubert’s (2017) new book *How Pornography Harms*, and in a growing number of other scholarly materials, the porn industry is rapidly producing even more extreme violent and racist materials, including those that are blatantly racist and that include underage actors. What is more, the Internet makes it possible for people to access the most graphic sexual images with the click of a mouse and in an increasingly competitive market that remains patriarchal and misogynistic. Porn producers continuously try to “out-do” their competitors and throw any boundaries that may have existed right out of the playing field

into uncharted territory. This has markedly increased most porn consumers' acceptance of sexualized brutality (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016).

Again, contemporary mainstream porn is also racist. Some images include old bigoted themes about the enormously endowed and animalistic black man and the always sexually available animalistic black woman. Other common and popular examples include well-endowed black men with white women (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016). These may serve as evidence of a type of "revenge porn;" that is, white men's revenge against white women they can't have but using black men with bigger penises "as proxies to subordinate them" (Kimmel, 2008, p. 185). Moreover, as Dines (2010) observes:

In all-white porn, no one ever refers to the man's penis as "a white cock" or the woman's vagina as "white pussy," but introduce a person of color, and suddenly all players have a racialized sexuality, where the race of the performer(s) is described in ways that make women a little "sluttier" and the men more hypermasculinized" (p. 123).

Men and women of color are not the only people to be racially exploited by the porn industry. Keep in mind these videos featured on the widely-used site Xvideos.com: *Sexy Latina Rides a Black Bull in Front of Her Husband* and *My So Asian*. Still, regardless of the racial/ethnic identities of those who appear in gonzo, the most common images overwhelmingly cater to a white heterosexual male audience and feature women always ready for sex, willing to please, and always sexually satisfied. Women are often portrayed in one-dimensional hyper-sexualized images without any "sexual agency" (Corsianos, 2007). In other words, they are always orgasmic, willing to do anything, often reacting by doing what they are told, or by being physically moved into position to perform in particular ways, always accepting of what is being done to them regardless of the level of humiliation or degree of violence, and always wanting more. That these images are now mainstreamed with the audience wanting more tells us much about the fantasies of many heterosexual men and/or the acceptance of these images.

More is said about the contemporary porn industry in Foubert's *How Pornography Harms*. If what was stated above is not enough to make you care, then Chapter 1 of his riveting book will motivate you to do so. This book is one of a rapidly growing number interdisciplinary offerings that directs our attention to an unsettling truth, one that requires immediate attention from all advocates of social justice. Foubert's work is an important tool for those seeking to get involved in the ongoing struggle to curb one of the world's most compelling social problems. He "tells it like it is" and is dedicated to eliminating harmful sexual imagery from our lives.

What makes this book distinct from others written by leading feminist experts in the field (e.g., Dines, 2010) is that Foubert offers a Christian perspective on porn, especially in Chapter 2. Even so, *How Pornography Harms* also reviews the most up-to-date scientific literature, including the works of radical feminist scholars like me, Robert Jensen, and Gail Dines. Additionally, Foubert interviewed feminists and other types of experts in the field while preparing to write his monograph, and it includes excerpts of their observations scattered throughout it. Even if you are not a Christian or oppose Christianity, there is much progressive knowledge to be gained from reading Foubert's contribution. Nonetheless, many readers will find statements such as this one problematic: "If a person experiences sexual release

through self-stimulation while watching pornography, their sexual desire becomes retrained from the pre-wired, God designed desire for sexual gratification achieved through interacting with another person, to the rewired desire for images on a screen” (p. 32). Though people like me disagree with claims like the above for several reasons, including the fact that there is no scientific evidence of a God designed desire for anything, Foubert should be commended for putting his faith and politics up front for all to scrutinize.

Another unique feature of *How Pornography Harms* is Chapter 3, which examines the biological effects of porn consumption. The bulk of the extant empirical and theoretical literature on violent, degrading sexual imagery excludes reviews of studies of porn’s effects on the brain, but Chapter 3 makes it clear that porn researchers of all disciplinary backgrounds need to be familiar with biological work on the topic. Foubert reveals that there is now hard empirical evidence showing that porn rewires the brain, causes erectile dysfunction, and is addictive.

Other important topics addressed in this book include the link between porn and violence, women’s use of pornography, the motives of porn producers and actors, and child pornography. It is beyond the scope of this essay to summarize all the information featured in Foubert’s work, but I must state that his coverage of the extant literature on the topics covered in each of the 13 chapters is comprehensive, up-to-date, and highly intelligible for non-academics. This is definitely a “go to” book for people seeking a contemporary sourcebook on porn.

What is to be done about porn? How can you confront porn in your own life, the lives of others, and in society in general? Chapter 13 provides practical answers to these questions, such as seeking an “accountability partner.” This is “preferably a close friend or two who will hold you accountable” (p. 206). Most of the suggestions for change are informed by Christian perspectives and thus feminist readers will be disappointed by insufficient attention given to targeting broader patriarchal and capitalist forces, such as boycotting hotels and convention centers that offer in-room adult pay-per-view pornography (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016). Foubert includes a very brief section on a public health approach, but more space should be devoted to initiatives that fall under this model. Hopefully, Foubert will address feminist policy proposals in the next edition of this book.

Where do we go from here? How do we advance the social scientific study of porn? How do we build on the work of Foubert and other anti-porn scholars? One step forward is to recognize that pornography transcends videos, pictures, and adult novels. On top of living in a “post-*Playboy* world (Jensen, 2007), we also exist in a “striptease culture” (McNair, 2002). The sexual objectification and degradation of women exists in a wide range of contexts, including strip bars, live sex shows, and even advertising. McNair (2002) correctly points out on the back cover of his book that “sex and sexual imagery now permeate every aspect of culture.” Much, if not most, of what he is referring to is harmful and, in many cases, contributes to much pain and suffering, including harms uncovered by DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez’s (2016) rural southeast Ohio study. Some of their data gleaned from interviews with 52 female survivors of separation/divorce violence support earlier research showing a strong association between violence against women and perpetrators’ involvement in the sex industry outside the realm of pornographic media (Simmons, Lehmann, & Collier-Tenison, 2008).

DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez uncovered various nuanced reports from several women about how the broader pornographic cultures affects women’s lives. Billie’s

ex-partner, for example, “wasn’t really into porn” that she knew of, but throughout the course of her interview, she strived to make sense of his fetishes that ultimately played a major role in her sexually abusive experiences:

He had a few particular fetishes. And uh, you know at first I thought it was okay but then it became really uncomfortable but he wasn’t, you know, wasn’t willing to change that. And I guess maybe a part of me still loved him and maybe wanted to, you know, please him, but it was just, you know, perverse to me. It was like it went against the grain of everything I have held, however I ever looked at sex and how it was supposed to be in a relationship. Um, so, like I said, I mean I was a completely different person. He totally changed me. It was all an emotional, physical, spiritual thing. It was all twisted up so it is really hard to explain.... And, also like, and he was kind of like a masochist type. He became the sadist.

There has yet, to the best of my knowledge, to be another national survey of adult women that incorporates questions about their current and former male partner’s porn consumption conducted since the Canadian one done by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998). Smaller-scale representative sample surveys of adult women are also conspicuously absent. It is true that “populations surveys, in which random samples of women are interviewed about their experiences of violence using detailed behaviorally specific questions, yield more valid and reliable estimates of the prevalence of these phenomena in the population” (Jacquier, Johnson, & Fisher, 2011, p. 26). Self-report surveys of potential male perpetrators, too, are much needed because they yield better data on the factors that motivate men to use porn and harm women. The lack of survey research on the linkage between porn and both adult men’s and women’s experiences with intimate violence is somewhat surprising because there is a sizeable portion of surveys that examine other risk factors associated with woman abuse, such as intimate relationship status, patriarchal male peer support, and so on (DeKeseredy, 2015).

Theoretical developments have not kept pace with the burgeoning empirical literature on the relationship between pornography and its negative effects (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016). Even leading contemporary feminist experts, such as Dines (2010), pay scant attention to theorizing this problem. This is not to say, however, that her work and those of others who share her analysis (e.g., Jensen, 2007) is completely atheoretical because it is heavily influenced by radical feminism. Yet, the time is now for social scientific offerings that link broader macro-level forces with micro-level determinants. It is not enough to simply assert that porn and its consequences are functions of capitalism, racism and patriarchy. How do these problems shape individual behavior and group dynamics? The male peer support theories crafted by DeKeseredy and Olsson (2011) and DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013, 2016) attempt to answer this question. There has never been a study specifically designed to test their perspectives but preliminary evidence provided by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (2013), DeKeseredy and Hall-Sanchez (2016), and Hall-Sanchez (2014) strongly suggest that the correlations between Internet pornography, having patriarchal and abusive male friends, and woman abuse is an emerging problem that will only get worse soon. Still, more research is necessary and so are actual tests of male peer support models to conclusively determine if this is really the case.

Many more suggestions for further empirical and theoretical work could easily be suggested here. In the words of pioneering anti-porn scholar Robert Jensen

(2007), we still “have a lot of work to do” (p. 184). Foubert’s *How Pornography Harms* will stimulate scholars to do some new, meaningful work. His book speaks to me on many levels and numerous pages in my copy are filled with margin notes. As Claire Renzetti (1997), Editor of the widely read and cited journal *Violence Against Women*, reminds us, “From my experience as a teacher, researcher, editor, and activist, this is usually the sign of a very good book – good not only because it makes an interesting read but, more important, because it is useful” (p. vii).

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Walter S. DeKeseredy is Anna Deane Carlson Endowed Chair of Social Sciences, Director of the Research Center on Violence, and Professor of Sociology at West Virginia University. He has published 22 books and over 160 scientific journal articles and book chapters on violence against women and other social problems. In 2008, the Institute on Violence, Abuse and Trauma gave him the Linda Saltzman Memorial Intimate Partner Violence Researcher Award. He also jointly received the 2004 Distinguished Scholar Award from the American Society of Criminology's (ASC) Division on Women and Crime and the 2007 inaugural UOIT Research Excellence Award. In 1995, he received the Critical Criminologist of the Year Award from the ASC's Division on Critical Criminology (DCC) and in 2008 the DCC gave him the Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2014, he received the Critical Criminal Justice Scholar Award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences' (ACJS) Section on Critical Criminal Justice and in 2015, he received the Career Achievement Award from the ASC's Division on Victimology. In 2017, he received the Impact Award from the ACJS's section on Victimology.

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