

September 2017

## Book Reviews: Recent Books on Pornography: From Discussions of Harm to Normalization

Robert Brannon

Brooklyn College CUNY, rbran999@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity>

 Part of the [Applied Behavior Analysis Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Brannon, Robert (2017) "Book Reviews: Recent Books on Pornography: From Discussions of Harm to Normalization," *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 6.

DOI: 10.23860/dignity.2017.02.04.06

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss4/6><http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss4/6>

This Book Review Essay is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@etal.uri.edu).

---

# Book Reviews: Recent Books on Pornography: From Discussions of Harm to Normalization

## **Abstract**

Nine books addressing the specific harms linked to adults' viewing of heterosexual pornography are examined. All were published since 2010, and range from some that are opposed to all pornography, to others that approve of pornography. The books differ considerably in scope, quality, and scientific rigor. Several include discussions of the feminist anti-pornography movement, in the U.S. and worldwide, from 1975 to the present. These accounts range from criticism of the anti-pornography movement to praise and appreciation. This collection of books provides a useful view of the remarkable diversity of thought about all issues connected with pornography's effects on adult viewers.

## **Keywords**

pornography, harm, addiction, neuroscience, laboratory studies, radical feminist, anti-feminist, internet, sexualization, obscenity, sex portrayals, violence, movement, history

## **Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

## BOOK REVIEWS: NINE RECENT BOOKS ON PORNOGRAPHY— FROM DISCUSSIONS OF HARM TO NORMALIZATION

Robert Brannon

*National Organization for Men Against Sexism*

### KEYWORDS

pornography, harm, addiction, neuroscience, laboratory studies, radical feminist, anti-feminist, internet, sexualization, obscenity, sex portrayals, violence, movement, history

### ABSTRACT

Nine books addressing the specific harms linked to adults' viewing of heterosexual pornography are examined. All were published since 2010, and range from some that are opposed to all pornography, to others that approve of pornography. The books differ considerably in scope, quality, and scientific rigor. Several include discussions of the feminist anti-pornography movement, in the U.S. and worldwide, from 1975 to the present. These accounts range from criticism of the anti-pornography movement to praise and appreciation. This collection of books provides a useful view of the remarkable diversity of thought about all issues connected with pornography's effects on adult viewers.

**B**OOKS EXAMINING THE WAYS in which heterosexual pornography is harmful to some adults who view it—especially books discussing scientific laboratory research on pornography's effect—have not often appeared in recent years. The empirical researchers who once authored and edited such books (Malamuth, Donnerstein, Russell, Check, Zillman, etc.) are no longer doing so. Many anti-pornography feminists are unaware of the laboratory research. Most journalists and publishers today seem to believe that matter has been entirely settled, that the research proved nothing, and that pornography is harmless.

A large clinical and self-help literature is appearing however, in response to the many growing problems of pornography addiction: how to treat it, how a man can quit, how women can help their partners quit, etc. *The Porn Trap*, by two sex therapists who formerly recommended commercial pornography to clients, but stopped (Maltz and Maltz, 2010), is among the best of these. There is also a small but growing literature by women who write of the damages they personally suffered from being used in pornography (e.g. Lubben, 2010).

There are also a few new books that assert that viewing pornography produces brain and hormonal changes, which lead viewers ineluctably to addiction (e.g. *Your Brain on Porn*, Wilson, 2015). While the data they provide is certainly of interest, it comes from studies of strongly addicted, high-frequency pornography consumers—dysfunctional pornography addicts. All debilitating behavioral addictions (to gambling, video games, alcohol, drugs) have various brain-data correlates. This data is more clearly relevant to the study of severe addictions than to the multidimensional issues of pornography's effects on average adult males. It does not address well the fact that most viewers do not become addicts.

Below are some brief reviews of nine books published in the past six years, which to varying extents discuss some specific ways in which pornography can be harmful. Some are strongly opposed to pornography, while others are very much pro-pornography, and discuss the laboratory research on effects only to scorn and dispute it. Several also offer interesting accounts of the feminist anti-pornography movement, both praising and highly critical. A few additional books that would qualify are Kiraly & Tyler (2015), Comella & Tarrant (2015), and DeKeseredy & Corsianos (2016).

**1. *Big Porn Inc: Exposing the Harms of the Global Pornography Industry*. Melinda Tankard Reist and Abigail Bray (Eds.) (2011). Spinifex Press, North Melbourne, Australia.**

This is by far the best and most significant of these recent books. It comes from *Spinifex*, a feminist press in Australia, where radical feminism is prospering rather more than in the U.S. (*Spinifex* was recently profiled by Barry, 2016). With 40 solid chapters, this is the richest such feminist collection since Laura Lederer's (1980) *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* and/or Diana Russell's (1983) *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*.

With contributions from Melissa Farley, Catharine MacKinnon, Diana Russell, Bob Jensen, Gail Dines, and Chyng Sun (and praise from Robin Morgan, Kathleen Barry, Janice Raymond, and Chris Stark), it represents much of the best of feminist analysis from the U.S. It adds many other good selections from Australia, Japan, India, South Africa, Croatia, Scotland, and Britain.

The wide range of topics is impressive: internet pornography, pornography now on campus, the sexualization of youth and of childhood, rape culture, feminist movement-building, pornography addiction, free speech issues, governmental indifference, rape video games, child and incest pornography, pornography of animal-abuse, challenging the demand for pornography, etc.

It also contains moving accounts from damaged survivors. A woman used in stripping writes: "I left with my self-esteem is shreds, my pockets empty, my body damaged, and my heart filled with shame." A victim of pederasty and of child pornography describes the terrible lasting effects on her life.

Melissa Farley describes the many profound intersections of prostitution and pornography, and Abigail Bray reveals the highly profitable exploitative economics of each. Sheila Jeffreys describes the intermeshing of strip clubs and pornography: shared marketing, proximity, same owners, same customers, same women, used interchangeably.

Maggie Hamilton explores how sexualized marketing directly targets children. Megan Tyler describes how some sex therapists promote hard-core pornography to couples seeking help, offering films such as *Jenna Loves Pain* and *Deep Throat*. They suggest that clients model this behavior, and sometimes also recommend buying whips and bondage restraints. Teenagers' sharing of photos they have made of themselves should (arguably) not be labeled "pornography," but Nina Funnell's article on this subject was good and thoughtful. This thick, landmark book is highly recommended.

**2. *Anti-Porn: The Resurgence of Anti- Pornography Feminism*. Julia Long. (2012). ZED Books, London.**

This is the most positive and hopeful book of this group. It comes from Britain and describes a broad and inspiring resurgence of grassroots anti-pornography and anti-

sex-industry feminist activism, between 2000 and 2010 in the United Kingdom, especially in Scotland. (The author “holds a Ph.D. on feminist anti-pornography activism from London South Bank University,” an eye-catching credential.)

The text is well-written, referenced, and informative. Chapters 1-3 provide an excellent historical and modern overview of feminism generally, and of the antipornography struggle, in the U.S., Britain, Australia, and elsewhere. A wide range of important issues is thoughtfully explored and well-referenced.

Chapter 4 is the core new material of the book: greatly renewed grassroots feminist activism campaigns against the sex industry in England and Scotland, around 2000–2010. Their targets were lap dancing and strip clubs, Playboy clubs, nude women displayed both in “lad’s magazines” and in daily British tabloid newspapers. The feminists were primarily inspired and guided by the work of Gail Dines and her colleagues. They were able to muster extensive publicity and support among young people, men as well as women. While not totally successful, they were able to force some positive legal changes. In 2009, they got lap dancing strip clubs re-categorized in official zoning laws, to make them much easier for communities to disallow and keep out. In the same year, they secured passage of a law-making possession of an “extreme pornographic image” a criminal offense punishable by up to three years’ imprisonment. The wording of the law left much to be desired, and it has rarely been enforced, but was nonetheless a first for Britain, a precedent-setting achievement. There is much detail here on organizing strategies and successes. The book is informative, hopeful, and recommended.

**3. *Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary: The Politics of Sex, Gender, and Aggression in Hardcore Pornography*. Natalie Purcell. (2012). Routledge, New York.**

This is an odd and uneven book, but worth reading (in part, at least). It is like an impressive, attractive silk gift box, well worth saving, but offering little of interest inside.

The Introduction, and also the Afterword, contain some of the most intelligent, thoughtful, and erudite writing about pornography issues that can be found. They are wonderfully well-referenced, a treasure for scholars. And of books on this subject, it is almost uniquely “balanced,” with equal consideration of the arguments of opposing sides. It offers an overly short (half page) but useful citing of some of the scientific laboratory studies by Malamuth, Russell, Koss, etc., showing the harmfulness of some kinds of materials. But the author strangely writes that “empirical research” has met “distrust and animosity.” This laboratory evidence is in fact far broader and stronger than Purcell indicates (see Layden, 2010; Brannon, 1991; Russell, 1988; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984). Purcell then moves on to extensively quote, cite, and consider the ideas of pro-pornography performers, militants, and activists (Sprinkle, Queen, Bright, Hollibaugh, Duggan, Willis, Vance), none of whom are social scientists or have training in judging empirical data.

The core of this book (90%) however, 145 pages, in Chapters 1-7, is remarkably repetitive, irrelevant, boring, and distasteful. It is a literal, scene-by-scene, word-by-word rendering of the content of 110 hard-core X-rated films. As a graduate student the author watched these films for five days a week, roughly three per day. Readers are now asked to plow through many pages of graphic penetrations, abuses, and humiliations, with such “text” as:

“He grabs her roughly by the hair and orders her to open her mouth and lick his penis. She does, making eye contact...” “He acts as a puppet master, telling her what she wants, and what she likes, spitting his words out like

venom.” [The director] “assembles the men into a line, and has Stephanie fellate each of them in turn. She is on her knees and wearing knee-pads as she slides from one man to the next.” “She’s “a total fuck slut who would do anything for money.” “Open your mouth and suck the dick, bitch.” “I could have talked this whore into sucking my dog’s dick.” “...his tone grows firmer, more confident, more callous. He is not asking, he is telling.” “We throat-fuck cunts like you.”

This dubious ‘research’ was done for a Ph.D. thesis at U.C. Santa Cruz (and did not lead to academic employment).

This book can be recommended to scholars, for its high-quality Introduction, and Afterword, but one might choose to skip, or to skim, its main content.

#### **4. *After Pornified: How Women Are Transforming Pornography, and Why It Really Matters.* (2012) Anne Sabo. Zero Books, Winchester, UK.**

An unresolved movement issue is whether there can be imagery of human beings having sex that is in no way harmful to adults who choose to view it. Many would say “no,” but two of the most respected feminist thinkers have strongly endorsed the concept. Gloria Steinem argued (1977) that if a woman and a man engaging in sex were shown as having: equal power, equal pleasure, and equal choice, and the imagery is egalitarian, non-coercive, and non-degrading, this should be termed not pornography, but “erotica.” Diana Russell wrote: “Erotica is sexually suggestive or arousing material that is free of sexism, racism, and homophobia, and respectful of all... I am in favor of erotica, but against pornography” (1993).

In empirical research, Senn (1993) found that female college students liked and enjoyed seeing explicit sex pictures that were “loving,” while strongly disliking those that were “sexist, coercive, or male-dominated.”

*After Pornified* reports on a network of women in several countries advocating and working for sexually arousing, woman-made materials based on equality. They say traditional pornography is “misogynist... violent toward women... no sensuality or flirting, no kissing or build-up to the sex... women humiliated and hurt... complete objectification of female bodies... too vulgar... left me with a bad taste...”

They call instead for sex portrayals that are: “egalitarian... do not represent women’s sexuality in misleading ways... attractive people who are more realistic, varied in age, and body type, who genuinely relate to each other with passion and sensitivity... men are sensitive and attentive to women’s sexual preferences... and ‘ordinary’ sex honored as the sensual, intimate and powerful thing we all know it to be... an alternative, empowering, inspiring, and pleasurable vision... that is fundamentally based on gender equality, and justice.”

Surprisingly, the book describes a number of such films that already exist. One is “a feminist film, in how it captures mutual love and respect, and in how it focuses on her experience and what unscripted sex is like for her, and for him.” In another, “there is a comfortable intimacy between the two, and after they’ve had sex, they confess their insecurities to each other.” In another, “...it’s a welcome relief to see a woman of age and substance set a scene on fire.” There is a list of these films and how to obtain them.

These women would seem to have made contributions to an ongoing discussion among feminists. But surprisingly, the book purports to be strongly anti-feminist. It mocks and belittles feminists by name, including Gail Dines, Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan, Pamela Paul, etc. It openly praises various XXX pornography industry figures. The women sometimes use the word “feminist,” but they claim to be ideological enemies of feminism.

The woman-sensitive, equalitarian materials that this “anti-feminist” book advocates clearly resemble what some feminist analysts have been saying for years. Movement labels aside, one can see a kind of convergence. Perhaps we are seeing here an emerging consensus of at least some women, right and left, who see a need for some form of equalitarian, non-objectifying erotica.

**5. *The Porn Myth: Exposing the Reality Behind the Fantasy of Pornography*. Matt Fradd. (2017). Ignatius Press, San Francisco.**

This is an interesting, passionately anti-pornography set of arguments. Ignatius is a Catholic publishing house and the author is “unabashedly Catholic,” but this book is written from an addiction recovery perspective. Mr. Fradd writes that he is a recovered pornography addict. (As a young teen “porn began to consume me, and it took me a long time to regain control.”) He is now a full-time writer and speaker against pornography.

*The Porn Myth* offers many useful facts, good quotes, and numerous references. Its range of topics is wide and well-chosen. The book is tightly organized around refuting 24 specific pro-pornography assertions, assumptions, or myths. For each, there are then several pages of sharp rebuttal. The issues that are rebutted include: pornography as ‘empowerment’ of women, only child-porn is a problem, the women in porn freely choose to act, they enjoy the sex, it’s all only a harmless fantasy, it’s not addictive, it prevents rape, it is a positive sexaid, ‘erotica’ is a better alternative, swimsuit magazines are harmless, etc.

The weakness of the book is that the rebuttals are short, sketchy, anecdotal, and sometimes polemical. Reasonable opposing arguments are ignored. Any argument that seems anti-pornography, however, may be included, whether fact-based or not. A reader is aware of seeing only one-sided “talking points,” rather than a full or partially balanced discussion.

Chapter 15, on pornography addiction, strangely and quickly broadens the focus to discussing “sex addiction,” a controversial diagnosis no longer accepted by the American Psychological Association. To discredit the construct of ‘erotica,’ Fradd illogically equates it with the recent S&M domination fantasy, *Fifty Shades of Gray*.

Chapter 14, on pornography’s links to rape, is largely anecdotal and lacks data, but is stronger than some others. However, there is a citation of a long-ago correlational study (Barron and Straus, 1984) that falsely linked reported state rape rates with sales of *Playboy*, etc., an outcome that was an artifact of state-differences in percentages of young males.

A new term has emerged among academic scientists: neuro-realism. It means using brain and hormone data (especially brain scans, which make impressive images) to make claims seem more scientific. (Studies suggest people are much more likely to believe an argument if it is accompanied by brain data, or a brain picture—even if irrelevant.) Fradd’s book extensively cites and heavily relies on recent ‘brain biology’ literature, which asserts that viewing pornography produces brain changes that lead viewers to addiction (e.g. “Your Brain on Porn,” Wilson, 2015). Two different Appendices here list over 40 articles. While such data is certainly of interest, it comes from studies of strongly addicted, high-frequency pornography consumers, i.e. from dysfunctional pornography addicts. All debilitating behavioral addictions (gambling, video games, alcohol, drugs) have brain data correlates. This data is more clearly relevant to the study of severe addictions than to the multidimensional issues of pornography’s effects on normal average adults.

This is an easy-to-read and useful book for those already convinced of pornography’s harmfulness, but probably not one to give to more critical skeptics.

**6. How Pornography Harms: What Today's Teens, Young Adults, Parents, and Pastors Need to Know. John Foubert. 2017. LifeRich Publishing, Bloomington, Indiana.**

Dr. Foubert has a Ph.D. (in personnel administration), but this is a frankly and proudly Christian-inspired set of arguments. Chapter 2 is “A Christian Perspective on Pornography,” beginning with... “What the Bible has to say about pornography.” The author is a frequent, widely heard, and successful public speaker, to Congress, the Pentagon, and many churches and institutions. A significant national figure, he is the author of seven books on preventing sexual violence, and is often seen on national media.

The range of topics covered here is impressive, including motives of producers, motives of those being filmed, impacts on youth and teenagers, effects on women of a partner's pornography use, women's own use of pornography, the internet and other new technologies, confronting pornography in your own life, etc. There are many insightful and extended quotations, and a persuasive, often eloquent text. Like the above book by Fradd, however, one is aware of reading a one-sided text that omits other perspectives. The scholarship is also thin and uneven.

Like Fradd, Foubert gives heavy weight and emphasis to the “your-brain-on-porn” arguments. “Porn rewires the brain,” he flatly states.

Chapter 4, on pornography's links to sexual violence, is especially disappointing. It opens with one brief mention of an important scientific study, by Malamuth, but then contains only interviews and quotations from several close allies, and it wanders somewhat toward the end.

His dismissive treatment of ‘erotica’ consists entirely of a three-page interview with one feminist who fiercely opposes the idea; she feels it violates a 30-year-old four-part formulation once proposed by Andrea Dworkin. Steinem, Russell and other feminist proponents of the idea are never mentioned.

Chapter 9 however is excellent. It persuasively demonstrates that many college academics and journalists embrace unsupportable myths, arguments, and non-facts to justify and support all forms of pornography. His points here ring true. Chapter 12 on children's exploitation in pornography lacks data, but is also thoughtful and quite good.

This is a useful, well-written book with many good observations, quotes, and resources, if a somewhat uneven total product.

**7. Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement, 1976 - 1986. Carolyn Bronstein. (2011). Cambridge University Press.**

As a social movement history, this somewhat dry and weighty book is an excellent authoritative resource. It chronicles the U.S. anti-pornography movement, in almost microscopic detail, from its earliest roots up to the mid-1980s, when the author, a teacher of media studies, believes that it largely disappeared, in defeat.

The volume begins with two wide-ranging chapters, covering how the sexual revolution was unrewarding and oppressive to many women, rampant sexism in the New Left, the appearance of NOW, of radical feminism, lesbian feminism, separatism, cultural feminism, and the growing awareness of the magnitude of sexual violence, rape, battering, and sexual harassment. Then a full chapter is devoted to how films like *Deep Throat* symbolized the rapid explosion of the U.S. commercial sex industry.



The next chapter relates in detail the birth and growth of Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), the first national feminist organization to focus on sexual violence in media. It began in Los Angeles in response to the 1975 release of *Snuff*, a low-budget exploitation film purporting to show the sexual murder of a real woman on screen, which brought in \$600,000 in just three months. WAVAW spread to other cities, hired a national coordinator in 1976, and mobilized nationally when a Rolling Stones billboard showed a bruised and battered woman, captioned “I’m black and blue...and I love it.” WAVAW held a national meeting in New York in 1978, and led a long and finally successful boycott of Warner, the corporate sponsor.

A similarly named group, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), mobilized in Northern California around 1977, and was the first to point specifically to pornography as a concern. Leaders, including Diana Russell, Kathleen Barry, and Laura Lederer, viewed pornography as having some influence on rape and sexual violence levels, and were open to considering legal remedies. They held the first public demonstrations, and the first national conference opposing pornography, and led the first Take Back the Night March in San Francisco in 1978.

The final four chapters detail what the author believes was the fatal wrong-turn and undoing of the movement: the rise to leadership of Women Against Pornography (WAP) in New York. This group had a broad and radical anti-pornography analysis, led eye-opening tours of Times Square’s many stripping and pornography parlors, and soon became the leading public face of the movement. There is a lengthy critique of WAP’s many demonstrations and efforts, and equally extensive treatments of its critics, and the arguments used against it. Oddly, there is only a brief (and critical) account of the more well-known Dworkin-MacKinnon Anti-Pornography Ordinance introduced in Minneapolis, Detroit, Indianapolis, Boston, and Bellingham, WA beginning in 1983 (Dworkin, 1985). A small group called FACT, informally sponsored by the ACLU and working from an ACLU office, was formed in New York specifically to oppose Dworkin and MacKinnon. It argued that they were ‘anti-sex,’ advocating censorship, and ‘in bed with the right wing.’ The author praises, quotes at length, and clearly echoes the views of this particular group.

For social movement historians, this is a richly detailed, indispensable factual resource. The author’s clear political biases, however, somewhat diminish the valuable historiography.

### **8. *The Pornography Industry: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Shira Tarrant. 2016. Oxford University Press.**

This book might better be titled “What the Pornography Industry Wants Us to Believe.” Tarrant is a long-time pornography advocate and enthusiast, but this thin new paperback is surprisingly superficial.

The Index appears unusually large (102 named topics, filling four and a half pages of Index). However, there mostly then follow only short, often casual discussions of each topic. The “definition of pornography” gets just one page of “popular understanding” generalities, and no specifics, no citations, no analysis. There are chapters on countless little industry matters, that Tarrant feels “everyone needs to know:” What awards are given for porn? What is a stag film? What are some leading industry organizations? What is the difference between Gonzo and Unscripted? How did porn evolve? What records must be kept? How much does it cost to make? What was the Golden Era of porn?

After 88 pages of pro-industry trivia, and much spin, there are three (almost hidden) pages on “Does Pornography Cause Violence Against Women?” No empirical research whatsoever is cited, except one qualitative-content observational study by

Chyng Sun, and strong but unsupported views from Gail Dines. Tarrant very quickly dismisses both as unpersuasive, and mentions no other facts or evidence.

The book however addresses such urgent matters as: "Will pornography be taught in college?" and "What about Porn in Space?"

There are some positives. One useful chapter, on obscenity vs. pornography, is a clear and detailed description of the court cases and legal events that frame today's complex status of those terms.

A chapter on watching "porn while at work" has interesting and disquieting numbers—63% of men and 36% of women, three-fourths of men age 31 to 49—but their published source is hard to determine. Much space here is devoted to arguing that "many" women watch pornography. One study mentioned, however, (but not included in the references) found that three-fourths of the women who watched did so in the company of a man, which "might be" due somehow to his influence (p.74).

This book reads rather like promotion of the commercial pornography industry. It recycles virtually all the myths—everyone really enjoys porn, it doesn't ever harm relationships, performers are very well paid, enjoy their work, have few if any health issues, etc. There's an admiring section on those who advocate the concept of "Fair Trade porn," in which "performers" are well-paid, "treated with care and respect, and their consent, safety, and well-being" considered very important. But Tarrant cannot offer any evidence of this actually existing, anywhere. "Hopefully this will improve in the future," she writes.

This small book is useful in giving a convenient, easy-to-read summary of almost all of the pro-pornography arguments that are widely accepted in most arenas of journalism and popular culture. It generally ignores and denies both social science and feminist concerns. (Oddly, it does not much develop the First Amendment and censorship line of defense.) With strong endorsements by ACLU's Nadine Strossen, prostitution advocate Ronald Weitzer, etc., Tarrant has the backing of other passionate defenders of the commercial sex industry.

### **9. *The Unmade Bed: The Messy Truth about Men and Women in the 21st Century.* Stephen Marche. (2017). Simon & Schuster, New York.**

Only one chapter directly addresses pornography, but this new book of essays is included because Marche is a successful novelist, and magazine and book author, editor of *Esquire* magazine, and because this ill-informed, machismo book was warmly reviewed by the *New York Times*, to which he often contributes.

With a chapter called "The Case for Living in Filth," Marche signals readers that he's a real man, albeit of the well-educated, handsome, affluent upper-class variety. His long chapter fiercely defending pornography, however, is an elephant's graveyard of misinterpretations, specious reasoning, chest-beating boasts, and clueless male self-interest.

A key fact about pornography, Marche writes, is that it "provides you with information," and is a form of "enlightened sexual education" (p.114). "No one needs to wonder what a blow job is anymore; a million examples are a click away." Marche himself has seen "several thousand vaginas" in his years watching porn, and if he were a teenager with an internet connection now, "I would have seen many tens of thousands more" (p.112).

He sees concerns with online pornography as aimed at preventing male masturbation (p.111). He applauds today's "vast new realms of sexual choice and openness... necessary for the flourishing of pornography." "We should celebrate ...sex has become much healthier, much less shameful." (p.118-9).

He says we should not look at the extensive laboratory research into pornography's effects, because "old-fashioned moral prurience stigmatizes it." But he nonetheless cites one questionnaire study that found "no definite link" between pornography use and "perceived interpersonal closeness" (p.126), a non-finding based only on males' reports and perceptions.

Kutchinsky's 26-year-old claim—that an increase in pornography (in far-away Denmark, over 20 years) had been inversely correlated with rape levels (Kutchinsky, 1991)—was a maze of obvious measurement errors, and was discredited decades ago. Marche naively reports it at length here, as if exciting, newsworthy and valid (p.122).

Marche reasons: "If violent pornography had the effects on men" that are claimed, there should be "an epidemic of rape and sexual violence. Except that the opposite has occurred." He then cites some correlation data that he suggests shows that "pornography is a substitute for rape" (p.122).

As to the feminist critics, pornography is "famously undefinable," and "anti-pornography crusades are moral panics." The rise of radical feminism "was in tune with the other great religious revivals," much like the one against "demon rum" (p.123).

## CONCLUSION

It is striking how strongly polarized these books are. Five emphatically detail all the harms linked to pornography and the broader sex industry, two insist on no harmfulness whatsoever, and two (Sabo and Bronstein) are harder to categorize. Since the issue of pornography has been perhaps the single most divisive of all issues ever addressed by second wave feminism, it hardly could be otherwise. Brownmiller's feminist history (1999, p. 295) called the late 70's and early 80's "the time of the terrible pornography wars." Those divisions remain even today.

It is interesting that virtually the only anti-pornography feminist that many of these authors seem to be aware of is Gail Dines, and her close allies Bob Jensen and Rebecca Whisnant. I respect and admire these fine activists, and am grateful that they have kept the anti-pornography movement visible in recent years. But the three speak with virtually one voice, and are not empirical social scientists, familiar with the laboratory studies that so clearly show the harmfulness of some forms of pornography. The new authors would do well to learn about the extensive anti-pornography scholarship of Diana Russell (two major books, plus countless chapters and articles), Dorchen Leidholdt, Laura Lederer, Kathleen Barry, Ann Simonton, Lisa Thompson, Catharine MacKinnon, Margaret Baldwin, Mary Ann Layden, Sheila Jeffreys, Melissa Farley, Norma Ramos, Robin Morgan, Chris Stark, Rachel Durshlag, Phyllis Chesler, John Stoltenberg, Wendy Stock, Max Waltman, Shelley Lubben, and others. They seem unaware even of the influential anti-pornography contributions of Gloria Steinem. Some of the new authors should learn more in depth about their subject, before they purport to write books.

It is also regrettable to observe how frequently passionate partisanship overrides any careful, objective weighing of evidence. Some writers are quick to repeat anything that seems to support their position in this debate, without ever reading the original report and evaluating it objectively. Two useful indicators of such careless scholarship are the citations of two studies that both once attracted attention, but were soon shown to be error filled and totally misleading. Baron and Strauss (1994) compared data across U.S. states, and announced that sales of men's magazines like *Penthouse* and *Playboy* were positively correlated with reported state rates of rape. On the other side, Kutchinsky (1991) claimed that over a span of many years in Denmark, rates of reported rape went slightly down, as pornography became more prevalent. Both of these now-discredited studies are still cited, in some of the books reviewed above.

Issues of pornography's harms, once hotly debated, have in recent years largely disappeared from the general public discussion. There is a widespread consensus that anti-pornography feminists were soundly defeated, proven wrong in their concerns. But as pornography addiction becomes a growing national clinical problem, disrupting families and destroying careers, as our culture becomes ever more coarse, vulgar and "pornified," as pornography proliferates on the internet, now available even on kid's cellphones, as children are exposed to woman-abusing rape-portrayals at increasingly younger ages, as "revenge porn" becomes a growing public issue, as even true (illegal) child pornography remains available (for a price) on the little-known dark web, as strip shows, sex trafficking and prostitution continue to flourish, not just in Las Vegas but all across the U.S., these sex industry issues are again emerging as urgent public concerns.

Mainstream national feminist leaders have rarely been very willing to confront the sex industry. (NOW's position on pornography is that we have no position! once proclaimed NOW leader Olga Vives (at a 2007 NOMAS Conference). Surveys show however that rank-and-file feminists have always been solidly opposed. So too are Unitarian, Presbyterian, and other faith-based groups. The once more centrist National Center on Sexual Exploitation (endsexualexploitation.org) has recently begun to productively collaborate with feminists in this struggle (see *Dignity*, Vol. 2, #3, 2017).

When a critical mass of public awareness of the numerous harms linked to a profiteering sex industry is achieved, flagrant public sexual woman-abuse materials may gradually become as atypical as flagrant racial-abuse materials have become today. This may happen not because of any major legal restrictions, but due to an evolution in public opinion.

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Robert Brannon is a social psychologist (Harvard, 1965) who has focused on male and female gender studies, violence against women, and social effects linked to the commercial sex industry. He serves as Chair, National Task Group on Sex-Trafficking, Pornography, and Prostitution, for the National Organization for Men. Brannon is chair of the National Task Group on Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry, National Organization of Men Against Sexism (www.Nomas.org).

#### **RECOMMENDED CITATION**

Brannon, Robert. (2017). Book review: Nine recent books on pornography: From discussions of harm to normalization. *Dignity: A Journal of Sexual Exploitation and Violence*. Vol. 2, Issue 4, Article 6. DOI:10.23860/dignity.2017.02.04.06. Available at <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol2/iss4/6>

## REFERENCES

- Barron, L., and Straus, M. *Sexual stratification, pornography, and rape in the United States*. In Malamuth, N. and Donnerstein, E. (Eds). (1984). *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*. New York: Academic Press.
- Barry, Kathleen (2016) The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of Spinifex Press. *Dignity: A Journal on Sexual Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dignity/vol1/iss1/3>
- Brannon, R. (1991) Torturing women as fine art: Why some women and men are boycotting Knopf. *On The Issues*, Fall: 18-21.
- Comella, L., and Tarrant, S., (Eds). (2015) *New Views on Pornography*. Praeger.
- DeKeseredy, W., and Corsianos, M. (2016) *Violence Against Women in Pornography*. Routledge.
- Dworkin, A. (1985) Against the male flood: Censorship, pornography and equality. *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 8: 1-29. [www.nostatusquo.com](http://www.nostatusquo.com).
- Kiraly, M., and Tyler, M., (Eds). (2015). *Freedom Fallacy: The Limits of Liberal Feminism*. Connor Court Publishing, Australia.
- Kutchinsky, B. (1991). Pornography and rape: Theory and practice? Evidence from crime data in four countries where pornography is easily available. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 26, 47-64.
- Layden, M. (2010) Pornography and violence: A new look at the research. In *The Social Costs of Pornography*, Stoner, J. and D. Hughes (Eds.). Philadelphia, PA: The Witherspoon Institute. ISBN 978 0 9814911
- Lederer, L., (Ed.) (1980) *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*. New York: Morrow.
- Malamuth, N. and Donnerstein, E. (Eds). (1984) *Pornography and Sexual Aggression*. New York: Academic Press.
- Russell, D. (1988) Pornography and rape: A causal model. *Political Psychology* 9, (1) 41-73.
- Russell, D., (Ed.) (1993) *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Senn, C. (1993) Women's responses to pornography. In Russell, D. (Ed.), *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Steinem, G. (1977) Pornography—not sex, but the obscene use of power. *Ms.*, August.
- Wilson, G. (2014). *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction*. Commonwealth Publishing.