The Pornography Industry's Disinformation Campaign on Addiction Recovery Resources

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Abstract
As pornography became increasingly popular online, many unsuspecting consumers reported adverse effects. These included sexual dysfunctions, such as lack of response with real partners, delayed ejaculation, erectile difficulties, and sexual compulsivity. Some pornography consumers began congregating in online self-help portals (forums and websites) to assist one another in quitting or reducing problematic pornography use. The popularity of the self-help resources and their potential to dampen the profits of a lucrative industry resulted in disinformation campaigns run by individuals connected to the pornography industry. In this article, I examine how a paper containing significant inaccuracies about the people organising the online recovery forums passed the peer-review process while failing to disclose the author's conflicts of interest. The author of the case study has documented affiliations with a major pornography company, MindGeek (the owner of Pornhub). Somehow, it passed peer review, lending it a false halo of credibility. Pornography industry-connected individuals then repeatedly exploited it, for example, on social media and Wikipedia, to discredit pornography self-help recovery resources.

Keywords
pornography, addiction, self-help, recovery resources, disinformation

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THE PORNOGRAPHY INDUSTRY’S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN AGAINST ADDICTION RECOVERY RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT
As pornography became increasingly popular online, many unsuspecting consumers reported adverse effects. These included sexual dysfunctions, such as lack of response with real partners, delayed ejaculation, erectile difficulties, and sexual compulsivity. Some pornography consumers began congregating in online self-help portals (forums and websites) to assist one another in quitting or reducing problematic pornography use. The popularity of the self-help resources and their potential to dampen the profits of a lucrative industry resulted in disinformation campaigns run by individuals connected to the pornography industry. In this article, I examine how a paper containing significant inaccuracies about the people organising the online recovery forums passed the peer-review process while failing to disclose the author’s conflicts of interest. The author of the case study has documented affiliations with a major pornography company, MindGeek (the owner of Pornhub). Somehow, it passed peer review, lending it a false halo of credibility. Pornography industry-connected individuals then repeatedly exploited it, for example, on social media and Wikipedia, to discredit pornography self-help recovery resources.

KEYWORDS
Pornography, addiction, self-help, recovery resources, critics, pornography industry, defenders, disinformation

HERE HAS BEEN A LONGSTANDING tension between people wishing to commercialise sexual activity and people in wider society concerned about the risks of consuming pornography. Although commercially sold image-based pornography has existed for decades, a key development in the sex trade began when the pornography industry moved online. Pornography existed on the internet as early as 1994 (Green-span, 2023). The internet provided an environment to allow pornographers to overcome the fundamental barriers of accessibility, affordability, and anonymity (Cooper, 1998). By 1998, the online pornography market had grown to nine million consumers per year (Cooper et al., 2000).

Yet the subsequent development around 2008 moved internet pornography as a consumer product from an online niche to worldwide adoption. Three emerging technologies propelled its expansion. These were the widespread introduction of smartphones, communication networks able to deliver high-resolution video to domestic consumers at affordable prices, and the “free” pornography tube-site business model. Once these critical elements were in place, the number of people accessing...
pornography over the internet grew rapidly to hundreds of millions every month (Website SEO Checker, 2023).

By 2011, within three years of the start of the boom, there was an unexpected consumer reaction to the availability of free internet pornography. A cohort of secular pornography users who reduced or quit consuming emerged. They reported positive effects in their lives as a result of stopping pornography. These people said they had improved their sexual health and avoided compulsive use of pornography. Previously, many of them had suffered severe consequences from heavy use of pornography (Luscombe, 2016). This cohort was motivated by self-improvement to recover their sexual health. This group was different from other opponents of pornography. They were not against the concept of pornography but advocated for recovery from what they often refer to as “pornography addiction.”

In the past decade, these people have effectively developed a grassroots movement focused on the risks of pornography use. Their key goal was to facilitate online mutual support to help people who wish to remove pornography from their lives but struggle to do so.

Over time, these pornography addiction self-help resources became the target of escalating, systematic attacks from supporters of the pornography industry, as well as from the industry itself (Mead, 2023; Davison, 2019; Your Brain on Porn, 2021b; Townhall Media, 2020; Van Maren, 2020). Educated consumers who understand the negative impact of problematic pornography use, most of whom are secular and sex-positive, are bad for the pornography industry’s business model. For instance, they are likely to disparage pornography to their peers. Worse yet, such consumers do not fit the industry’s carefully curated narrative that those who object to pornography are solely motivated by sex-negative attitudes or religious shame.

If allowed to exist without interference, such sex-positive, secular self-help groups for problematic pornography use will continue spreading awareness of risks to the public. This can potentially have a non-negligible financial effect on the pornography industry. Self-help groups for problematic pornography use are credible entities. The pornography industry faces the risk that influential journalists, philanthropists, and politicians could take notice, creating the potential for governmental regulation of the pornography industry’s practices. For example, there could be widespread calls for age verification measures to prevent children from accessing pornography websites. Or it might increase demands for warnings about the potential risks of pornographic videos. It could also lead to embedding pornography-use risks in sexual education class materials for schools. Such a backlash is already emerging in many countries.

There is undoubtedly a strong financial incentive for the pornography industry to suppress pornography addiction recovery self-help resources, particularly the secular ones. In response to this grassroots consumer education and support movement, advocates for the pornography industry have engaged in a program of sustained attack in academic journals, social media, and mainstream media. Their purpose is to deny any adverse health impacts associated with the use of pornography. They have reinforced their strategy to counter the self-help groups. They do this by directly targeting opposing voices to undermine the credibility of recovering pornography users. This paper thoroughly examines one of these instances, unpacking the techniques used to build campaigns to smear the industry’s most effective critics.
THE PLAYBOOK: A GUIDE TO DENYING EVIDENCE

The playbook is a term for the methods some corporations use to deny science, spread misinformation, and profit at the expense of the environment and public health. It was first developed by Big Tobacco in the 1950s when research started to link smoking to lung cancer. The public relations strategy was created to cause doubt about that link in the public and decision-makers’ minds. The concept has been formalised by Oreskes and Conway in Merchants of doubt (2012) and, more recently, by Jacquet in The playbook (2022). These authors provide an understanding of how the tools and techniques of the playbook are employed across a range of controversial industries, including tobacco, alcohol, and gambling. Their work also features dialogues around fossil fuels and climate change denial.

Jacquet (2022) presents corporations’ strategies to counter scientific evidence that may pose a risk to their business. She emphasises the tactic of building an arsenal of individuals, institutions, and communication networks to support their desired corporate narrative. Each actor involved in this process utilises a unique approach, leaving a trail of evidence that makes it difficult to uncover the larger scheme. While the specifics of the methods may vary from situation to situation, the underlying strategies employed by corporations to deny science and sell lies are similar.

The internet pornography industry’s approach to public relations closely adheres to the tenets of the playbook:

The Playbook also includes a recruiting tool for attracting and cultivating university researchers who can challenge scientific research with a patina of independence. The assembled network will be equipped with a variety of tools, such as press releases and advertorials, and various arguments and rhetorical devices. This arsenal provides a defence against any aspect of the scientific process that implicates our product in a problem. The arsenal is deployed to carry out the four-pronged strategy: 1) challenge the problem, 2) challenge causation, 3) challenge the messenger, and 4) challenge the policy. (Jacquet 2022, p. xvi).

The pornography industry recognised the enormous public relations value of getting plausible-sounding, distilled soundbites into academic papers which support its narrative of pornography as “risk-free, healthy entertainment” and discredit its critics. When used in the right circumstances, these short, pithy elements can disproportionately and positively impact the pornography industry’s claim that there is no harm from their product. Industry supporters can then say that everyone claiming pornography-related harm is mistaking the cause of that harm. The claim is that, despite solid research to the contrary, any harm associated with pornography use is due to other reasons besides the consumption of pornography. This is a tactic of deflection. Once papers like this are published in academia, these claims are often projected into the public consciousness through various means discussed below.

Today, the study of pornography addiction is a well-established research area within the behavioural addictions field (Begovic, 2019; Bôthe et al., 2023; Brand, 2019; Brown & Wisco, 2019; de Alarcón et al., 2019; Lewczuk, Mauer-Vakil & Anees, 2020; Qian et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2018). There is a relevant diagnosis in the International Classification of Diseases, 11th Edition, for those suffering from the effects of problematic pornography use: Compulsive Sexual Behaviour disorder (World Health Organization, 2020). The most common, clinically distressing activities relating to Compulsive Sexual Behaviour (CSB) in men:
Are compulsive masturbation, pornography use, casual/anonymous sex with strangers, multiple sexual partners and paid sex ... Among women, high masturbation frequency, number of sexual partners and pornography use are associated with CSB. (Kraus et al., 2016)

Fieldwork from Poland drawn on by the World Health Organization suggested, “that well over 80% of people seeking treatment for CSB had a problem with pornography use” (Mead & Sharpe, 2018).

Indeed, while there is ample third-party research conducted on problematic pornography use, outlier papers by pornography industry-supportive academics receive far more attention in mainstream media than the papers comprising the great bulk of the evidence. The preponderance of third-party research supports the idea that excessive pornography use can lead to adverse effects. However, papers by non-industry-connected scientists may often go unnoticed. In contrast, papers by industry-friendly academics can be popularised through expensive public relations services and online astroturfing (for example, Wikipedia). Astroturfing is the practice of masking the sponsors of a message or organisation to make it appear as though it originates from and is supported by grassroots participants (Wikipedia 2023c). Such tactics misrepresent the current research on problematic pornography use to the public. They falsely present the fringe as the scientific consensus.

The following case study demonstrates the pornography industry’s ongoing effort to control public opinion. The industry is playing a carefully curated, long game to put in place the tools and narratives to build a positive public image for what is still considered by many to be a relatively distasteful product. Discrediting its critics plays a key part in this effort. It is also taking advantage of the fact that the health harms often take several years to develop and have not yet been fully recognised by industry regulators.

THE PORNOGRAPHY INDUSTRY’S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

In this article, I chose one paper to illustrate the techniques used by the defenders of the pornography industry: “The New Censorship, Anti-Sexuality Groups and Library Freedom” (2020) by Brian Watson.

Watson’s paper appeared in the Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy, an imprint of the American Library Association (ALA). This journal is an important platform for the culture wars surrounding sexuality, censorship, and access to knowledge. The ALA is the largest library body in the world, and its publications are accepted as accurate by its influential professional community of librarians. These librarians have significant power to influence how the culture thinks about issues such as pornography.

Like Brian Watson, I am also a professionally qualified librarian working on sex education. As a librarian, I hold the qualification of Fellowship of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals in the U.K., and I have held the role of Deputy National Librarian at the National Library of Scotland. I also have personal knowledge of the activities of the individuals and organisations about whom Brian Watson wrote so disparagingly in their paper. Accordingly, I approached the American Library Association’s Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy for an opportunity to publish a rebuttal piece, to correct the disinformation presented in Watson’s original and revised papers, and to push back against some statements of opinion they asserted. When that journal refused to allow me to publish a factually correct
response to these attacks, my librarian's instinct led me to dig deeper into what might be happening. My conclusion was that, despite the publication being called the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*, the editorial team did not want to allow adherence to the principles of intellectual freedom based on truth to undermine a false academic narrative they had allowed to propagate.

I selected Watson’s paper for analysis because it is a powerful hit piece containing inaccurate information that passed peer review and was thus considered a good academic study (in this case, by the ALA). Watson took a broad swipe at a wide range of opinions that Watson claims oppose pornography consumption.

The new anti-sexuality movement can be loosely categorised into three main groups, which will be discussed in order: anti-pornography feminists, internet activist “Fapstronauts,” and religious morality groups (Watson 2020, p. 21).

In this case study, I will focus solely on Watson’s views on the so-called “internet activist ‘Fapstronauts’” and what Watson claims is “Their shared assertion that uncontrolled pornography and sexuality present a great danger to modern society” (Watson 2020, p. 21). Rather than utilising Watson’s inaccurate and charged label, I will refer to these pornography self-help groups with a more neutral label: self-help resources. Fapstronaut is the name given to members of the online community at nofap.com, a website that facilitates peer support for recovering porn addicts and sexual compulsives. NoFap challenges heavy porn users to consider temporarily abstaining from porn use, and/or masturbation for up to 90 days, to determine how their sexual habits impact their lives and relationships (NoFap, 2021).

To include the words “anti-sexuality” in the title of Watson's paper is an example of a blatant attempt to shock and catch media attention. It creates a false narrative from the start.

Watson wrote about the alleged impact of purported “anti-sexuality” groups on library freedom and censorship. Here, Watson uses sleight-of-hand techniques to falsely link pornography recovery groups to parties who seek to censor libraries. These pornography recovery groups have never been involved in such practices. Such false linking is a deliberate tactic to undermine the credibility of these self-help groups.

**WATSON'S ERRONEOUS VIEW OF THE SELF-HELP RESOURCES**

The central problem with Watson’s argument is that it claims there is an “anti-sexuality movement.” Watson presents no evidence for this view but simply asserts it. The paper does not test the groups it discusses against criteria in any way meeting a sensible definition of being “anti-sexuality.” In essence, Watson argues that if you think that unlimited access to all forms of pornographic content may not be a good idea for everyone in society, no matter the user’s age or other vulnerabilities, you are “anti-sexuality.” The definitions of “anti-sexuality” versus “pro-sexuality” matter. This is a key element in the wider public debate around the role that pornography should or should not play in society. I propose another way of characterising these groups.

Watson ignores that it is possible to be sex-positive but cautious about the risks of excessive pornography use. Instead, they paint such sceptics as “anti-sexuality” or somehow sex-negative. Yet for former users, pornography scepticism often arises from the product’s adverse impact on their own sexual and mental health.
What are these targeted self-help resources trying to achieve? The following analysis will show Watson has ascribed goals to them that they would not themselves recognise. This is neither reasonable nor fair, but it is an easy way to impress a dubious strawman argument on readers. Using charged and opinionated terms like “anti-sexuality” is a familiar tactic in the broader culture wars around pornography (Ciclitira, 2004; McKay, 1998). The definition of words matters. Pejorative labels matter. The term “anti-sexuality” carries significant negative historical and political baggage (Whatley & Trudeil, 1989; Berer, 2004).

At a simple level, I would suggest six criteria to define pro-sexuality:

1. Being sex-positive, or having a favourable opinion of oneself or others engaging in sexual activity;
2. Approving of comprehensive sex education;
3. Expressing a desire to engage in sexual behaviour;
4. Desiring that partners have accurate information for achieving satisfaction from sex;
5. Opposing legal restrictions on sexual activity for consenting adults. This includes accepting the ability of consenting adults to create, share, or consume filmed sexual acts; and
6. Supporting the concept that pornography is a commodity to be created and consumed by consenting adults.

By way of contrast, what are the characteristics of an anti-sexuality group? Suggest that they would be mostly or entirely sex-negative; oppose comprehensive sex education; discourage sex between partners except in very constrained circumstances; resist promoting information about increasing sexual satisfaction; support sexual censorship and wish to ban pornography; and not value sexual consent.

Watson seems to have deliberately employed “anti-sexuality” as a pejorative label to stimulate unthinking resentment and hostility towards the groups targeted. In this context, it is intended to create needless divisions within society and to undermine the availability of free online support for those wishing to explore whether problematic pornography use is the cause of specific health problems. As I will show, the self-help resources Watson has described are pro-sexuality when considered against the above criteria.

**THE WEBSITES, PORNOGRAPHY, AND CENSORSHIP**

Watson examined three key resource groups in the online space – *Fight the New Drug, Your Brain on Porn*, and *NoFap*. Within their respective areas, each group is a substantial voice providing a counter-narrative to the all-pervasive industry trope that pornography is beneficial, harmless, adult entertainment.

Watson is critical of the self-help resources:

Each claim in these sections are backed up by references and links to articles. Anything more than a cursory examination, however, reveals that the groups are playing into the general public’s perceived information illiteracy. The claims and studies cited are, more often than not, poorly designed, suspiciously funded, misleading, incorrectly derived, or just outright false (Watson, 2020 p. 22).
I will now look in turn at each of the key self-help resources criticised by Watson to see if they are using robust evidence or if they seem to be trying to fool a gullible public.

**Fight the New Drug**

Fight the New Drug (FTND; [https://fightthenewdrug.org](https://fightthenewdrug.org)) is a Utah-based organisation that describes itself as:

> A non-religious and non-legislative nonprofit that exists to provide individuals the opportunity to make an informed decision regarding pornography by raising awareness on its harmful effects using only science, facts, and personal accounts. (Fight the New Drug, 2023).

The FTND website has a broad international audience, receiving more than 10 million visits per year (SimilarWeb, 2023a). It is one of the largest and most successful campaigning groups providing information on the risks associated with pornography use.

Watson identified three pieces of web content to illustrate poor communication practices. Confusingly, authorship of the specified items was incorrectly ascribed by Watson to the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE). They are items on the FightTheNewDrug.org site, and that organisation is not affiliated with NCOSE.

I will now consider the use of allegedly poor-quality source material in the items named by Watson.

On August 23, 2017, *Fight the New Drug* published a web article entitled “Peer reviewed research on how porn affects the brain” (Fight the New Drug, 2017a). The 1,000-word blog post quotes *The brain that changes itself* (Doidge, 2007). The author, a Canadian psychiatrist and neuroscience researcher, cites material drawn from articles written by leading sex and neuroscience researchers in ways that are appropriate and supportive of the points being made. The article also cited content drawn from a wide range of academic journals.

Commenting on the *Fight the New Drug* blog post, Watson wrote:

> The problems with the sources would be immediately clear to any librarian trained in resource evaluation: many of the referenced journals are suspiciously titled, no longer active, or were funded by the organisations mentioned in this article. These sites offer a valuable pedagogical example for instructional librarians and resource evaluators. Unfortunately, this is more than just intellectual dishonesty and manipulation (Watson, 2020: 22).

This is a serious charge. Watson’s tactic here is to broadly assert that the content is of poor quality without proving that this is true. Watson did not provide any examples or further information to justify these allegations of misconduct. However, it seems that Watson challenges causation (of adverse effects associated with excessive pornography use) by seeking to undermine the sources put forward by *Fight the New Drug*.

As a senior, professionally qualified librarian trained in resource evaluation, I would be more than satisfied to recommend this particular *FTND* article to library users as a reliable source of information. The facts do not bear out Watson’s assertion of poor practice. The sources cited in *FTND*’s article are relevant to the topic and come
from leading, mainstream, peer-reviewed journals and well-sourced books. The journals are not suspiciously titled; they are still actively publishing, and none appear to be funded by FTND. Journals cited include *JAMA Psychiatry, Journal of Behavioral Addictions, Brain, Brain Science, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, and *Brain and Cognition*. In my view, the other examples ascribed to FTND and cited by Watson as demonstrating poor practice are, in fact, similarly robust (*Fight the New Drug*, 2017b, 2017c).

YOUR BRAIN ON PORN

*Your Brain on Porn* (**YBOP**; https://www.yourbrainonporn.com) is a clearing house for academic research about pornography and provides thousands of self-reports by users on their experience of quitting pornography, including the health benefits they experience as a result. It is non-political and non-religious. The site is available in over 100 languages and accessed by approximately 14 million people annually (SimilarWeb, 2023b).

Watson’s comments on *Your Brain on Porn* (which Watson abbreviated as **YBP**) and its creator Gary Wilson, are now analysed from six different perspectives. These are the role of Watson’s article in seeking to establish a false narrative, consideration of Wilson’s credibility as a science communicator, questioning Wilson’s qualifications to comment on pornography addiction; the role of the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy* in defending Watson’s false narrative; Watson’s undisclosed conflicts of interest in creating the false narrative and finally, the impact of having Watson’s false narrative in wide circulation across the internet.

Creating a False Narrative in the Peer-Reviewed Literature

First, I would like to explore how Watson’s article comments on the work of Gary Wilson and his website *Your Brain on Porn* in a way that weaponised it for pornography-industry apologists. Watson (2020, p. 22) wrote:

*YBP* cites the work of Gary Wilson, an Oregon man with no scientific training or background, who has made a career peddling pseudoscience and speaking about pornography addiction (Ley, 2016; 2018; Hickman et al., 2016; Hamblin, 2016).

This is a clear example of the *challenge the messenger* approach to creating doubt.

What about his having no scientific background? Wilson completed more than five years of full-time study towards two separate degrees in two different states, one a nursing degree and one a physician’s assistant degree. However, he did not complete either program because of recurring physical health issues. Wilson also taught anatomy, physiology, and pathology for many years at vocational schools, as well as teaching anatomy and physiology labs at Southern Oregon University. He was the author of a popular, respected, evidence-based book on pornography's effects, endorsed by multiple experts, including clinicians, addiction researchers and respected medical academics (Wilson, 2018). While Wilson did not possess a formal degree, this is not quite the “no scientific training or background” Watson suggests.

Assertion that Wilson Was Peddling Pseudoscience

Does the issue of reporting poor-quality research apply to the *Your Brain on Porn* website? If **YBOP** was a "pseudoscience" site, it would mainly point to outlier studies or speculate without citing any credible research. Instead, it comprises long lists of
mainstream academic papers with hyperlinks to the original research. There are over 900 studies on pornography provided in context on the site. This appears to be the bulk of what has been published in English within the field of problematic pornography use over the past 15 years. I have been a researcher working in this field since 2015. In my view, when YBOP occasionally chooses studies to critique, it is primarily when researchers report unusual or outlier results. YBOP then contrasts them with the mainstream literature, the preponderance of the evidence.

At the end of the quotation about Wilson noted above, Watson provides four citations (Ley, 2016; 2018; Hickman et al., 2016; Hamblin, 2016). Citations may seem to lend an air of legitimacy to Watson’s disparagement of Wilson, but none provides any insight into Wilson’s work. Wilson is not mentioned by name in any of these sources, nor do they refer to his website. This is quite odd, as Watson implies a link between content in these papers that do not mention Wilson.

Watson does not mention that David Ley has been a paid consultant to the pornography industry (Neuwave, 2019). This deceptive tactic misleads readers, who are left believing these empty references must support Watson’s false claim about them unless they read the cited papers for themselves.

**Assertion that Wilson Was Not Qualified to Comment on Pornography Addiction**

Mr. Wilson wrote about pornography addiction. He was the author of a peer-reviewed paper recommending more research on pornography use (Wilson, 2016). He also co-authored another peer-reviewed paper in this field with seven U.S. Navy doctors (Park et al., 2016). The publication by Park et al. (2016) was fiercely attacked by a few vocal, pornography industry-connected academics who convinced the Committee on Publication Ethics to investigate the quality and veracity of the paper. In response, in June 2018, after an extensive review, the publisher of Behavioral Sciences, MDPI, put out a single, non-substantive correction. The whole text of the correction reads:

"The conflict of interest section of the published paper [1] has been updated as follows:

‘Gary Wilson is the author of Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction. He holds an unremunerated, honorary position at The Reward Foundation, the Registered Scottish Charity to which his book proceeds are donated. The authors declare no other conflicts of interest. Opinions and points of view expressed are those of the authors’ and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. NAVY or the Department of Defense.’

In addition, the academic editor’s name has been removed from the manuscript” (Park et al., 2018).

Please note: within this correction, the only change from the original paper was the inclusion of the words: “In addition, the academic editor’s name has been removed from the manuscript” (Park et al., 2018). Wilson’s ties to The Reward Foundation had already been fully disclosed in the original paper.

Why was the Park et al. paper so fiercely attacked by pornography industry supporters? The most likely answer is that it included case studies that suggested a causal
link between quitting pornography and healing from pornography-related health issues. According to the playbook model, causation must always be challenged.

The 2016 Park et al. paper Is internet pornography causing sexual dysfunctions? A review with clinical reports has been widely cited in the academic literature. As of January 24, 2023, Scopus listed 86 citations, Web of Science, 69, and Google Scholar, 234. By that date, there had been over 180,800 full-text views. Behavioural Sciences lists this as the most viewed paper of the 1,509 papers they have published since the journal was founded in 1996 (MDPI, 2023). On this basis, I would suggest that the article plays a legitimate role in scientific discourse. It has been exposed to scrutiny from the broader scientific community and escaped the echo chamber of like-minded readers hampered by information illiteracy.

The Role of the Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy in Defending the False Narrative

When Watson’s paper came to my attention in August 2020, I approached the editors requesting an opportunity to respond to what I considered to be a misrepresentation of the self-help resources, particularly YourBrainOnPorn.com and its creator, Gary Wilson. What followed was a year-long process of them placing impediments in my way as a means of discouraging a peer-reviewed response. The editors did not wish to allow readers to comprehend the actual situation. At the end of the negotiation (150 emails later), the editors would only agree to publish a non-peer-reviewed response if it were written in a way that improperly implied that the publication of MDPI’s correction in 2018 introduced new information potentially damaging to Wilson. As noted above, the correction had not done that, changing nothing about Wilson’s conflict of interest declaration from 2016. I ultimately refused the offer of the Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy to support their implication that Watson had treated Wilson impartially.

This dialogue should be viewed in a wider context. The Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy is an imprint of the American Library Association (ALA). As a librarian and member of the ALA, I then raised the issue of poor editorial behaviour at the Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy with the ALA board and senior management on three occasions. I received no response to my correspondence. Unfortunately, this did not entirely surprise me, as I had suspected they had taken a pro-pornography stance in the culture wars surrounding this topic.

The fundamental ALA position is that they:

Are defending the constitutional rights of all individuals of all ages to use the resources and services of libraries. We champion and defend the freedom to speak, the freedom to publish, and the freedom to read, as promised by the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States. We stand opposed to censorship and any effort to coerce belief, suppress opinion, or punish those whose expression does not conform to what is deemed orthodox in history, politics, or belief. The unfettered exchange of ideas is essential to the preservation of a free and democratic society.” (American Library Association, 2021)

However, this position within the American Library Association has trumped their separate duty to provide children with age-appropriate access to content. The American Library Association has campaigned against using internet filters for pornographic material. It has reportedly supported library suppliers who have supplied
junior schools with product bundles that allow children to access pornographic content through their school library (National Centre on Sexual Exploitation, 2020).

Consequently, the American Library Association’s position against censorship sees it fail to make any attempt to balance this freedom against a social responsibility to prevent potential harm to consumers of pornography, particularly underage consumers. Fundamentally, the ALA does not seem to recognise potential pornography harms. The National Center on Sexual Exploitation placed the American Library Association on its Dirty Dozen list in 2017, claiming that it has allowed children online access to pornographic materials (National Center on Sexual Exploitation, 2017).

Undisclosed Conflicts of Interest

Assuming that Brian Watson was an independent academic, I corresponded with the Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy and later the American Library Association, without knowing of links between Watson, the pornography industry and the American Library Association. While writing this paper, I discovered that Watson had strong connections to the pornography industry and the American Library Association, which should have been declared as conflicts of interest but were not.

Brian Watson has had their own page on the Pornhub Sexual Wellness Center since at least 2017 (Pornhub Sexual Wellness Centre, 2017). Watson's online CV records roles as a blogger in the ALA Office of Intellectual Freedom and notes that they had received research funding from the ALA. Watson's online CV from 2019 also lists “Sex-Ed articles for Pornhub.com’s Sexual Wellness Center” (Watson, 2019; Watson, 2022). It is a well-established tactic for academics who support controversial industries to omit to mention these conflicts when publishing (Davey, 2023).

Pornhub is one of the world’s three largest commercial pornography suppliers (SimilarWeb.com, 2022). From 2004 it was owned by MindGeek, which also controls many other online pornography brands. In March 2023 MindGeek was acquired by Ethical Capital Partners. On 17 August 2023 MindGeek was rebranded as Aylo. Critics have claimed both of these name changes were part of an attempt to separate Pornhub from a wide range of legal challenges involving hosting non-consensual content, rape videos and child sexual abuse material (Spangler, 2023).

Impact of Having the False Narrative in Wide Circulation

Since the publication of The New Censorship, Watson's unfounded quotation about Wilson has been weaponised and pressed into service on social media to denigrate Mr. Wilson's overall work. By August 17, 2020, shortly after Watson's paper appeared, the “Real Your Brain on Porn” Twitter account (@BrainOnPorn) was tweeting an infographic saying “Even peer-reviewed science now holds Gary Wilson out as an example of a classic pseudoscientist” citing Brian Watson as the source (Anti-Your Brain on Porn, 2020). Despite the “real” prefix, the “Real Your Brain on Porn” site was never Wilson's site; pornography industry allies employed the name as a means of confusion. Twitter was renamed X in July 2023, shortly after its acquisition by Elon Musk (Counts & Levine, 2023).

The deceptively named @BrainOnPorn Twitter account would also extensively post similar defamatory or disparaging statements on a near-daily basis, with more than 150 postings in one day alone (Your Brain on Porn, 2021c). Twitter suspended the @BrainOnPorn account in October 2020 for breaching its Terms of Service. Further, when the @BrainOnPorn account started, the first Twitter account to publicise it was @Pornhub. That is the official Twitter account representing one of the most
popular pornography websites (Drillinger, 2021). Interestingly, Pornhub is the same pornography website to which Brian Watson contributed “sex-ed articles,” yet failed to declare it a conflict of interest in their paper (Pornhub Sexual Wellness Centre, 2017).

The quote from Watson’s paper has also been used as a smear on Wikipedia. At the time of writing, the biographical entry for Gary Wilson says, “According to historian Brian M. Watson, Wilson ‘with no scientific training or background ... has made a career peddling pseudoscience.’” (Wikipedia, 2023b). From Wikipedia, such disinformation can propagate quickly across social media (Reddit.com, 2023).

This Wikipedia page is, in turn, a part of the broader smear campaign against Wilson. The page devoted to Wilson has been controlled by editors aligned with the pornography industry since it was created on 14 June 2022, preventing correction from members of the public.

As early as May 2021, Wilson believed that one pornography industry-connected activist had operated over 50 sock puppet accounts to astroturf Wikipedia pages related to pornography (Your Brain on Porn, 2021a). Even after Wilson’s death, the Twitter account @scienceofporn was replying to a five-star review of Wilson’s book using Watson’s quote (Porn-science.com, 2021). In another response to a positive book review, a porn industry-associated activist posted:

In summary, he was “an Oregon man with no scientific training or background, who has made a career peddling pseudoscience.”

https://journals.ala.org/index.php/jifp/article/view/7177

and you are just another sucker who fell for it. (Prause, 2022)

In 2023 the Watson quote was used to attack the evidence-base of an online, therapy-based programme for people trying to quit pornography addiction, sex addiction and compulsive sexual behaviours (Prause, 2023a). Around the same time, this quote was used to criticise an ABC News item on a sexual practice known as “Karezza” (Prause, 2023b).

In sum, while Brian Watson rightly raises issues of research quality among campaigners such as climate-change deniers, I would suggest that the content of YBOP is, in contrast, balanced. It is both qualitatively and quantitatively a solid resource.

**NOFAP**

NoFap (https://nofap.com) is an online, self-help, pornography recovery platform created in 2011. It receives more than 50 million visits a year. (SimilarWeb.com, 2023c). NoFap also has a Reddit forum with over one million subscribers (https://www.reddit.com/r/NoFap/). NoFap provides a mutual aid community for users to measure their progress on quitting pornography and to exchange tips and suggestions for changing behaviour. People of all ages and genders use it. It is non-political and secular (NoFap, 2022).

The common factor bringing people to the NoFap community is their shared experience of out-of-control use of pornography, generally over an extended period, resulting in negative consequences. For these people, the issue is not censorship—they have already seen and masturbated to any conceivable form of human sexual activity. Their consistent message is, “How can I gain control of my porn use?” These people
found they have recurring urges, even compulsion, to view more pornography (NoFap, 2020). The internet has led them into compulsive behaviours. Yet it is also home to online grassroots communities that serve as a means of helping them move away from unwanted behavioural patterns.

This message is embedded in the NoFap ethos:

We believe that quitting porn is one of the most sex-positive choices a person can make. NoFap doesn’t argue that individuals should abstain from sex or masturbation altogether for the rest of their lives, nor do we argue that individuals should “save themselves for marriage.” [...] We ultimately want people to enjoy sex! [...] Most users return to sex soon after their reboots only to report vastly improved sex lives. (NoFap, 2020: para. 14).

The founder of the site, a web developer by trade, has “described himself as ‘an Internet-freedom zealot’ who thinks the dangerous effects of pornography are best dealt with in sex-ed class and not through government regulation” (McMahon, 2014; NoFap, 2020, para. 13). NoFap members are nicknamed “Fapstronauts,” a term unique to NoFap which Watson inaccurately conflated with Fight the New Drug and Your Brain on Porn in their paper.

Watson originally opened with the false claim that Fight the New Drug “owns and operates NoFap.com” (Watson, 2020, p. 22). This was factually incorrect, and the Journal’s editor subsequently removed that statement in the revised version of Watson’s published paper.

Relying on the fabricated “legitimacy” created by Watson’s peer-reviewed “truth,” the contentious quotation disparaging Wilson noted above was soon used as a tool to undermine the legitimacy of NoFap on Wikipedia (Wikipedia, 2020: para. 1). At the time of writing, the pornography industry-supporting Wikipedia editors also have the quote in the NoFap entry a second time:

Some of the group’s beliefs cite the work of Gary Wilson, an anti-pornography activist who has no medical or scientific training. Wilson’s work is pseudoscientific (Wikipedia, 2023a: para 10).

Since around 2018, the pornography industry and its collaborators have sought to smear any experimentation with abstaining from pornography. For instance, they attempt to portray pornography addiction recovery as related to political activism, religious extremism, and even violence (Cole, 2018; Dickson, 2019; Manavis, 2018; Ley, 2018b). Indeed, one prominent industry-associated advocate openly stated that they intend to “de-platform” online forums that allow for peer support to reduce or eliminate pornography use (MrGirlPodcast, 2022). On another podcast, this person also promoted targeting pornography addiction recovery advocates, whom they portray as anti-pornography groups, because these individuals implicitly incite violence against the commercial pornography industry (Mendelson, 2022).

**CONCLUSION**

This case study touches on all four playbook strategies identified by Jacquet. However, it is exceptionally instructive in highlighting the techniques used to ‘challenge the messenger’. It demonstrates how a peer-reviewed academic paper filled with deliberate factual errors and innuendo can create a tool to “legitimise” attacks on mutual self-help groups. Further, Watson’s paper forms an integral element of a broader
campaign by commercial pornography industry collaborators to “de-platform” mutual self-help groups.

If successful, the pornography industry’s campaign against the mutual self-help groups would produce three deleterious effects. First, it would eliminate key, cost-free support for suffering pornography users. Many such users are young and without independent means. Second, it would deny them support from their peers. Third, it would remove substantial opportunities for them to access independent information outside the industry’s carefully crafted narratives.

These self-help resources do not have a censorship agenda. Upon review, their agendas regarding pornography seem strongly libertarian and anti-censorship (Fight the New Drug, 2020: para. 5; Your Brain on Porn, 2020: para. 2; NoFap, 2020, para. 13-15). They all recognise that in the current world, banning or censoring pornography is not technically possible, nor for many, even desirable.

There may be such a thing as “anti-sexuality internet activists” trying to impose censorship and impede intellectual freedom. If these “internet activists” exist somewhere, Watson has not named them. The individuals and organisations Watson targets do not fit that description and should not be characterised this way. To do so is inaccurate, unreasonable, and suspicious as to intent.

I share Watson’s concern over the adoption of “tactics from conservative climate change denialists such as ‘well poisoning’ and spreading FUD (fear, uncertainty, doubt)” within public debates around pornography (Watson, 2020, p. 20). Here, I differ profoundly in identifying those using these tactics and to what end. As I demonstrated in this article, Brian Watson actively promotes the fear, uncertainty, and doubt they claim to be working against. I see a clear distinction between individuals who favour censorship to improve, manage, regulate, or control society and Watson’s targets, who publicly state that they do not seek to do these things. Instead, these self-help resources want to empower individuals and groups to separate themselves from the sexual-industrial complex developed on the internet.

Fight the New Drug, Your Brain on Porn, and NoFap are pro-sexuality, but they all recognise the real risks that unfettered pornography use can carry. They do not contend that sexuality presents a significant risk to society, but that excessive pornography use presents a significant threat to sexuality.

These three resources, which point out the health risks of pornography, are not proposing censorship. They are helping individuals who are already using commercial pornography to experiment with quitting pornography to see if it is the cause of their health issues and, if so, to help them change their behaviour. This recognition that pornography use has the potential to create harm is now supported by a substantial body of mainstream science and within many parts of the medical establishment, including the World Health Organization (Böthe, et al., 2023; Potenza, et al. 2017; World Health Organization, 2020).

It seems the main risk the pornography industry is concerned about is that by quitting, problematic pornography-using consumers take back control of their sexuality. As a result, they stop contributing money and data to the multi-billion-dollar companies that supply commercial pornography, make ad revenue from each page load, and exploit users’ personal data (Hassan, 2018; Maris et al, 2020; Pornhub, 2019; Raustiala and Sprigman, 2019). Indeed, Pornhub has made light of the rather serious issues with which many of Pornhub’s consumers struggle. For several years the bottom of Pornhub’s home page included the phrase “[W]e’re always working
towards adding more features that will keep your *porno addiction* alive and well” [emphasis added] (Pornhub, 2011; Pornhub, 2014; Reddit.com, 2018).

The individuals behind Fight the New Drug, Your Brain on Porn, and NoFap subscribe to an ethos that is sex-positive regardless of sexual orientation. They support quality sex education, focus on sex between people without the adverse effects of compulsive pornography use, encourage information that makes people better lovers, and oppose censorship. Some of them also promote child protection. They certainly do not directly or indirectly pose a threat to library freedom, intellectual freedom or privacy.

The pornography industry and its allies use disinformation created by academics such as Watson in a deliberate strategy to generate a false narrative within the peer-reviewed literature on the impacts of its products. By using a toxic mix of fabrication and innuendo to build a case against people who raise awareness about pornography harms and addiction, the industry is employing classic tactics from *the playbook*. They promote a false narrative to deny the well-established health and social risks associated with problematic pornography consumption.

Watson’s unfounded claim that Wilson and other pornography recovery advocates are engaged in pseudoscience is now a part of Big Pornography’s public relations toolkit. Pornography industry apologists have rolled out a strategy of disinformation about the industry’s targets in Wikipedia and more widely across social media. Until unfounded claims by academics such as Watson are regularly challenged in the peer-reviewed literature, the recovery websites targeted by the pornography industry will be falsely portrayed as ignorant, uninformed, unscientific, or even disingenuous. This places at risk the future sexual health of the pornography-consuming population.

**STATEMENT OF THE AUTHOR’S INTERESTS**

This research received no external funding. The late Gary Wilson was the author of *Your brain on porn: Internet pornography and the emerging science of addiction*, a book described in this paper. The Reward Foundation, a registered nonprofit (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation SC044948), receives the author royalties from Gary Wilson’s book. Darryl Mead is now a volunteer at this nonprofit. Mead’s wife Mary Sharpe supplies management services to The Reward Foundation on a contract basis. The Reward Foundation has been targeted with various forms of online harassment, defamatory statements, and administrative reports by pornography industry-connected activists. Mead has participated in surveys, mailings, and public consultations on problematic pornography use, government policy for sex education, age verification, digital archiving and other topics. He has provided advice to public bodies, governments and legislative review programmes around the world. He has performed grant reviews for institutions in the U.K. and New Zealand. He has peer-reviewed articles on pornography use. He has delivered continuing professional education events in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland, Ireland, Croatia, Germany, Turkey, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the USA.

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