

Chris Richards and Trevor Stammers look at the escalating problem of internet pornography

Caught in the NET

key points

The ready availability of sexual images on the internet has led to an explosion in pornography use and addiction and Christians are not immune from the pressures. By offering stimulation without consequences and intimacy without responsibility, pornography brings unreal and damaging expectations into relationships. Furthermore, by encouraging unfaithful thoughts, the use of porn clearly violates God's commandments and undermines marriage. Warnings from the Old Testament prophets are chillingly relevant today. Christians need to recognise the risks of pornography, seek God's forgiveness for involvement and embrace practical measures that will help them resist the temptation to get involved.

Despite pornography rarely being *out* of the newspapers, the media recently reported that all is not well in the airbrushed garden. The *Daily Mail* was alarmed that more than nine million men - almost 40 percent of the adult male population - logged onto sex websites last year. The number of women downloading internet porn soared 30 percent to 1.4 million.¹ The more liberal papers showed concern as well. The *Independent on Sunday* gave it front page coverage and four pages of analysis.² However, it also allowed a porn user two pages to explain why he wasn't a monster.³

Christians on the net

Christians are not immune from the pressures of living in a sex-saturated society: Operation Ore, a United States-led investigation into an online service offering thousands of images of abused children, led to the identification (from credit card details) of more than 7,250 British subscribers and resulted in 2,000 prosecutions. Several Christians were among those arrested, their ministries shipwrecked and their families devastated. But for every person who gets involved in viewing child pornography, there are thousands viewing legal and easily accessible adult material that many would

claim is harmless or even therapeutic. How can we respond to this issue, both personally and in our professional dealings with patients seeking help?

Size does matter

What is the extent of the problem? The UK is one of the most affected countries in the world - our porn industry is worth an estimated £1bn share of the £20bn world market. UK internet surfers look up the word 'porn' more than anyone in the English-speaking world. And 2.5 million men, a quarter of the male population aged between 25 and 49, have accessed an 'adult website' in the past month. The number of men downloading pornography has quadrupled over the past six years in the UK whilst, not surprisingly, sales of pornographic magazine titles have halved. Printed material cannot compete with the internet, which is affordable or even free, accessible around the clock, and anonymous.

Women are also increasingly using the internet for sexual purposes though in different ways, preferring to use chat rooms. Even online, women still seek sexual outlets in the context of relationships. Cybersex may also prove appealing because it reduces the social stigma that is often attached to women who enjoy frequent sex, and it forms a safe haven to concentrate on sexual activity in an

uninhibited way. Anna Span, the UK's leading female porn director, makes films 'from a female point of view': characters are 'more three-dimensional...there is more foreplay and we have eye contact between the characters....'⁴

Not all women are so enthusiastic about pornography. Liberal Democrat shadow health spokesperson Sandra Gidley MP said she was 'alarmed by the type of material accessible to people...and concerned that the boundaries are being pushed on what is acceptable'.⁵

God on porn

What does the Bible have to say about porn? Obviously its modern form was not known in ancient Israel, but the Ten Commandments include three very relevant edicts: 'You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not commit adultery... You shall not covet your neighbour's wife'.⁶ Taken together, these laws establish that God regards anything which causes a person to desire sexually anyone other than his/her spouse as totally wrong.

In the book of Ezekiel, God exposes the full extent of the hidden decadence of Israel's spiritual leaders. The 'idol that made the Lord so angry' was probably that of Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility whose worship entailed *porneia* (the Greek word often translated as fornication or sexual immorality) and self-gratification.⁷ God instructs Ezekiel to view initially through a hole in the wall to see what the leaders 'are doing with their idols in dark rooms...saying "The Lord doesn't see us"'.⁸ However, nothing is hidden from God's eyes and eventually the whole wall is torn away, exposing the evil within. The application to the Christian, whether doctor or patient, who views pornography is obvious: God still sees and grieves over the deeds done in dark rooms illuminated by the seductive glow of such pornographic images today.

In chapter 23, with striking contemporary relevance, Ezekiel turns his attention to women, using the parable of the sexually-addicted sisters Oholah and Oholibah (allegorically referring to Israel and Judah). Not only did they lust after handsome young men, but Oholibah carried what Ezekiel calls 'her prostitution' still further by lusting after *pictures* of men 'portrayed in red, with belts around their waists and flowing turbans on their heads'.⁹ Though expressed in cultural terms appropriate to Ezekiel's time, this detail echoes the specificity of certain items of clothing used to enhance stimulation in pornographic images today, a specificity which search engines are well designed to find. The passage also speaks graphically of the phenomenon of 'genitalisation', of focussing on the size of sexual organs as a measure of sexual stimulation.¹⁰ God's verdict on such behaviour is clear: 'The shame of your prostitution will be exposed'.¹¹

The battle for hearts and minds

In the New Testament, Jesus takes things one stage further: 'You have heard it said "Do not commit

adultery". But I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart'.¹²

It is not just our actions that matter, but also our thoughts and attitudes. Pornography threatens the integrity of sex because it encourages unfaithful thoughts and undermines marital fidelity. Many men also testify to on-going intrusive thoughts about other women, the remains of their pornographic past.

Based on a false image of reality, pornography brings unreal and damaging expectations into relationships; as one woman describes: 'The real reason I hated *Playboy* was that the models established a standard I could never attain without the help of implants, soft lighting and airbrushing. It's a standard that equates sexuality with youth and beauty. I didn't want him buying into this definition of sexuality. I was planning a future with this man and I wanted to feel secure in the knowledge that, even after two kids and 20 years, he would still find me sexy'.¹³

Escape from the net

How can we stay free and help our patients to do so? Remarkably, in the Christian faith there is no sin too serious, no life too awful and no person too hopeless to be beyond God's reach. Jesus has already paid the price for the worst of sins imaginable when he hung on the cross. None of us has lived the blameless life that approaches the perfect holiness of God: 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God'.¹⁴ There are only two types of people – those who have received God's forgiveness and those who need to! There is no other way to freedom.

When taking radical steps to deal with pornography, confession to God may be augmented by confession to a trusted Christian friend or counsellor.

¹⁵ The principle of 'confess your sins to one another' can be of enormous help when dealing with sexual sin.¹⁶ Admitting the full extent of pornography addiction is very difficult; the temptation to hide aspects of it is always there. Fully exposing the issues means that healing can go as deep as it needs to and the chances of relapse are reduced.

Conclusion

'There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.'¹⁷ Pornography can seem so attractive, offering stimulation without consequences, intimacy without responsibility. But its rewards are as shallow as the page or flat screen, its reality as false as the sugary smiles and makeup, and its damage long outlasts its transient thrills.

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Adapted with kind permission of Christian Viewpoint for Men



Practical help

- Place the highest level of filter on your internet.
- Only view the internet in an open place.
- Find an accountability partner to discuss your progress with honestly.
- Install a programme that sends your weekly website hits to your accountability partner:-
www.cvmen.org.uk/resources.html
www.covenanteyes.com
www.xxxchurch.com
- Bowring L (Ed). *Searching for Intimacy: Pornography, the Internet and the XXX Factor*. Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2005
- Care for the Family www.care.org.uk/anon
- Lovewise www.lovewise.org.uk

references

1. Downloads of Net porn hit record high. *Daily Mail* 2006; 29 May
2. Porn UK. *Independent on Sunday* 2006; 28 May
3. Lott T. I look at porn. Am I a monster? *Independent on Sunday* 2006; 28 May
4. Porn UK. *Independent on Sunday* 2006; 28 May
5. *Ibid*
6. Exodus 20:4,14,17
7. Ezekiel 8:5
8. Ezekiel 8:12
9. Ezekiel 23:14-15
10. Ezekiel 23:20
11. Ezekiel 23:29
12. Matthew 5:27
13. Shalit W. *A Return to Modesty: Rediscovering the Lost Virtue*. London: Simon & Schuster, 1999:52
14. Romans 13:23
15. Psalm 32:5
16. James 5:16
17. Proverbs 14:12