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ON A SCREEN NEAR YOU

IT'S POPULAR, PERVASIVE AND SURPRISINGLY PERVERSE, ACCORDING TO THE FIRST SURVEY OF ONLINE EROTICA. AND THERE'S NO EASY WAY TO STAMP IT OUT

BY PHILIP ELMER-DEWITT

Sex is everywhere these days--in books, magazines, films, television, music videos and bus-stop perfume ads. It is printed on dial-a-porn business cards and slipped under windshield wipers. It is acted out by balloon-breasted models and actors with unflagging erections, then rented for \$4 a night at the corner video store. Most Americans have become so inured to the open display of eroticism--and the arguments for why it enjoys special status under the First Amendment--that they hardly notice it's there.

Something about the combination of sex and computers, however, seems to make otherwise worldly-wise adults a little crazy. How else to explain the uproar surrounding the discovery by a U.S. Senator--Nebraska Democrat James Exon--that pornographic pictures can be downloaded from the Internet and displayed on a home computer? This, as any computer-savvy undergrad can testify, is old news. Yet suddenly the press is on alert, parents and teachers are up in arms, and lawmakers in Washington are rushing to ban the smut from cyberspace with new legislation--sometimes with little regard to either its effectiveness or its constitutionality.

If you think things are crazy now, though, wait until the politicians get hold of a report coming out this week. A research team at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has conducted an exhaustive study of online porn--what's available, who is downloading it, what turns them on--and the findings (to be published in the *Georgetown Law Journal*) are sure to pour fuel on an already explosive debate.

The study, titled Marketing Pornography on the Information Superhighway, is significant not only for what it tells us about what's happening on the computer networks but also for what it tells us about ourselves. Pornography's appeal is surprisingly elusive. It plays as much on fear, anxiety, curiosity and taboo as on genuine eroticism. The Carnegie Mellon study, drawing on elaborate computer records of online activity, was able to measure for the first time what people actually download, rather than what they say they want to see. "We now know what the consumers of computer pornography really look at in the privacy of their own homes," says Marty Rimm, the study's principal investigator. "And we're finding a fundamental shift in the kinds of images they demand."

What the Carnegie Mellon researchers discovered was: THERE'S AN AWFUL LOT OF PORN ONLINE. In an 18-month study, the team surveyed 917,410 sexually explicit pictures, descriptions, short stories and film clips. On those Usenet newsgroups where digitized images are stored, 83.5% of the pictures were pornographic.

IT IS IMMENSELY POPULAR. Trading in sexually explicit imagery, according to the report, is now "one of the largest (if not the largest) recreational applications of users of computer networks." At one U.S. university, 13 of the 40 most frequently visited newsgroups had names like alt.sex.stories, rec.arts.erotica and alt.sex.bondage.

IT IS A BIG MONEYMAKER. The great majority (71%) of the sexual images on the newsgroups surveyed originate from adult-oriented computer bulletin-board systems (BBS) whose operators are trying to lure customers to their private collections of X-rated material. There are thousands of these BBS services, which charge fees (typically \$10 to \$30 a month) and take credit cards; the five largest have annual revenues in excess of \$1 million.

IT IS UBIQUITOUS. Using data obtained with permission from BBS operators, the Carnegie Mellon team identified (but did not publish the names of) individual consumers in more than 2,000 cities in all 50 states and 40 countries, territories and provinces around the world--including some countries like China, where possession of pornography can be a capital offense.

IT IS A GUY THING. According to the BBS operators, 98.9% of the consumers of online porn are men. And there is some evidence that

many of the remaining 1.1% are women paid to hang out on the "chat" rooms and bulletin boards to make the patrons feel more comfortable.

IT IS NOT JUST NAKED WOMEN. Perhaps because hard-core sex pictures are so widely available elsewhere, the adult BBS market seems to be driven largely by a demand for images that can't be found in the average magazine rack: pedophilia (nude photos of children), hebephilia (youths) and what the researchers call paraphilia--a grab bag of "deviant" material that includes images of bondage, sadomasochism, urination, defecation, and sex acts with a barnyard full of animals.

The appearance of material like this on a public network accessible to men, women and children around the world raises issues too important to ignore--or to oversimplify. Parents have legitimate concerns about what their kids are being exposed to and, conversely, what those children might miss if their access to the Internet were cut off. Lawmakers must balance public safety with their obligation to preserve essential civil liberties. Men and women have to come to terms with what draws them to such images. And computer programmers have to come up with more enlightened ways to give users control over a network that is, by design, largely out of control.

The Internet, of course, is more than a place to find pictures of people having sex with dogs. It's a vast marketplace of ideas and information of all sorts--on politics, religion, science and technology. If the fast-growing World Wide Web fulfills its early promise, the network could be a powerful engine of economic growth in the 21st century. And as the Carnegie Mellon study is careful to point out, pornographic image files, despite their evident popularity, represent only about 3% of all the messages on the Usenet newsgroups, while the Usenet itself represents only 11.5% of the traffic on the Internet.

As shocking and, indeed, legally obscene as some of the online porn may be, the researchers found nothing that can't be found in specialty magazines or adult bookstores. Most of the material offered by the private BBS services, in fact, is simply scanned from existing print publications.

But pornography is different on the computer networks. You can obtain it in the privacy of your home--without having to walk into a seedy

bookstore or movie house. You can download only those things that turn you on, rather than buy an entire magazine or video. You can explore different aspects of your sexuality without exposing yourself to communicable diseases or public ridicule. (Unless, of course, someone gets hold of the computer files tracking your online activities, as happened earlier this year to a couple dozen crimson-faced Harvard students.)

The great fear of parents and teachers, of course, is not that college students will find this stuff but that it will fall into the hands of those much younger--including some, perhaps, who are not emotionally prepared to make sense of what they see.

Ten-year-old Anders Urmacher, a student at the Dalton School in New York City who likes to hang out with other kids in the Treehouse chat room on America Online, got E-mail from a stranger that contained a mysterious file with instructions for how to download it. He followed the instructions, and then he called his mom. When Linda Mann-Urmacher opened the file, the computer screen filled with 10 thumbnail-size pictures showing couples engaged in various acts of sodomy, heterosexual intercourse and lesbian sex. "I was not aware that this stuff was online," says a shocked Mann-Urmacher. "Children should not be subjected to these images."

This is the flip side of Vice President Al Gore's vision of an information superhighway linking every school and library in the land. When the kids are plugged in, will they be exposed to the seamiest sides of human sexuality? Will they fall prey to child molesters hanging out in electronic chat rooms?

It's precisely these fears that have stopped Bonnie Fell of Skokie, Illinois, from signing up for the Internet access her three boys say they desperately need. "They could get bombarded with X-rated porn, and I wouldn't have any idea," she says. Mary Veed, a mother of three from nearby Hinsdale, makes a point of trying to keep up with her computer-literate 12-year-old, but sometimes has to settle for monitoring his phone bill. "Once they get to be a certain age, boys don't always tell Mom what they do," she says.

"We face a unique, disturbing and urgent circumstance, because it is children who are the computer experts in our nation's families," said Republican Senator Dan Coats of Indiana during the debate over the

controversial anti-cyberporn bill he co-sponsored with Senator Exon.

According to at least one of those experts--16-year-old David Slifka of Manhattan--the danger of being bombarded with unwanted pictures is greatly exaggerated. "If you don't want them you won't get them," says the veteran Internet surfer. Private adult BBSs require proof of age (usually a driver's license) and are off-limits to minors, and kids have to master some fairly daunting computer science before they can turn so-called binary files on the Usenet into high-resolution color pictures. "The chances of randomly coming across them are unbelievably slim," says Slifka.

While groups like the Family Research Council insist that online child molesters represent a clear and present danger, there is no evidence that it is any greater than the thousand other threats children face every day. Ernie Allen, executive director of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, acknowledges that there have been 10 or 12 "fairly high-profile cases" in the past year of children being seduced or lured online into situations where they are victimized. Kids who are not online are also at risk, however; more than 800,000 children are reported missing every year in the U.S.

Yet it is in the name of the children and their parents that lawmakers are racing to fight cyberporn. The first blow was struck by Senators Exon and Coats, who earlier this year introduced revisions to an existing law called the Communications Decency Act. The idea was to extend regulations written to govern the dial-a-porn industry into the computer networks. The bill proposed to outlaw obscene material and impose fines of up to \$100,000 and prison terms of up to two years on anyone who knowingly makes "indecent" material available to children under 18.

The measure had problems from the start. In its original version it would have made online-service providers criminally liable for any obscene communications that passed through their systems--a provision that, given the way the networks operate, would have put the entire Internet at risk. Exon and Coats revised the bill but left in place the language about using "indecent" words online. "It's a frontal assault on the First Amendment," says Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe. Even veteran prosecutors ridicule it. "It won't pass scrutiny even in misdemeanor court," says one.

The Exon bill had been written off for dead only a few weeks ago. Republican Senator Larry Pressler of South Dakota, chairman of the Commerce committee, which has jurisdiction over the larger telecommunications-reform act to which it is attached, told Time that he intended to move to table it.

That was before Exon showed up in the Senate with his "blue book." Exon had asked a friend to download some of the rawer images available online. "I knew it was bad," he says. "But then when I got on there, it made Playboy and Hustler look like Sunday-school stuff." He had the images printed out, stuffed them in a blue folder and invited his colleagues to stop by his desk on the Senate floor to view them. At the end of the debate--which was carried live on C-SPAN--few Senators wanted to cast a nationally televised vote that might later be characterized as pro-pornography. The bill passed 84 to 16.

Civil libertarians were outraged. Mike Godwin, staff counsel for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, complained that the indecency portion of the bill would transform the vast library of the Internet into a children's reading room, where only subjects suitable for kids could be discussed. "It's government censorship," said Marc Rotenberg of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "The First Amendment shouldn't end where the Internet begins."

The key issue, according to legal scholars, is whether the Internet is a print medium (like a newspaper), which enjoys strong protection against government interference, or a broadcast medium (like television), which may be subject to all sorts of government control. Perhaps the most significant import of the Exon bill, according to EFF's Godwin, is that it would place the computer networks under the jurisdiction of the Federal Communications Commission, which enforces, among other rules, the injunction against using the famous seven dirty words on the radio. In a Time/CNN poll of 1,000 Americans conducted last week by Yankelovich Partners, respondents were sharply split on the issue: 42% were for FCC-like control over sexual content on the computer networks; 48% were against it.

By week's end the balance between protecting speech and curbing pornography seemed to be tipping back toward the libertarians. In a move that surprised conservative supporters, House Speaker Newt Gingrich denounced the Exon amendment. "It is clearly a violation of free speech, and it's a violation of the right of adults to communicate

with each other," he told a caller on a cable-TV show. It was a key defection, because Gingrich will preside over the computer-decency debate when it moves to the House in July. Meanwhile, two U.S. Representatives, Republican Christopher Cox of California and Democrat Ron Wyden of Oregon, were putting together an anti-Exon amendment that would bar federal regulation of the Internet and help parents find ways to block material they found objectionable.

Coincidentally, in the closely watched case of a University of Michigan student who published a violent sex fantasy on the Internet and was charged with transmitting a threat to injure or kidnap across state lines, a federal judge in Detroit last week dismissed the charges. The judge ruled that while Jake Baker's story might be deeply offensive, it was not a crime.

How the Carnegie Mellon report will affect the delicate political balance on the cyberporn debate is anybody's guess. Conservatives thumbing through it for rhetorical ammunition will find plenty. Appendix B lists the most frequently downloaded files from a popular adult BBS, providing both the download count and the two-line descriptions posted by the board's operator. Suffice it to say that they all end in exclamation points, many include such phrases as "nailed to a table!" and none can be printed in Time.

How accurately these images reflect America's sexual interests, however, is a matter of some dispute. University of Chicago sociologist Edward Laumann, whose 1994 Sex in America survey painted a far more humdrum picture of America's sex life, says the Carnegie Mellon study may have captured what he calls the "gaper phenomenon." "There is a curiosity for things that are extraordinary and way out," he says. "It's like driving by a horrible accident. No one wants to be in it, but we all slow down to watch."

Other sociologists point out that the difference between the Chicago and Carnegie Mellon reports may be more apparent than real. Those 1 million or 2 million people who download pictures from the Internet represent a self-selected group with an interest in erotica. The Sex in America respondents, by contrast, were a few thousand people selected to represent a cross section of all America.

Still, the new research is a gold mine for psychologists, social scientists, computer marketers and anybody with an interest in human

sexual behavior. Every time computer users logged on to one of these bulletin boards, they left a digital trail of their transactions, allowing the pornographers to compile data bases about their buying habits and sexual tastes. The more sophisticated operators were able to adjust their inventory and their descriptions to match consumer demand.

Nobody did this more effectively than Robert Thomas, owner of the Amateur Action BBS in Milpitas, California, and a kind of modern-day Marquis de Sade, according to the Carnegie Mellon report. He is currently serving time in an obscenity case that may be headed for the Supreme Court.

Thomas, whose BBS is the online-porn market leader, discovered that he could boost sales by trimming soft- and hard-core images from his data base while front-loading his files with pictures of sex acts with animals (852) and nude prepubescent children (more than 5,000), his two most popular categories of porn. He also used copywriting tricks to better serve his customers' fantasies. For example, he described more than 1,200 of his pictures as depicting sex scenes between family members (father and daughter, mother and son), even though there was no evidence that any of the participants were actually related. These "incest" images were among his biggest sellers, accounting for 10% of downloads.

The words that worked were sometimes quite revealing. Straightforward oral sex, for example, generally got a lukewarm response. But when Thomas described the same images using words like choke or choking, consumer demand doubled.

Such findings may cheer antipornography activists; as feminist writer Andrea Dworkin puts it, "the whole purpose of pornography is to hurt women." Catharine MacKinnon, a professor of law at the University of Michigan, goes further. Women are doubly violated by pornography, she writes in *Vindication and Resistance*, one of three essays in the forthcoming *Georgetown Law Journal* that offer differing views on the Carnegie Mellon report. They are violated when it is made and exposed to further violence again and again every time it is consumed. "The question pornography poses in cyberspace," she writes, "is the same one it poses everywhere else: whether anything will be done about it."

But not everyone agrees with Dworkin and MacKinnon, by any means; even some feminists think there is a place in life--and the Internet--for

erotica. In her new book, *Defending Pornography*, Nadine Strossen argues that censoring sexual expression would do women more harm than good, undermining their equality, their autonomy and their freedom.

The Justice Department, for its part, has not asked for new anti-porn legislation. Distributing obscene material across state lines is already illegal under federal law, and child pornography in particular is vigorously prosecuted. Some 40 people in 14 states were arrested two years ago in Operation Longarm for exchanging kiddie porn online. And one of the leading characters in the Carnegie Mellon study--a former Rand McNally executive named Robert Copella, who left book publishing to make his fortune selling pedophilia on the networks--was extradited from Tijuana, and is now awaiting sentencing in a New Jersey jail.

For technical reasons, it is extremely difficult to stamp out anything on the Internet--particularly images stored on the Usenet newsgroups. As Internet pioneer John Gilmore famously put it, "The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." There are border issues as well. Other countries on the Internet--France, for instance--are probably no more interested in having their messages screened by U.S. censors than Americans would be in having theirs screened by, say, the government of Saudi Arabia.

Historians say it should come as no surprise that the Internet--the most democratic of media--would lead to new calls for censorship. The history of pornography and efforts to suppress it are inextricably bound up with the rise of new media and the emergence of democracy. According to Walter Kendrick, author of *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, the modern concept of pornography was invented in the 19th century by European gentlemen whose main concern was to keep obscene material away from women and the lower classes. Things got out of hand with the spread of literacy and education, which made pornography available to anybody who could read. Now, on the computer networks, anybody with a computer and a modem can not only consume pornography but distribute it as well. On the Internet, anybody can be Bob Guccione.

That might not be a bad idea, says Carlin Meyer, a professor at New York Law School whose Georgetown essay takes a far less apocalyptic view than MacKinnon's. She argues that if you don't like the images of

sex the pornographers offer, the appropriate response is not to suppress them but to overwhelm them with healthier, more realistic ones. Sex on the Internet, she maintains, might actually be good for young people. "[Cyberspace] is a safe space in which to explore the forbidden and the taboo," she writes. "It offers the possibility for genuine, unembarrassed conversations about accurate as well as fantasy images of sex."

That sounds easier than it probably is. Pornography is powerful stuff, and as long as there is demand for it, there will always be a supply. Better software tools may help check the worst abuses, but there will never be a switch that will cut it off entirely--not without destroying the unbridled expression that is the source of the Internet's (and democracy's) greatest strength. The hard truth, says John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the EFF and father of three young daughters, is that the burden ultimately falls where it always has: on the parents. "If you don't want your children fixating on filth," he says, "better step up to the tough task of raising them to find it as distasteful as you do yourself."