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# Antiporn Agendas: Feminism, Internet Filtering, and Religious Strategies

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# Antiporn Agendas: Feminism, Internet Filtering, and Religious Strategies

*Christopher Boulton*

As an object of analysis for cultural studies, Internet pornography is uniquely positioned as both an enormously popular media genre and a deeply despised idea. It is a contested textual space, opposed from various angles by grassroots activists, opportunistic politicians, and religious conservatives; each group evokes, and sometimes even displays, pornographic images in order to spark the shock and disgust of a supposedly respectable public and then rearticulates this affective response with its own larger programs of social reform. This chapter looks specifically at how the evolving agenda of the feminist antiporn organization Stop Porn Culture (SPC) has helped enable government-mandated Internet filtering along with other attempts to quarantine adult content online. It also considers how some conservative churches have, in addition to filtering, turned toward sex-positive language as a religious strategy for opposing pornography. Moreover, in light of this recent confluence of events, it now seems an opportune time to revisit and update “Porn and Me(n),”<sup>1</sup> my analysis of the 2007 national antipornography conference held at Wheelock College—an event that drew in both feminists and religious conservatives alike and served as the launch pad for SPC and its emerging legislative agenda.

I initially attended the 2007 Wheelock conference with an antiporn agenda of my own. Up to that point, my personal experience with Internet pornography had long been a deeply irrational and contradictory one—a repeated cycle of ecstasy and despair. First would come the titillation of search and discovery for a suitably arousing image to accompany masturbation. The Web offered an infinite and ever-expanding virtual universe of willing bodies at-the-ready; but then, once the selection was made and orgasm achieved, would always come the inevitable crash—the switch from an all-consuming passion for a pornographic image to utter disgust for the same could be brutal and abrupt. The process often was impulsive, rushed, and frantic. In the end, I would find myself alone, depressed, and full of regret, sometimes resolving

never to do it again, until I did. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't. Although I came from a religious background, I did not experience shame or guilt so much as pain and longing. The women in these pictures and videos were not, after all, available to me in the flesh and never would be. The fantasy that they were—while exciting for a moment—would, over time, cultivate dissatisfaction with my potential and actual sexual partners by offering explicit visions of ones that would never be.<sup>2</sup> I should note here that Internet pornography is a broad and blunt term, comprising a wide range of queer, alternative, and otherwise subaltern practices that offer unique opportunities for sexual identification and instruction, both to and from sexual minorities. Indeed, I often defend the Internet pornography industry on these grounds alone—that it has opened up a space capable of accommodating such a wide range of sexual tastes, desires, and practices that otherwise would go unrepresented and remain hard to find. In short, there are surely a variety of porn viewing practices that fall well outside the realm of my own experience. And yet, when I read debates between so-called antiporn and prosex feminists, I often got the sense that neither side had an appreciation for men—like me—who use Internet porn, but, for a variety of reasons, wish that they didn't. Neither side had very much to say about changing porn's effect on my life. John Stoltenberg<sup>3</sup> and Robert Jensen<sup>4</sup> offered empathy, but, in terms of solutions, both seemed to believe that merely knowing the antiporn analysis and subscribing to the correct politics would, alone, be sufficient for the enlightened feminist male to reconcile the contradictions of his desires and live a porn-free life of sexual integrity. I went to Wheelock College in 2007 looking for a third way.

After the conference, I conducted several rounds of interviews with four other male attendees, whose political and spiritual commitments ranged from conservative Christian to progressive secular humanist, asking them about their own consumption of porn as well as their experience of Wheelock. I wrote up my findings in an article entitled "Porn and Me(n)." In it, I argued that the radical feminist analysis of pornography not only failed to account for the pleasures of objectification, but also created a hostile environment by provoking—then quickly shaming—heterosexual male desire while refusing to stipulate the bounds of an acceptable alternative. I then compared the relatively diminished and marginal position of the Wheelock approach with the wildly popular and mainstream success of the Christian antipornography movement across a range of media-friendly initiatives. I concluded that the religious formula of confession and redemption offered a more effective rhetorical and practical appeal that bound men together through a process of communal catharsis, spiritual exorcism, and a collective return to the dignity and respectability so clearly delineated by what Gayle Rubin has called

the “charmed circle” of monogamous, heterosexual coitus freely exchanged within the privacy of the home and the sanctity of marriage.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Wheelock not only sacrificed intellectual rigor by pandering to a populist stance of disgust toward male sexual deviance, but, more crucially, failed to offer those men—even the most well-meaning and feminist identified of the men actually in attendance—a clear pathway toward sexual self-actualization. In sum, I argued that this theoretical retrenchment has allowed conservative Christians to successfully take one of feminism’s most popular issues from its larger political program and rearticulate it as a religious one.<sup>6</sup>

When I initially presented this work at an academic conference in 2008, Robert Jensen, one of the founders of SPC, spoke up during the Q&A to address my argument that the Christian antiporn agenda was more flexible, welcoming, and popular than the current feminist approach. Jensen explained as follows:

The Wheelock conference—for all of its ideological uniformity—also had conflicting strains in it. Some were rooted more in an older antagonism. There were people who didn’t even think I should be on the stage speaking [because I’m a man] . . . but in defense of the movement, because the feminist anti-pornography movement is part of a broader left feminist movement and the goal isn’t just to critique pornography, it’s to undermine patriarchy, white supremacy, and corporate capitalism in the imperial culture—slightly more ambitious goals than just getting people to stop using porn. So, not surprisingly, if you’re rooted in that kind of political analysis, the mainstream culture ain’t much interested in talking to you! . . . But I think your point is well taken about how you formulate a rhetoric to men that is—at least—not alienating. Whether it’s easy to create this sort of ‘here’s a land of milk and honey’ or ‘walk over here and it’s a land of endless orgasms’ is another question [audience laughs].<sup>7</sup>

Jensen’s clever comment offers three important insights that preview the main sections of this chapter. First, antiporn feminism often conjures the kind of identity politics that makes it difficult for men to speak out openly and honestly about their often contradictory experiences with pornography. Second, in trying to keep other axes of oppression on the agenda along with collectivist society-level reforms, the feminist antiporn movement may have a structural disadvantage compared with government and religious antiporn Internet filtering efforts that locate choice at the level of what Margaret Thatcher called “individuals and their families.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, antiporn feminists need to develop a way to offer porn-using men a value-added proposition for

changing their behavior; even religious reformers realize that shame is not enough. In what follows I begin with a recent trajectory of how the antiporn feminist movement, as led by Gail Dines and SPC, has generally failed to open up more space for men or offer them a less alienating framework. What the movement has achieved is an influential position in the public debate over regulating pornography, aided by religious and political organizations that do not share what Jensen described as their “slightly more ambitious goals” of undermining “patriarchy, white supremacy and corporate capitalism in the imperial culture.”<sup>9</sup>

### ANTIPORN FEMINISM: A RESURGENCE

Much has changed for SPC since 2007. For one thing, their critique has gone mainstream. As Clarissa Smith and Feona Atwood noted in 2013, “the last five years have seen a flood of news reports, observations, policy documents, and calls for increased legislation against the ‘pernicious tide’ of sexually explicit representations in music, film and new communication technologies.”<sup>10</sup> In 2010, Beacon Press published Gail Dines’s *Pornland*,<sup>11</sup> which summarizes the radical feminist account of how pornography has evolved from skin magazines into a vast and diversified commercial space expanding into ever more niche and brutal porn subgenres that degrade and debase women. Arguing that this “industrialization of sex” provides inexhaustible supply chains for Web site proprietors while, at the same time, profiting the bankers, hotels, and home cable operators that fund and distribute adult media content, Dines then turns from porn’s political economy to the effects of its content, asserting—largely on the basis of anecdotal evidence—that sexualized violence or “torture porn” can turn boys into aggressive and selfish brutes, both in and out of bed. Notably, Dines neglects to define exactly what she thinks proper sexual decorum and decency might look like, but laments that porn—once shamed to the periphery and difficult to access—is now so widely available and accepted that explicit sex, kink, fetish, and other alleged perversions of what sex ought to be have now achieved a degree of legitimacy in popular culture. Moreover, Dines’s call for collective action in response to porn as a public health problem indulges in the public’s common sense around the vulnerability of others—especially children.

Later in 2010, Routledge published Karen Boyle’s edited volume *Everyday Pornography*.<sup>12</sup> And while the contributions address a variety of topics and critical perspectives ranging from methods for analyzing content and interpreting meanings to porn’s impacts on men, women, and youth, the first chapter, entitled “Arresting Images: Anti-pornography Slideshows, Activism and the Academy,” pays particular attention to the revival of antipornography

feminism and features a roundtable interview with Gail Dines and Rebecca Whisnant, two of the principal organizers of the Wheelock Conference. In addition to rehearsing their now-familiar critique of pornography as a sexist industrial product that exploits and objectifies female bodies, Dines and Whisnant argue that academics need to get beyond textual analysis and start interrogating pornography as a particular kind of industrial practice. Textual analysis is not enough, they argue; scholars must also work to translate their work beyond the academy in order to promote activist attempts to regulate or outlaw the porn industry. When Boyle poses a question about how this translation has led to a conservative co-optation of feminist antiporn discourse, Dines offers this response:

We've had very little contact with the Christian right. They stay away from us . . . what they have done, though, is adopt some of our language, and that's not a terrible thing, because we got them thinking about harm to women . . . The main [religious] focus at the moment seems to be pornographic addiction, and one of the reasons is that there are so many religious men who are addicted. I was speaking to someone whose husband runs an addiction group for Mormons—for addictions to any substance or behavior—and yet the room is full of men wanting to talk about their addictions to pornography.<sup>13</sup>

If the Christian right, does, in fact, “stay away” from Dines, she doesn't stay away from them. Just a few months before the publication of *Everyday Pornography*, Dines accepted an invitation to appear at a briefing alongside conservative political action committees, interfaith coalitions, and faith-based charities at the U.S. Capitol sponsored by *PornHarms.com*.<sup>14</sup> PornHarms is an initiative of Morality in the Media, a group launched in 1962 by a group of clergy who worked with both the Nixon and Reagan administrations “to curb traffic in obscenity and uphold standards of decency in the media [using] common sense, anecdotal evidence and social science research.”<sup>15</sup> The founder and president of PornHarms, former Department of Justice official Patrick Trueman, personally lobbied Republican Presidential Nominee Mitt Romney<sup>16</sup> and has declared that “all the efforts of Morality in Media, and groups, churches and individuals will come to naught unless our Lord is directing them [toward] a great awakening to the harms, spiritual and physical, of pornography.”<sup>17</sup> Trueman opened the briefing by insisting that hardcore pornography was obscene and therefore should be prosecuted as illegal under existing law, whether distributed through the Internet, television, hotels, or retail stores.<sup>18</sup> In her presentation, Dines followed suit, listing a series of hardcore pornography Web site titles as self-evident proof of sexual

assault and thereby translating the feminist analysis of pornography into a format designed to shock and mobilize an audience of conservative—and largely Christian—legislative activists.<sup>19</sup>

More books by antipornography scholar-activists were to follow. In 2012, Zed Books published Julia Long's account of the history and newfound energy of public protest against pornography based largely on Long's participatory observation within the UK antiporn feminist groups OBJECT and Anti-Porn London.<sup>20</sup> Long chronicles radical feminist responses to pornography—from the genesis of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s through a new generation objecting to lad magazines on sale in Tesco supermarkets. For Long, pornography is not just a highly lucrative and prolific industry; it has led to the normalization of erotic venues (strip clubs and *Playboy* brand stores), risqué media (music videos that objectify women and Page 3 topless photos in British tabloids), and even sexual self-improvement (labiaplasties, breast enlargements, and pole-dancing exercise classes). Long contends that these trends have sparked a resurgence of the antiporn agenda and the infectious *jouissance* of feminist activists participating in a range of antiporn tactical repertoires.

In that spirit, Long calls for increased international networking among groups such as Norway's Otter, Australia's Collective Shout, and SPC in the United States.<sup>21</sup> In addition to rave reviews from Dines and Whisnant championing her book as a rejoinder to the academy's general acceptance of pornography and a welcome revisionist history of the antiporn movement, Long boasts a strong endorsement by Clare Short, a former member of the British Parliament,<sup>22</sup> which is important because it foreshadows SPC's legislative agenda—one that, as we shall see, would soon bear fruit.

In the summer of 2012, SPC hosted Long, among others, during a four-day event at the University of San Diego.<sup>23</sup> The first half, described as "Anti-Porn Activist Training," included an antiporn slide show presentation along with practice Q&A sessions to help participants "speak publicly against pornography in your community." As others have argued, this slide-show-as-consciousness-raising strategy addresses audiences as good and upstanding citizens naïve to what's "out there" and therefore in need of exposure to a "thrilling" truth that will radicalize and rally them to rise up and oppose porn in all its forms.<sup>24</sup> The second half, "Contemporary Radical Feminism in the Age of Porn," featured scholars from the United States, Australia, Norway, and the UK presenting scholarship and discussing past successes and future tactics for legal recourse and public policy gains.<sup>25</sup> For instance, after presenting an update on SPC, Dines proposed taking legal action against the industry—not the enforcement of obscenity laws, as proposed by Patrick Trueman at the U.S. Capitol briefing back in 2010, but rather class action

lawsuits seeking compensation for bodily damage to porn workers. She also emphasized the importance of global alliances, noting that the “Who wants to be a porn star?” slide show and accompanying script first introduced at Wheelock in 2007 remains “the absolute central piece of our activism and education.” This slide show is now used and adapted by colleges, social service agencies, and churches throughout the UK, Canada, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, and other countries.<sup>26</sup>

The following year would bring more international alliances for SPC, along with a shift in focus from lawsuits to legislation. In March 2013, Dines posted a petition on the organization’s Web site in support of Iceland’s efforts to enact legislative limits on violent Internet pornography.<sup>27</sup> Several months later, in June, MP Claire Perry invited Dines to present to members of the British House of Commons as part of a forum titled Generation XXX: *Sunday Times* Symposium on How to Save Our Children From the Dangers of Online Porn.<sup>28</sup> Just days after her presentation, Dines would be quoted in the *Guardian* regarding another petition,<sup>29</sup> this one calling on Routledge Press to diversify what the petition’s organizers called a “uniformly pro-porn” editorial board of its recently announced *Porn Studies* academic journal. The petition recalls similar tactics used by Women Against Pornography to try to prevent the convening of the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality through phone calls, letter writing, and eventually picketing the venue.<sup>30</sup> And while SPC’s petition against *Porn Studies* did not get much traction at the publishing house,<sup>31</sup> the group’s efforts to build international alliances in the UK were about to gain a powerful ally at 10 Downing Street.

## INTERNET FILTERING: GOVERNMENT RESPONDS

On July 22, 2013, British Prime Minister David Cameron called a press conference: “I’m not making this speech because I want to moralise or scare-monger, but because I feel profoundly as a politician, and as a father, that the time for action has come.”<sup>32</sup> Concerned with how online pornography was “corroding childhood,” he had worked out a deal with Internet service providers (ISPs) to place automatic, family-friendly, network-level filters on domestic Internet connections by default, thus affecting all devices in the home and meaning that customers would have to actively opt-out of the protection in order to access legal porn and other adult material online.<sup>33</sup> Cameron’s announcement made waves overseas. A few months later, in November 2013, Canadian MP Joy Smith invited Dines (and Julia Beazley of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada) to Ottawa to present to parliamentarians on

the necessity of the government's building a "pornwall" to protect children.<sup>34</sup> Later that month, *PornHarms.org*, which had sponsored the Capitol Hill briefing where Dines appeared back in 2010, launched a petition to bring Britain's opt-out model to the United States.<sup>35</sup> In March 2014, SPC launched the group's first European chapter (Stop Porn International UK) at an antipornography conference bringing together feminists from five nations (including Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Austria) in London, just a five-minute drive from Mr. Cameron's residence.<sup>36</sup>

This confluence of proposed legislation and activist activity placed Britain at the forefront of government responses to Internet pornography; however, many doubts remain as to how such an opt-out filtering program would actually work. For instance, what, exactly, would be blocked? The BBC reported that the very same family filters already in place on public Wi-Fi spots in the UK stopped users from accessing news articles about Cameron's plan—presumably due to the articles' inclusion of the term "pornography."<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, studies of filters currently in use by some UK ISPs found that well-known porn sites came through just fine while educational sites about reproduction or sexual health sites are rendered invisible.<sup>38</sup> And while boasting that he had closed a loophole to make it "a criminal offense to possess Internet pornography that depicts rape," Cameron did not explain the criteria for what constitutes "rape porn."<sup>39</sup> When pressed, he admitted that there could be "problems down the line," adding that he didn't believe that the *The Sun's* Page 3 topless pictures or written erotica would be blocked, but this would ultimately depend on decisions made by third-party vendors:

The companies themselves are going to design what is automatically blocked, but the assumption is they will start with blocking pornographic sites and also perhaps self-harming sites . . . It will depend on how the companies choose how to do it. It doesn't mean, for instance, it will block access to a newspaper like *The Sun*, it wouldn't block that—but it would block pornography.<sup>40</sup>

Britain's largest Internet provider, BT, complied with Cameron's request by offering their 6.8 million broadband customers a filter designed to control all Internet-enabled devices using the same home network. The filter comes with three predefined settings (strict, moderate, and light) covering seventeen categories. And while all three of these settings restrict pornography, they can also exclude sites promoting drugs, alcohol, tobacco, hate, and self-harm. For instance, the moderate setting excludes "sites featuring nudity, weapons and violence, gambling and social networking" and the strict setting even blocks "fashion and beauty sites, file-sharing, games and media

streaming.”<sup>41</sup> As the *Guardian* observed, other potential blocks range from “anorexia and eating disorder websites” to “suicide related websites” and even include such vague categories as “extremist related content,” “web forums,” and so-called “esoteric material.”<sup>42</sup> Adding to the confusion, the lowest setting of BT’s opt-in filtering system blocks “obscene content,” which, oddly enough, also covers file-sharing sites commonly used for downloading music and software.<sup>43</sup> And while BT retracted a controversial category that initially blocked sites featuring a “gay and lesbian lifestyle,”<sup>44</sup> the filtering is run by a private third-party supplier and so its criteria, as well as coding, key terms, and other algorithmic formulas, are not necessarily subject to either government or public oversight.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to vague filtering categories and criteria, there are also troubling privacy issues. For starters, the UK model requires that each family subscribing to an ISP home network connection would have to make one decision about whether they want access to “obscene material.” This decision would then affect everyone trying to access the Internet through this home network. When asked whether this decision could force some awkward conversations among spouses, such as a husband having to “fess up” to his wife if he wanted to opt-out of the filters to look at porn, Cameron responded flatly, “Yes, it does.”<sup>46</sup> It is also unclear just how much of British citizens’ surfing, or even that singular act of opting-out, would be reported to the government or perhaps stored and thus made vulnerable to future surveillance. Recent events should give us all good reason for caution in this regard. NSA documents leaked by Edward Snowden in late 2013 describe how the agency tracked online porn viewing as a way to discredit six suspected Muslim “radicals” by exposing their hypocrisy and thereby undermining their influence through social media.<sup>47</sup> This tactic recalls the Hoover-era FBI surveillance of Martin Luther King’s alleged affairs and the subsequent attempt to use this information to blackmail him.<sup>48</sup> In sum, governments cataloging so-called obscene content and potentially tracking private Internet use could lead to all sorts of mischief.

And yet, despite the haunting specter of government abuse, Cameron’s attempt to regulate Internet pornography reveals less about state power than it does about the state’s ever-increasing dependence on the private sector to help mediate—and indeed arbitrate—the public’s access to online information, whether pornographic or otherwise. For instance, within the Tumblr Web site, bloggers can use tags to identify adult content and readers can set a “safe mode” search to limit their own access to that content; but the Tumblr mobile app automatically blocks porn-related search terms<sup>49</sup> for fear of violating the antiporn marketplace parameters imposed by the oligopoly of the Apple App Store and Google Play. As the two major players in

smartphone operating systems, Apple and Google police both the content and capability of their applications—prohibiting the apps in their stores from either containing or even searching for pornographic content. This is another, if perhaps unintended, effect of the push for Internet filtering as a means to protect and preserve “family friendly” spaces. It incentivizes social media platforms such as Tumblr to ban a wide variety of search terms—again determined by an unaccountable third party—and render their mobile apps porn-free.<sup>50</sup>

Internet filtering can be justified either by governments as a necessary measure to protect the innocence of children or by corporations as a technique for preventing unwanted exposure to what they categorize as offensive content. The prevailing assumption throughout is one of victimization through accidental incursion and ignores the intentional Web searches of healthy, curious children. The logic underpinning many Internet filtering initiatives is thus less about protection and more about control: Childhood interest in sex is deemed dangerous for fear that unfettered access to Internet pornography will allow kids to seek out images and ideas that may intrigue at first but may, over time, also damage them. The assumption here is that children have no impulse control. But what if the presumably more responsible and rational adult behaves in the same way?

## **RELIGIOUS STRATEGIES: ACCOUNTABILITY, CONFESSION, AND ADVICE**

As I mentioned in the introduction, the feminist antiporn agenda at the Wheelock Conference condemned my desire for pornography and expected me to control my impulses through sheer force of will, but the conservative Christians in the audience had a different strategy. While at Wheelock, I met members of XXXChurch, an upstart Christian antipornography organization that, in addition to holding “Porn and Pancakes” events at churches and distributing “Jesus Loves Porn Stars” bibles at sex-industry conventions, also developed X3Watch, a free accountability software program to help people practice a porn-free life. The program—which launches at start-up and appears ever-so-discreetly in your computer’s system preferences as a groovy purple “W” logo—tracks users’ Web activity and notifies your self-appointed “accountability champions” of any visits to “inappropriate sites” by e-mailing users a bimonthly report. If any porn sites pop up on the report, the understanding is that the champions will confront you. In addition—and this is key—the program is based on the assumption that you are an addict; your resolve will weaken and, if given the chance, you will succumb to temptation.

To prevent a “relapse,” X3Watch alerts all champions when you make any modifications such as deleting a champion or uninstalling the software; there is no privacy, and that is precisely the point.<sup>51</sup> Even if you activate Safari’s private browsing or Chrome “incognito” in order to turn off your browsing history and thus visit pornographic sites off the record, X3Watch keeps running in the background and records every page. As XXXChurch founder Craig Gross explained in 2013, the software now has over a million users and “the mere knowledge that someone else will be seeing where you go online—will be virtually looking over your shoulder as you browse the Internet—is a huge deterrent to leaping down the rabbit hole of porn. It just works.”<sup>52</sup>

Well, not exactly. Because Apple does not permit third-party applications to run in the background on iOS devices, XXXChurch had to create a new version of X3Watch for iPhones that, after disabling Safari, functions as an alternative, and vastly inferior, browser (e.g., slow performance, frequent crashes, no tabs, no bookmarks, and URLs from other applications must be copied and pasted). So, while the software is free, users pay a hefty price in terms of inconvenience. That being said, it was good enough for me.

Covenant Eyes is a similar accountability service named after the biblical verse, “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman.”<sup>53</sup> In 2013, the company grew by 18 percent to over 125,000 paid subscribers, with expectations that it will grow by another 30 percent in 2014.<sup>54</sup> The service uses an algorithm that sends spiders across the Web to analyze text, links, domain names, search terms, and even YouTube video titles in order to rate every page in real time according to categories drawn from video games and TV shows (E for everyone, T for Teen, M for Mature, etc.).<sup>55</sup> An in-house team can then further refine these ratings with user feedback about the algorithm’s accuracy. Like X3Watch, Covenant Eyes can filter content and/or send out synopsis reports of browser histories categorized by rating to accountability partners who often are parents or spouses.<sup>56</sup> According to Sam Black, an Internet Safety Consultant and a manager at Covenant Eyes, some technical loopholes remain: Social media sites’ log-ins can block tracking, and mobile apps with built-in browsers can allow users to work around both the filtering and accountability functions. Despite these limits to the software’s capability, Black insists that the principle of accountability is always more effective than filtering because it incorporates the Christian strategies of confession and rebuke: Subscribers must first admit their sins in order to secure an accountability partner and then be prepared for a rebuke if they sin again. But Christian software solutions are only one of the more recent religious antiporn strategies. For many Christian speakers, authors, and pastors, pornography is not just a problem, it’s a hook.

At the time of the Wheelock Conference in 2007, Michael Leahy, a born-again Christian and self-proclaimed “fully recovered pornography addict,” was wrapping up Porn Nation, an evangelical college tour of more than eighty campuses that, along the way, had collected porn-use surveys from over 24,000 college students and been featured on ABC’s *20/20* and *The View*.<sup>57</sup> Since then, other Christian leaders have followed Leahy’s lead, pulling porn out of the shadows and up into the pulpit. In 2007, Craig Groeschel, senior pastor at Life Church, one of the largest churches in America with a weekly attendance of 52,000 across 18 different campuses,<sup>58</sup> preached a sermon series entitled “My Secret,” which invited people to get their pornography addictions out in the open by making an anonymous confession. It was a successful formula for Groeschel, inspiring him to preach other series, such as Satan’s Sex Ed, and to host XXXChurch events like The Porn Event and National Porn Sunday.<sup>59</sup> Others, like Fred Stoeker, have co-written Christian antiporn self-help books such as *Every Man’s Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time*,<sup>60</sup> a title that has been translated into six languages and has sold nearly 900,000 copies worldwide.<sup>61</sup> Still others have tried to start a movement. In 2010, Jay Dennis, a megachurch pastor in Florida, asked a stadium-style church auditorium of Christian men to bow their heads, close their eyes, and stand if they were struggling with porn. After a brief pause, all you could hear was the sounds of seats flipping up as the men stood “and it was almost like the chains were falling off and there was a sense of revival.”<sup>62</sup> Three years later, Dennis took on what he called “the new Bubonic Plague” by writing *Our Hardcore Battle Plan: Joining in the War Against Pornography*.<sup>63</sup> Later that summer he launched Join One Million Men,<sup>64</sup> a national campaign urging men to make “a porn free commitment” by posting their names to an online Internet “wall.”<sup>65</sup> The Southern Baptist Convention,<sup>66</sup> an annual gathering that represents “forty-five thousand churches and church-type missions with nearly sixteen million members,”<sup>67</sup> endorsed and promoted Join One Million Men, calling it “a Godsend” because “the devil has figured out that the greatest weapon in his arsenal to destroy families and to destroy lives in 21st-century America is hardcore Internet pornography.”<sup>68</sup>

So what does all this saber rattling mean? In 2007, XXXChurch and Porn Nation were controversial in evangelical circles. Today, men talking about porn in public is a mainstream religious strategy for attracting younger members. Indeed, by 2012, the sheer volume of conservative Christian antiporn accountability software hacks, college tours, sermons, books, and online confessionals prompted the *Daily Beast* to observe that “straight talk about sex” could now be considered a new “feature of evangelical cool.”<sup>69</sup>

And there’s been yet another important shift in religious antiporn strategies. In “Porn and Me(n),” I critiqued XXXChurch and Porn Nation’s taboo

testimonials and titillating confessions as a kind of double bait-and-switch that, not unlike SPC's slide show, would lure prurient curiosities with the promise of "thrilling" discourses and imagery safely ensconced within the socially acceptable confines of critique, only to then shame any resulting arousal and, finally, offer conversion (whether political or spiritual) as the only way out.<sup>70</sup> But, just as with antiporn feminism, much has changed since 2007 and many conservative Christians now are pivoting from prohibition to instruction.

For instance, Groeschel preached "God Love Sex," a six-part sermon series that drew on both his own, personal experiences and one of the most poetic books of the Bible, the Song of Solomon.<sup>71</sup> Taunting prudes with a warning that some had deemed the biblical passages as "not suitable for reading in church," Groeschel just smiled and gave the following advice: (1) because the bible uses the metaphor of "fawns" for breasts, men should sneak up on them "gently" like a hunter would approach a deer; (2) if parents want thirty minutes of privacy for sex during the day, they should plop their kids in front of an episode of *Barney*; (3) if "ladies" want to initiate sex, they should drop their clothes when their husbands walk in the door and "watch him just worship right there!"<sup>72</sup> Mark Driscoll, the head pastor at Mars Hill Church,<sup>73</sup> wrote a blog with his wife entitled "Christian Sex: Frank Answers to Honest Questions" and rated MH-17 (Under 17 Requires Adult Permission),<sup>74</sup> with some of the entries referring readers to Covenant Spice (a Christian sex toy shop)<sup>75</sup> and Christian Nymphos (a blog with categories ranging from "position of the week" to "creative sexual techniques").<sup>76</sup> Driscoll then wrote *Porn Again Christian*,<sup>77</sup> a book that, while condemning masturbating to pornography, strongly endorses adventurous, albeit marital, sexual exploration.<sup>78</sup> In January of 2012, Driscoll and his wife published *Real Marriage: The Truth About Sex, Friendship, and Life Together*, a book that endorses role-playing, cybersex, and wives anally penetrating their husbands—all to keep marital sex vital and help couples avoid "The Porn Path."<sup>79</sup> That same month, Ed Young, another megachurch pastor who has preached against porn,<sup>80</sup> with a congregation spread over ten campuses in three states plus a satellite in London, also published a book with his wife called *Sexperiment: 7 Days to Lasting Intimacy with Your Spouse*.<sup>81</sup> Ahead of the book's release, Young and his wife staged a twenty-four-hour "bed-in," inspired by John Lennon and Yoko Ono,<sup>82</sup> on the roof of their Fellowship Church flagship building.<sup>83</sup> Propped up on pillows, tucked under the covers, and surrounded by lights, cameras, and crew, the couple entertained Skype calls from sympathetic church leaders and fielded questions from local and international media about how having sex for seven days in a row renews and restores Christian marriages because "God is pro-sex."<sup>84</sup>

Whether it's Groeschel's "God Love Sex," Driscoll's "Frank Answers," or Young's "Sexperiment," these three famous pastors of very large conservative congregations don't stop at accountability or confession when it comes to sexual sin; they go on to offer concrete advice to help the men in their flock redirect their desires away from pornography and back towards their wives. Sex, they promise, when confined within a Christian marriage, can be kinky and abundant. Whether this actually works or not is an open question, but this shift in religious strategy matters because it fills an important gap left by the radical feminist analysis of pornography—namely, sex education. While SPC has gained ground with powerful political allies in furthering their supply-side regulatory reform agenda against "bad sex," their silence on both defining "good sex" and teaching the public how to get it has allowed conservative Christians to claim it as their own. And despite SPC's tendency to describe porn use as an addiction, the organization does not include any accountability software (such as 3XWatch or Covenant Eyes) on its resource page nor has it publicly asked browsers to grant users the ability to maintain browsing history as an accountability device—indeed, given Apple and Google's prudish attitude towards apps in their own stores, it is surprising that, as of this writing, it is impossible to turn off the "incognito" or "private browsing" option on either Chrome or Safari.<sup>85</sup> The radical feminist analysis of pornography, in choosing a collective top-down strategy, has failed to provide either a concrete, appealing, and sex-positive vision of the porn-free life or any accountability tools for helping all those irresponsible and irrational individuals with no impulse control, such as myself, hoping to get to the promised land.

## CONCLUSION

The anti-porn agendas examined in this chapter are never just about sex. Some feminists, governments, and Christians use Internet pornography as a means to a much larger end, whether it be challenging the existing social order, consolidating political power, or spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this way, porn remains a powerful, and contested, signifier—loved by its fans, feared by its enemies. Thus, the current state of affairs is an ironic one. On one hand, sectors of the megachurch evangelical right are embracing a more sex-positive discourse as both a media-friendly tactic for selling books and a practical—and very popular—instruction manual for their congregations to find sexual agency within the structure of heterosexual marriage.<sup>86</sup> On the other hand, politicians in both the UK and Canada have repurposed one very limited aspect of feminism in order to pander to their constituents' panic around Internet pornography and children. Due to the technological

challenges in mapping and categorizing the Internet, the state's efforts to regulate adult content may ultimately fail, but Cameron's move has placed antiporn feminism at the center of the public policy sphere. Personally, I am sympathetic. As an X3Watch user, and someone who does not *want* to want to see porn, I welcome any ironclad mechanism whereby, in a moment of moral fortitude, I could scrub my Internet experiences clean and, despite myself, never go back. For me, porn is much more than simply a text;<sup>87</sup> it is an embodied practice that associates familiar scripts with physical pleasures again and again. It is precisely the reliability of porn's unique value proposition (e.g., instant access to images of women ready to do whatever it takes to help you attain orgasm) that makes it so attractive to men and so repulsive for those wary of how men might apply it to their personal and professional lives.

At the end of "Porn and Me(n)," I concluded that there is a problem among those feminists publicly condemning the representation of certain sexual practices as misogynist while refusing to offer constructive alternatives. In naming the bad, but refusing to define the good, it is no wonder that the radical feminist analysis of pornography at the Wheelock Conference had all the guilt and none of the pleasure. Such an approach suggests that the only kind of healthy sexual activity is exclusive, scarce, noncommercial, and invisible. It is an agenda that dovetails with that of moral conservatives. In response, I asked SPC to consider a critical men's porn conference that would focus more on explicit sex education—a safe place for men to share good techniques, consider the benefits of forgoing masturbation, and generally inspire each other to move from spectatorship towards embodiment.<sup>88</sup> SPC has gained influence in legislative circles, yet it has neglected to help men imagine a viable alternative, ceding even more valuable ground to conservative Christians like Groeschel, Driscoll, and Young who have been much quicker to adapt to the needs of ambivalent audiences. Indeed, while media fans and antifans may be familiar to cultural studies scholars who are interested in learning more about them, we are less familiar with reluctant fans who, like me, regret the ritual consumption of particular media genres and wish to interrupt the cycle. In short, porn can be a source of both momentary pleasure and enduring pain. Pastors get this, but many feminist antiporn academics don't.

## NOTES

1. Chris Boulton, "Porn and Me(n): Sexual Morality, Objectification, and Religion at the Wheelock Anti-Pornography Conference," *The Communication Review*, 11, no. 3 (2008): 247–73.

2. The men I spoke to at Wheelock told similar stories. Boulton, "Porn and Me(n)," 2008.

3. John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (New York: Penguin, 1990).
4. Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007).
5. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove et al. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 666.
6. I sent copies of my "Porn and Me(n)" article to both Gail Dines and Rebecca Whisnant, two of the principal organizers of the Wheelock Conference, hoping that my analysis would be welcomed as constructive criticism; I never heard back. The article did, however, generate great interest during my time on the academic job market. While I initially worried that such a taboo subject could jeopardize my career prospects, I encountered many search committees eager to bring a critical engagement with pornography to their campuses. Boulton, "Porn and Me(n)," 2008.
7. Robert Jensen, face-to-face communication, June 13, 2008.
8. Margaret Thatcher quoted in Stuart Hall, "And Not a Shot Fired," *Marxism Today*, December 10, 1991. [http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/91\\_12\\_10.pdf](http://www.amielandmelburn.org.uk/collections/mt/pdf/91_12_10.pdf).
9. Jensen, June 13, 2008.
10. Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, "Emotional Truths and Thrilling Slide-shows: The Resurgence of Anti-Porn Feminism," in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Tristan Taormino, et al. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 43.
11. Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).
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15. "About Morality in Media," <http://pornharms.com/history>.
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17. "National Day of Prayer," <http://pornharms.com/prayer>.
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19. According to at least one observer, Dines's tactic worked: "Several members of the audience were noticeably affected by the repulsive, violent, degrading acts [Dines] described to demonstrate that today's pornography is not traditional *Playboy*-style images." PornHarms, "Pornography Debases Men, Women & Culture. Dr. Gail Dines at PornHarms.com Briefing GailDines.com," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaA1Y-aypD0&feature>.
20. Julia Long, *Anti-Porn: The Resurgence of Anti-Pornography Feminism* (New York: Zed Books, 2012).

21. Ibid., 207.
22. Clare Short, quoted in Long, *Anti-Porn*, back cover.
23. A very similar event, entitled “Challenging Porn Culture,” took place in London the previous December. Feminist Brighton, “Report from the Challenging Porn Culture Conference 3rd December,” <http://feministbrighton.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/report-from-the-challenging-porn-culture-conference-3rd-december>.
24. Given the popularity of the genre, it is certainly possible that such “exposure” could backfire by arousing audience members—a finding I came across at Wheelock. Moreover, while the presenters did display sensitivity towards sexual assault victims, warning them that some of the slide show imagery could “trigger” past trauma, there seemed to be little thought of how images, so popular with men, might affect male audience members.
25. Feminist Philosophers, “Stop Porn Culture: Conference and Training,” <http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2012/03/16/stop-porn-culture-conference-and-training>.
26. stoppornculture, “6/19/12 Part 3,” [http://www.livestream.com/stoppornculture/video?clipId=pla\\_0831f323-8a0e-45d0-9d27-3b4f9b3ac385&utm\\_source=lslibrary&utm\\_medium=ui-thumb](http://www.livestream.com/stoppornculture/video?clipId=pla_0831f323-8a0e-45d0-9d27-3b4f9b3ac385&utm_source=lslibrary&utm_medium=ui-thumb).
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31. The careful reader will notice, however, that Routledge did publish *Everyday Pornography*, which features an interview with Dines and other anti-porn feminists in the first chapter.
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37. BBC News Technology, “Q&A: UK Filters on Legal Pornography,” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-23403068>.
38. Ibid.
39. Hawkins, “Online Pornography.”
40. Oliver Wright, “Family Filters Won’t Block ‘Soft’ Porn: David Cameron Retreats in War on Internet Porn, Admitting There Will Be ‘Problems Down the Line,’” <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/family-filters-wont->

block-soft-porn-david-cameron-retreats-in-war-on-internet-porn-admitting-there-will-be-problems-down-the-line-8726991.html.

41. Sophie Curtis, "BT Forces Porn Filter Choice," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet-security/10520537/BT-forces-porn-filter-choice.html>.

42. Martin Robbins, "Cameron's Internet Filter Goes Far Beyond Porn—and That Was Always the Plan," <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/12/camersons-internet-filter-goes-far-beyond-porn-and-was-always-plan>.

43. Laurie Penny, "David Cameron's Internet Porn Filter Is the Start of Censorship Creep," <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/03/david-cameron-internet-porn-filter-censorship-creep>.

44. Robbins, "Cameron's Internet Filter."

45. Such secrecy has led to fears that filters could have other unintended consequences such as the infringement of unpopular speech. Citing how MP Joy Smith's failed attempt to pass a Clean Internet Act in 2007 did not stop at porn but "would also have banned material deemed to advocate or incite racial hatred or violence against women (neither of them defined)" and how often "Canadian Christians have been hauled before Human Rights Commissions and judges for alleged extremism and hatred against homosexuals, abortion clinics, and Muslims," a contributor to *TheChristians.com* worried that letting government censors determine what constitutes extremist material could eventually lead to filtering prolife and profamily sites on the basis of speech deemed to be too radical. Byfield, "A Raft of Good Internet Intentions."

46. Wright, "Family Filters."

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70. Boulton, "Porn and Me(n)," 2008.
71. "God Love Sex," <http://open.lifechurch.tv/groups/1237-god-love-sex>.
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new places and new positions such as lovemaking outdoors during a warm spring day (Song 7:11–13). The bottom line is don't sin, but have fun." Pastor Mark Driscoll, "Chapter 5: Masturbation," [http://theresurgence.com/books/porn\\_again\\_christian/ch5](http://theresurgence.com/books/porn_again_christian/ch5).

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87. Indeed, as a commercial industry, porn's fantasies may be invented and its pleasures exaggerated, but the abode of porn's production—that is the assembly of its own manufacture—is an embodied activity that tends to be represented through a set of supposedly self-evident physical responses to sexual stimulation by sex workers aimed to facilitate an embodied reception (from arousal through masturbation to orgasm) by its vastly male audience.

88. Boulton, "Porn and Me(n)," 268.