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Pornified America—The Culture of Pornography

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Paul, a contributor to *TIME* magazine and other major journals, developed her interest in the cultural impact of pornography when she was asked to write about the subject for *TIME*. “Like many Americans, I believed pornography was no big deal,” she explains. Nevertheless, her experience writing about pornography for *TIME* changed everything. “My eyes were blown open,” Paul now remembers.

What Pamela Paul discovered was that pornography is not merely a major player in the economy. Now, it has become an engine for transforming the entire culture—and corrupting countless lives.

Pornified is really an extension of Pamela Paul’s investigative work for *TIME* magazine. The book is more a journalistic report than a sociological analysis. In one sense, that’s what makes this book all the more significant in terms of impact. Paul has filled her book with anecdotes drawn from her interviews with hundreds of porn users and analysis drawn from a massive study on pornography’s effects, done in partnership with Harris, Interactive.

Paul begins by recalling a conversation with a septuagenarian couple. Explaining that she was writing a book on pornography, the wife responded: “It’s ruining this country. Just terrible. Pornography everywhere. Not like it was when we were young.” Then she asked her husband, “Do you remember your uncle Joe?” Her husband was instantly reminded of his uncle’s collection of “wolf cards”—playing cards that featured explicit sexual images. At least, the images were considered sexually explicit for that day. “But it was so much tamer than what’s out there today,” the wife explained.

Paul quickly takes her reader into the real-life world of modern pornography. In “pornographed” America, millions of men are like the husband described by a 38-year-old woman from a Chicago suburb. “He would come home from work, slide food around his plate during dinner, play for maybe half an hour with the kids, and then go into his home office, shut the door, and surf Internet porn for hours. I knew—and he knew that I knew.”

Paul describes contemporary American culture as “pornographed” because porn is now literally everywhere. The users are no longer just fraternity boys and those written off as “dirty old men.” Now, the users of virtually unrestricted porn include children, teenagers, and adults of all ages. The victims include not only those whose lives, marriages, relationships, careers, and sexuality are corrupted, but also everyone involved in the vast pornography industry at every stage.

A sense of historical development adds credibility to Paul’s analysis. She recognizes that some forms of pornography have been a part of human culture since antiquity. A quick look at the various sculpture galleries in the British Museum

should be sufficient to prove that point. Nevertheless, she recognizes that today's pervasively pornified culture represents something new. Even in her own life span, Paul can note the development. "Men and women who came of age during the sixties, seventies, or eighties, or whose experience with pornography dates to those eras, think of pornography in terms of gauzy centerfolds, outre sexuality, women's liberation, and the Hugh Hefner lifestyle. Back then, the lines between softcore and hardcore pornography were clear and distinguishable."

We now face a very different reality. "Today, pornography is so seamlessly integrated into popular culture that embarrassment or surreptitiousness is no longer part of the equation." As she observes, millions of today's teenage boys would simply roll their eyes when confronted with what would have been considered explicitly pornographic just a few years ago.

Paul's analysis looks at the impact of pornography on both men and women. While increasing numbers of women are involved with pornography in various ways—as producers, users, distributors, and victims—the major users of sexual pornography are men, both young and old.

The statistics are truly frightening. According to industry studies, seventy percent of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old men visit pornographic sites in a typical month. These young men represent something like one-fourth of all visitors to pornography sites on the Internet. The next largest group of users are young men in their twenties and thirties, 66 percent of whom report being regular users of pornography.

The appeal of pornography to teenage boys and young men is clear. Highly interested in sex, young males find their way into patterns of sexual excitement and arousal by being introduced to what, for most boys, are soft-core pornographic images—at least at first. Before long, pornography becomes a sexual whirlpool, pulling users into deeper and deeper habits and into more and more extreme versions of pornography.

The pornography industry understands that pornographic images desensitize viewers over time. Therefore, regular users of pornography—especially on the Internet—fuel their patterns of arousal and sexual excitement by expanding their "menu" of pornographic subjects and images.

Today's average teenage boy is likely to have seen thousands of explicit sexual images, ranging across the spectrum of sexualities and perversions. Many of these boys and young men are driven by sexual fantasies that previous generations of young men would not even have known to imagine. In the language of contemporary academic jargon, the "transgressive" has become the normative.

The economic incentives are a big part of the pornography industry, Paul understands. According to the trade publication *Adult Video News*, one in every five videos were categorized as "adult" almost twenty years ago. Now, Americans rent more than 800 million pornographic videos and DVDs per year—about twenty percent of all rentals. At least 11,000 pornographic videos are produced annually, amounting to revenue for the adult film industry estimated at between five and ten billion dollars per year.

The pornography industry also includes cable and satellite television, where pay-for-view pornographic programming is big business.

Paul also documents the profit incentive that has attracted the hotel industry. "Television pornography also pays off big in the travel industry for chains such as Holiday Inn, Marriott, Hyatt, Hilton, and Sheraton," Paul reports. "Given that half of all hotel guests order pornographic pay-per-view movies, the industry is hot for porn. Such films on pay-per-view compromise 80 percent of in-room entertainment revenue and 70 percent of total in-room revenue."

The latest new "delivery system" for pornography is cell phones. The cell-phone pornography industry is expected to reach 1.5 billion dollars in Europe this year. "America is scrambling to catch up," Paul explains. "Now, with more cell phones featuring color display screens, digital cameras, and Web browsers, technology firms are offering more sophisticated ways to provide pornographic content."

Parents will be especially interested by Paul's finding that libraries, including both public libraries and school libraries, have become a major conduit for getting pornography to teenage boys. Stephen Jones, a 14-year-old boy from Washington State, complained to his hometown newspaper: "I love to read. I love the Internet service the library provides;

but we have a problem. Pornography is available through the library Internet. The library has filters, but as it stands now anyone over the age of twelve can have the filters taken off.”

We can be sure that many parents are unaware of these policies. David Burt, a public librarian concerned about the trend, cited a librarian in Washington who told him: “On Monday of last week a group of about eight to ten teenage boys came to the library and asked if they could get pornography on the Internet. I replied that they could . . . Later that afternoon one of the younger boys (elementary age) said that the big boys had shown some dirty pictures on the computer . . . When I applied to work at the library, running a porn shop was not in the job description . . . We are supplying pornography to minors without their parents’ permission or knowledge.”

Put simply, porn is now considered cool. As Paul argues, “Pornography is wildly popular with teenage boys in a way that makes yesteryear’s sneaked glimpses at *Penthouse* seem monastic. For teenagers, pornography is just another online activity; there is little barrier to entry and almost no sense of taboo. Instead pornography has become a natural rite and acceptable pastime.”

Paul goes on to report that if pornography is popular among high schoolers, when boys get to college, “Pornography is more than accepted—it’s exalted.” On some campuses, young men are known to leave notes on their doors that read: “Leave me alone, I’m watching porn.”

Pamela Paul functions as a reporter in this book, and her report should send a message of alarm throughout the culture. Regrettably, her book may find a chilly reception in a society increasingly given over to the titillation, perversion, and profits offered by pornography.

Christians cannot afford to be seduced by this complacency. God’s gift of sexuality is being trampled underfoot and grotesquely corrupted by the commercialized debasement of sexuality. The wreckage left in the wake of pornography reaches many Christian homes, schools, churches, and countless Christian lives. Some pastors report that pornography is now the leading cause of marital distress and breakup. This crisis calls not only for Christian concern, but for a bold Christian response.

