

How One Man Unleashed The Porn Plague

When Hugh Hefner founded Playboy 50 years ago, he spearheaded a sexual revolution that church leaders say is devastating society.

When Hugh Hefner published the first Playboy 50 years ago, he kept his name out of the magazine in case it didn't survive more than one issue and he needed to find another job.

Today he is saluted as a pioneer of sexual liberation, and fellow pornographers don't put their names just in their publications but on ballots as well—as did Hustler publisher Larry Flynt when entering the recent contest for governor of California as “a smut peddler who cares.”

The shift from low-profile to headlines mirrors the way pornography has gone from shameful to chic, from hard to find to almost difficult to avoid for anyone who uses e-mail and the Internet. What Hefner shocked society with in 1953 would today not raise an eyebrow, much less a temperature, when compared with some of the general-interest titles readily available on a typical store's magazine rack.

Just how much pornography has become accepted as an everyday part of life has been partly obscured by concerns over the extreme kind of obscene material to be found free of charge on the Internet. But decency campaigners view the wickedness of the Web as just the extreme symptom of a pervasive sickness that has seen the Playboy bunny logo and “Sexy Porn Star” T-shirt become popular fashion statements among teenage girls.

Sex Sells ... Better Than Ever

From the mall to the media, pornography has been mainstreamed. Skin, the fall's new Fox network drama described as "Romeo and Juliet set against the backdrop of the adult-entertainment industry," is just one of the latest examples of how porn has become accepted everyday fare.

Hollywood—which turned Flynt into a free-speech champion in 1996's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*—set its lenses on the seamy side again last year when Oscar-nominated Greg Kinnear (*As Good As It Gets*) starred in *Auto Focus*, a biopic about murdered TV star Bob Crane, a porn addict.

Another true-life drama due soon will feature Val Kilmer (*The Doors*) as John Holmes, the legendary porn actor who was acquitted of murder and died of AIDS, and there is talk of a film about Linda Lovelace, the abused star of the infamous 1970s porn movie *Deep Throat*.

Oscar nominee Liam Neeson (*Schindler's List*) has been linked to a movie about sex researcher Alfred Kinsey—a profound influence on Hefner and still highly regarded for his groundbreaking studies of sexuality, despite having been widely discredited as a pervert with an agenda to dismantle social taboos.

Back on the small screen, HBO describes its cable reality-TV series *Family Business*, which documents the porn moviemaking of Seymore Butts—real name Adam Glasser, who employs his mother as bookkeeper—as "an hilarious blend of real-life absurd situations and eccentric characters."

More recently Pony shoes Vice President Come Chantrel defended the company's use of adult-film stars in a series of advertisements by telling one interviewer that when he was growing up "models were the ultimate feminine ideal," adding: "For the 20-year-old kid, porn stars have kind of replaced what models used to represent."

Recognizing that pornography is not just significant culturally but also economically, some in the news media have established specific porn "beats" for journalists. Among them is The Los Angeles Times, whose turf includes the San Fernando Valley, capital of America's porn industry. The area has been dubbed "Silicone Valley" for the many "enhanced" female figures among the estimated 9,000 people working there in the business.

The community even boasts its own health-care clinic for porn workers. The Adult Industry Medical Health Care Foundation, founded by former adult-film actress Sharon Mitchell, carries out 600 AIDS and sexually transmitted disease tests a month. It also offers counseling and a scholarship fund for actors and actresses wanting to go back to school to learn a new trade.

In addition, the industry's trade journal, Adult Video News, hosts its own glitzy annual version of the Oscars, with trophies awarded for "best scene" performances in a wide variety of categories unprintable here. Pornographers are widely recognized to have played a major role in developing entertainment-media technology. They are credited with having seen first how 8 mm film, then video, the Internet and interactive DVDs could broaden their market.

As pornography has become more readily and widely available,

it has also become more extreme. Penthouse magazine, once considered to be pushing the envelope, filed for bankruptcy in August because its sales have dipped so badly in the face of increased competition.

Sales of Playboy have dropped too, with the company diversifying into cable TV and videos that go beyond what is found on the magazine's pages. Although the company has lost market share in recent years, Hefner's creation is still recognized as having paved the way for much of what has followed.

Christians in a Porn Culture

Don Paul, a prayer ministry leader based in Santa Monica, California, attended one of Hefner's famous New Year's Eve parties at the Playboy Mansion on what he called "an assignment from God ... He wanted to show me some things." He views the Playboy Corp. as "one of the largest religious organizations in the world" for the way it has shaped thinking about sexuality through its products and the liberal programs it supports through its charitable foundation.

For the TV documentary Inside the Playboy Mansion, Hefner spoke briefly about his "very repressive background" growing up in a "very puritan home." He looked back fondly on the time between the introduction of the contraceptive pill and the advent of AIDS as one of "innocence and adventure."

Playboy spokesman Bill Farley told Charisma his boss would not be interested in talking to this magazine "not [because] he has any disrespect for the beliefs or philosophies" that Charisma represents, but because Hefner had long ago decided

“there was no advantage to be gained in [discussing] whether Playboy was pornography.”

But as Playboy gears up to celebrate a half-century of hedonism, as well as Hefner's position as the elder statesman of erotica, Christian leaders have been weighing how far things have come since that first issue with a coyly naked Marilyn Monroe.

“It's hard to underestimate how much responsibility [Hefner] holds for the devolution of our culture,” says Jan LaRue, chief counsel at Concerned Women for America.

Gene McConnell, who tours college campuses with a hard-hitting visual presentation that shows just how tame the early Playboy images now seem in the sex-saturated 21st century, observes of today's fare: “It's far more graphic than what we called porn back in the 1950s.”

That's not just the assessment of conservative campaigners. Journalist Eric Schlosser, who investigated the porn world for his book *Reefer Madness: Sex, Drugs and Cheap Labor in the American Black Market*, observed: “American attitudes toward porn have changed more in the last 30 years than in the previous 200. People were sent to prison in the early 1960s for selling material much tamer than what HBO now shows on a typical night.”

The result of that shift, according to McConnell, is: “The culture is pornographic. Kids are growing up with an appetite for sexually charged images for entertainment. The generation we are looking at right now has never known a time of innocence.”

Such concerns prompted respected pastor, author and seminary leader Charles Swindoll recently to pen an open letter to American churches urging them to address their “number one secret problem”—pornography.

“It’s ruining marriages, destroying relationships, harming youth, and hurting the body of Christ,” he wrote. “You hardly need to be reminded that fallen pastors and priests did not ‘suddenly’ fall. More often than not, pornography played a role in their downward spiral.”

At Global Harvest Ministries, usually focused on prayer and spiritual warfare for world evangelization, Vice President Chuck Pierce echoes Swindoll’s alarm. “Perversion and sexual sin seem to be major ruling forces in the church today,” he says.

In July the ministry staged Hope for Tomorrow: Breaking Sexual Bondages—believed to have been the first national gathering of its kind to address the issue publicly.

“I don’t think that the typical church really realizes how bad the problems are,” comments Clay Jones, a former pastor.

After several years of helping to train anti-porn community activists, Jones founded 2nd Glance Ministries to equip Christians to battle porn because he “was tired of talking about the problem and wanted to provide a biblical solution.”

Although community groups have achieved success at limiting and controlling sexually oriented businesses at a local level—to the point of closing down stores—many anti-porn campaigners accept that the bigger fight over whether

pornography is acceptable in principle has been lost.

“It’s like King Canute trying to hold back the tide,” says Daniel Weiss, social research analyst for pornography and sexuality at Focus on the Family in Colorado. Though he hopes for a reversal one day, he laments that for now “we have lost the war, and all we can do at this point is pick up and care for the survivors.”

At the National Coalition for the Protection of Children and Families, Michael Craven, vice president of religious and cultural affairs, sees part of the problem as being that “for too long we have been fighting on the wrong level, the level of the symptoms, and not been challenging the presuppositions of the worldview upon which the behavior is based.”

“We have been throwing Scriptures at people without realizing all the while that religion has become increasingly irrelevant in Western culture in terms of shaping public policy and moral conscience,” Craven adds.

Though LaRue admits porn is “ubiquitous,” she doesn’t buy the premise that it is acceptable with most people. “Especially if you are talking about hard-core material,” she says. “The latest polls say that 81 percent strongly believe federal obscenity laws should be prosecuted.”

Addressing the Issue

America’s porn industry flourished under what some called “benevolent neglect” during obscenity’s prosecution-free years while President Clinton was in office. Anticipating a change with the Bush administration, some in the industry debated a

form of self-policing, even circulating a suggested list of forbidden action that, if adhered to, might help them fly under the obscenity radar. They hoped that by distancing themselves from some of the more extreme material, they might slip by unchallenged as the acceptable face of porn.

Though the current administration promised a crackdown on porn, the 9/11 attacks saw Justice Department attention diverted from pornographers to terrorists. Porn came back into prosecutorial focus in August when the owners of Extreme Associates of North Hollywood—producers of videos depicting rape and violence—were indicted on 10 counts of obscenity violations.

LaRue has tracked the involvement in porn of big-business figures such as AT&T and General Motors, both of which have had cable-programming links, in what she calls “the porn ring around corporate white collars.”

She observes: “Lots of mainstream businesses have gotten the impression, wrongly, that because it is available it must be legal so we might as well make money off it. Drug dealers know better than to assume such a foolish premise.”

She says it is important to dispel the idea of porn as a harmless pastime for consenting adults.

“This is not a victimless crime,” she says. “If you care about public health and safety, abortion, incest, education, marriage and family, the economy, then you have to care about pornography, and you have to understand how it influences you whether or not you look at it personally.”

Weiss and McConnell advocate challenging attitudes toward porn in such a way that people recognize for themselves it is wrong, rather than being told.

“We wanted to liberate sex, make it a god, but we have become in bondage to it,” says Weiss, who oversees the Focus Web site set up to help men or women snared by Internet porn. “If releasing ourselves from sexual inhibitions was going to make us happy, we should be the happiest nation on Earth, but we are exactly the opposite.”

Paul sees a spiritual root to the problem and isn't surprised that legal efforts have failed to stem the tide. “You cannot stop a ruling spirit with a man-made law,” he says.

McConnell agrees that legislation isn't the answer: “That's been the typical approach but it's a serious mistake, because I believe pornography exists because we have a need for it. The reason porn exists is that we live empty lives.

“The issue is intimacy, our greatest need. Take that as into-me-see—you see my life and see who I am, and you love me. That's the greatest need, male and female. But it's also the greatest fear—that if you know the real me, if you see my weaknesses, then you would abandon me.

“So you go to things you can control, where you can get the things you want without rejection. She will never walk off those pages. You can have the strongest orgasm, but it's an empty embrace, an illusion. It's really a clear picture of how desperate we are, for a human being to go to a piece of paper or a video clip for an embrace.”

Weiss sees signs of hope in the recent removal from some big stores of the new breed of raunchy “laddish” men’s magazines such as Maxim, and the covering-up of some women’s magazines with sex-focused cover copy.

“If we can start with this kind of seemingly innocuous message, you are stopping porn and addressing the issue before it gets to the point where it’s some kind of violent rape scene,” he says, “because the underlying philosophy is the same—treating people as commodities. It’s just a different point along that spectrum.”

How a Playboy Bunny Found Abundant Life

Former centerfold Daina House now ministers Christ to women who face issues similar to the ones that snared her.

Playboy may be classier than the raw pornography available on the Internet, but “it’s pretty much the same thing, just with a soft, fuzzy filter,” says Daina House, a former Playmate of the Month. “It degrades women.”

Now a ministry leader at the Church on the Way in Van Nuys, California, House speaks as an insider who worked for the Playboy empire for almost 20 years and knows the reality behind the sign of the bunny. She found herself caught in a cycle of men, drugs and alcohol she describes as “like the devil’s candy store.”

“They were rich, but they did the same things that the poor people did. They just did them in mansions,” she says.

One night the model, actor and singer who had achieved everything she wanted materially but still felt empty inside prayed that she might die. Then she had a dramatic encounter with God that set her free from her addictions.

“I had to find out who Daina was on the inside because I had only seen her from the outside,” House recalls. “She was pretty and had great eyes and a great rear end, but when I looked into her eyes [in the mirror] there was darkness. My soul was dead.”

After years of walking “with one foot in the world and one in the church” the one-time Most Beautiful Girl in California went through a season of being “purified and cleansed by His fire.” In 1993 she had a vision in which God told her: “I have brought you out of this. Now I am going to bring others out through you.”

Today she leads a single mothers group at The Church on the Way and also travels with a deliverance and prophetic ministry. “He started with me because I have seen so much deliverance,” she says, “... from lust, perversion and witchcraft, and so on.”

Because of her own experiences, House believes she is able to identify with and minister to women dealing with similar issues.

“If I was having a baby and had a woman telling me to push, it won’t hurt much longer, I wouldn’t listen to her if she hadn’t had any babies [of her own]. I would want to hear from a woman who has had nine and have her tell me they are all OK,” House says. “What God pulls you out of, sometimes He sends you right

back in that place when you are strong, to take the lantern into the darkness and bring the others out.”

House, who is a single mother and works as a financial assistant and business manager, looks back with a different perspective on the times her career did not go the way she had hoped.

“God had His hand on me all along the way,” she says. “You think of it as rejection, that someone up there doesn’t like you [when things don’t seem to work out], but on the contrary, there is someone up there who is protecting you.”

Though various Web sites ensure that she is unable to shake her 1976 centerfold history, House says she doesn’t regret anything she did because it all got her where she is today.

‘Jesus Loves Porn Stars’

Two young ministers believe it’s better to confront the sex industry with a handshake than a shaken fist.

Alarmed at the way pornography has invaded the church, Craig Gross and Mike Foster have decided it’s time to turn the tables.

The Southern California ministry pair’s appearances at two of the country’s biggest sex-industry trade shows—handing out postcards that declare “Jesus Loves Porn Stars”—are just one of the unconventional ways they have decided to go on the offensive against the offensive.

"We are just trying to get them to think," Gross explains. "We are not trying to shut down a multibillion-dollar industry. We just want to get the other side of the story out there ... people who have lost their homes, jobs, marriages because of porn."

The trade-show booth for their XXXChurch ministry—a Web site warning of the dangers of porn and offering support for guys trying to break its grip—nestles amid others selling the latest hard-core movies, where scantily clad and surgically enhanced models draw leering visitors.

"Some of these girls are beautiful, but you can't look at them," Gross says. "Mike wears glasses, so he takes them off."

The men's wives accompany them, sometimes dressing up in a goofy children's church costume as Rex the Rabbit. It attracts passersby who stop to talk. Gross and Foster have had to explain to them: "We can't have naked women at our booth because we are pastors, and that wouldn't really work."

Some of those people manning and visiting the other, wilder exhibits may think the guys' presence a little strange, but as Gross and Foster point out about the adult-entertainment business: "They are really the industry that is against censorship, so for them to say we shouldn't be there would be kind of bad for them."

At one recent show, the pair and their helpers gave away almost 1,000 free Bibles to people they got into conversations with. They believe their approach may bear more fruit than joining a picket line of angry protesters outside the event.

“They are only going to take us seriously if we get in there with them,” Gross says. “We don’t bash the people who are making this stuff. If you show people love and respect, you don’t have to water down your message.”

XXXChurch has even given special awards to a number of Internet porn sites. Those that agree to set the link directing under-18-year-olds away from their porn pages to XXXChurch’s instead are given a letter of commendation.

While their unorthodox approach has bemused some pornographers, it has angered some believers.

In XXXChurch’s home area, a group of Christians offended by Gross and Foster touting their Web outreach as “the number one Christian porn site” successfully lobbied to have a billboard advertising the ministry taken down—leaving others hawking strip clubs and escort services still standing. Others have sniffed at the “No Ho” modesty pledge young women believers are urged to make at the XXXChurch Web site.

Then there was the criticism of a TV ad featuring a midget. Gross and Foster paid for the 30-second spot about short Eddie’s frustration at finding so many things out of his reach—and the message that “Porn Stunts Your Growth”—to run on MTV and during The Howard Stern Show and The Man Show in their broadcast area.

Their edgy approach has won some admirers and imitators. And you can look for Gross and Foster in a theatrical movie next year. They were among the sex trade-show exhibitors asked to recreate part of the event for scenes in 20th Century Fox’s forthcoming *The Girl Next Door*, about a young man who falls in

love with a former porn star.

They see their involvement as just another way to question the almost blanket acceptance of pornography.

“Porn is totally mainstream, pushing the envelope more every year,” Gross says. “In years to come people are going to be just: ‘Man, how did you ever let this go? Why did we let this in?’”

Breaking the Grip of Porn

Because porn ruined his life, Gene McConnell works to keep others from falling victim to it.

Gene McConnell’s assessment of the damage pornography can inflict is not just academic, it’s highly personal. The campus speaker’s personal struggle sent him to jail and cost him his ministry and his marriage.

Raised in the church, he was first exposed to porn at the age of 12. “I was hooked,” he recalls. “It moved me like nothing else I had seen.” He tried to shake the addiction at Bible school and in marriage, but would fall back. “I used it like a drug, a mind-altering experience to overcome the pain of rejection.”

While serving in church ministry, he spiraled down into strip clubs and escort services. Then one night he followed a woman to her car, intending to act out a rape fantasy. He backed out when he came to his senses and realized how scared she was. He ended up behind bars.

That was more than 20 years ago, and though McConnell has since found freedom, his struggles led to the end of his marriage, and also affected his daughter. Now he shares his own journey through his Cincinnati-based Authentic Relationships International ministry.

He says the reason so many people continue to struggle is that “very few people are really in the light. So the enemy continues to work in their life because as long as we are in the shadows, he will do his work.”

Not everyone will sink as deeply as he did, he recognizes. “The biggest complaint I have about people who fight porn is that they make this big thing of, ‘You will become an addict or a rapist or a molester.’ Most people who consume porn will never become addicted. But they are affected at the attitude level.”

They embrace messages that say a woman’s value is based on her body, and that women are just for sexual pleasure. “Porn is hate speech,” he says.

Bible study and deliverance have their place in breaking porn’s grip, he says, but they are not enough on their own. “What it really takes is centered around authentic relationships—where I am able to find a place where I can be real about my stuff and get it on the table and sense God’s embrace and love, and also His correction.”

That came for him when, after being kicked out by his church after his arrest, he went to visit an old friend. McConnell spilled his guts, and the man didn’t reject him.

Instead he hugged him and expressed concern for all the pain McConnell had bottled up inside. "I had never experienced that before," McConnell says.

"So much of the church's effort regarding porn has been shame, which says you can't be real and be loved. ... Shame causes people to go into secrecy, into hiding, because they don't think they can be real and be loved."

Andy Butcher is senior writer and news director for Charisma and editor of Christian Retailing.