

TV REVIEW

'Frontline' exposes new princes of porn

► *Frontline: American Porn*, 10-11
tonight, WPBT-PBS 2.

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Pssst! Wanna buy some good porn? Well, don't waste your time with those grubby little peep shows out by the airport. To get the really good stuff, buy a copy of Fortune magazine and look in the index: AT&T, Marriott, Hilton, General Motors: Those are the princes of porn in the new digital age.

The most interesting disclosure in tonight's hard-eyed *Frontline* look at the pornography industry is that smut-peddlers have moved from back alleys to corporate boardrooms.

AT&T's take from the distribution of an explicit porn channel through its

cable TV operations could be hundreds of millions of dollars a year, according to one analyst. GM sells four million porn-pay-per-views a month through DirecTV, its satellite television business. And Hilton, Marriott and other upscale hotel chains make more money from selling in-room dirty movies than they do off their minibars.

As *American Porn* shows, pornography is booming as never before, the happy beneficiary of an odd confluence of events: the



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explosion of the unregulated Internet; the expansion of digital cable and satellite television operations with the capacity to devote whole channels to adult movies; and a decision by Janet Reno's Justice Department to shut down federal obscenity prosecutions.

"When [the Bill Clinton administration] comes in, it's definitely blue skies and green lights and fat bank accounts," boasts Mark Cromer, who produces the bizarre *Jail Babes* video series, in which female ex-cons talk about the crimes they committed and then have sex with one another.

Cromer is one of several smut producers to talk to *American Porn*. Feminists who argue that pornography is a systematic exploitation of women by men may need to do some rethinking: Many of the

exploiters turn out to be of the female persuasion.

They range from the whimsical Danni Ashe, a self-described "geek with big breasts" who is not only the CEO of one of the hottest porn websites but also its major star, to a faintly scary director calling herself Lizzie Borden who includes real beatings in her videos. ("Sometimes it makes you more horny when you're getting hit," she explains.)

American Porn reports that the good times may be about to end: The Bush administration is preparing a new wave of obscenity prosecutions. If there's a weakness in this program, it's in the failure to explore whether chasing pornographers is wise or even practical these days.

It seems to me that even if federal prosecutors can navigate the many legal difficulties in attacking porn in the digital age (how do you figure out "community standards" on an Internet that serves both South Beach and Bucyrus, Ohio?), all they'll do is drive the industry offshore. Will American morality be significantly uplifted if dirty movies have to be downloaded from Hong Kong instead of purchased from The Hot Network? And what would you rather the FBI was doing, tracking al Qaeda terrorists or trying to make clandestine buys of *Debbie Does Dallas*?

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In any event, *American Porn* is worth a look — though not for the easily offended. It includes rougher language, and lots more skin, than you're accustomed to seeing on broadcast television, *Playmate Fear Factor* notwithstanding.

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