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Pornography: the naked truth

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By Joe Williams

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Here's a quiz question. Which of these American pastimes generated the most revenue in 1996?

- A. Hollywood movies
- B. Broadway theater
- C. Rock music
- D. Pornography

The answer is D. According to a cover story in the Feb. 10 issue of U.S. News & World Report, Americans spent about \$8 billion on pornographic videos, explicit magazines, online sex services and adult novelties in 1996.

Yet rarely will you find a law-abiding citizen who is willing to admit that he or she has ever dropped a token into this sprawling apparatus. Thus, it can be surmised either that A.) pornography appeals to a small handful of deep-pocketed misfits, or B.) the real audience for adult entertainment is far larger than generally acknowledged.

For both the audience and the manufacturers of adult-themed entertainment, the pressure to go public may be reaching critical mass. As a growing female constituency contributes ideas and revenues to the stream and as the industry itself imposes standards against underage performers and violent imagery,

adult entertainment is stepping from the closet and presenting a new face to the outside world.

Today, respectable hotel chains earn millions from in-house X-rated movies, local porn-video stores advertise on late-night TV, and characters such as Larry Flynt are honored as heroes of the First Amendment.

Is it only a matter of time before the pneumatic luminaries of the adult film industry share the stage with Dick Clark at the People's Choice Awards?

In the St. Louis area, Valentine's Day is one of the busiest times of the year at such adult novelty and video stores as Dr. John's in Bridgeton. Among the holiday offerings that were mentioned in its radio ads were fresh bouquets of flowers.

At nearby V.I.P. (Very Intimate Playthings), the storefront windows were festooned with paper hearts, red balloons and scarlet garters. A clerk at V.I.P. estimated that, year-round, 40 percent of the store's clientele is female.

About half the retail floor space at V.I.P. is devoted to lingerie, scented oils and what used to be called "marital aids"; the other half comprises explicit magazines and videos. Newcomers might be surprised to learn that among the wares, it is virtually impossible to find the kinds of violent or fetishist images

that have long been the focus of anti-porn crusaders.

The mellowing of the subject matter since the peep show days of the 1970s is no accident. While videotape technology has made feature-film production more cost-effective (which has led to longer, more plot-oriented films that can be viewed in the privacy of the home instead of in theaters or arcades), the industry has embraced a set of voluntary standards that are designed to skirt obscenity laws and further its mainstream acceptance.

The Free Speech Coalition, a California-based consortium of the largest adult video producers, advocates such measures as a total ban on violent content, union-approved workplace conditions and strict age verification and AIDS testing for adult video performers.

Another big influence on the industry has been the growing number of female consumers and producers. Many adult-film actresses have made the transition to script writing and production, and there is a thriving market for female erotica, both literary and visual, that focuses as much on relationships as on sexual gymnastics.

In the late '80s, a survey of Redbook's female readership found that almost half had watched pornographic videos in their homes. Post-feminists such as Camille Paglia have further muddled the traditional

boundaries.

Speaking before the Meese Commission that was convened in 1986 to study the effects of pornography, Andrea Dworkin, an ardent foe of obscenity, conceded that federal sanctions were unnecessary against what Gloria Steinem calls "sexually explicit material that shows mutuality and reciprocity and equality."

Judging by the new online-content restrictions in the Communications Decency Act and by the recent prosecution of an adult bookstore owner in Edwardsville, the definition and regulation of pornography is an ongoing process.

Governments will continue to tinker with zoning ordinances and broadcast regulations that are meant to keep explicit materials away from the hands (and eyes) of children. But it seems that, overall, taxable pornography is here to stay, and the incursion of erotic images into such pop culture bastions as MTV and blue jean advertising renders the momentum nearly unstoppable.

Says Flynt, "We pay a price to live in a free society, and that price is tolerance. We have to tolerate things we don't necessarily like." Especially when it generates so much cash.

Williams writes for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. (Scripps Howard)

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