

Psychologists and the Government Consultation on
“Extreme Pornographic Material”

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The following document is publicly available at:

<http://www.bps.org.uk/index.cfm?F3240258-306E-1C7F-B6EB-46934E6062D0&ForumID=1&fuseAction=displayMessage&messageID=437>

If that doesn't work go to www.thepsychologist.org.uk and then “forum” and then “Extreme Pornography consultation”.

I am grateful to Burr and her colleagues (May *Psychologist*) for drawing attention to the Government Consultation paper on possession of extreme pornographic material and the BPS's response. These are of the greatest concern at many levels, only a few of which can be addressed here.

Personally, I find the Government document shocking.

First, there is the unexamined use of the word “pornographic” and its restriction mainly to sexual acts involving violence. Yet we are continuously bombarded with what is, in reality, pornographic material of the most outlandish kind portraying, legitimising, and normalising brutality on an massive scale (among other things by military and police forces) and deploying sexual imagery to induce us to commit acts which contribute to crimes of violence of enormous proportions ... eg by wearing clothes produced by corralled slave labour, buying cars the commodities for the manufacture of which (and the petrol for propelling which) depends on brutal appropriation, and eating foods whose production is driving our species (and the planet as we know it) toward extinction.

But then, even if we accept this use of words (and it is but one example of the widespread Orwellian deployment of words to mean their opposites ... to which we, as psychologists, should be drawing attention), one is confronted by the following incredibly illogical argument: A small proportion of the few children who accidentally come across a video of adults engaging in certain behaviour while surfing the net may be damaged by so doing. These pictures, produced abroad, are abhorrent to most people (although they are obviously attractive to some). Besides, some of them portray acts that are illegal in this

country. So, to deter their production (and thus protect our children), we will imprison anyone guilty of watching them for 3 years.

WOW!

Now then. What proportion of whose children accidentally come across such material? What proportion of them are damaged by so doing? How does this compare with the (huge) number damaged by schools, motor vehicles, atmospheric pollution, AIDs, and industrialised food production? Are we going to imprison everyone involved in perpetuating these major crimes against humanity and gaia?

In any case, should we really imprison everyone who does things abhorrent to the majority? At one time or another this would have included protestants, catholics, atheists, homosexuals, indeed everyone who engaged in anything other than coital sex.

True. Some of these things may be illegal. But so what? The statute book is cull of crazy laws. We are assured that ID cards will be no threat to “law abiding citizens”. But, given the state of law, no one of high integrity should aim to be “law abiding”. Many of these laws result from the codification of public prejudice whipped up by small numbers of people via the media (often with some ulterior, often diversionary, motive).

And can one seriously believe that imprisoning a few of the adults who enjoy this material will deter producers? Does the imprisonment of thousands of cannabis smokers deter its producers? (Incidentally, cannabis smoking only became “abhorrent to most people” and criminalised as a result of a campaign organised by the manufacturers of synthetic fibres in order to remove hemp from the market).

Presumably to recruit more emotive support for its cause, the Consultation document trails out the argument that “pornography” should to be banned because it can lead to the exploitation of “prostitutes” (assumed to be female) ... as if most of us are not exploited as we market our best talents and as if many sex workers do not gain as many ancillary satisfactions from their work as the rest of us gain from ours.

Just what does the BPS think it is doing supporting, such illogical, emotive, advocacy?

More seriously, what are we doing to promote the work we should be doing?

This involves:

1. Collecting *evidence* and feeding it into *public* debate ... not just to government committees made up of people who promote themselves as guardians of the public interest ... so that people can make informed choices. Actually, this is rather problematic because, unless there is a diversity of provision suited to people with different priorities, it is not possible to mount comprehensive assessments of the differential consequences of alternatives. (Note that comprehensive evaluation implies the collection of evidence on *all* the short and long term, personal and social, consequences of alternatives and that, if

we are to mount evaluations this sort, most of us will have to change our image of “science”.)

2. Contributing to the development of the organisational arrangements - the societal management systems - which will facilitate widespread societal experimentation (often with options that are “abhorrent to most people”), learning from the effects of those experiments (especially about the hidden social forces which control human behaviour), and the evolution of a new, radically different, but sustainable, form of human society.