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## **Life before Internet porn: the golden years?**

**Alan McKee**

I've noticed a strange tendency in recent discussions about pornography and its influence on young people – an increasing romanticisation of the world before the Internet, and of relationships between the sexes in those innocent days.

Take the 'Reality and risk' project (<http://www.dvrcv.org.au/eroticising-inequality/>) for example, which aims to 'promote critical thinking among young people about pornography and the messages it conveys about women, men and sex'. Their report states:

Young people are exposed to porn at unprecedented rates. ... They are seeing it more frequently, through more media, and what they are seeing is harder and more aggressive. Young people are living in an era of new sexual expectations, acceptance and practices. And, significantly, porn is normalising sex acts that most women in the real world don't enjoy, and may find degrading, painful or violating. There is evidence that many young people are enacting porn scripts ... The young women we interviewed talked about young men trying things they'd seen in porn, sometimes without even asking.

The language throughout this piece is of change. Young people are seeing porn at 'unprecedented' rates, 'more frequently', through 'more media'. It's 'normalising' sex acts - which clearly were not 'normalised' before. The effect of this change is that men are 'trying things' that women 'may find degrading, painful or violating', 'sometimes without even asking'. The implication is clear – before Internet porn, men did not try to impose their sexual desires on women. If we could get rid of it then there would be no problems with consent or negotiation. There would be no issues with different sexual interests in couples. In the good old days before Internet porn, the argument runs, men treated women better. They took more interest in their sexual needs. They were more thoughtful, respectful lovers.

This worries me. Let me state this very simply: relationships between men and women have improved markedly since the 1970s. Young men these days have

attitudes towards women that are better than their fathers had – and light years ahead of their grandfathers. We know this through empirical research – our survey for the book *The Porn Report* showed that young men had the best attitudes towards women of all the age groups. And if you doubt that it's true, have a look at the writings of feminists before the advent of Internet pornography. Reviewing the 1970s, Gloria Steinem wrote at the end of the decade that:

Masculine dominance and female submission were still defined as “natural”; so much so that even violence towards women was accepted as a normal part of sexual life, Saturday night beatings and the idea that women “wanted” to be forced were all accepted to some degree ... rape was finally redefined in the 1970s and understood as an act of violence ... not a “natural” sexual need ... [and] “battered women” was a phrase that uncovered a major kind of violence that had long been hidden. It helped us to reveal the fact that most violence in American takes place in our homes, not on the streets (Steinham, 1980: 23)

It's true that things these days are far from perfect. Young women are still not encouraged to grasp sexual agency for themselves, whether they choose to use that agency to remain celibate, to have rampant sex with many people, or anything in between. And young men are still not encouraged to be reflective about what they want sexually and why. We still need, as Moira Carmody has argued (<http://www.sexualethics.org.au/>), more extensive and systematic education in sexual ethics and consent for all young people. What we don't need is to stick our heads in the sand and pretend that things were better in the good old days before Internet porn. Things weren't better. Those weren't the good old days. They were the bad old days, and relationships between young men and young women have improved immeasurably since then.

## Reference

Steinem, Gloria (1980) 'Introduction' in Suzanne Levine, Harriet Lyons, Ellen Sweet and Mary Thom (eds) *The Decade of Women: a Ms history of the 70s in words and pictures*, New York: Paragon Books, pp 6-25.