

# HOW BRITISH BROADCASTERS ARE PROMOTING THE UNJUSTIFIED CENSORSHIP OF PORNOGRAPHY: AN OPEN LETTER AVEDON CAROL

Feminists Against Censorship  
BM Box 207, London WC1N 3XX

28 July 1993

To: The Independent Television Commission,  
The Broadcasting Standards Council,  
The Broadcasting Complaints Commission, and others

Dear Madam/Sir,

Re: Consistent Promotion of Censorship on Television:  
Unsubstantiated Statements, Lies, Bigotry and  
Invasions of Privacy

Pursuant to the broadcast of the *Cook Report* last night and the many calls we've already received subsequent to its showing, we feel it has become manifestly obvious that broadcasters in this country are prepared to use the most specious arguments, misrepresentations of research, unsubstantiated rumour, outright lies, and even dishonourable practices which do immediate harm to their victims, all in order to promote a social panic against "the pornography industry" that would result in greater censorship and fascistic methods for enforcement.

And all with virtually no balance in the form of a reasoned opposing voice.

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Avedon Carol is a member of Feminists Against Censorship, and is not a free market capitalist. She is co-editor, with Alison Assiter, of *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism*, Pluto Press, London, 1993. This pamphlet is the text of an open letter sent out to all the relevant authorities in July 1993.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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We cite as evidence the following:

**Omnibus**, BBC1 — an episode on Andrea Dworkin in which highly emotive statements are made and heavily wrought images of crying women are exploited to promote the belief that pornography, by its very existence, causes violence and other harm to women. No opposing view whatsoever was given any representation; the defence of this given at the time was that Dworkin explained the anti-censorship view well enough by herself. She did nothing of the kind; in fact, she did not explain it at all — not that her own version of an opponent's position would have been sufficient in any event. 50 years of research have shown no support for her contentions.

**Dispatches**, Channel 4 (Autumn 1992) — An episode promoting Catherine Itzin's anti-pornography book and the Canadian "feminist" anti-pornography law, claiming that the case against pornography has been proven and that a similar law is necessary in this country. The Home Office's 1990 report on pornography is dismissed out of hand — it is wrong because the producer of the show says so, Catherine Itzin says so, and it just doesn't matter what decades of research have actually shown. Itzin makes a spurious case from a few references to specialty items related to a small subcategory of pornography — sadomasochism, unrepresentative of most porn — to suggest that all pornography is about violence. Only the most insubstantial hint of "balance" is present: a sentence or two from a woman who works on a sex magazine, and another sentence or two from a highly-regarded researcher in the field — the driest of statements — which are instantly overlooked. One would hardly guess from this that the content of the show is flatly contradicted by the existing research.

The show also grossly exploited the experience of abused women in dysfunctional relationships whose husbands used pornography as *one of* the means to humiliate and control them. What is overlooked is that many husbands have believed they had the right to force their wives to perform a variety of domestic services - including housework and "normal" sex — against their wills, and until two years ago the law supported that belief, in that marital rape was not considered a crime (and the change is by one single departing incident of case law, only). The unstated suggestion of this show is that such events never happen without the use of pornography — a lie — and that forced sex in marriage would not be objectionable if it were ordinary intercourse without the use of pornography.

**The London Programme**, LWT (21 May 1993) — "Soho and the Sex Industry", at first expressing reasonable dismay that economic conditions have forced many legitimate, respectable establishments out of business in Soho, where they have been replaced by elements (some not entirely legal) of the sex industry, suddenly leaps to the unsupported conclusion that censorship is the necessary and only way to eliminate this problem. No alternative view is voiced. It would appear that economic conditions are not responsible for the situation, and that economic programmes (most obviously, commercial rent control) could not be used to help restaurants and other establishments retain their premises.

**The Cook Report**, ITV (27 July 1993) — episode on Computer Porn. This is the most problematic of all, sharing all of the sins of the above and making a few new ones of its own.

## ORDINARY SEXUAL ACTS PRESENTED AS PERVERTED

To begin with, the show takes for granted — in contrast to all evidence from 50 years of social science research on sex of-

fenders and pornography itself — that sexual imagery is bad. Indeed, it is strongly suggested that *masturbation* is bad, and that it is outrageous that young men may actually be doing this. By the end of the programme, it was almost surprising that we weren't told it would cause hair growth on the palms. (There were no questions asked about the mental stability of an adult who thinks stopping 15-year-old boys from masturbating is a worthy cause.)

Moreover, the language of the speakers on the programme, including Chief Superintendent Michael Hames — a scandalously politicized police officer who is clearly off on his own moral campaign — repeatedly made clear their belief that ordinary sexual acts which are common to many people are disgusting and perverted. That the people who are assigned to be the guardians of our morality are so enormously out of step with normal sexual practice was never remarked on.

The computer technology available to us also soared into the realms of science fiction in the broadcast. It is simply not possible to download films and videos from computer bulletin boards into the small home computers kids currently have access to as was implied in the Cook Report.

### “FOREIGN FILTH”

As has become increasingly consistent, we are reminded that the sexual material in question comes principally from sources in Europe. The constant refrain of the “foreign filth” motif becomes deafening in the sort of nationalistic belief that the evils of degradation that are so manifestly a part of the lives of “foreigners” will be imported to these holy shores. It is never mentioned, of course, that the looser restraints on censorship in Europe have never led to increased sex crime, and that it is our hypocrisy, and not their licentiousness, that makes illegal importation of sexual materials an issue. The undertone of bigotry in this line of “reasoning” has become incessant. Why is it acceptable? And is it any coincidence that so many of the people who warn of the (alleged and unproven) dangers of this “tide of foreign filth” are Eurosceptics?

Again, we had child abuse mercilessly exploited to promote censorship. In this case, both the statements of the victim and those of the abuser used precisely the same words and phrases to describe the situation, although they were not stated to have been involved in the same crimes or treated by the same clinics. Yet it was manifestly evident that their testimony had been rehearsed from the same sources. It cannot be stressed strongly enough that the belief that pornography is an instrumental cause of sexual abuse flies in the face of over 50 years of programmes designed to study and treat sexual abusers. We *know* that sex abusers have historically managed to commit their crimes without the use of pornography, since mass-produced sexual material was not always available. We *know* that men like the one in the programme admit that they would have committed these crimes even if pornographic materials had never been available. Saying that some men use pictures of sexual acts in order to communicate what they want does not mean pornography is the culprit; historically, men have simply had to rely on physical and verbal instructions, coercion and force instead. The means of communication itself — whether it be the English language or pornography — is not the cause of the crime. (It is, of course, never mentioned that children who have been given appropriate sex education cannot be misled in this way.)

As always, pornography itself is grossly misrepresented in the show. Most commercial pornography is of nudes and of adults having sex, but the speakers kept reiterating claims that

made it sound like they were finding a deluge of child pornography and bestiality. Michael Hames remarks on the fact that the (few) items of this nature they have found are pictures that they have seen on film ten years ago, without realizing that he has actually said that there is very little new material around — it is a tiny handful of items making the rounds over and over. That is, of course, the case, but Hames and others all spoke as if *most* porn was composed of this kind of material, and lots of it.

### UNCONSCIONABLE INVASION OF PRIVACY

The most alarming new element in this show was the airing of the faces, names, homes and employment situations of men who were entrapped into selling down-loading services to the agent provocateur in the programme. These men had violated no existing law at all, and had certainly not been convicted of criminal acts, yet they were mercilessly exposed to a national television audience and *without substantiation* charged with the equivalent of being child pornographers. They will almost certainly lose their jobs and be hounded — perhaps even assaulted — by neighbours. This unconscionable invasion of their privacy (and of the deaf girlfriend of one of the victims, who was addressed more than once by name and would be easily identifiable to anyone who has seen her) will ruin their lives — and yet, they have been convicted by nothing but unsubstantiated suggestion. Without any real evidence offered other than the highly-loaded language of professional anti-sex campaigners (and didn't I recognize a member of CARE who is a notorious campaigner against safe sex education?) who apparently think that any sexual imagery and any masturbation is *by definition* disgusting, these men were tried, convicted and sentenced on television to the loss of their jobs, homes, and safety. It is terrifying to live in a society where a television host with no knowledge of the subject can destroy the lives of people on the air without even a proper trial, for something that is not a crime.

The consistent pattern of all of these programmes is to blame all of our problems — though they pre-date the existence of mass-produced pornography by several millennia — on modern erotic materials, and to take for granted that the cure to all of our ills is greater censorship. There is no evidence that censorship reduces violence and abuse, yet one would never guess that from the material presented in these shows. Without any empirical evidence, our broadcasters have decided that no invasion of privacy is too great, no lies and misrepresentations too dishonest, no loss of our civil liberties too costly, if only we can stop people from using pictures to masturbate.

### A LIE ABOUT THE DANGERS OF PORNOGRAPHY

It is morally wrong to pretend that we can end sexual violence by handing over our freedom of expression to the forces of repression. Half a century of research has consistently demonstrated that it is sexual repression, not pornography, that is at the root of the outrageous acts performed by most serious sex offenders. Why are we being sold a lie about the dangers of pornography, rather than told the truth about the causes of sexual violence? And when is it going to stop?

Yours faithfully,

**Feminists Against Censorship**

