

User-generated pornography: amateurs and the ambiguity of authenticity

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When focusing on pornographic content generated by amateurs, pornography starts, to a degree, become undone as a point of reference, object of common-knowledge, topic of public debate, policy and regulation. Largely, albeit not completely detached from the framework of the porn industry as a perceived system of production and distribution, the developments and histories of amateur pornography remain ill documented. These cultural artefacts remain notably absent from publicly available media archives, yet enough traces of images, films and texts have remained to suggest that the amateur production has been both lively and multi-medial well before the rise of digital production and distribution, and so-called user generated porn. While some scholars identify DIY content especially with the affordances and specificities of network media (e.g. Jacobs 2007), such claims come with the risk of ahistorical generalization

This chapter accounts for both the historical roots of amateur porn production across different media and the complexities that contemporary distribution of user-generated content involves. In order to chart some of the mundane histories and experiences connected to amateur practice, I draw on memory work material on pornography that my research group collected together with the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society in 2012.¹ These recollections are helpful in mapping out both transformations and continuities in everyday encounters with pornography across decades as they have played out in one specific North European country in the course of drastic changes in media culture, technology and in the public visibility and regulation of sexual cultures alike.

The appeal of amateur content

The Latin root of the word, *amare*, “to love,” suggests, amateurs assumedly do what they do for the love of the practice rather than for the objective of monetary or other gain.

This separates amateurs from the professionals who also stand apart in their mastery of professional technique and professional tools. Furthermore, “while the professional conducts activities for work, an amateur labors away from work, in free time or leisure time” (Zimmermann 1995, 1). This category of the amateur, in its contemporary uses, is a creation of late 19th century, connected to the separation of work from leisure and hobbyism from professionalism. In the process, the amateur “shifted from the older, aristocratic notion of the *lover*, to the newer middle-class notion of the hobbyist” (Armstrong 2000, 102). Aristocratic amateurs wrote poetry, created architectural plans, composed music and excelled in watercolour painting whereas the new articulation of the amateur was more closely tied in with consumer markets catering leisure diversion for the middle-class.

Amateur photography and film have been, since their 19th century beginnings, focused on the private sphere of home, leisure, family and intimate others, and amateur porn marks no exception to the rule. Amateur camera markets broadened from photography to 16mm film in the 1920s, 8 mm the following decade, and Super 8 in the 1960s (Slater 1991; Zimmermann 1995; Citron 1999). Polaroid cameras, with their self-developing film, became a popular format for amateur porn in the 1960s, the same decade that witnessed the launch of the very first portable video cameras (McNair 2002, 39). It was nevertheless not until the 1980s expansion of the mass market for video cameras and VCRs that “millions of people bought their first home video camera and budding film-

makers decided to make their own pornography” (Esch and Mayer 2007, 101). These home grown products were occasionally shared through swap-and-buy services, yet broader distribution remained an obvious challenge. Later digital imaging technologies – including inexpensive scanners and easy to use, often free, image manipulation and video editing software – built on these developments while also expanding the possibilities of sharing and recycling materials generated by non-professionals.

Before the era of the World Wide Web, images of both amateur and professional origins were shared in Usenet newsgroups and through IRC (Internet relay Chat), which allowed for exchanges between people with similar sexual interests, tastes and preferences (Slater 1998; Dery 2007). Such DIY activities developed in tandem with the more mainstream distribution forms of online pornography which have, since 2006, increasingly focused on easy-to use, and mostly free video sharing sites modelled after YouTube (such as PornHub, YouPorn, Tube8 or RedTube). The era of smart phones and ubiquitous connectivity in the 2000s has amplified these developments, and the last decade in particular has witnessed a radical increase in the available volume and forms of online pornography, and in the cultural visibility of amateur productions in particular.

Amateur porn distributed in the self-organizing online networks of sexual subcultures has been identified as gift economies driven by the pleasure to see and be seen (Jacobs 2004a; Dery 2007) where “deviance is the norm” (Halavais 2005, 21). The appeal of non-professionally produced pornography is regularly, even routinely, associated with its unpolished aesthetics of directness, authenticity, domestic intimacy and rawness, as well as with its assumedly ethical principles and conditions of production (e.g. Hardy 2009; van Doorn 2010; Hofer 2014; cf. Chalfen 2002). This was also the case with six respondents to our memory work project who wrote about favouring amateur content

exactly due to it being more raw, relaxed and unpolished than commercially produced imagery: “since you see real people in it, no unnaturally built-up men, or women drowning in silicone” (male, born 1986). User-generated pornography has also more generally been seen to broaden the range of body shapes and styles, sexual tastes and practices available in the palette of online porn, beyond North American video porn and their female performers “permatanned, waxed, bleached, artificially enhanced with silicon” (Härmä and Stolpe 2010, 113; also Albury 2003, 204; Rooke and Moreno Figueroa 2010, 227), even if the performers of the most viewed and the most highly rated amateur videos do not deviate far from culturally hegemonic beauty norms. Some respondents doubted the authenticity of the amateur content they have consumed while others considered the ethical dilemmas potentially connected to its circulation.

I've watched almost exclusively amateur porn online. I like it a lot since I think it's real. It depicts ordinary people in sexual acts and they're not as false as regular porn films. I believe that for other people, this falseness offers fantasies to be experienced but what I want for porn is a sense of real life. So perhaps I'm a "voyeur". But then again amateur porn also evokes conflicting feelings. One can't know if a video uploaded online has ended there intentionally or through dishonest means. I've heard of cases where a video intended to be private has been uploaded after a break-up out of vengeance and without the other party's knowledge. I can't know that as a viewer so perhaps it'd be best for me not to think about it. (male, born 1988)

I haven't produced porn material myself but I'm scared that my former partner might add personal pictures of me on some web site. There's nothing

pornographic, revealing material, in them though but someone may perceive even mundane pictures as such. (female, born 1989)

Contra to the idea of amateur porn being more ethical in its production practices, the respondents cited above commented on the controversies and concerns connected to revenge porn (for which numerous sites have been dedicated, and which has sparked legal action in several countries) and other forms of non-consensual circulation of personal media materials (also Parvez 2006, 627). For the male contributor, the uncertainty of consensual distribution is a source of unease that eats away the titillation of the videos themselves, even if such hesitations do not necessarily drive him to turn away from the materials in question as such. Some, primarily male, respondents emphasized the pleasures of authenticity and creativity that amateur content offers. For others, however, realness itself translated as boring, dull and unexciting:

“Neither have I been any consumer of amateur porn – its appeal has been said to lie in its realer connection with ‘real sex’ but I’ve really never been interested in ‘real sex’ or realism in porn. Porn is about fantasy tales for the adult that aren’t for me meant to be fully realistic. I’m bothered by the bad lighting and such of amateur porn (I’m a very visual person) so I’ve chosen to consume less of it. Of course the boundary is mercurial these days.” (male, born 1975)

Niels van Doorn (2010) has explored the similarities between amateur and professional pornography in the acts, poses and routines that they document and depict, in his study of YouPorn amateur videos. As Doorn points out, amateur porn both approximates the generic conventions of studio porn and provides alternatives to it as scenarios that are

assumedly more authentic and less acted out. One crucial factor in these distinctions involves monetary compensation, given that amateur pornographers largely share their content online for free, “for the love of it”, while professionals do it for the money (also Jacobs 2004b). At the same time, most platforms on which amateur content is shared are far from non-profit in their principles of operation. User-generated pornography involves particular forms of gift economy where users post their pictures and videos for free and hosting sites sell advertising space and possible premium membership fees while often withholding the rights to distribute the user-generated content in any formats they see fit. Users may therefore have precariously little control over the content that they generate and that they willingly give for the site to host. The situation is not altogether different from that of mainstream social media services, such as Facebook, where sites also reserves the right to use the content their users post for any purposes they consider appropriate. In most instances, users are unlikely to read through the terms and conditions.

At the same time, not all amateur content is representative of such gift economies, and the divisions separating the amateur from the professional, or the non-commercial from the commercial, are neither binary nor fixed (Paasonen 2010a). The boundary of amateurs and professionals has in fact never been particularly clear in its contours in the context of online pornography where some of the first entrepreneurs to gain fame and fortune around the mid-1990s were amateurs running their own websites (Paasonen 2011, 93–97). User-generated content travels across platforms both freely and for money and, given its popularity, it is far from being a marginal feature in the landscape of contemporary pornography. On sites such as *Sell Your Sex Tape*, amateurs are compensated for the content they upload. In her analysis of the site in question, Kristina Pia Hofner notes that the videos depict pornographic heterosexual domesticity

void of squabble, friction or compulsory routines. At the same time, their gendered domestic scenarios, including household chores, are elaborately staged “to gloss over the fact that producing a pornographic video is labour.” (Hofner 2014, 335, 343–344.) The authenticity of amateur pornography can therefore also be conceptualised as a form of emotional labour as the suppression and expression of feeling that adds to the value of the products generated by detaching them from content of the more scripted, glossy and acted sort (also Parvez 2006).

DIY across media

The standard narrative of amateur pornography, in sum, would travel from still photography and 8mm home movies, through Polaroid and video (necessitating no photochemical developing and outside involvement) to the qualitative and quantitative rupture caused by digital media technologies and online distribution platforms. Through this rupture, amateur pornographers have become understood content generators whose productions can be circulated on web sites openly or behind member-only paywalls, shared one-on-one or kept privately for nobody else to see.

It is nevertheless noteworthy that this narrative, while in many senses apt in summing up the central transformations that have occurred in the possible forms of engaging with media technology, heavily privileges image and video. This emphasis is aligned with how public concerns over the public visibility and the perceived effects of pornography – or, more broadly still, concerns over the so-called sexualisation or pornification of culture (Smith 2010) – focus on visual and audiovisual media culture as a site of contestation and intervention. This gives rise to notable blind spots concerning the field of pornography as one spanning the written word and visual culture well beyond

photography, film and video. Pornographic literature, drawing, painting and graphic prints preceded the era of photographic and audiovisual pornography by centuries (e.g. Hunt 1996) and they remain notably lively fields in the production of user-generated content.

The popular appeal of the written word is easily exemplified by the cultural phenomenon of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (and E.L. James' continuing publishing efforts connected to the series), which grew from sexually explicit amateur Twilight fan fiction to one of the largest financial literary successes of the new millennium (Deller and Smith 2013; Illouz 2014). Less successful amateur literary efforts accumulate on seemingly endless online platforms, of which Literotica (est. 1998) alone hosts well over 300,000 submissions. While the themes and scenarios of amateur erotica are often more explicit and controversial than those of video porn – incest and non-consent, for example, are among the most popular Literotica story categories – they tend to garner little public attention outside their readership that not only reads but also grades the stories and provides authors with feedback on their strengths and shortcomings (see Paasonen 2010b).

The sociability of people engaged in the production and consumption of pornographic content is hardly a phenomenon specific to the online platforms of the 2000s, many of which incorporate social media features into their principles of operation. Online platforms have nevertheless rendered such sociability and exchange increasingly available and visible outside the closed circuits of specialist clubs and networks. The current range of publishing forums for amateur pornography in their multiple forms also speaks of how user-generated content has, in general, become seen as a resource and source of profit after the dot.com crash. And, as already mentioned above, it speaks

equally of the popular appeal of low-fi production and its claims to authenticity that has, in obvious ways, added to the diversification of the palette of online porn.

The division between users and producers is highly blurred on online platforms, considering the volume and range of peer-to-peer exchanges, personal uploads, practices of tagging and sharing that contribute to the erasure of dualisms separating the producers of online content from its consumers, performers from audience members – or, to appropriate the terminology of classic communication models, the “senders” from the “receivers” (see Attwood 2002; Dijck 2009). Such opening up of categories easily seen as mutually opposing allows for a reconsideration of the degree to which the consumers, or audiences, of porn, have also been its producers, as well as the degree to which the practices of porn consumption and production have tended to entangle (also Wood 2015).

DIY has been part and parcel of the cultures of pornography from the outset and throughout. It is therefore not surprising that altogether sixteen contributors to the memory work project wrote of having made porn themselves, in productions amateur, professional and somewhere in between – and in multiple roles as authors, performers, directors and publishers alike.

I have both read and written erotic stories, or perhaps I should call it porn in this context. First of all I read them but since I was interested in reading also in other ways, at some point I noticed judging erotic stories also as literary achievements. I often thought how clumsy description and bad language there was. And that I could probably write better. My first stories were

published before I had accumulated any practical knowledge of sex. (male, born 1973)

This respondent had contributed short stories to Finnish men's magazines for a decade for pay. While he described the pleasure of "how at best the story began to unfold at its own speed, and how it felt to channel one's growing arousal to writing", he also stated his current unwillingness to share such stories online for free: "I know I'm good at erotica writing but why on earth would I write for free so that some site host makes money off his advertisers, and I get nothing out of it but the joy of writing? There's enough professional pride in me that I didn't want to go back in the amateur league, that is, to produce porn for the use of others without monetary compensation". The difference between amateur and professional author was, in this instance, articulated as one of skill and money, as well as insights into the profit mechanisms of online platforms. In addition to their textual achievements, contributors described drawing both singular images and comics.

I drew kinds of comics with colour pencils in notebooks. Then I started drawing on Xerox paper and some thicker paper. For some drawings I used photos as models. I mostly draw a series of one to three images. They featured curvy women. I also drew on a computer but it was too hard since I couldn't use the mouse well enough. I only have left 199 A4 sheets of drawings from 1989–2002. The drawings are stapled into three books with a plastic sheet and cardboard with a cover image drawing and black carton as the back.
(male, born 1970)

It is noteworthy that encounters with material perceived as pornographic described before World War II were primarily ones involving drawings, raunchy jokes and song lyrics: in other words, materials that would currently be understood as user-generated.

At the end of the Winter War I was a 12-year old school kid. Our school was closed for a Military hospital during the winter. As we returned back to school at the eve of spring, then at some point as I was sitting at the ring of the outhouse and looking for some sort of a tissue, my attention focused on some paper roll [... stuck between the inner wall]. I only managed digging it out for my reach with some effort. As I managed spreading out the roll, I was looking at an A4-sized pencil drawing. I understood it to be of a man and a woman in what I later understood to be the missionary act position. It was a very beautiful drawing having some artistic eye. The image revealed well the genitals of both. I showed it to my comrades and we laughed and snickered about the image. (male, born 1928)

Men's magazines only grew available in Finland after WWII, and audiovisual material remained even scarcer for decades to come. Drawings came across in the memory work material as a particularly common forms of generating – and, in instances such as the one described above, encountering – pornographic material. This would also be the material that people, with some exceptions, do not describe sharing online with others. The privacy attached to drawings in particular – which respondents often describe destroying soon after completion and possible masturbation – speaks of the ephemerality of such practices in terms of media historiography. Not only are these images privately generated and stored but they are often immediately discarded and hence available as other than traces that people are willing to later recall. Similar

privacy, temporality and ephemerality seem to apply to self-made pornography more generally. Respondents also wrote of their unwillingness to share written porn with other than intimate partners, for whom these may also have been especially composed:

I've written one porn story, it was especially for my partner as a gift. The story is about 5 pages long and includes many things that we've done and what I'd like us to do for real. I actually gave it to her and she was delighted that I'd made a story for her that she featured in. (male, born 1986)

Both male and female respondents described taking photos of themselves in order to see how they might appear to others, shooting videos with their partners and drawing erotic pictures for sexual titillation: some of these products were immediately discarded while others were kept for private use. Despite the obvious limitations of this memory work material in terms of its cultural specificity and limited number of respondents, it allows for selected glimpses at people's mundane engagements with amateur pornography across decades as both its producers and consumers.

Ephemerality and longevity

Contra the ephemerality of amateur porn across the previous decades, materials once uploaded online have considerable tenacity. Digital files are often associated with immateriality (as opposed to the tangibility of print photographs, film reels, paper magazines or video cassettes), even if this is hardly accurate. Hosted on servers that eat up considerable energy resources, both produced and viewed on smart phones, tablets and computers, user-generated porn is copied and circulated in ways and directions impossible for those who originally uploaded them to control.

The boundaries of pornography have grown ephemeral as people engage in intimate web cam sessions or share images both sexually suggestive and explicit on social media sites, dating apps and sites specialized in porn. The issue is therefore not only one of rethinking the notion of pornography – who makes it and how, who consumes it and why – but one concerning the mediated forms, spaces and functions of sexual depiction and expression more generally. Sexual imaging and writing is shared on online platforms, even if the majority of people may choose to keep such practices private. The expansion of sexual amateur content nevertheless means its availability for consumption and analysis alike. Rather than framing this as a social concern over the pornification of culture, the accumulation of user-generated porn, in its more or less kinky forms, with its broad range of performers and other creators, can be seen as affording insights into how sexualities, and the norms attached to them, are lived, enacted and re-imagined.

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¹ The memory work material involves 14 female and 31 male respondents born between 1924 and 1994 and it spans a total of 853 pages of text. For a more detailed discussion of the research methodology, analysis and findings, see Paasonen et al. 2015; Kyrölä and Paasonen 2015.