

# University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform

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Volume 21  
Issues 1&2

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1988

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### Recommended Citation

Daniel Linz & Edward Donnerstein, *Methodological Issues in the Content Analysis of Pornography*, 21 U. MICH. J. L. REFORM 47 (1988).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjlr/vol21/iss1/4>

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# METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PORNOGRAPHY

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Daniel Linz\*

Edward Donnerstein\*\*

No scientifically sound analysis of the content of pornography in the United States as a whole currently exists. Dietz and Sears's article takes us a small step closer to quantifying the contents of pornography. Some of the methods employed in the present study, however, prohibit us from making solid generalizations from the findings reported here to the nationwide pornographic marketplace. Our critique of the article will concentrate first on the methods employed in the study and then on the findings obtained through these methods and the authors' interpretation of these findings.

## I. IDENTIFYING THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND SELECTING A DATA BASE

Exactly what do Dietz and Sears seek to determine from their content analysis? In this case, they are not answering a question posed by a social scientific theory about the effects of exposure to pornography, but are interested in answering critics of the work of the Attorney General's Commission. These critics have contended that the pornography used as exhibits by witnesses at the public hearings was extreme, not commonly available, or unrepresentative of what was sold in pornography retail outlets across the country. The aim of the Dietz and Sears study is to demonstrate that the examples brought before the Commission by antipornography witnesses were, in fact, representative of materials widely available in the United States. We must first

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ask if the procedures employed in this study allow us to say something about pornography in the United States as a whole.

This question may be broken down into several subquestions. First, we might ask: What is a suitable data base for understanding the types of pornographic material available in adult bookstores? Ideally, the researcher selects communication artifacts that are directly pertinent to the research problem. In this case, the authors have chosen magazine covers as their unit of analysis. They have done so not because they are interested in magazine covers only, or even primarily. Rather, they are interested in the covers insofar as those covers are a reliable proxy for what is contained inside. The question is: Are magazine, book, and film container covers representative of the content of pornography in general?

The authors assume they are not. But, they believe that this works to produce more conservative results than they would have otherwise obtained. They state: "The methods used—particularly the analysis of only pictorial images on the front covers of the materials—tend to skew the results in the direction of making the materials surveyed appear less sexually explicit and more conventional than is in fact the case."<sup>1</sup> The authors claim to verify this assumption by examining the insides of 105 of the works. They assert that all but two of these contained imagery that was more sexually explicit or deviant than the cover. How was this determined? By what standard were the contents deemed more explicit or deviant than the cover? Further, how were the 105 works chosen for further investigation in the first place? There is no evidence that a random sample of materials was chosen for this more in-depth analysis, nor is there any evidence that once the 105 works were chosen, a systematic analysis of their content was undertaken so that their covers could be compared to what was inside.

Without such an analysis, we are skeptical of the authors' claims about the covers' being less explicit or deviant than the contents. It would be just as reasonable to assume that the publishers of pornographic magazines and books would try to entice the reader by including a very lurid image on the outside and that the contents may fail to live up to the promise of the cover. This might be particularly true in an adults-only bookstore where publishers need to draw attention to their product amid

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1. Dietz & Sears, *Pornography and Obscenity Sold in "Adult Bookstores": A Survey of 5132 Books, Magazines, and Films in Four American Cities*, 21 U. MICH. J.L. REF. 7 (1988).

many shocking, sexually explicit images. In any case, without a random sample of the materials for further inspection, and without some sort of systematic way of comparing the covers to the insides of the works, we cannot be sure of the direction of bias.

## II. SELECTING A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF BOOKSTORES AND COVERS

The authors chose to examine merchandise in thirteen bookstores in four cities in the Northeastern corridor: Washington, Boston, Baltimore, and New York. If we take their original goal, of producing results that are representative of the United States as a whole we might ask: How close did they come to realizing this goal given their sampling strategy of choosing four areas in the Northeast? On the face of it, we would have to say not very close. Indeed, the authors found differences between the materials sold in the four geographical locations included in their sample. What would the difference be if we compared the Northeast to the Deep South or both of these regions to the Midwest?

It would undoubtedly have been expensive for the authors to undertake a nationwide study to engage in these regional comparisons. We would go so far as to say that implying that only a nationally representative sample should be used for analysis would be, for most authors, unfair. But these authors are unusual. When this Article is cited by parties interested in making a case for either the legal regulation or deregulation of pornography, these authors' affiliation with the Commission will undoubtedly be mentioned. Their content analysis may therefore carry the weight of the Attorney General's Commission because of their association with it. The Commission claimed to have investigated pornography as a nationwide problem and is often cited as an authoritative source across the country.

To say something about the content of pornography that would apply generally to the whole nation, we would first need to develop a sampling frame listing every magazine, film, and book available across the country (a formidable, if not impossible task) and then randomly sample magazines, books, and films. More workable would be a multistage cluster approach that might begin with a random selection of locations, and then a random selection of bookstores in those locations, and narrow to a selection of materials within the selected bookstores. Without these procedures, the authors' study remains interesting in many ways, but their claims of universality are not valid. The

best the authors can offer in the absence of a national sample is their statement: "We believe that the merchandise surveyed is representative of the merchandise sold in commercial pornography outlets throughout the United States."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, this would not be acceptable to most social scientists.

Finally, we may pose a broader question about the representativeness of material in adult bookstores. If the authors intend to demonstrate that pornography in America contains a large quantity of deviant and degrading images, why do they limit themselves to adults-only bookstores? Are the materials available in these outlets actually representative of the totality of pornographic images consumed by Americans? It could be argued that such bookstores are not patronized by the vast majority of Americans who consume what many might term "pornography." It is probably safe to assert that most of the sexually explicit images viewed in the United States are done so through the purchase or rental of video cassettes or magazines sold in "family" video outlets or through local convenience stores. Consequently, limiting the study to covers of works sold in adults-only bookstores (even if we had a scientifically sound sample of these outlets) would still allow us to draw conclusions about a small and relatively contained collection of images—images to which most Americans are not exposed. In this sense, the sample may be quite unrepresentative. Further, to quote a member of the Commission, as the authors do at the conclusion of the Article, about the effects on a "person who learned about human sexuality in the 'adults-only' pornography outlets of America"<sup>3</sup> may compound this misperception. Research has shown that most American teenagers probably learn far more about sex from peers, parents, and more widely available mass media than they do from other sources.<sup>4</sup> Our children are far more likely to have seen an R-rated slasher film that depicts levels of violence against women in far more graphic form than most material available in adult bookstores. Scientific research has shown that repeated exposure to these images may have a negative effect on viewers.<sup>5</sup>

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2. *Id.* at 38.

3. *Id.* at 42.

4. Gebhard, *The Acquisition of Basic Sex Information*, 13 J. SEX RES. 148 (1977).

5. Linz, Penrod, & Donnerstein, *The Effects of Long-term Exposure to Violent and Sexually Degrading Depictions of Women*, J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOLOGY (in press); Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, *The Effects of Multiple Exposures to Filmed Violence Against Women*, 34 J. COMM., Summer 1984, at 130, 130-37.

### III. THE MEASUREMENT SCHEME, CODING, AND COMPUTATIONS OF INTERCODER RELIABILITY

One of the most important features of any content analysis is that the researcher demonstrate that all coders give reasonably close interpretations of each content category coded. An index of the level of agreement among raters is essential to allow the reader to determine which differences described in the data analysis (e.g., between magazine and film covers, or differences in the treatment of males and females on the covers of magazines) are due to error and which are "true" differences. At the very least, we should have some indication of the percentage of agreement between coders who have been asked to look at identical material. This can be accomplished by having the coders code identical magazines and then examining the average correlation between coders. These inter-rater reliability coefficients range from zero to one. The closer the coefficients are to one, the greater the magnitude of inter-subjective agreement. The authors provide no indication that they performed even the most rudimentary assessment of coder reliability.

We should also be told something about the coders themselves, so that we might make a judgment as to whether their personal attitudes, beliefs, and motivations influenced their coding. Who were they, how were they chosen for the job, and how were they trained? The study reported here used police officers and special detectives as coders. One might immediately suspect that law enforcement officials would have an interest in making sure that the best case be made against pornography, and that they would (perhaps unwittingly) judge the material more harshly than would other observers. In this study, it is impossible to tell whether these motivations may have influenced the outcome. A more solid design might have included both law enforcement and non-law enforcement personnel as coders so that a comparison between the two types could have been made. If no differences were found, then we could be assured that the special nature of the coders had no effect on the outcome of the study. As it stands now, we have no way of knowing about this possible source of bias.

As a point of comparison, the procedures used by Yang and Linz<sup>6</sup> for selecting coders for a content analysis of sexual mate-

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6. N. Yang & D. Linz, *Sexual, Violent, Sexually Violent, and Prosocial Behavior in R- and X-rated Videotapes* (1988) (unpublished manuscript; University of California, Los Angeles).

rial may be informative. These investigators recruited male and female coders from a pool of applicants. Applicants were told that they would be participating in a study about interpersonal relationships and asked to complete a variety of scales which assessed their opinions about sex, attitudes toward women, and the acceptance of interpersonal violence. Responses to these scales were used to screen persons with extremely high or low scores. Only after selection were coders informed about the true nature of the study.

#### IV. THE FINDINGS

Despite these problems, is it possible that the authors have still uncovered something about the content of pornography? The authors divide their results section into a discussion of: 1) violent, bondage, and sadomasochistic imagery; 2) nonviolent paraphilic imagery; 3) nonparaphilic sexual variations; 4) particular sexual acts; 5) degrading and humiliating imagery; and 6) sexual depictions without violence, degradation, or humiliation. They then examine gender differences in the images depicted and compare the images in magazines, books, and films. One of the most important findings is that about thirteen percent of the covers contain some form of violent, bondage, or sadomasochistic imagery. At least two important caveats, however, must be included with this finding.

The first is made by the authors themselves. They admit that the coding categories are not mutually exclusive and, as they put it, "single items often bore multiple images from this list."<sup>7</sup> This problem makes table 2<sup>8</sup> virtually uninterpretable, at least from the point of view of informing us about the number of violent images relative to those that are not overtly violent within particular classes of material. It is important that the reader understand that despite the large number of deviant and violent acts listed in the table, only a relatively small percentage of the works as a whole contained these acts. We see from the table, for example, that twenty-six magazines contained depictions of whipping, thirteen magazines contained depictions of bruises, and eleven magazines contained depictions of blood. Since whipping a person might produce bruises and blood, the three images are likely to occur together on the same cover. Therefore, a small

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7. Dietz and Sears, *supra* note 1, at 19.

8. *Id.*

number of particularly violent covers are counted many times in table 2.

The second and perhaps more important qualification concerning the findings about violence is one that is not raised by the authors. This concerns the question of what figures might be obtained if we were to content code violence in magazines, books, and film covers available outside the pornographic market. What if we did a content analysis of magazines at a local convenience store? It is not unreasonable to expect that at least ten to fifteen percent of these covers would contain some form of violent imagery. In fact, a comparison of the levels of violence may reveal lower levels in adult bookstore fare, once we considered superhero comics, detective magazines, and gun and ammunition publications.

#### CONCLUSION

The authors end with a long list of conclusions drawn from their work. All of these conclusions must be tempered with the reservations expressed above. A significant danger is that the casual reader might only attend to the summary provided at the end of the Article. Impressed by the authors' prestige as members of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, such a reader might assume that each of their points is scientifically valid. We have provided several reasons for concern about the scientific validity of the study, and we hope that readers will keep these points in mind when considering the results.

