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Pornography, Space, and the Internet: The Politics of the Seattle Public Library System as documented by readers of Vice Magazine

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PORNOGRAPHY, SPACE, AND THE INTERNET: THE POLITICS OF THE SEATTLE PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM AS DOCUMENTED BY READERS OF VICE MAGAZINE



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The Change.org petition entitled, “Seattle Public Library: Stop allowing pornography to be watched on public library computers,” claims that it stands “for everyone who does not want to participate in viewing the disenfranchisement of others.” [1] The petition represents only a recent development in the Seattle Public Library’s ongoing interactions with pornography. In 2012, “A Seattle librarian refused to force a man watching hardcore porn on a computer to move to a more discreet location, even after a woman with two children complained.” [2] This was even after in 2010 the Washington Supreme Court in a six to three decision held that the library can block porn if it chooses. [3]

However, the Seattle Public Library has chosen not to block porn, much to the chagrin of certain patrons. Earlier this year, Julie Vanderburg asked a man at the Beacon Hill Library to stop watching porn, which led the librarians to ask her to “stop approaching patrons.” [4] The conflict facing the Seattle Public Library system stems from the divergent perceptions of what role libraries play in society. Todd Anten writes in the *Texas Journal on Civil Liberties and Rights*, “While some view libraries as public spaces with a duty to be ‘family-friendly,’ others view libraries as research centers obligated to provide constitutionally protected information.” [5] The conflict between public and private spaces lies at the core of the Internet.

In this article, I intend to analyze the interactions of individuals in the comments section of Vice magazine. I have chosen to study Vice because the magazine is both a part of “counterculture” and “trendsetting metropolitans,” resulting in its position as “the number-one tastemaker” for the 21- to 34-year-old demographic. [6] Further, the Alexa Rankings, a leading monitor of web

traffic, shows that “people who went to college are over-represented” in Vice’s readership, there is also an overrepresentation of males and an underrepresentation of females. [7] With Vice’s readership in mind, I had a few research questions. First, does the readership of Vice support bourgeois views of sexuality? Second, how do its readers interact with distinctions of class? Third, what does Vice reveal about the relationship between the Internet and special politics?

Literature Review

The core of my interest lies in understanding how individuals interpret specific media artifacts and events. Mass self-communication “is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many.” [8] I think that comments on news articles serve as a perfect example of this discursive tool, as they are self-sorted, and since media consumption choices are based on individual beliefs [9] and are entirely self-directed. Comments provide immediate responses to a specific cultural artifact in an organic manner that allows for the documentation of interactions between different cultural paradigms.

Public and private spaces form the basis of social interaction. As Zizek notes that “every order of explicit normativeness has to rely on a complex network of informal rules which tells us how we are to relate to explicit norms” including how, when, and to what extent we apply them. [10] Thus, sometimes “the explicit ‘no’ effectively functions as the implicit injunction to get on with it, but in a discreet way.” [11] In effect, society is built off of considerations regarding time, place, and manner, or spacialization. Dr. Jeff Cain asserts that “the Web is now less of a place for information to be provided, searched for, and digested, and more of a dynamic participant within our social landscape.” [12] His words allude to the tension at the heart of the Internet, which lies in its function as a social space. Dr. Jim Porter explains, “the Internet is at the same time a public square, a public library, a television, a shopping mall, a newspaper, a movie theater, a game device, a virtual world, a communication medium, etc.” [13] This confounds societal norms because the constructed zones of exception collapse online.

At the same time, the Internet plays a critical role in class distinctions. The Pew Research Center found in a September 2013 study that of the fifteen percent of Americans that do not have Internet access nearly twenty percent of Americans cite “the expense of owning a computer or paying for an internet connection” as the reason they cannot connect. At the same time, nine-percent of Americans that use the Internet lack home access. [14] As Vice magazine keenly observes, “Just because you’re reading this on your iPad or whatever doesn’t change the fact that not everyone has a computer. . . many of the li-

brary's patrons don't have access to personal computers, or have had to give up Internet service because of financial challenges." [15]

The advent of the Internet and the class divides it accentuates relate directly back to sexuality. Laura Kipnis traces the interaction between class and sexuality in order to develop a "low-theory" of sexuality. She analyzes *Hustler* magazine and acknowledges, "control over the body has long been associated with the bourgeois political project," but this in fact allows it to become a discursive tool for the lower class. As Kipnis concludes, "the body is a privileged political trope of the lower social classes. . . through which bodily grossness operates as a critique of dominant ideology." [16] The discourse of the body is one that strips away the manners and tact demanded by middle class life.

Middle class life is dominated by the optic and the aesthetic. As Kipnis put it, "the bourgeois. . . want to remove the distasteful from the sight of society." [17] This visual politic serves to allow for the stabilization and domination of competing worlds. Goldberg-Hiller summarizes it simply, "what makes law legitimate are the frameworks of temporality, spatiality, speech, and silence that synthetically make law appear enduring, monolithic, and just." [18] Thus, appearances lie at the core of the bourgeois society. The frameworks that Goldberg-Hiller point out often define specific and legitimate contexts for actions. Bakhtin traces the nature of laughter and its various forms observing, "early Christianity. . . condemned laughter. . . this intolerant seriousness. . . made it necessary to legalize the gaiety. . . During the Easter season Laughter and jokes were permitted even in church." [19] He contrasts this sort of specifically sanctioned laughter under the feast with the laughter of the carnival, which existed in a "completely different, non-official, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical" sense. [20]

Therefore, there is a difference between the sanctioned private, unseen viewership of pornography and viewership that takes place as a spectacle in public. Much in the same way, discourses of the body differ in their message and potential for counterhegemonic existence depending on whether or not they abide by bourgeois control of the body.

Methodology

In this study, I am going to analyze comments on a news article from *Vice* magazine, [21] responding to the Seattle Public Library's continued efforts to support access to pornography on library computers. I am going to do a content analysis of the various comments in order to understand the ways in which individuals framed their response to the story. I coded for three different themes that I saw in pilot readings of the comments. (1) class; (2) space; and (3) gender. I also coded for two frames: (1) the violation of rights; and (2) the

save the children frame, which I coded any time a commenter argued that it was a matter of protecting children. I use a good deal of qualitative analysis to interpret commenters' arguments relating to the library policy, along with the broader social implications of such arguments.

Results

Of the 53 comments 19 were not related to the topic of discussion. Of those, seven were off-topic political statements of the "Liberalism is a mental disorder" variety. Six were about minor details of the story itself. The last six were one word or completely off topic. Of the remaining 34 comments, 16 framed the issue as one of space, 16 focused on the gender aspects, seven employed the save the children frame, four discussed class.

Analysis

Spacialization

Spacialization remains a central part of the middle-class, bourgeois social structure. The location where an act takes place becomes more important than the act itself. This obsession with space lies at the core of many commenters concerns. One commenter suggests a solution to allow individuals to watch porn in the library, without exposing children,

What if they had a separate, closed off area for computers? Like one that didn't block anything, and then the ones out in the open blocked porn and other graphic things? Idk, I'm pretty anti-censorship, but I wouldn't want children to be exposed to that sort of thing.

The subdivision of spaces plays a central role in the modern capitalistic existence. In the same way that specified spaces are created for work and home and play. This in turn leads to the specialization of spaces for specific activities. The department store represents the best visual signifier of this spacialization, with its specific organization and compartmentalization of domestic life for easy consumption. And when I enter a department store I know that I am not allowed to play golf in it or watch porn. The delineation of activities into sanctioned spaces is conveyed by one commenter, who observes,

It's okay to look at porn in a place where little kids are running all

around but you can't smoke in a bar where there is only adults who are all consenting to be there. Fucked.

The commenter compares the act of smoking—a social taboo—to viewing porn—another social taboo—the commenter analyzes the contextual nature of the actions and compares their perceived legitimacy. The commenter then rejects the notion that viewing porn in a library fits with social mores more than smoking in a bar. The discussion of legitimacy in regards to time, place, and manner of an action is central to the notion of capitalism. To do an activity outside of its sanctioned space is considered lacking in manners. One commenter calls the viewing of pornography in a library, “just plain rude behavior.” The message is clear: the particular place an act takes place in determines its appropriateness.

The Internet undermines the territorialized spaces of society, by allowing a different space to transpose itself into the carefully organized sphere of conventions. It brings the pornographic crashing into the forefront of the public life. Sex and by extension pornography are both facts of life and yet it is considered tactless to discuss them in public, or for children to glimpse them or discover their existence. However, the Internet allows for two different spaces to exist in the same geographic location. The individual at the computer can view anything they desire, creating their own private space. In a public location this creates a clash between the codified manners of the bourgeois expectations of the place and the individual’s constructed space. One commenter arguing in favor of porn in libraries states,

*Yes, because clearly we'd all be *much* better off with your "world view" or that of the US Supremes. Your "SafeLibraries" program reads like just another Gladys Kravitz "social watchdog" program pimped by the conservatives to micromanage the adult lives of US citizens. Let's make a deal: you don't define for me what's appropriate for me, and I won't define for you what's appropriate for you; we'll both make adult decisions to be responsible for our own business, and will mind it thusly.*

In response to him, other commenters emphasize the inappropriateness of the space. One person states:

But I think refusing to tell some dude watching hardcore porn in a public library to knock it off because it might threaten his right to be a creepy motherfucker, is where you officially hit the point of absurdity. Thinking that people should watch porn in places that aren't full of

kid [doesn't equal] being a conservative who wants to "micromanage the adult lives of US citizens."

Thus, it is clear that space is a central issue for the readers of Vice magazine who reaffirm bourgeois notions of spacialization advocating for the continued demarcation of areas for legitimate action. The Internet challenges the appropriate through its ability to challenge territorialized boundaries.

Class

While class is a central issue brought up in the article, and in sexuality, most authors avoid class. Class only appears in four comments, yet they fit with Kipnis' understanding of class distinctions of sexuality. One brazen commenter makes the issue directly economic proclaiming,

[P]orn isn't a human right, libraries have full rights to not allow it in a public space. . . If you can't afford your own computer, or an internet cafe, suck it up and buy a magazine. The world doesn't exist to please your dick.

The comment directly engages with the notion that access to porn is a privilege, but also that it must be purchased. The commenter conveys a sense that only those that can afford to pay for access to porn deserve to have it. This economic argument relating to porn plays out in the other comments as well. Another commenter emphasizes that allowing porn in the libraries will cause them to collapse:

Parents will, of course, simply chose to avoid Public Libraries. And then they will simply chose not to fund Public Libraries. But whatev' At least no one is cramping your sacred adult choices.

Indeed, many commenters, even those that don't mention class, feel like the ability for individuals to watch porn means an end to the library system, or at the very least their access to it. The issue of class was used in conjunction with concern for the library apocalypse. As one commenter put it,

Hurray, the grown up babies have won the right to keep the real babies out of the library. Your space, you won it fair and square, any one who complains is a Bad Person because it's your right to deny children Safe Places. You, however, because you are a special snowflake, have

the right to whatever you want, no matter what it imposes on other people around you. Congratulations! The only actual, real Small People who are hurt by this are those who's parents are not wealthy. But this isn't about them, after all, it is about YOU.

This individual exemplifies what I like to call the rich man's burden. Their argument is entirely about how the library's porn policy will limit the ability of poor children to access the library due to their parents' fear of porn. Yet, as Kipnis points out, attitudes towards sex and sexuality are different depending on class. Thus the commenter assumes that the parents of the less wealthy have the same views as them but more importantly assumes the mantle of saving them. The commenter also conveniently ignores the part of the article that talks about access to the Internet. It's not about all "not wealthy" people being able to access the Internet or libraries so much as it is about saving babies.

Gender

Gender came up surprisingly often as early commenters thought the article's writer was a man, until one commenter pointed out that the writer was in fact a woman. The issue of gender assumptiveness on the part of the commenters is addressed by one commenter who theorizes,

I wonder what it was that made ppl think a man wrote this? I guess ppl stereotype and think only guys watch porn n jack off. Livin' in the Past... The times have-a-been-a-changin... I remember back in the summer of '98 when I caught my mom, grandma, and aunt watching gay guy porn while sippin' on Rurple Minze and Dr. Pepper. Grown Woman Shit... THEY WERE A LITTLE SWEATY..

This commenter locates the heart of the issue as many of the other gender comments focused on what were normal activities for males and females. After one commenter questioned the writer's taste in pornographic movies, another commenter defended the author's choices, noting, "calling "him" sexually depraved for watching gay porn, and fat porn. . . is neither depraved nor particularly irregular for a female." Another commenter assumed that all women wear certain clothes observing, "The author has no problem with porn in a public library but try playing Rush Limbaugh real loud.....bet she pops her spanx over that!" Gender plays a central role in public perceptions of sexuality, a fact the commenters are keenly aware of. One notes, "I'd like to see what might have happened if you had done this while male," which reinforces the figure of the male watching pornography that probably led to the assumption of a male author addressed by an earlier commenter.

At the core of the assumptions and articulations of appropriate performance lies aesthetics. The comments convey how each commenter views the act of porn watching as either gendered or not, in turn separating the subjects “woman” and “porn watcher.” The fact that the commenters originally thought the writer was a man plays into the bourgeois desire for visually digestible culture, as the “sight” of the individual portrayed in the article clearly referenced their understanding of the aesthetic masculine subject. The interactions over the internet without face-to-face contact allow for individuals to avoid easy visual cues, forcing them to use the frameworks they’ve developed for delineating individual subjects, resulting in a fascinating tendency to assume identity based on conformity to actions they’ve preselected.

Conclusion

I think there is a great deal of room for further study here, especially in regards to how individuals construct and determine gender, when forced to determine it through an individual’s actions without seeing them. It is clear that commenters entered the social engagement with centered ideas of the subject of man and woman and then applied this subject to the writer’s actions. This article is not the best for determining this, as perceptive readers of the Vice article could check the byline. It would be interesting to see how those same commenters, absent the article author’s name, perceived her gender.

I also think that there’s a great deal of room for further study in regards to the Internet’s role in spacialization. The Internet is broadening the world and personalizing it, but how does it interact with preexisting spaces? I think analyzing other articles to see if the commenters have the same concern about space could be fascinating.

I think that being able to study the instant reaction of individuals to the cultural event/cultural object is fascinating, as it allows for patterns to emerge that showcase the diversity and convergence of opinion. I would like to focus another study on reactions to a pop culture object, such as a song, video, or tv show, through comments or tweets, as I think this could help us to better understand the common interpretations of society’s dominant image culture.

While Vice claims to oppose societal norms, it appears that the reason it is so appealing to marketers is because it is a very safe opposition to norms. When Vice questions societal norms, its readers respond in a way that reaffirms the dominant “upper class” view of sexuality. In this, Vice manages to be a safe form of counterculture, as its readers, through the comments, reaffirm their preconceived beliefs about the world. In essence, some of Vice’s readers treat counterculture, as a novelty, something to examine and tour, but not a viable belief system. On the other hand, a minority of the commenters demonstrate

the countercultural ethos espoused by the magazine. In order to determine which type of reader dominates the publication it would be interesting to do a larger study of the entire site. The comments on this article reveal a fundamental tension between Vice's readership and its supposed countercultural status.

Notes

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