

A statement to the Moore College community
about internet pornography
by John Woodhouse

I have a pastoral concern I want to share with you. It is the awkward, sensitive and emotional subject of internet pornography. I want to outline something that we as a community can do about it.

One of the peculiar features of this subject is that simply to name it stirs emotions of various kinds. It is a subject that can be addressed in a manipulative way. Feelings of guilt or shame or just awkwardness with the subject can be misused by a speaker to coerce his hearers into agreeing with him even if they don't. I do not want my words to have such effects.

Let me take a few minutes to explain the context in which I find myself thinking about this.

My first thought is that there is a responsibility on a community like ours to do all that is reasonable to create a safe living environment for all who live and work among us. I see internet pornography as something in our environment that has become a serious problem that I believe we can do something positive about. In this world you can never create an entirely safe situation, but we can take steps to limit the power of potential dangers to people — and therefore potentially protect people from harm.

In some ways I see an analogy in what I am proposing to steps that we are taking these days in child protection. It is different, but there are some similarities. We want our churches and our College to be environments where harm does not come to children. We therefore take and will continue to take steps and set in place structures and requirements — some of which cause us a little inconvenience, but are worthwhile if it means that our children are protected. I suspect that there is more we will need to do in this area as time goes on. And I hope that we will find better ways to do it. I hope you will see a kind of analogy here to what I outline below.

Another aspect of the context of my thinking has been this. I have been concerned for some time to work out what more we might be able to do here at College to support the building of strong and good marriages. We are putting our minds to this question and welcome suggestions.

These concerns have been in my mind at the same time as I have come to the view that we can and should do something about the particular issue I am raising with you this morning. We are all aware, at least anecdotally, that a considerable number of people, particularly men, have problems with internet pornography. It is not exclusively a male problem, but it is predominantly. The idea I am going to put to you is not a 'solution' — but I do believe that it will be a real help.

Before outlining what I hope we can do, and how I believe it will be good, let me say a little about pornography. I am no expert on this subject, but I think I should briefly explain the understanding that motivates the proposal I am working towards explaining.

The following four things are at least widely acknowledged to be true.

First, pornography does hurt people. It does harm. It hurts the person concerned — and especially the Christian person, I believe. It messes with your mind in serious ways. It affects your attitudes to something that is in fact good and wonderful, namely your sexuality. It can also harm relationships. It can do serious harm to marriage relationships. It is true that problems with pornography can be a symptom of other difficulties a person or a relationship has. But it can also cause difficulties. *Pornography does hurt people.*

Second, pornography is powerful. It can capture, and it can create a serious addiction. An almost seemingly innocent curiosity can become a distressing obsession. And it is very easy to get caught up in it. Then beyond its attractive and addictive power is the power of shame that it causes, and again this is particularly so in a Christian person. The shame is very strong and causes further problems. The shame is a big part of the power of pornography. A normally honest person finds that he lies. The tangle that life can become can be very distressing, and it can be difficult to unravel — you find it hard to know where to start. *Pornography is powerful.*

Third, the shame means that a person who has been or is *suffering from pornography* — and although that is a strange way of putting it, I think it is a helpful way to put it as I will explain in my fourth point — a person who has been or is *suffering from pornography* can find it difficult to seek help — indeed difficult to do anything that might suggest to anyone that he has a problem in this area. It can be a desperately lonely problem to have — although many will testify that the act of seeking help was the most liberating thing they have ever done.

My *fourth* point is very important, and in my opinion needs to be clearly said and heard. I do not want to take away the real responsibility we all have for our own actions, but I do want to say that the 'bad guys' in this whole matter are the purveyors of this material. In a very real and important sense those who get caught by it are victims of exploitation. Again, we really are responsible for our own actions, and should accept responsibility, but the purveyors of pornographic material are just like drug pushers — and are doing something just as wicked. They have a product that hurts people — and they try to get people hurt

by it — preferably addicted to being hurt by it — for their own perverse gain. I want to say to any who have in one way or another been caught by this stuff: we as a community want to care for you, help you, and protect you from the 'bad guys'. We do not want to do anything that will make you feel that we are out to catch you or condemn you. That, in my opinion, is not the response this problem needs.

And so my question is, What can we do to protect ourselves and each other from evil people who would harm us in this way? The question is pastoral, and the proposal I am about to outline is intended to do no more — but no less either — than take away some of the power of internet pornography to do harm to people in our environment.

The idea is that we confiscate — as best we can — a critical aspect of the power that the purveyors of pornography have gained since the arrival of the internet. The fact that it is available and can be pushed *secretly* — and can be viewed secretly — is the big 'advance' that the internet has brought. It has greatly increased the power of the pushers. At an earlier time a person had to do something that could be seen, like buy a magazine, or walk into a shop, before pornography could reach you. There was a barrier that was big enough to save many people who might otherwise have been caught. Now the barrier is as tiny and secret as a mouse click.

How can we as a community strip the pushers of at least some of their power? I think we can. The idea I am proposing is that all members of the College community agree to install on their computers a program that you may have heard about called (appropriately) Covenant Eyes (see Job 31:1). To state the obvious, I am hoping that people will do this whether or not you have ever had problems in this area. That is a key to this idea working.

What does this program do? It significantly takes away the critical power of secrecy from the pushers. The program logs every web site that your computer visits and reports to a nominated person in a way that draws attention to any 'questionable' site. It is not a filter. The program does not do anything about past internet activity. Again this is not about 'catching' people out. It is about taking a step that will mean that the pusher can no longer make you think that you can secretly respond to his stuff. That, in my opinion, and according to some of the material I have been able to read about this, makes the presence of pornography on the internet considerably less powerful.

I have asked William Hood to manage the technical side of this project. More details can be found at <http://inform.moore.edu.au/ce> At this stage the College will bear the costs involved. It will not be compulsory, but my hope is that everyone will agree to join in this action. (However anyone may choose not to.)

The idea is not perfect. It is certainly not a 'solution' to the problem of pornography. People struggling in this area may well have other issues that should be addressed. This is not an alternative to addressing those issues and, where appropriate, seeking help or support. But I believe that it *is* a way to significantly protect our community from seriously harmful predators. By raising the issue, taking action and talking about it we may find other — perhaps better — ideas to help overcome this menace.

I am confident that some people who are being hurt by internet pornography will find that the step I am proposing is actually the key to them getting free from it. I understand that many have found this to be the case. Some, I believe, will not become caught up in it who might otherwise have been — because of this measure. Some, especially if this has been a problem for a longer time, or if they have crossed more boundaries, may really need to seek more help than this little step. But I hope that this step of naming the problem publicly, acknowledging something of its nature, will help people who need more help to take that really difficult step of seeking it — knowing that help, not condemnation, is available here.

We would appreciate any feedback.

Let me tell you my greatest concern about this. It is that what we are doing will be misunderstood as a policing exercise to catch people who are struggling here. That is absolutely *not* what this is. Our students, or any others in our community who need help here are not the 'bad guys'. This is intended to help and protect us all from the people I consider to be the real 'bad guys'. I am introducing this measure as a pastor — and I am hopeful that this step will be received by everyone as it is: both an expression of pastoral care towards you, and an opportunity for you to care for others by helping to make this just 'what we do around here'.

Finally I should say that if anyone does not agree that this is a good thing to do, that is ok. This will not be compulsory or required. But I hope that many of you — perhaps all of you — will agree and join in.

John Woodhouse