

# *The Pornography Wars* by Kelsy Burke, PhD

## Guide for Classroom Use

*The Pornography Wars* is appropriate for undergraduate and graduate courses in a wide range of disciplines, including Sociology, Women's and Gender Studies, History, Religious Studies, and Media and Communication Studies, and First Year Reader programs. The following guide is a tool for instructors and was created by the author.

### **Discussion Questions / Writing Prompts**

1. How would you define pornography? What does it mean to say that “pornography is a socially constructed concept” (page 3)?
2. Compare the historic figures and antipornography crusaders Anthony Comstock, J. Edgar Hoover, and Jerry Falwell. What do these men have in common? How did their broader social context shape their actions in different ways?
3. How did the different eras of the pornography industry (from stag films in the 1940s, to “porno chic” in the 1970s, to VHS tapes and DVDs in the 1980s and 1990s, to the internet in the twenty-first century) spark different strategies and logics of opposition?
4. Why has the antipornography movement been “rebranded” as a broader anti-sex-trafficking movement? What is the relationship between feminist and conservative Christians who are activists within this movement? How does pornography fit into the anti-sex-trafficking campaign's agenda?
5. Both pornography's opponents and its sympathizers want to protect women who work for the porn industry. What does this protection look like for each side? Why do you think these sides have such radically different perspective on *how* to protect women?
6. In recent years, many states have passed resolutions that declare pornography is “a public health crisis.” What evidence do they use to support this claim? Do you think pornography is a “public health crisis” and, if so, what does that mean to you?
7. Scientific studies offer mixed conclusions on whether watching pornography is bad for you. Why do studies offer such inconclusive results? How do you think scientists can best answer this question?
8. Conservative Protestant men are more likely to report that they are addicted to pornography than any other group, even when they look at pornography less often than their secular counterparts. What about evangelical culture explains this puzzling statistic?
9. Both pornography's opponents and its sympathizers want to properly educate children and teens about pornography. What does pornography education look like for each side? Why do you these sides have such different perspectives?
10. Dr. Burke argues that people's beliefs about pornography are *deep stories*, meaning that “beliefs we know to be true so deeply that we construct logical support and justification for them after the fact. It doesn't matter what evidence the ‘other side’ might have to convince us that our perspective is wrong or ill-informed. We believe in its rightness at our core” (page xvii). Do you agree? Why or why not? What other social issues might be considered “deep stories?”

### **Classroom Activities / Supplemental Resources**

1. Watch the public service announcement supporting SESTA/FOSTA legislation that included the voices of many celebrities (available on YouTube:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9SB7-uqvnS0>) to consider why the bills attracted widespread support alongside the critiques presented in chapter 7.
2. Watch the panel discussion of the documentary *Hot Girls Wanted* (discussed in chapter 9, with relevant themes also appearing in chapter 11) to consider how women experience victimization and agency within the pornography industry. The panel discussion is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpJoCoKec7g>.
  3. Read Stoya's op-ed "Can There Be Good Porn?" (published by the *New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/04/opinion/stoya-good-porn.html>) to critically consider the commercial pornography industry (e.g., the MindGeek empire) alongside alternative genres: independent, feminist, and ethical porn (chapter 12).
  4. Analyze Utah's 2016 resolution declaring pornography to be a "public health crisis" (the first of such laws to be passed) alongside its discussion in chapter 13. The full text of the resolution is available through the Utah state legislature: <https://le.utah.gov/~2016/bills/static/scr009.html>.
  5. Watch the TED Talk given by Dr. Emily Rothman, who describes developing the nation's first pornography literacy curriculum (<https://www.tedmed.com/talks/show?id=730488>) to accompany a discussion of sex education and pornography (chapter 17).
  6. Read the eulogy of Jerry Falwell written by Larry Flynt (published by the *LA Times*: <https://www.latimes.com/la-op-flynt20may20-story.html>) to consider political polarization in pornography debates and beyond.