Cable, Pornography, and the Reinvention of Television, 1982–1989

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by Luke Stadel

Abstract: This article surveys the discourses produced by the emergence of pornographic programming on cable television during the 1980s, advancing an argument not only that pornography helped establish cable as a consumer medium, as existing analyses have asserted, but also that the cultural and regulatory responses to pornography on cable helped establish a new ontology for television as a sexual technology.

At 10 a.m. on July 31, 1985, the Senate Committee on the Judiciary’s Subcommittee on Criminal Law convened a hearing to debate S. 1090, the Cable-Porn and Dial-a-Porn Control Act. The hearing began with a prepared statement by Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina. According to Senator Helms:

Many people complain about the increasing amounts of pornography in our society and worry about the effects it is having on young people. But few take the time and make the effort to impress on their legislators the seriousness of this problem. The Halls of Congress are full of high-powered, well-paid lobbyists representing various financial interests—we may even have a few here today representing those whose profits come from the porn industry. But the people who oppose pornography—and this includes the overwhelming majority of America in my opinion—have no economic interest at stake. They are simply concerned about humane [sic] values and what used to be common decency. In short, it is not the vested interests who oppose pornography, but it is the mothers and fathers concerned about the moral well-being of their children, the wives abandoned by over-sexed husbands, and the many others who have been victimized in one way or another by widespread pornography.¹

¹ Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Cable-Porn and Dial-a-Porn Control Act: Hearing on S. 1090, 99th Cong. 2 (1985).

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Upon Helms’s departure, Senator Jeremiah Denton of Alabama went on to clarify the particularly urgent nature of the bill under discussion. As Denton asserted, “Innovations in the methods of distributing pornography, particularly in the areas of cable television and interstate telephone service, make it imperative that Congress address the gaps or ambiguities in existing law.”

The existing law to which Denton referred was the Communications Act of 1934, which laid out the basic regulatory framework for broadcast television. Although it contained no explicit mandate for dealing with pornography, the act gave the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) the power to regulate broadcasting to serve the public interest. However, during the 1970s, cable operators began to argue that they possessed different First Amendment rights than broadcasters, thus creating uncertainty as to the extent of the ability of both local and national entities to regulate pornographic content in this new medium. In 1984, the Cable Communications Act (CCA) was passed to add cable explicitly to the FCC’s purview, and S. 1090 was proposed to further clarify the CCA’s clause outlawing the transmission of “obscenity” on cable. The new legislation proposed that “whomever [sic] utters any obscene, indecent, or profane language, or distributes any obscene, indecent, or profane material, by means of radio or television, including cable television, shall be fined not more than $50,000 or imprisoned not more than two years, or both.” Ultimately, S. 1090 was never signed into law, likely because of the significant objections the FCC raised as to the enforceability of the proposed restraints on obscenity contained within the bill. Although lawmakers behind S. 1090 were not yet willing to accept it, during the 1980s cable was becoming widely understood as a medium distinct from broadcast television, primarily in the private and selective nature of its transmission.

Despite being relegated, like so many other pieces of failed legislation, to the scrap heap of congressional history, S. 1090 stands as a testimony to the changing status of television in American culture during the 1980s. In fact, central to S. 1090 is the very nature of television itself. Proponents of the bill asserted that cable television was essentially the same thing as broadcast television, and thus was subject to the same kind of restrictions on obscenity, per the tradition of common law. The bill’s detractors argued that cable was a fundamentally different medium, and thus not subject to existing legal paradigms. What was at stake in the debate was not merely the right of cable systems to distribute pornographic content, or the right of cable consumers to view pornographic films in the privacy of their homes, but a definition of cable as a new medium. In this article, I analyze the debates over “cableporn” that took place during the 1980s, with a particular focus on the period from 1982 to 1989. I argue not only that pornography helped establish cable as a consumer medium, as existing histories have stressed, but also that the discourse surrounding the diffusion of various categories of programming designated as “pornographic” on cable—through movie

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2 Ibid., 9.
3 Ibid., 10–11.
4 Cableporn is the term used in industrial discourse to describe pornographic programming on television. My repetition of the term is intended to respect the historical specificity of cableporn as not simply a genre of texts but a larger conceptual framework within which such texts were historically situated.
channels like Home Box Office (HBO) and Cinemax, cable-access programming, and “adult” channels like the Playboy Channel—and the regulatory model used to contain pornographic programming on cable—represented a shift in the meaning of television as a medium that could not be defined by widely held notions of television as broadcast television. The discourse around cable television produced during the 1980s saw television reimagined as a sexual technology, marking a shift in the place of the television within the physical spaces of American homes and, more broadly, within the cultural imaginary.

From Sexploitation to Softcore: The Emergence of Porn on Cable. Long before the congressional debates of 1985, sexually explicit material was established as an important way for cable to distinguish itself from broadcast television and thus to justify the largely untested concept of getting American households to pay for television. HBO, which was founded by Time Inc. in 1972, was the first cable network, and from the outset it relied on airing content that was more sexually explicit than network fare or the R-rated movies shown on cable superstations like Turner Broadcasting System and WGN. Part of what HBO relied on were films of the “sexploitation” tradition, a genre that grew out of the counter-Hollywood ethos of what Eric Schaefer has characterized as the classical exploitation cinema. Sexploitation, characterized during this period by the work of directors like Russ Meyer and Doris Wishman, courted viewers by pushing the boundaries of what was allowed under the Hollywood Production Code, which, though weakened during the early 1960s, featured at most moments of brief female nudity and implied off-screen sex acts. However, the growth of the hardcore industry, which produced films featuring explicit sexual acts during the late 1960s and early 1970s, diminished the theatrical demand for tamer sexploitation product. Likewise, Hollywood’s adaptation of more explicit sexual content to traditional narrative structures via the new ratings system of 1968 forced a similar squeeze from the other end of the pornographic economy.

Although antiporn activists often accused cable of being a haven for hardcore pornography, the sex most commonly found on cable was of a different variety. According to media historian David Andrews, the wide-open terrain of cable provided the perfect outlet forexploitation films of the 1970s, a style of filmmaking that would become known as softcore pornography. Andrews argues that softcore could cater to the demands of consumers unsatisfied by the sex offered up by standard Hollywood fare while allowing consumers to avoid trips to sleazy hardcore theaters. In his analysis, this tradition would lead to the development of the softcore genre proper in the early

1990s, as typified by Zalman King’s *Red Shoe Diaries* (Showtime, 1992–1997), which combined simulated sex acts with the conventions of classical Hollywood filmmaking.\(^{10}\)

Historian of technology Jonathan Coopersmith has advanced an economic explanation for the role of pornography in the development of cable television, suggesting that pornography’s introduction to the medium of television was no different from its introduction via other new media, dating back as far as the printing press. According to Coopersmith, “Pornography is defined by technology, because its creation, transmission and diffusion are so intimately related to the development of communication technologies.”\(^{11}\) His analysis follows the schema of “invention, innovation, diffusion,” a common analytical framework for studying new technologies in the field of industrial organization.\(^{12}\) His basic model is structured as follows:

Consumers of pornography have accelerated the diffusion of new communication technologies like the VCR and CD-ROM by becoming early buyers and users, thus providing a profitable niche market for newly introduced services. Their willingness to pay an initial premium increased early sales, thus reducing costs for later buyers who benefitted from the economics of larger markets for more mainstream services [as through this early activity] providers and distributors of pornography gained experience and profits. These pushed technologies which were soon transferred to mainstream products.\(^{13}\)

As in the cases of previous technological innovations in photography and film, Coopersmith has asserted that cable television was driven by its ability to offer a greater means for capitalist exploitation of pornography than existing technologies. He argues that “cable TV was the first twentieth century medium that significantly expanded access to pornography for millions of people. Flipping a channel to ‘cableporn’ was much easier, and demanded far less planning, effort or subterfuge, than going to an adult bookstore or ordering pornography by mail . . . [T]he product came to the consumer, not vice versa.”\(^{14}\) Thus, he attributes the proliferation of pornography on cable to simply the natural workings of a market-driven media environment in which sexually explicit material commands a higher price than other kinds of media because of both high consumer demand and the socially discouraged status of its consumption.

While Coopersmith and Andrews both address important facets of the proliferation of pornographic films on cable television, neither offers a complete picture of cableporn as a cultural and industrial phenomenon. Andrews’s heavy emphasis on softcore texts themselves leads him to overlook the way cableporn was shaped by the regulatory environment of the 1980s. Similarly, in treating pornography as a purely economic and transhistorical concern, Coopersmith neglects the way pornography

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 110–130.


\(^{12}\) This model has been most notably advanced in media studies by Douglas Gomery in “Toward a New Media Economics,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 407–418, and later in his *The Coming of Sound* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

\(^{13}\) Coopersmith, “Pornography,” 95.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 102.
on cable grew out of particular debates over the nature of television that were occurring during the 1970s and 1980s. He notes that “if it were not for the subject matter, pornography would be publicly praised as an industry that has successfully and quickly developed, adopted, and diffused new technologies. But because the subject matter was pornography, silence and shame have been the standard response.” However, it is precisely the contentious nature of pornographic images that makes them desirable. Coopersmith’s argument relies on the idea that pornography basically sells itself because of a natural and preexisting consumer base, which is problematic given the historical fluctuations in social attitudes about sexual images, not to mention the way that numerous fine-grained binaries (e.g., X versus R ratings, softcore versus hardcore, obscene versus indecent) have been significant in distinguishing different varieties of pornography from one another throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In the remainder of this article, I address these concerns by offering an account of cableporn that describes the way pioneers of the cable industry attempted to sell various types of pornographic content to television audiences and unpacks the cultural ramifications of coupling explicit sexual content with the average American television set. In addressing both industry-level discourse on cableporn and historical debates over the legal definition of obscenity, I offer a framework for understanding what pornography meant to the growth of cable television in the American media landscape as well as how cable television as a medium was defined through debates over pornography, a process that contributed to the larger reinvention of television as a sexual technology.

“The Most Eagerly Awaited Event in Cable History!” The Origins of the Playboy Channel. Despite American television’s long history as a “family-friendly” medium, discussions of sex on broadcast television date back nearly to the medium’s origins. NBC’s The Dr. Joyce Brothers Show, a fixture of the network’s daytime programming from 1958 to 1963, often dealt with topics related to sex, albeit sex occurring within the socially sanctioned space of heterosexual marriage. The 1970s saw a particularly significant rise in the sexual content of television, one that reflected and refracted the liberalization of sexual mores that took place during the 1960s and 1970s, including an increased sexual enfranchisement of women, African Americans, gays, and lesbians. According to television historian Elana Levine, “Television of the 1970s made the new sexual culture the new American culture, and it made American culture more openly sexual than it had ever been before.” In competing both against the increasingly sexualized product of Hollywood and against one another for ratings, the three major networks had established sex, including pressing political topics like rape, venereal disease, and homosexuality, as a common subject for televisual representation by the end of the decade.

In one way, cableporn appears to emerge as simply a logical extension of this culture of sexual liberalization, a culture in which more-open discussions about sex paved

15 Ibid., 95.
the way for varying degrees of explicit sexual content on the average television set. However, the historical record for cableporn is much more varied than such a simple trajectory would suggest. Rather than selling itself on the basis of intrinsic appeal, pornography was something that cable networks had to sell to television consumers, a process that involved learning to view the television set in a new light, as not simply a forum for family programming or discussions of social issues related to sex but as a sexual technology that could be used as an adjunct to sexual practice, a kind of virtual sex toy.

Sexually explicit programming was a staple of cable television at least as far back as the early 1970s, and not just on pay channels. A 1979 editorial in the *New York Times* lamenting the lack of original content on cable notes that access channels of the early 1970s that were “envisioned as community forums” quickly “ran into controversy over bringing pornography, mostly of the soft variety, into the living room.”  

One of the most notorious was Al Goldstein’s *Midnight Blue* (Channel J, 1974–2003), which began airing in New York City in 1975 and mostly featured Goldstein interviewing women in various states of undress. Another show with a similar premise on New York cable access beginning in the 1970s was *The Ugly George Hour of Truth, Sex, and Violence* (1976–1991), which featured host and former porn star George Urban roaming “the city with a portable video tape camera, brashly inviting strange women to come to his studio and disrobe before his lens.” The history of pornography on cable access remains nebulous terrain, as sources on this kind of programming are difficult to locate. A much richer historical record exists for channels dedicated to “adult” programming.

The importance of sexual content on cable, as manifested in both R-rated Hollywood films and softcore pornography, was largely due to the way such content was organized. While broadcast television was centered on a model in which all channels are essentially the same in terms of accessibility for consumers, the development of cable was built on a tiered structure. Erik Barnouw has described cable as having a “fragmenting effect” on television’s audience, representing a fundamental change in the medium: “Television . . . could now be as free as any medium; viewers were the ultimate arbiters. They were, in effect, their own programmers, selecting from a large menu of choices.” Significantly, Barnouw treats all cable channels as equal with HBO and TBS as basically separate manifestations of the same phenomenon. However, within the spectrum of cable programming, it is important to acknowledge the finer-grained distinctions between channels that made different appeals to different groups of television consumers. Initially, cable programming models involved only two tiers: basic cable, which encompassed the vast majority of channels (e.g., MTV, ESPN, ESPN2, TBS, HBO, etc.), and premium cable channels, which charged a monthly fee for access and contained more explicit programming.

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20 For a brief discussion of porn on cable access, see Levine, *Wallowing in Sex*, 56–58.
CNN) and pay or premium cable, which could be purchased on a per-channel basis or in a bundle of such channels. Even though cable itself was a “pay” service, “pay cable” framed television viewing as the purchase of a single channel with a specific programming approach. While the act of paying for television marked an important distinction between broadcast and cable, the idea of paying for individual channels represented an even greater degree of difference between the two. In 1980, there were two kinds of pay channels: movie channels (e.g., HBO, Showtime, Cinemax) and “adult” channels. The launch of the Disney Channel in 1983 would add a third category, the “family” channel. In allowing viewers to purchase a channel dedicated to sexual programming as a separate addition to their basic cable service, pornography helped form the basis of what would become the major distinguishing feature of cable, the selective and private nature of its audience. The idea of pornography being available from a menu of programming options rather than openly available to anyone with a television would also be an important aspect of regulatory debates, as I discuss in later sections.

Several adult channels were available in the early years of cable, most of which experienced limited success. In 1981, Newsweek asserted that “no fewer than six pay-cable networks devoted exclusively to sexually oriented fare now serve the home audience.”22 Another estimate by Playboy pegged the number as high as two hundred, although the number widely available to a national viewership, as evidenced by industry trade journals, was much smaller.23 At various times, channels with names like Private Screenings, the Pleasure Channel, and Adults Only were available nationally (Figure 1), but none ever managed to stay on cable systems for more than a year, despite having subscriber bases reportedly numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The case of one such channel, Eros, is indicative of this paradigm (Figure 2). Debuted in 1982, Eros was only ever available on six systems, and despite having more than a hundred thousand subscribers at its peak, according to reports by Cablevision, by October 1983 it was relegated to peddling its wares on a pay-per-view basis to satellite subscribers.24 Frequently, channels would be announced but never launched, as in the case of Penthouse Entertainment Television.25 Pornographic films were also available on a pay-per-view basis on over-the-air systems like ONTV

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