

ENCOUNTER WITH PATCHEN BARSS

The porn supremacy

It's a dirty little secret, the thing they don't tell you, and they don't talk about — how every wave of technological advance has been fuelled by pornography.

By LIZA POWER

IN HIS more than 20 years as a technology writer, Canadian journalist Patchen Barss spent a lot of time marvelling over whiz-bang gadgets and the bells and whistles that came with them. He wrote about what these technologies and innovations were designed to do, what distinguished them from their predecessors, how they had been developed and the social trends spurred by their creation; how in the hands of consumers there were few limits to the ingenious uses to which people could put them.

Barss liked to monitor academic research in the field and translate findings into plainspeak, never feeling that difficult or controversial ideas lost their potency by being expressed simply or exposed to a wider audience. "I've always found a real hunger for that kind of writing," he says. "People want to be spoken to intelligently about complex ideas. They want to think."

One of the most complex and recurring themes Barss came across in his research wasn't so confounding in itself; what made it difficult to investigate — or write about — was that so few people spoke openly of it: the role of pornography in every wave of technological innovation.

He labelled it technology's "dirty secret" and dedicated two years of research to the topic. Titled *The Erotic Engine: how pornography has powered mass communication from Gutenberg to Google*, the resulting work is, in its author's words, "a 40,000-year story" of our compulsion to communicate. Its focus may be pornography, and the "seedy" origins of such everyday playthings as Google, Amazon, eBay, YouTube and Flickr, but Barss's broader tapestry is human nature: why, since the dawn of time, humans have felt compelled to capture, produce and disseminate graphic depictions of sex.

The scope of his journey, which extends from Palaeolithic and Renaissance art to online video streaming and touch technologies, doesn't offer neat conclusions or easy explanations, nor does it champion or lampoon pornography for its manifold vices or virtues. Instead, it maps technologies forged in so-called "adult industries" to the people, contexts, circumstances, cultures and confluences that propelled them to success or failure.

"I feel as though some people had an expectation that I was either going to come out and condemn pornography as a whole and write this as a scandal of technology, or that I was going to come out with a wink and a nod and say we should all love pornography because it's great for technology. But I don't do either of those things. I think people found that confusing."

Barss's motivation for writing the book was simple. "I thought [pornography] is this hugely powerful force that has given us all kinds of tools and toys that we use every day and it seems people are either unaware or willfully ignore the fact of its influence."

His priority, as such, was to take an

array of innovations, from photography to VCR, cable television to video games, and trace their histories. He established a pattern with each.

"I was researching the origins of photography and with the first photographs the exposure times were too long; you couldn't take photos of people. But from the moment you could, people took sexual, nude pictures. That's interesting, it's important, but it's left out of many histories of photography. That story is replicated over and over with technology."

To flesh out the bare facts of dates and data, Barss chased up names and clues that emerged from his research. Not the great stars of the porn industry — although he does land an interview with superstar Jenna Jameson — but rather people who work at the coalface of research and development. He attended pornography conventions in Las Vegas, Barcelona and beyond, where chance meetings led to conversations and introductions; if people in mainstream technology circles were keen to play down the role of pornography in their fields, pioneers in the adult industry were, by contrast, happy to sing their own praises.

In the midst of these vignettes, Barss pieced together the obvious and less obvious factors that make pornography and mass communication technologies such happy bedfellows — from pornography's capacity to generate astounding levels of revenue and therefore fund further research and development, to the windows it provides opportunistic entrepreneurs to try out new ideas; strippers turned webcam millionaires, businessmen who combine existing technologies with new ventures — vending machines that retail USB flash drives containing adult content — and so on.

As with any research, Barss needed to distinguish fact from fiction, renegades from rats. When the revolutionaries of new technologies were rats, or at least fairly abhorrent characters with reprehensible views about sex and women, he recorded the interviews and transcribed the accounts of their exploits verbatim; he didn't want to colour readers' impressions with his own sense of morality or judgment, so "people telling their own stories" offered the solution.

"I think I expected to meet the same sorts of personalities you get anywhere else; someone who loves to build websites no matter what kind of websites they're building. But that turned out not to be the case. I met smart people, but there was an extremeness [to them], and a lot of their unsolicited opinions were really hard to listen to. I hadn't counted on that."

One such colourful character is Ugly George Urban, who between 1976 and 1982 roamed the streets of New York with a camera, cajoling women down alleyways where he filmed them taking off their clothes. His show, called *Ugly George's Hour of Truth, Sex and Violence*, screened on Manhattan Public Access Television when cable TV was in its infancy and many industry professionals believed it would never take off.



The show earned it maker a cult reputation and its high ratings helped to lure viewers from broadcast to cable television. Barss puts such developments within a broader context of the 1970s cultural landscape, which he terms "an experimental time for both sex and technology", saying the convergence of these factors was no coincidence; they drove each other.

"I was talking to Ugly George because he essentially claims to have created the market for cable television in New York and forged the way for the fortunes of HBO," says Barss, who describes his claims as "overblown, but not completely false".

Other individuals Barss sought out ranged from mainstream media and e-commerce executives to computer programmers, web developers and small-scale operators: a clique of alternately savvy, determined, talented and difficult characters whose insight into pornography veers from fascinating to fraught.

WITH art historian and curator Elizabeth Semmelhack, Barss discusses the ancient Japanese erotic art of shunga, which dates to the 14th century. Noting the depictions of male figures with ridiculously disproportion-

tionate appendages, Semmelhack jokes about conducting a blood flow study to see whether these characters could have maintained an erection and consciousness at the same time; they couldn't. Regardless, the justification she offers for study in the field, and the insight such images offer into the culture that produced them, prove enlightening.

"If you're somebody who's interested in what was actually happening and what was actually meaningful within a culture at any given period, study pornography. It has to be sexy and work in that moment. These ephemeral things that are constantly changing are the way that you can actually take the pulse of a culture."

Cultures, of course, have multiple pulses, and yet pornography's presence and prevalence across so many cultural divides, not to mention its capacity to provoke violent responses and taboos at every juncture, is, as Barss acknowledges, one of its unique qualities. Huge amounts of research devoted to the social and psychological impact of pornography already exist; Barss walked a fine line in sticking to his topic while finding it impossible to entirely wash his hands of value judgments on pornography or acknowledgment that it has an impact on society and on people.

"Just as I don't believe you can tell the history of communications technology without including the story of pornography's impact on it," he says, "I don't believe you can tell the story of pornography's impact without some reflection on issues of exploitation and sexism and violence and worse. But I also don't think you can tell that story without also acknowledging aspects of liberation and education."

While Barss says he went to great lengths to consider many of these ideas in his time as a technology writer, their complexity did not necessarily lend themselves to articles with limited word lengths published in mainstream media. His assumption with *The Erotic Engine* is that people will be intrigued to learn the origins of the technologies they take for granted.

However, he often confronted reluctant editors when writing about these topics for newspapers and journals.

"I tried to be pretty frank in my writing about the internet. I wrote about the sexual content that was driving its development and driving so many people to become a part of that technology. But I was also writing about sexual material, about people creating erotica for and with

other users; that was also a huge driver [in the growth of the internet]. And this latter material was hard to write about [and have published] because it made people really uncomfortable."

This "uncomfortable" relationship presented Barss with dead ends. If he wasn't tracking down accomplished web developers who had honed their skills in the adult industry but later scrubbed their work history from their CVs to re-enter mainstream commerce, he was "unscrubbing" the histories of companies and technologies whose pasts had been gentrified for easy consumption.

"So you can have a company like Blockbuster Videos that thrived until recently that never stocked adult content in their stores but used a technology [VHS videos] whose original success was determined by the pornography industry. And the same goes for Apple and their iPhone and iPad. They're not going to support pornography on their products, but those products would never have got to the stage of development they're at without the initial push from the pornography industry. That history has largely been erased."

These grey areas extend to tracking down specific statistics on how much money the pornography industry generates — Barss quotes research suggesting it is worth \$US97 billion (\$A100.8 billion) a year worldwide — and breakdowns of such information. He says the only two sources of data are the industry itself and companies selling "nanny" software to prevent downloads.

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PATCHEN BARSS

"I think if Nielsen or Media Monitors kept statistics on the industry they'd not only have a lot of trouble doing it but there would also be a strong concern that [by doing so] they'd be perceived as legitimising the industry."

Often the surprise revelations Barss made in his research proved most rewarding. "I'd go to the library and be reading a book and there'd be an offhand or obscure comment and I'd think to myself: where does that go?"

"I was studying histories of photography when I came across a little side comment on the police raids of photographic studios in Paris in the late 1800s. They seized a bunch of photographs that were a strange offshoot of photography called Stanhopes and, of course, they're these tiny, micro-photographs that you need a specially designed lens to look at.

"The historian noted they were ideally suited for pornography for two reasons: they appealed to people's voyeuristic tendencies and because you could carry around this secret in your pocket without anyone knowing you were carrying it. I thought I should find out more about this."

Barss found that what at first seemed like a great side story or novelty technology turned out to be something else. "But then there was a banker in the 1920s who figured out, 'If I can create these tiny images of people I can use the same idea to archive bank records.' That was the start of microfilm and microfiche. So one little avenue opens where pornography has shaped a whole new technology."

Bringing attention to these avenues doesn't, Barss says, "change anything about pornography, or people's beliefs or feelings towards it. All those things are still true and they're not mitigated or changed by [my book]." Any tool, as the adage goes, is only as good as the person using it.

That said, if touch technologies developed in the porn industry cross into mainstream medicine, giving patients in remote areas access to virtual physiotherapy and the like, Barss won't be complaining. And neither, it is likely, will the rest of us.

Liza Power is an Age writer.

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PATCHEN BARSS CV

BORN 1969, Concord, Massachusetts.

EDUCATION

1993 Graduate diploma, journalism, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

1991 Bachelor of arts, philosophy and music, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada.

CAREER

1993-96 Designer, computer technician and writer, *Montreal Gazette*.1999 Freelance writer, *The Gazette*, *National Post*.200-01 Feature writer, editor, *The Toronto Post*.2005-present Researcher, Discovery Channel, CineNova film company; producer, *Inside Media*, CBC; communications director, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.

PERSONAL Lives in Toronto with partner Andrea Addario.

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Giorgio de Chirico
Left: *Costume for a male guest* c. 1929 from *Le Bal* National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 1984.
Right: Cover of the *Souvenir* program for the twenty-second season of the Ballets Russes de Serge Diaghilev 1929 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra © Giorgio de Chirico/SIAE. Licensed by Viscopy
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