Preserving Pornographic Media

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I have two specific interests in the preservation of pornographic media. The first is the challenge of locating and archiving material that has not been very valued even within the small and isolated field of Pornography Studies, let alone the larger archival/academic community, and almost not at all by society at large. Specifically, I'm interested in the most ephemeral pornographic items and how they have been produced and distributed, everything from paperback books to cheaply produced magazines to escort service advertisements passed out on street corners or taped to phone booth walls, the types of objects that might once have been available in adult bookstores or adult theaters or passed from person to person. Specifically, I mean items *other* than adult films, the kinds of pornographic media that were not intended to be collected or archived—they were deliberately disposable. Nevertheless, they are not just a part of the historical record and worth saving on that basis alone, they also offer vital evidence into the broader cultural landscapes of their time, including how pornography and sexuality were conceived, perceived, and experienced. There are many challenges to preserving this material, but two stand out. First, there is a staggering amount of this material—enough that it could never be completely located and collected, and definitely not properly preserved. What might be called the "scale problem" is critical: where would such a project even begin? The second problem is related to the question of value: there is very little to no interest, by anyone, in collecting and preserving this sort of material.

My second interest is in more contemporary pornography, and specifically the preservation of digitally-based material beginning circa 1996 with the creation and explosive growth of the World Wide Web. As with the physical ephemera from previous eras, there is a staggering amount of material that will never be recovered or archived, much of which is due to technological limitations. Additionally, as with the earlier ephemera, there is little traditional value to this material: very few historians are interested in cataloguing, archiving, and preserving, for example, the early adults-only bulletin board systems, or the links in the original thumbnail gallery post websites. These websites, along with the millions of images and videos that have been produced in the last few decades for online distribution, are already critically important for understanding how the internet developed, and that importance—and these difficulties—are only going to continue to grow.

These problems require different but related solutions. The question of how to preserve and archive online pornography is technologically daunting, but it doesn't require massive physical space. It will, however, require some kind of dedicated effort along with digital storage, as well as a commitment to begin digging into the past. A more difficult challenge will be to locate and preserve the physical ephemera that predates online pornography. This vast amount of material will require physical archival space,

raising blunt resource questions of funding and maintenance, as well as coordination. Will both the physical and digital archives be coordinated and overseen by the same organization? Who will support that effort, and will it be a long-term commitment? These are all urgent questions, even if they do not necessarily feel that way yet in the field; without an archive of some kind, future historians and scholars will face an unavoidable crisis.

In 2014, while thinking about these questions, I created the Adult Film History Project (AFHP), a crowd-sourced online archive dedicated to preserving (at least in digital form) this history. After several false starts involving the possibility of dedicated support from the University of Oregon, and after inviting archivist Dan Erdman to join as co-director of the project, the AFHP began to work with the Internet Archive to create a space where digital scans of adult content-related material could be stored and accessed. The project was not designed as and is not intended to be a long-term solution: I came up with the idea, in part, to draw attention to this topic, but also simply to provide a space to start the preservation process, no matter how small. The archive as it exists now is available for anyone to scan and contribute material, and the goal is for scholars, historians, collectors, and so on to be able to contribute their own collections.

The AFHP is obviously not a solution, but it was never intended to be one. I do hope, though, that at the very least it can raise critical questions about the future, and what will be lost (along with what is already lost) if efforts aren't made to think about the necessity of preserving the ephemeral histories of pornography, both on-and-offline.