

FUCKING WITH THE CANON:  
Archiving Porn in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Program  
Department of Cinema Studies  
New York University  
May 2022

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# Abstract

This thesis aims to examine pornography in the digital age, specifically how changing technologies and persistent censorship continue to influence how archives and individuals preserve and archive pornography. This thesis is not a plea to save all pornographic material found online. Instead, its central goal is to discuss the different ways pornography has been collected within the United States and challenge the notion that there is no place for today's porn within an institutional archive through a case study of the 2021 OnlyFans explicit content ban. While this thesis does not necessarily seek to archive every pornographic video found online, its main intentions are to advocate for ethical pornography preservation and to advocate for sex work in general. This approach strives to practice radical empathy, specifically regarding the rights and privacy of persons portrayed in archived moving images. In practicing radical empathy, archivists accept the responsibility of considering the perspectives and rights of everyone who may encounter the material in every step of the process.

# Acknowledgments

**This work is dedicated to the online sex work community.**

There are so many people to thank:

- My family - Josie, Chris, Sara, Stacey, Isabelle, Mia, Flo, Mike, Jenny, Rada, Betsy, Corbin, P.J. the Cowboy Kid, Winry, and Riley.
- My brilliant and kind classmates, who inspire me like no other. I will always be your cheerleader.
- My MIAP instructors, whose passion and enthusiasm constantly reminded me just how much I love the work I do. And a special thank you to Desiree Alexander for taking me under her wing at Cornell.
- My mentors at UNC Asheville - Anne Slatton, Sarah Judson, and Alan Hantz.
- A big thank you to my thesis advisor Dan Erdman. So happy to have had your expertise during this time and thank you for putting up with 500 drafts littered with bullet points and musings.
- And finally, to everyone who assisted me in my research in some way, whether that be in their own research or for taking the time to talk with me - Eve Arballo, Oscar Becher, Heather Berg, Susie Bright, Samantha Cole, Dino Everett, Alison Fortune, Genevieve Havemeyer-King, Patrick Keilty, Nick Krabbenhoeft, Justin LaLiberty, Jiz Lee, Madeleine Mendell, Mireille Miller-Young, Tal Nadan, Jenni Olson, Liz Purchase, Dave Rice, Emily Shoyer, Whitney Strub, Todd Wiener, and Linda Williams.

# Introduction

Sex sells. It's a cliché but a good one at that - turn on your television, go to a movie, or hop on social media, and one is bound to encounter some sort of sexually charged material. Dive deeper into the depths of the internet and find a plethora of kinky (and oftentimes, oddly specific) media ready at the click of a mouse. Pornography may not necessarily have a large presence within mainstream culture, but sex has always had an influence on the media we create. Humanity has always had a fascination with sex, although history seems to favor those who wish to shut it out. From the ruins of Pompeii to the fan blogs of Tumblr, there always seems to be someone new to offend. These conservative forces come out sporadically, always with a new agenda and someone to protect. And more often than not, these attempts see success. Despite this, pornography perseveres. Want proof? Look in the archives.

The word pornography - and in turn, porn and porno - refers to materials that express or suggest sexual activity. Martha Cornog and Timothy Perper give a clear-cut definition in their chapter of *Libraries, Erotica & Pornography*, which includes activities such as “masturbation, ejaculation, vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse.”<sup>1</sup> Pornography is intended to arouse the viewer, and depending on what you're watching, that may also be its only goal. The word pornography is not just limited to moving images; written works could also be referred to as ‘pornographic,’ although pieces of fiction and poetry primarily get marketed as ‘erotica.’ Likewise, films that evoke romantic, sexual feelings often get labeled as ‘erotic films’; however, there can be a stark contrast in the filmmaking style of an arthouse erotic film and internet porn. Erotic movies tend to have narratives that drive the sex seen on-screen, while porn often has no story other than the

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<sup>1</sup> Cornog, Martha, and Timothy Perper. “Words, Libraries, and Meaning.” In *Libraries, Erotica & Pornography*. Oryx Press, 1991.

sex. Many mainstream erotic films also feature acts of simulated sex, and those films that feature unsimulated sex are often shunned by the film community. A great example is Shu Lea Cheang's 2001 film *I.K.U.*, which was marketed as a "Japanese Sci-Fi porn feature" ahead of its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival.<sup>2</sup> Despite clearly labeling the film as porn, many audience members were still shocked and walked out of the premiere. Obscene is another word that comes with discussing pornography. America has a long history of obscenity and censorship laws, some of which stem from Hollywood itself. Cornog and Perper also state materials that have been challenged for obscenity were done so because they were seen as "offensive to modesty or decency ... impure, indecent, lewd."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, materials that seemingly promote sex or sexual health will often be roped into this definition, even if the work is for educational use. More recently, this extends to materials related to the LGBTQ community, materials whose mere presence in public libraries continues to be challenged by conservative forces.

Despite definitions and examples, arguments continue over what makes something pornographic. In fact, defining pornography has always been a bit of a slippery slope scenario. Linda Williams, who has written pioneering studies on pornographic studies, has pointed out that even the dropping of the 'graph' in 'pornography' seems to "signal a kind of familiarity ... a nickname that signals our new comfort with the genre."<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best-known example of this slippery-slope scenario was seen in the 1964 U.S. Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, which saw the court grapple directly with the consequences of setting up a definition for 'hardcore pornography.' In his now-famous concurring opinion, Justice Potter Stewart wrote: "I

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<sup>2</sup> Shu Lea Cheang Papers, MSS.381. Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

<sup>3</sup> Cornog, Martha, and Timothy Perper. "Words, Libraries, and Meaning."

<sup>4</sup> Williams, Linda. "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field." In *Porn Archives*, edited by Tim Dean, 29-43. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand decision; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it ...”<sup>5</sup>

Justice Stewart did not commit to defining what makes something hardcore and this was largely done on purpose to avoid excessive censorship. But despite keeping things broad, this quote is still controversial due to its reliance on subjectivity - i.e., a Supreme Court Justice’s definition of what makes something hardcore may be different than radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin. It seems like the only time someone will give you a straight-up definition of pornography is if they are vehemently against it. It would be remiss not to mention Andrea Dworkin in a discussion on preserving pornography, especially considering she called for its overall destruction. From her seminal work, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* -

“The word pornography does not mean ‘writing about sex’ or ‘depictions of the erotic’ or ‘depictions of sexual acts’ or ‘depictions of nude bodies’ or ‘sexual representations’ or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores ...

The word pornography does not have any other meaning than the one cited here, the graphic depiction of the lowest whores.”<sup>6</sup>

The feminist sex wars of the 1980s is partly responsible for much of the discourse surrounding pornography today, while the conception and explosion of the internet have come to heighten the amount of sexually explicit material created each year, thus further distorting definitions. The shorthand word porn has become ubiquitous with digital sexual media, including videos, images, and GIFs. Perhaps this reflects Linda Williams’s earlier statement on the dropping of the graph; that people online are finally getting comfortable with porn.

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<sup>5</sup> Gewirtz, Paul. “On ‘I Know It When I See It.’” *The Yale Law Journal* 105, no. 4 (January 1996): 1023.

<sup>6</sup> Dworkin, Andrea. *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. New York: Perigee Books, 1981.



Adult materials of all kinds can be found in museums, archives, and libraries across the world. While the origins of these collections and their contents vary, a major recurring theme found throughout is the desire to document and appreciate human sexuality. One of the most well-known collectors of the 20th century was Ralph Whittington, who curated a collection of over 10,000 items in the home he shared with his mother.<sup>7</sup> Whittington, who had previously worked for the Library of Congress, considered himself to be an erotic archivist and sold much of his collection to the Museum of Sex prior to his passing in 2019. In addition to the Museum of Sex, pornography can be found in the archival collections of institutions across the United States such as Cornell University, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the University of California Los Angeles Film & Television Archive, the University of Southern California HMH Foundation's Moving Image Archive, The Smithsonian Institution, New York University, the Leather Archives and Museum, the World Erotic Museum, as well as other Do-It-Yourself archives like the Sexual Minorities Archive and Ask Any Buddy.<sup>8</sup> This is also not to mention the dozens of other pornography collections that exist in other countries across the world.

It is hard to pick out the ideal or perfect artifact, moving images are some of the most sought-after materials by scholars of all types. Moving images, even those that have no sound, demand the full attention of the viewer and it can often take multiple viewings to truly uncover what is happening on screen. Film scholar Eric Schaefer notes that scholars' fascination with pornography comes from their desire to explore the work through a large range of lenses, ranging from religion, social relations, law, and identity. He further breaks this down into three specific

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<sup>7</sup> Schudel, Matt. "Featured Obituary: Library of Congress Curator Was Also Erotica Collector Extraordinaire." *The Bulletin*, August 21, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Reay, Barry. *Sex in the Archives: Writing American Sexual Histories*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019.

themes: politics, power, and pleasure.<sup>9</sup>



*Figure 1 – Frames from Kiss (Date Unknown) from the Alan Sondheim Papers at New York University Fales Library and Special Collections. Photo by author.*

Those pornographic films that transcend into erotica territory are favorites among scholars, especially when they come straight from the creator. One example of this is the Pat Rocco collection at the UCLA Film & Television Archive, which is one of its most popular collections. Rocco was an important figure in the gay filmmaking community and wanted his films to be remembered, which fueled his decision to donate his collection to their archive. Rocco was also very hands-on throughout the whole acquisition process and was able to provide the archive with prints and information on every film he contributed.<sup>10</sup> UCLA also holds the Peter Berlin collection, which is another great example of an archive acquiring films straight

<sup>9</sup> Schaefer, Eric. “Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies.” *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105.

<sup>10</sup> Todd Wiener, Motion Picture Curator at UCLA. Zoom conversation with author, Jan 18 2022.

from the source. Berlin directed and starred in his own productions, and like Rocco, also wanted his to be remembered.<sup>11</sup> Collections like Rocco's and Berlin's provide researchers with a wealth of information about the gay adult films of the period, and this is in part due to how involved they were in the acquisition process. Not all collections get this sort of treatment, especially if the works are orphans. For example, Avery Willard is another prominent gay adult filmmaker from the 20th century. His films were gifted to the New York Public Library in 2000 by a friend of Willard's after he passed away, but it took several years to coordinate, and the collection has yet to be fully cataloged.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most prolific institution that does collect pornography is the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction. Part of Indiana University, the Kinsey Institute has become a staple for porn scholars. Alfred Kinsey, the institute's founder and namesake, actively sought out pornography in part because he viewed it as, "a record of sexual behavior" rather than an artistic work.<sup>13</sup> Kinsey's collecting, as well as his insistence on its value and scholarly worth, sets this institution apart from others. That being said, much of that pornography was acquired under problematic circumstances, specifically their collection of stag films. Stag films make up the first pornographic filmmaking trend, lasting from the 1910s to the early 1970s and existing entirely in an underground circuit. To quote Linda Williams, "Stag films are anonymously made, short, undated silent films displaying one or more hard-core acts."<sup>14</sup> Films traveled across the country to be screened for men in brothels or could be rented by individuals for private screenings. As stag films were considered to be obscene and being

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<sup>11</sup> Todd Wiener, Motion Picture Curator at UCLA.

<sup>12</sup> Avery Willard Films, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, Linda. "'White Slavery' Versus the Ethnography of 'Sexworkers': Women in Stag Films at the Kinsey Archive." *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 107–34.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

found in possession of one could be punished by law, each was illicitly distributed, and tracking down specific titles often proved to be difficult. According to Williams, most of the stag films in their collection were acquired between 1928 and 1956 and were received in several ways. Films that were of interest to Kinsey would sometimes be borrowed from dealers and copies would be made using an optical printer located on the campus and then returned.<sup>15</sup> Other times, films were purchased from exhibitors or private collectors and occasionally donations from police departments across the country, who had racked up quite the collection over the years.<sup>16</sup>

It should also be noted that documentation of stag films, and older sex films in general, is practically nonexistent. Porn scholar Dan Erdman writes that “[N]o stag film was ever submitted for copyright registration, therefore any dates which might be linked to a title are suspect. Similarly, there is no conceivable reason why a producer would have bothered to submit a film to any of the regional censorship boards which existed during the heyday of the stag.”<sup>17</sup> Erdman also notes that few promotional materials or any general trade press about stag films were preserved, leaving no effective paper trail for researchers to use. Additionally, producers and participants in older pornographic films would often credit themselves using fake names or distorted their appearance, making it almost impossible for today’s researchers to verify anyone’s identities. This practice is still common in porn created today, especially amongst amateurs when posting online.

But there is something else missing from the archive: digital porn, e-porn, internet porn, the porn being created in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is not necessarily because archives are not

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<sup>15</sup> Erdman, Dan. *Let’s Go Stag! A History of Pornographic Film from the Invention of Cinema to 1970*. Global Exploitation Cinemas. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, Linda. “‘White Slavery’ Versus the Ethnography of ‘Sexworkers’: Women in Stag Films at the Kinsey Archive.”

<sup>17</sup> Erdman, Dan. *Let’s Go Stag! A History of Pornographic Film from the Invention of Cinema to 1970*.

equipped to do so; many archives are actively acquiring born-digital materials that are far more complex than an MP4. This is also not necessarily because of when they were created; there are plenty of born-digital materials currently in the archives that were only a few years old. It is mostly because porn is seen as lowbrow, especially in comparison to what is already in collections. The New York Public Library, for example, does not actively seek out any kind of pornography, although its librarians did purchase erotic novels from porn shops during the 20th century.<sup>18</sup> Any pornography found in the collections at NYPL, such as the Avery Willard films, was instead donated by happenstance, and considered to be erotica. USC also has a similar policy when it comes to pornography - while they are not actively acquiring any pornographic films, they would potentially take them in should a donor have them as part of their collection.<sup>19</sup> However, this sentiment is likely to not extend to digital porn, as most of their digital storage is dedicated to preserving student films. The Museum of Sex and the Kinsey Institute, two different institutions with a similar focus, also have no porn in their collections. The Kinsey Institute does currently collect born-digital photographs, but not born-digital video.<sup>20</sup> And while porn may be in line with the Museum of Sex's collecting practices, external factors such as storage and funding have prevented them from expanding its scope.

All these collections have the support of an institution or organization and many of these collections are highly sought after by scholars. Despite this, pornography still takes a backseat to other material. Funding for the preservation and restoration of any type of film, let alone pornographic films, is hard to come by. Acquisition of pornography is also not consistent,

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<sup>18</sup> Tal Nadan, Reference Librarian at the New York Public Library. Zoom conversation with author, Jan 14 2022.

<sup>19</sup> Dino Everett, Archivist at University of Southern California HMH Moving Image Archives. Zoom conversation with author, Jan 26 2022.

<sup>20</sup> Shawn Wilson, Associate Director of Library and Special Collection at the Kinsey Institute. Email to author, Jan 11 2022.

especially for materials created after 2000. The question of acquiring born-digital porn is one that has yet to be fully explored. For one, the porn industry is constantly shifting to accommodate new trends and materials are being created faster than can be documented. Many consider today's porn industry to be oversaturated with materials, which can bring about questions about its value and place within an archive. After all, not everything online can be preserved, just like how not every physical object can be saved. Why waste time and resources preserving materials that are only meant to be consumed by a private audience? These are certainly fair arguments; however, they do not fully consider the perspectives of the sex work community, nor do they take the medium seriously for what it is. After all, every pornographic video is a record of people at work. Feminist studies scholar Heather Berg elaborates on this further in her book *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* stating, "The lessons porn work offers about living within and against late capitalism only become available when we take it seriously as work and read work dialectically. Most scholarship does not do this. Instead, porn scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on issues of representation and consumption."<sup>21</sup> Berg additionally notes that since most porn scholarship is done within the lens of cultural and media studies, these scholars are more likely to look at pornography as a text to be interpreted, rather than a record.

Porn may be commercial at heart and there may be a lot of it out there, but who is to say that those creating and starring in porn are not proud of the content they create? Porn preserved alongside oral histories, testimonials, and other materials from the people who created and participated in its production can provide valuable context that truly documents the work that went into creating it and the current environment in which it exists. To that extent museums,

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<sup>21</sup> Berg, Heather. *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021.

libraries, and archives (especially those that already collect explicit material) should allow both production companies and independent creators of porn the opportunity to donate their materials in the future. After all, internet porn and the people who create it are super unique! Porn being created today is often made without the help of a production company. Subscription-based porn sites like OnlyFans allow creators to produce and post materials more in line with their own tastes and allow them to set their own rates, choose who they want to engage with, and how to advertise themselves. OnlyFans exploded in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic and its creators continue to challenge the stigma around online sex work.

While porn can and should be seen as a valuable contribution to an archive, there is a long road ahead before any institution in the United States can start actively preserving it. Perhaps the most pressing issue facing preserving porn is the external forces working to make sure sex-positive spaces on the internet disappear altogether. In August 2021, OnlyFans announced it would be banning users from posting explicit material starting in October of the same year. The decision rocked the sex-work community, as it not only meant a loss of income but potentially also the loss of every explicit video on the website. While the company reversed the decision within days, the archival community cannot ignore the consequences of this near-ban and the reasoning behind it. At the end of the day, materials will always be lost. This is a hard thing to reconcile, especially from an archival perspective. Pornography often falls victim to this, but these conversations are still worth having. Chapter 1 will take a closer look at the recent OnlyFans ban controversy and examine the consequences that come when content bans happen online, while Chapter 2 lays out specific challenges that come with preserving porn and aims to lay a framework for this work to be continued.

# Chapter One - OnlyFans

## Background

OnlyFans users come from all over the world, and the site's success is in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic drastically changed lives overnight, and the porn industry was no exception. However, sex workers already had a distinct advantage; many were already active online, so they could quickly pivot to posting content on OnlyFans. This jump to the platform is another example of the hustle that has allowed the porn industry to survive for so long, despite constant attempts at censorship. Then things changed - OnlyFans announced a ban on adult content that devastated the sex work community, jeopardizing their livelihood.

OnlyFans may seem like a strange object to analyze regarding preservation or inclusion within an archive. It is an internet content subscription service with a vast following and lots of digital content. Its parent company is also based in the United Kingdom, so it falls outside of the scope of my earlier research which has been primarily concerned with collecting practices within the United States. One reason I chose to focus on OnlyFans is because of its popularity. During the pandemic, many memory institutions encouraged their communities to document their experiences and to then donate them to their collections. The wide variety of content available on OnlyFans, along with the adult ban controversy and its impact on the sex work community, is a unique experience that should be allowed the opportunity to present itself within the archives. OnlyFans is also particularly interesting because users can only access sexually explicit content behind a paywall, which presents a serious challenge to preservation of the website.



## About OnlyFans

OnlyFans is an internet content subscription service owned by Fenix International Ltd., a technology company based out of London.<sup>22</sup> The site was launched in 2016 by entrepreneur Tim Stokely, who had previously founded the adult performance websites CUSTOMS4U and GLAMGIRLS.<sup>23</sup> Stokely had envisioned OnlyFans as a social media platform strictly for adults, with liberal posting policies compared to other platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Guidelines on OnlyFans allow for nudity and sexual content, which most popular social media platforms ban. Though OnlyFans has become known for hosting adult content, they have recently begun diversifying their scope to include ‘safe for work’ material such as cooking instructionals or exercise videos. OnlyFans is browser-based and not available in Apple or Google’s app stores. This is mostly because both companies ban adult content from their app store; however, OnlyFans has since stated that keeping the site browser-based allows creators to get the highest commission possible, which they argue would otherwise not be possible as both Apple and Google would take a percentage of their profits.

Here is how it works: creators over 18 years old offer free or paid subscriptions to clients. Creators can also post content behind paywalls that can be purchased outside a subscription, which can cost between \$3 and \$75. Adult content creators tend to put explicit content behind these paywalls and utilize free posts to advertise or ‘tease’ new clients. Content is not just limited to videos; images, texts, and even NFTs can be uploaded onto OnlyFans. Clients can also tip creators directly and request personalized materials for set prices. Popular creators on

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<sup>22</sup> Wells, Georgia. “OnlyFans to Ban Content Featuring ‘Sexually Explicit Conduct.’” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Hancock, Alice, and Patricia Nilsson. “OnlyFans Feels the Lockdown Love as Transactions Hit £1.7bn.” *Financial Times*, April 26, 2021; Simonetti, Isabella. “Tim Stokely Steps Down as OnlyFans CEO, Promotes Chief Marketing Officer.” *Observer (blog)*, December 21, 2021.

other porn websites often use OnlyFans to offer exclusive content such as higher-quality, uncut videos.

One advantage of the OnlyFans model for creators is that it allows them to forgo working with a production company. According to Heather Berg, traditional porn production companies such as Vixen or Hot Guys Fuck typically pay performers a flat rate for their work in porn.<sup>24</sup> This rate can vary based on their experience and the acts that were to make up the scene. These companies often do not offer additional royalties or bonuses to performers based on a video's success. But most people these days have access to a digital camera, typically on their phones. With OnlyFans, creators can produce the content they want to make and even upload it on the same day. Some creators also participate in livestreams, where they can interact directly with their clients. In terms of creators' profits, OnlyFans keeps 20% of the creators' revenue.<sup>25</sup> By comparison Fansly, another adult subscription service platform, also takes 20% while PornHub, a tube site, takes 35% of video sales.<sup>26</sup>

For the first few years of its life, OnlyFans was moderately popular, with around 7 million users on the site at the end of 2019.<sup>27</sup> By May 2020, two months into the lockdowns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of users had surged to 30 million.<sup>28</sup> Reasons for this sudden increase were varied: people were stuck at home and looking for things to do; many were out of work. The site quickly became popular among students and freelancers, and soon enough, even celebrities started posting on OnlyFans. As of March 2022, there are

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<sup>24</sup> Berg, Heather. *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism*.

<sup>25</sup> OnlyFans. "OnlyFans Help Center - Earnings and Payouts - Payout Percentages." OnlyFans.com, 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Fansly.com. "Fansly - Become a Creator." Accessed March 5, 2022. ; Pornhub. "PornHub Earnings and Payments." Accessed March 5, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> The West Australian. "WA Model Breaks Social Media, Makes Millions," April 7, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Rodriguez, Salvador. "Parler, TikTok, OnlyFans Contend for Facebook's Social Throne." CNBC, November 14, 2020.

over 1 million content creators catering to an audience of over 170 million overall.<sup>29</sup> Since its launch in 2016, over 300 creators have made more than 1 million dollars, and the site reports having paid creators over \$3 billion in total.<sup>30</sup>

While this may make for a large, diverse community, the large volume of users also increases competition and makes it harder to discover work by smaller creators. It is a common misconception that OnlyFans is easy money, that anyone can post their nude photos online, and money will start rolling in - this is far from the truth. OnlyFans, like any other porn site, is oversaturated with content, with many creators having already had a fanbase that then followed them to the platform. Examples of these include celebrities like rapper Cardi B and actress Bella Thorne, who gathered a large following within days of joining.<sup>31</sup> As a result, smaller creators work even harder to get attention: new content must be regularly uploaded, interaction with fans must be consistent, and cross-promotion on other social media platforms is a must.

Also significant is OnlyFans's view of intellectual property: creators retain the copyright of any work uploaded to the site. Though headquartered in the United Kingdom, OnlyFans voluntarily complies with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), especially concerning takedown requests.<sup>32</sup> The website offers a dedicated DMCA team to any creator which assists in investigating copyright issues. OnlyFans's terms of service also dictate their views on piracy - "Do not reproduce, print, distribute, attempt to download, modify, create derivative works of, publicly display, publicly perform, republish, download, store, or transmit any [content]..."<sup>33</sup>

Piracy has always been an issue in the porn industry, especially now. Subscription

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<sup>29</sup> Wise, Jason. "OnlyFans Statistics: Users, Revenue & Creator Earnings for 2022." EarthWeb, March 17, 2022.

<sup>30</sup> Wells, Georgia. "Why OnlyFans Isn't in the App Stores." Wall Street Journal, May 13, 2021, sec. Life.

<sup>31</sup> Song, Sandra. "Bella Thorne Criticized For Claiming She Was the 'First' to Use OnlyFans." PAPER, December 18, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> OnlyFans. "DCMA Takedown Policy." Accessed February 19, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> OnlyFans. "Terms of Service." OnlyFans.com, November 2021.

services have become a popular way to discourage piracy in the digital age or, at least, make it harder to do. OnlyFans is not the first subscription service site for porn. Paywall porn sites have been around for some time, and the model closely resembles a standard cam site that features live performances and where clients can chat with performers, tip them, and request private shows.<sup>34</sup>

### Ban on sexually explicit material

Although OnlyFans provides creators with a new means of producing and distributing adult content, much of the criticism the company has received is reminiscent of old arguments of the past. One such critic is radical feminist Catharine MacKinnon, who has made recent statements condemning OnlyFans and similar platforms. In an op-ed for *The New York Times*, MacKinnon argued that the shift to online sex work has only continued to oppress women and promote violence.<sup>35</sup> She then goes as far as calling OnlyFans a digital pimp, who takes cuts from creators and holds them hostage. MacKinnon's viewpoint has not changed since her time working with Andrea Dworkin in the 1980s, made evident by her blatant disregard for sex workers' autonomy. In MacKinnon's eyes, all women who participate in porn are victims who have been forced into this line of work and anyone's willing participation only seeks to further promote women's oppression. Frankly, this is an incredibly narrow-minded point of view, especially in the 21st-century, where women's rights are taken very seriously and considering the ways in which porn production has changed. Additionally, this argument only focuses on how women are exploited and ignores the plight of men, transgender, and gender-nonconforming sex

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<sup>34</sup> Barker, Alex. "OnlyFans Shows How the Creator Economy Is Shaping Media." *Financial Times*, September 2, 2021

<sup>35</sup> MacKinnon, Catharine A. "Opinion | OnlyFans Is Not a Safe Platform for 'Sex Work.' It's a Pimp." *The New York Times*, September 6, 2021, sec. Opinion.

workers. Nevertheless, attitudes critical of online sex work and its supposed effects on society have continued to make their presence known in the material world.

On August 19, 2021, Bloomberg broke the news that OnlyFans would be barring users from posting sexually explicit media on the site, with the ban taking effect in October of the same year. OnlyFans confirmed this in a statement, stating, “In order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the platform we must evolve our content guidelines.”<sup>36</sup> While the site did specify that creators would still be able to post photos and videos featuring nudity, they did not further elaborate on how the new policy would determine if the material qualified as sexually explicit. OnlyFans’s terms of service do describe what content is currently not allowed to be posted, such as videos depicting sexual assault, violence, and bestiality. Earlier in 2021, OnlyFans had also announced a ban on sexually explicit content filmed outdoors.<sup>37</sup>

When pressed on the decision, OnlyFans cited intense pressure from investors to get rid of sexual content at risk of losing funding. Stokely specifically called out banks for consistent “unfair” treatment and said the company had “no choice” but to change the policy.<sup>38</sup> Bank of New York Mellon got a special callout from Stokely, who revealed they had flagged and rejected every wire transfer from OnlyFans. JP Morgan and Metro Bank also have a history of being anti-sex work and continue to refuse OnlyFans business in fear of reputational risks.<sup>39</sup>

OnlyFans is also not the first website to face this type of scrutiny. Patreon, another internet content subscription platform, allowed users to post sexually explicit media up until

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<sup>36</sup> Shaw, Lucas. “OnlyFans to Bar Sexually Explicit Videos Starting in October.” Bloomberg.Com, August 19, 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Cole, Samantha. “OnlyFans Bans Public Sex.” Vice (blog), March 16, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Nilsson, Patricia. “OnlyFans Founder Blames Banks for Ban on Porn.” Financial Times, August 24, 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

2018 after also facing intense pressure from payment processor PayPal.<sup>40</sup> While nudity is still allowed on Patreon, they are very clear about what they define as pornography: “... real people engaging in sexual acts such as masturbation or sexual intercourse on camera.”<sup>41</sup> Most users that violated these terms had to take the offending materials off their accounts, while others were outright suspended.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps a more infamous example is the microblogging platform Tumblr, which also had allowed users to post and reblog sexually explicit content. In November 2018, Tumblr pulled its iOS app from the Apple App Store after reportedly finding child sexual abuse materials on the site.<sup>43</sup> While Tumblr did remove the offending blogs, they also purged numerous unrelated blogs in the process. Many of these blogs specialized in NSFW content, but several innocuous blogs were swept up as well. During this time, users took to Twitter to warn others of what was happening, with one giving others a valuable piece of advice - “Back up your stuff right now.”<sup>44</sup> A month later, the site announced that it would be banning all adult content from the platform.



**Y'all please. If you have a nsfw blog on tumblr. Back up your stuff right now. My blog got deleted. All of them.**

1:31 PM · Nov 19, 2018 · Twitter for iPhone

*Figure 2 - Twitter user @Jaspurrlock urges other Tumblr users to back up their blogs. Source – Twitter.com*

<sup>40</sup> Cole, Samantha. "Patreon Is Suspending Adult Content Creators Because of Its Payment Partners." Vice (blog), June 28, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Patreon. "Is Nudity Allowed on Patreon?" Patreon Help Center. Accessed February 21, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Cole, Samantha. "Patreon Is Suspending Adult Content Creators Because of Its Payment Partners."

<sup>43</sup> Kan, Michael. "Tumblr's Child Porn Crackdown Ensnarers Legit Blogs in Purge." PCMag (blog), November 19, 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Jaspurrlock, Twitter Post, November 19 2018, 1:31 p.m., <https://twitter.com/jaspurrlock>.

In 2020, credit card companies Mastercard and Visa also banned users from using their cards on Pornhub following an article in *The New York Times* about revenge porn on that site. Mastercard and Visa also instated new adult content guidelines in October 2021 requiring adult merchants online to “employ strong control measures that include the monitoring, blocking, and where necessary, taking down of content as appropriate.”<sup>45</sup> Yet it is not obvious whether any of these measures have proven to be beneficial to the community they were supposedly designed to help. A 2022 survey conducted by Dr. Valerie Webber found that these guidelines negatively impacted sex workers' ability to make money online, with many reporting a huge increase in piracy and a general feeling of uneasiness within the community.<sup>46</sup>

Anti-porn legislation from the United States Congress also probably played a role in OnlyFans' decision. Just nine days before OnlyFans made their announcement, Congresswoman Ann Wagner, a Republican from Missouri, published an open letter to the Department of Justice. The letter, which received bipartisan support, requested the DOJ to investigate the “...policies, or lack thereof, that OnlyFans employs to report instances of child sexual abuse materials or child exploitation on their platform.”<sup>47</sup> It is difficult to tell if this proposed investigation will move forward seeing that OnlyFans is not a U.S.-based company. Considering the timeline, it is likely that these threats, alongside the banking issues, scared OnlyFans investors. An OnlyFans representative spoke on these investigations to *The Wall Street Journal* and doubled down on the company's commitment to safety, saying they have a “zero tolerance policy related to child sexual abuse materials.”<sup>48</sup> The site bans anyone under the age of 18 from creating an account,

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<sup>45</sup> Mastercard. “AN 5196 New Specialty Merchant Registration Requirements for Adult Content Merchants,” 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Webber, Valerie. “The Impact of Mastercard's Adult Content Policy on Adult Content Creators - Survey Results & Analysis.” ResearchGate, February 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Wagner, Ann. “Wagner Letter to Department Of Justice Re: OnlyFans,” August 10, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Tweh, Bowdeya, and Georgia Wells. “OnlyFans Suspends Plan to Ban Sex Videos.” *The Wall Street Journal*, August 25, 2021.

and users wishing to post anything (even just a text post) must complete an identity verification process in compliance with Mastercard and Visa's new guidelines.

Also at play is the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers and Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (SESTA-FOSTA) and the Eliminating Abusive and Rampant Neglect of Interactive Technologies Act (EARN IT act). SESTA-FOSTA, enacted in 2018 under the Trump administration, looked to stop the spread of sex trafficking resources on the internet. As noted by Ian Thompson of the American Civil Liberties Union, the law is not specific in what it seeks to eliminate, with vague language used throughout - such as, "promotion of prostitution."<sup>49</sup> This broad definition can be interpreted in many ways, leading to the Department of Justice's seizure of classified advertisement site Backpage. Backpage had become a popular way to advertise for adult services and filled a gap in the market following Craigslist's decision to close their adult section in 2010.

This in turn opened the doors for additional legislation. Following on FOSTA-SESTA's heels was The EARN IT Act, first introduced in 2020 but yet to be signed into law. EARN IT specifically targets online platforms that host adult content. Kate Ruane of ACLU states that EARN IT Act would "... force online platforms into changing how they moderate content online by scanning and censoring more of their users' communications."<sup>50</sup> While this bill aims to eliminate the presence of child exploitation materials online, its insistence on cracking down on strong encryption would also threaten privacy and online speech rights. If this bill were to pass, it would endanger the privacy of sex workers, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community, many of whom rely on encryption to organize and share resources.

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<sup>49</sup> Thompson, Ian. "Congress Proposes to Fight Online Trafficking By Harming Sex Workers." American Civil Liberties Union, March 16, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Ruane, Kate. "The EARN IT Act Is a Disaster for Online Speech and Privacy, Especially for the LGBTQ and Sex Worker Communities." American Civil Liberties Union, June 30, 2020.



Concerns about sex trafficking and child sexual abuse materials online are legitimate - both are genuine issues that need to be taken seriously. However, both acts only serve to isolate sex workers from their communities, which can force them back to street-based work, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. The sex work community, including porn producers, takes consent very seriously, but lawmakers seem to be convinced otherwise. FOSTA-SESTA's passage led to Mastercard and Visa's new merchant guidelines, which in turn influenced OnlyFans' ban. This legislation is ill-formed, as the sex work community was not consulted during this process, and sex workers have been negatively impacted as a result.

As expected, the response to OnlyFans's ban was catastrophic and devastating to the site's creator community in general. Sex workers were shocked that OnlyFans, one of the few remaining sex work-friendly sites, would betray them despite being the reason for the site's recent success. Many took to social media to express their anger, and soon even the general public was ridiculing OnlyFans for the decision. Mainstream media news outlets, such as the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and even Fox News picked up on the story, which provided more insight into the reasons behind the decision and allowed sex workers another platform to express their frustrations and fears. Then, a few days later, OnlyFans reversed their decision - sexually explicit material could remain. This news was published on the site's Twitter page, stating that they had managed to secure the "... assurances necessary to support our diverse creator community."<sup>51</sup> It is unclear what these assurances were, and the company has yet to comment further. Many saw this reversal as a win; however, the damage was irreversible for sex workers who had relied on OnlyFans as a source of income. It was a reminder that money remains an enormous factor in whether porn can exist online, and that OnlyFans, which had been

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<sup>51</sup> OnlyFans, Twitter post, August 25 2021, 7:56 a.m.

seen as the champions of porn work in today and seemed to care about their creators, were willing to cut them loose.

A lot has happened since the company's ban and abrupt reversal in August 2021, beginning first with Tim Stokely's announcement in December that he would be stepping down as CEO of OnlyFans.<sup>52</sup> Congresswoman Wagner has also not backed down in her investigation of OnlyFans. In October, she appealed to the U.S. Department of Treasury's Financial Crimes Enforcement Network to investigate the company, "... specifically focusing on the 'assurances' that preceded OnlyFans's decision to continue allowing the sale of sexually explicit content."<sup>53</sup> In the midst of all this, unfortunately, porn sites keep getting shut down. Popular porn sites AVN Stars and GayVN Stars announced in December 2021 that they would be ending monetized content on their site.<sup>54</sup> A few months later, both announced they would be shutting down entirely.

## Preservation

What exactly would have happened to all the offending material on OnlyFans? The answer to this is not entirely clear. The initial ban was announced in August and wasn't to go into effect until October, so hypothetically creators would have had enough time to back up their content. OnlyFans did not specify how they would determine which content was sexually explicit or how they would deal with it, but it is safe to assume it would either be purged from the site or users would be asked to remove it themselves. It is worth noting that the previous ban on sexually explicit materials filmed outdoors saw the site take down the videos themselves

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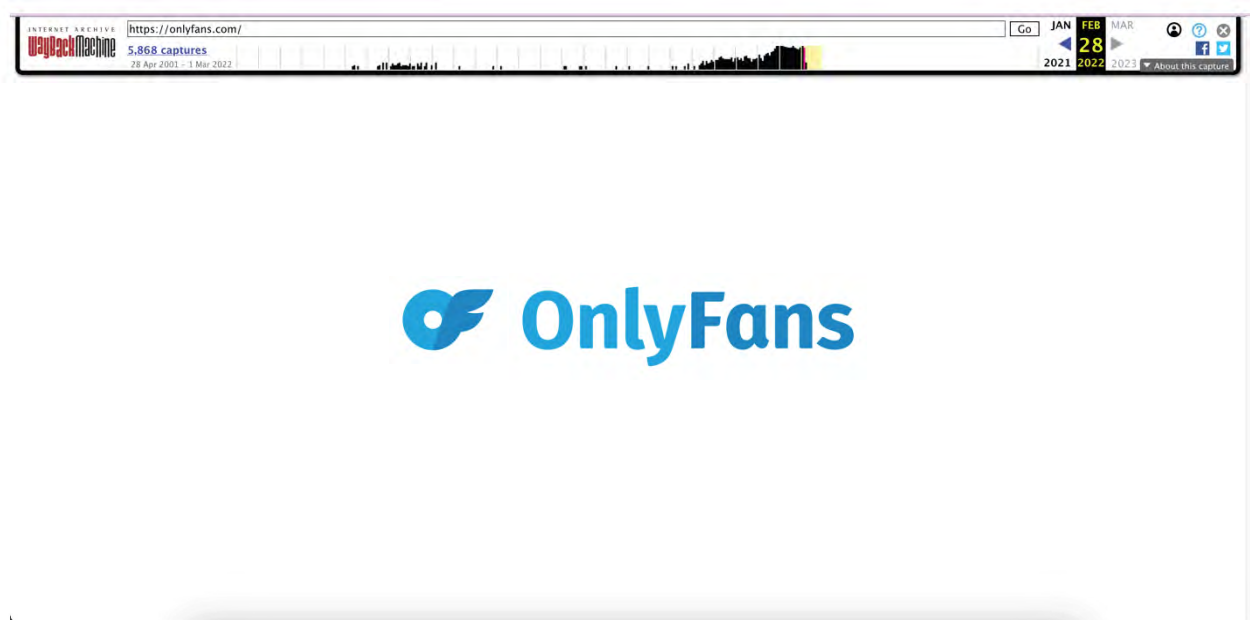
<sup>52</sup> Simonetti, Isabella. "Tim Stokely Steps Down as OnlyFans CEO, Promotes Chief Marketing Officer."

<sup>53</sup> Wagner, Ann. "OnlyFans Letter to Financial Crimes Enforcement Network," October 21, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> AVN, AVN Staff. "AVN Stars, GayVN Stars to Close on April 1st AVN." AVN, February 1, 2022.

without any warning to the creator.<sup>55</sup>

So essentially, the porn on OnlyFans would be missing in action; users may have been unable to find the videos on the site, but copies of the material would ultimately still exist. The site's free content, for example, can be scraped, and documentation exists on Github for open-source OnlyFans data scrapers.<sup>56</sup> However, the content behind a paywall is significantly more difficult to scrape because users can only unlock posts after paying for them. This would mean that in order to preserve everything on OnlyFans - every video, photo, text post, or audio file - one would either need to find a vulnerability in the site's application programming interface or (shocking) to pay for everything! Even the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, another popular web preservation tool, is incapable of doing a web crawl on OnlyFans; previous captures only show the front-page logo of the site.<sup>57</sup>



*Figure 3 - Wayback Machine capture of OnlyFans.com from Feb 2022. Source – Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.*

<sup>55</sup> Mendez II, Moises. "Some OnlyFans Creators Were Left Scrambling When the Platform Banned Public Sex Content without Warning." Insider (blog), March 18, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> DIGITALCRIMINAL. OnlyFans DataScraper (Python 3.9.X). Python, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> Wayback Machine. "OnlyFans." Internet Archive Wayback Machine, March 1, 2022.

Today, most people's archives exist on the cloud or an external hard drive, and both strategies have unique issues for sex workers. Creators could have copies of their work backed up, but one should not automatically assume that every creator has the means necessary to do this. As anyone in the archival field knows, file loss can easily happen due to data corruption or human error, and the expense of digital storage can discourage backups as well. Cloud storage, in particular, has proved not to be a reliable solution for sex workers. Heather Berg notes that there have been numerous instances where Google Drive deleted sexually explicit videos from their accounts with no warning, and the creators have effectively lost the only copy they had.<sup>58</sup>

## Conclusion

The pornography that gets the most attention from archivists and scholars is vintage pornography and commercially released narrative features. A classic example of this is *Deep Throat* (1972); its release in theaters allowed pornography to integrate within mainstream culture and was perhaps the catalyst that prompted further discussion into the value of moving image smut. There is nothing wrong with archives and scholars wanting to focus their energies on preserving and writing about narrative features, and I am in no way trying to discourage or criticize them for doing so. However, this focus also keeps others from seeing examples of more recent work that has since come to dominate the porn industry. Additionally, key figures in porn studies and film preservation have made a point to distance themselves from today's porn industry. These figures include Linda Williams, who has argued that this distance will help maintain porn studies' credibility within academia, and the genre film distribution company Vinegar Syndrome, whose founders told *The New York Times* that their goal was to provide

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<sup>58</sup> Berg, Heather. *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism*.

value over titillation.<sup>59</sup>

One of the reasons for this focus is due to the shift in how individuals consume pornography. In the early half of the 20th century, there were stag films. Those wanting to view stag films had to be involved within the circle in which these materials circulated and had to be willing to watch alongside others. The porno chic era of the 1970s and '80s films saw the beginning of wide releases across the country, but even then, one had to be close to a theater showing the film and willing to view the materials with an audience. The introduction of home film and video formats, first beginning in the 1960s, allowed viewership to shift again. Small gauge film such as 8mm and magnetic media allowed consumers to both make and own pornographic films that could then be watched at home. In the 21st century, porn is easily accessible to anyone with an internet connection. Today, viewing porn is a private act done at home and not something to make conversation about or educate others on.

Pornography production has also changed drastically since the porno chic era. While narrative porn features continue to be produced, most of today's porn is shorter than 60 minutes and is created independently, without the help of a production company, allowing creators more creative and financial control. There is a vast amount of porn found online, ranging from classic tropes to oddly specific kinks. Online spaces like OnlyFans have allowed porn to grow into an intimate new medium separate from the pornography that most people are familiar with. This is almost akin to advertisements or educational films, which can be classified as moving images for all intents and purposes but are not roped into a classic film definition. Advertisements and educational films were passed over when it came to preservation for a long time because they were seen as ubiquitous or lowbrow. Upon further reflection, both are now considered to be

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<sup>59</sup> Williams, Linda. "Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field." ; Piepenburg, Erik. "Smut, Refreshed for a New Generation." The New York Times, January 23, 2014, sec. Movies.

valuable artifacts that provide an honest insight into historical trends that may otherwise not be found in motion pictures. Similarly, today's porn should not be shoehorned into previous descriptions of pornography and needs to be taken on its own terms. The internet has revolutionized porn in a way that deserves to be remembered, especially with consideration of its historical value. Porn scholar John Stadler notes that "... Covid-19 will serve as an important inflection point, just as [the] 2008 [Great Recession] did for the adult industry."<sup>60</sup> The 2008 recession directly contributed to the surge in porn found online, just as the COVID-19 pandemic did with materials on OnlyFans. Both instances speak to the power of the internet and the porn industry's ability to harness that power to make a profit. It is also a powerful new narrative that deserves to be documented and remembered alongside archived pornography.

These sorts of discussions can happen when the materials are accessible, but this cannot happen if they are missing. It is true that material loss is inevitable, especially when it comes to born-digital materials; however, the problem here is that the loss of OnlyFans content would not have occurred organically. Instead, the materials have been targeted with little regard to how their deletion might affect their creators and the historical record. It is lucky that OnlyFans did not go through with the ban and that these videos are still up on the website, but this is something that can easily change.

Archives, which traditionally focus on preserving physical materials, are still in the process of establishing standards for born-digital collecting and preservation. So far, born-digital porn has yet to enter many archives in America due to general institutional neglect that nobody really wants to address or challenge. The argument that the preservation of porn should be the sole responsibility of creators and enthusiasts is flawed, especially if this view comes from

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<sup>60</sup> Stadler, John Paul. "Pornographic Altruism, or, How to Have Porn in a Pandemic," *Synoptique* Special Issue "Porn and Its Uses," 9.2 (Fall 2021).

within an institutional archive. Porn preservation is not as simple as it may seem, and creators are hard-pressed for the time and resources that many archives have at their disposal. Donations from clients or porn enthusiasts are not a viable or ethical strategy for collection development, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. Despite this, pornography enthusiasts have contributed a significant amount of pornography that can be found throughout archives in the United States.

Archives are in a unique position because preserving porn advocates for the work as it is and advocates for sex work in general. The inclusion of born-digital porn within the archive will encourage more scholarship, further solidifying this material's place within the canon. However, the only way this can truly be accomplished is if materials are acquired through purchases or donations from the creators themselves instead of through third parties unassociated with its productions. If porn is to be ethically preserved, archives would need to recognize the risks at hand, the challenges that must be overcome, and be prepared to make room for sex workers in this process.

## Chapter Two - Challenges

This chapter examines the challenges that come with an institutional archive acquiring porn and investigates some possible solutions. It should be said that this is not a complete list of challenges; public attitudes toward porn are constantly shifting and it is truly impossible to predict whether additional challenges will pop up in the future. These solutions strive to follow archival and preservation best practices, while also accounting for those moments when these standards cannot be achieved. Additionally, these solutions aim to practice radical empathy in interactions with creators, subjects, users, and both the sex work and archival community. Radical empathy, as defined by Michele Caswell and Marika Cifor in their essay “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” seeks to consider the perspectives of all people who may come in contact with archival materials.<sup>61</sup> What makes this practice radical is that the perspective of the copyright owner, who traditionally has the last say in how materials are distributed and preserved, is instead on equal footing as someone portrayed in the materials or even someone who merely wants to view them. In radical empathy, no one person is greater than another and archivists work to understand differing perspectives and find an appropriate solution.

### Re: Private collectors and porn enthusiasts

Consider the origins of a porn collection, or better yet, consider who may collect porn. Some collections are started intentionally while others may grow slowly over time. One example of an intentional collector of porn is a production company or producer, which likely

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<sup>61</sup> Caswell, Michelle, and Marika Cifor. “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives.” *Archivaria*, The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists, no. 81 (2016): 21.



has an archive of past productions, in addition to b-roll footage and other materials. Typically, production companies own the copyright to everything in their archive.<sup>62</sup> Independent content creators such as those who post on OnlyFans also collect intentionally and likely have some sort of personal archive of their materials. Likewise, these creators will also own the copyright. And finally, we have the private collector. The role of the private collector has evolved over the past twenty years thanks to technological advances. Before the internet, those who collected pornography collected physical media - film, magnetic tape, paper - and did so through purchases from sex shops or trades with other collectors. Some of these collectors were commentators such as Susie ‘Sexpert’ Bright, whose personal collection is now held at Cornell University, one of the few archives in the United States that openly collects pornography. Others were enthusiasts who just enjoyed the content and collected materials for their own personal use. As reported by Whitney Strub, Cornell University also has a collection of bootlegged gay pornography from the 1980s along with a handwritten ledger containing the anonymous donor's thoughts on each film.<sup>63</sup> Obtaining bootlegged copies has often been the preferred method of collectors, especially considering the challenges that came with distributing porn during the 20th century. Pornography could not even be possessed by individuals in the United States until the establishment of the right to privacy in 1969 with the landmark court case *Stanley v. Georgia*.<sup>64</sup> As such, private collectors of vintage pornography are often hailed as heroes to researchers; while most archives quietly dealt with (or ignored) the pornography in their collections, private collectors saw its value and actively took time to preserve and share their collections. It is quite

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<sup>62</sup> Berg, Heather. *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism*.

<sup>63</sup> Strub, Whitney. “Indexing Desire: The Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection as Affective Archive,” *Out of the Closet, Into the Archive: Researching Sexual Histories*, eds. Amy Stone and Jaime Cantrell (SUNY Press, 2015).

<sup>64</sup> *Stanley v. Georgia*, No. 394 U.S. 557 (Supreme Court of the United States 1969).

remarkable that we even have any pornography in the archive and that is undoubtedly due to donations from private collectors.

With all that said, when it comes to acquiring porn, archives should not rely on private collectors, nor should archives rely on the preservation methods that private collectors use today. Collecting porn is a lot different from collecting 16mm or VHS copies of porno-chic era films. While subscription sites like OnlyFans present unique preservation challenges, porn hosted on ‘tube sites’ that do not use paywalls like Pornhub is relatively easy to collect. Several open-source tools exist that can download videos such as those featured on that site; one of the most popular of these is youtube-dl, which boasts a long list of compatible sites and is even powerful enough to download entire channels or playlists.<sup>65</sup> Pirating also allows for continual uploading of one’s own downloaded copies if the original is taken down, which can lead to the video again being further downloaded and shared by others. Video downloads can easily have their metadata manipulated; even simply opening a file can potentially change the date and time stamps.<sup>66</sup> Downloads can then be renamed and or further manipulated using video editing software. This can easily venture into the realm of deepfakes, a type of synthetic media that has grown in popularity over the past several years and is often used to spread misinformation. Some of the more well-known examples of deepfakes portray celebrities or politicians saying things out of character, but porn deepfakes could use the likeness of one’s past partners, or even complete strangers.

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<sup>65</sup> “Youtube-Dl: Supported Sites.” Accessed February 21, 2022. <http://ytdl-org.github.io/youtube-dl/supportedsites.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Redwine, Gabriela, Megan Barnard, Kate Donovan Farr, Erika, Michael Forstrom, William M Hansen, Jeremy Leighton John, Nancy Kuhl, Seth Shaw, and Susan Thomas. *Born Digital: Guidance for Donors, Dealers, and Archival Repositories*, 2013.

All of this further separates the creator from their materials and with that, context is lost. Viewers are left to wonder: Who are the people in this video? Are they porn stars or amateurs? Do they know that another copy of the video exists? And it is important to stress the necessity of this context, especially if the origins of a video being acquired are ever deemed questionable. Are all parties consenting to the acts on view? More importantly, are all parties capable of consenting? Child exploitation videos and revenge porn should never, under any circumstances, be preserved. That has not stopped others from trying to do just this - Is Anybody Up? and Is Anybody Down? are just two examples of revenge porn sites that have been shut down within the past 10 years.<sup>67</sup> Is Anybody Down? is also saved on the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, although all photos and videos have been removed.<sup>68</sup> Most porn tube websites inevitably are captured by the Wayback Machine, granting users an expansive digital archive to browse. Pornhub alone has been saved over 65,000 times since 2001.<sup>69</sup>



Figure 4 - Wayback Machine results for Pornhub.com from Feb 2022. Source – Internet Archive's Wayback Machine

<sup>67</sup> Hill, Kashmir. "IsAnyoneUp Is Now Permanently Down." Forbes, April 19, 2012; On the Media. "Is Anybody Down?" WNYC Studios, November 15, 2012.

<sup>68</sup> "Wayback Machine - Isanybodydown.com." Accessed February 21, 2022.

<sup>69</sup> "Wayback Machine - Pornhub.Com." Accessed February 21, 2022.

The Wayback Machine allows users to archive downloads of a website on any given day and can capture practically every aspect, including a video's metadata. In theory, this is good for creators, who can then use this metadata to find videos and file takedown claims if their copyright has been infringed. Participants in videos that are not the copyright owners can also request takedowns, which have been sought to varying degrees of success. Even then, it can be very difficult to remove content from the internet, especially if what is being removed has gone viral.

These are the consequences of leaving porn preservation to web archivers and porn enthusiasts: data can be easily manipulated, instances of abuse get roped in with consensual porn, and the copyright owner has the only real say in how the material is made accessible. A lot of porn has already been preserved by enthusiasts using the methods discussed and they will continue to do so even if these tools were to be taken away. However, relying on piracy is not an ethical way to preserve porn, chiefly based on the damage it does to the porn community, and archives should not engage in this sort of activity. Piracy prevents paychecks and independent creators suffer at the expense of this practice.<sup>70</sup> It may be time for archives to reconsider their relationships with private collectors going forward. Enthusiasts have played a key role in the establishment of many collections, but there are good reasons to prioritize the interests of the creators of porn. While many will argue that anything uploaded to the internet may be saved by someone else, the issue is somewhat complicated if what they are saving is porn. Porn may be commercial at heart but that does not mean the rights of those who appear in it should be forgotten. Just as anyone has the right to withdraw consent from sex, anyone should also have

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<sup>70</sup> Berg, Heather. *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism*.

the right to withdraw from having their image preserved and made accessible, even if they are not copyright holders.

#### Fwd: Creators and production companies

If an archive were presented with the choice to acquire materials straight from the producers, or from a third party not directly associated with them, the right answer would be to default to the creators. These would be the best circumstances, and for a variety of reasons: the materials are coming from the creator so provenance and copyright could be easily established, creators could also provide inventories and additional metadata that could be of use during the acquisition and ingest process. Most pornography currently in the archives came from donations from creators and collectors; however, collections or individual works can also be bought outright by the institution. If an archive were to purchase a porn collection, it would be best to go directly to the creator and compensate them fairly. This may seem like a no-brainer but collecting institutions are often more than willing to forego this last point. Some may remember the controversy surrounding the Whitney Museum in 2020 when black artists' work was acquired at a discounted price during an online fundraiser. Rahel Aima of *The Art Newspaper* reported that none of the artists were made aware of this purchase or planned exhibition until after the sale, nor were they aware that their works would have also been ingested into Whitney's special collections.<sup>71</sup> It is completely inappropriate for a multi-million dollar institution to engage in this sort of collecting and this should not become a norm.

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<sup>71</sup> Aima, Rahel. "Whitney Museum Cancels Show Following Artists' Accusations of Exploitation." *The Art Newspaper*, August 25, 2020.

For any of this to happen, connections need to be made with producers, both porn production companies and independent creators. Acquisition is a complex, multi-step process that requires consistent engagement from both the donor and recipient. Each collection presents its own unique challenges, and it is critical that both parties remain on the same page throughout the process. It is also important that the relationship between the donor and recipient continue long after acquisition to ensure that the collection remains in good care.

There are a few key elements that need to be established right from the beginning. First, curators need to be respectful of the donor's time and boundaries. It may not always be appropriate to send a creator a direct message on OnlyFans. Connections can be made in other ways, perhaps potentially starting with digital preservation workshops tailored toward the needs of independent creators online. Creators may be disinclined to hear a preservation proposal, especially if the archive is the one to initiate the conversation. While individuals and production companies may very well be interested in long-term preservation, that sort of enthusiasm cannot be assumed of every person. Institutional archives, especially those in the United States, represent an enormous power rooted in white supremacy and colonialism. This power has long exploited marginalized communities and archivists today are still in the process of rectifying these practices. Sex workers may be uncomfortable with the idea of their materials being held by such a power and that discomfort is not to be argued with.

## Preservation

### An archive's role

It is important to first discuss the responsibilities an archive must assume when taking on a new acquisition. These will likely differ across institutions but, as noted in the Library of

Congress's legal guide to film deposits, for most acquisitions, an archive assumes responsibility for the “storage, preservation, restoration, and cataloging of deposit materials” as well as other measures like security.<sup>72</sup> The needs of the donor, as well as the availability of funding and staff, can also largely affect these responsibilities as well. There are many different types of archival care and there are a lot of differences between film preservation and digital preservation. All moving images - whether they are film, magnetic tape, or digital - deteriorate over time. When an archive takes in a collection, it is making a commitment to preserve the materials to the best of its ability. For film preservation, this may mean duplicating the film onto a newer film stock or a digital restoration.<sup>73</sup> Other tasks might include making room for the reels in temperature-controlled storage, rehousing the films into new canisters, repairing splices, and doing other remediation treatments to any films that may be in advanced stages of decay. Magnetic media requires a different type of preservation, although it does share similarities with analog film. Items must be stored upright in temperature-controlled storage and potentially rehoused. Tapes with sticky shed syndrome need to be baked and digitized, others may also need new cases, or be just covered in mold.

Digital preservation typically comes into play following digitization, and the method of care will largely depend on the materials' original format and the archive's desired outcomes. When it comes to video digitization, most institutions are strict with the codecs and wrappers they use. But when acquiring born-digital materials, archives cannot be choosy. Producers use all kinds of digital formats for the work they create. Care for the digital object will then largely depend on its format and age. Donations may include computers, external hard drives, or cloud

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<sup>72</sup> National Film Preservation Board. “Depositing Films with Archives: A Guide to the Legal Issues.” Library of Congress, August 1994.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

accounts; individual formats could include MP4, MOV, MKV, JPEG, TIFF, and any number of proprietary file codecs. Following an initial survey of the materials, archives will create a plan to best preserve them. Donors and archivists should not open or alter any files prior to the donation, and donors need to make archivists aware of any materials that they do not want to include. Once the collection has been handed over, archivists then migrate the materials to a new storage device. It is best practice to use a WriteBlocker during this process. Once migration is complete, archivists can use file manifests and begin the inventory process.

### Storage and privacy

Storage is a critical component of the preservation process. The donor and the archive both need to agree on where the materials will be ultimately housed, whether that is onsite or offsite.<sup>74</sup> Storage for physical objects can be costly, especially since film and video elements need to be kept in specific environments to ensure long-term stability. The same can also be said of digital storage. To preserve digital material, archives must have some sort of digital infrastructure already in place or have the means to start one. A standard method used in digital storage is the “3, 2, 1” method: three copies of the data on two different types of media with one copy each in a different location. Archives may choose to house data locally on servers or RAIDS. Cloud storage has also risen in popularity over the past 10 years, with many smaller archives opting to use Google Drive or Amazon Web services to host their digital files. Most archives have some version of this method in place for their digital materials, but there are many who choose to go about it differently. UCLA’s Film & Television Archive, for example, is more of a traditional analog film archive with limited storage for its digitized film materials.<sup>75</sup> At this

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Todd Wiener, Motion Picture Curator at UCLA.



point in time, they do not have the capacity to support digital preservation any further than that. USC's Moving Image Archive operates similarly, existing mainly as an analog film archive with limited digital storage used only for film school graduates.<sup>76</sup>

Archives must also make a commitment to store materials in stable and secure environments. This often means making security arrangements or limiting access to certain materials. Privacy and piracy can be a major concern for some creators, and it is important for archives to be open and receptive to anyone who may be concerned with the protocols in place. To bring back a point from the previous chapter, sex workers may be hesitant to donate their materials to an archive that primarily uses Google Drive for storage, as that service has a history of deleting explicit materials. Data leaks are also common when using the cloud, and even a company as powerful as Amazon has been susceptible to these. Additionally, those who no longer work in the industry may want to be credited under a pseudonym, to remain anonymous, or even request that materials be sealed for a certain amount of time. Archives and donors need to be prepared to work together to find the best solution. For instance, Linear-Tape Open technology is a relatively secure method of digital storage as data is stored offline until a tape is connected to a computer. Keeping materials offline is a good solution in general, especially when it comes to sensitive material and user accessibility.

### Cataloging and metadata

After a collection has been migrated and properly stored, the inventory and cataloging processes can begin. Some creators leave archives with inventories and descriptions, providing valuable metadata that can assist in the process, especially if the materials are not in a stable

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<sup>76</sup> Dino Everett, Archivist at USC.

enough condition to view. However, not all collections arrive in such an organized state. In that case, new inventories may be created, and additional research may be required to fill in any gaps. Any metadata gathered will be used to catalog the materials according to the archive's chosen standards and practices.<sup>77</sup>

While there is certainly a lot of pornography in the archives, it is not always easy to find. Archives generally have a constant backlog of unprocessed collections. The speed at which a collection is processed can depend on a lot of things: availability of staff, contact with the donor, money. Often, collections containing pornography, or even just pornography in general, are last on the list to be dealt with. Those pornographic materials that have been cataloged often fall into different categories, likely due to how they have been perceived by the creator or cataloger. To bring back a previous example, Cornell University has much of its pornography cataloged but even its standards are somewhat inconsistent. One collection (Gay male pornographic movies) may be found under the subject heading "gay men" while another collection (Gay male pornographic video collection) has been assigned to "sex in mass media" and "pornography."<sup>78</sup> Both collections primarily have films from the 1980s and 1990s. This discrepancy could become more apparent were someone to closely examine the contents of both, however, one of the collections is only partially cataloged.<sup>79</sup> Pornographic films are sometimes classified as 'erotica,' which suggests a sort of sophistication that is not found in pornography. If a film is labeled as erotic or erotica in a library catalog, seldom does the label also include pornography. This may seem like a simple thing, especially when considering that creators may also have a say

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<sup>77</sup> National Film Preservation Board. "Depositing Films with Archives"

<sup>78</sup> Gay male pornographic movies, #7637. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library; Gay male pornographic video collection, #7563. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

<sup>79</sup> One is a personal collection of bootlegged media while the other is Cornell's collection of pornographic films.

in how their material is cataloged. But it is also a reflection of the political landscape surrounding language in the archive. As Raananah Sarid-Segal writes, “Though in popular culture the library and archive is thought of as a quiet and peaceful place for reflection on history, they are quite frequently the sites of battles over how the people and events of the past and present are named.”<sup>80</sup> Sagrid-Segal goes on to describe how the 1970s gay liberation movement began the discussion on queer access within libraries, starting first with removing associations that suggested homosexuality was deviant or perverse. Pornography continues to be caught in the crossfires of classification, and the language used (or omitted) from its descriptions often speaks volumes about how it is viewed by the archive. On one hand, allowing for granularity certainly allows for a wide breadth of viewpoints whereas being general and labeling all sexually explicit materials as ‘pornography’ - or ‘XXX’ - symbolically puts red tape around the item. But how far can one go with granularity or even explicitness for that matter? Just look at Pornhub, which offers over 50 categories of porn including “Gay,” “Furry,” “Hentai,” “Amateur,” and “Pissing.”<sup>81</sup> Porn videos can get hyper-specific at times and may include the use of derogatory terms or even slurs, language that is often used because people get off on it. Archives do not necessarily need to be on the same level as Pornhub in terms of classification; however, they could benefit from expanding previous definitions and including new categories as well. The word ‘pornography’ does have a negative connotation attached to it, but its use within catalogs and finding aids, especially openly, normalizes the materials for what they are. And if problematic language is used in videos, archives should not censor the materials but should work to provide context on why it is being used. Further, it is important for the sex work

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<sup>80</sup> Sarid-Segal, Raananah. “Trans Lives in Metadata in the Archive, Past and Future.” Masters, New York University, 2017.

<sup>81</sup> Pornhub. “Pornhub Categories: Find Your Favorite Free Hardcore Porn Videos.” Pornhub, 2022. <https://www.pornhub.com/categories>.

community to be consulted during this process. Language is allowed to evolve, and communities coopt words and phrases all the time. Sex workers will be able to point to unacceptable language and can assist the archive in updating terminology to be more inclusive.

All this work cannot be done without staff, who are essential to this process. Cataloging is a tedious process that requires the attention of a human being who may spend years working on a single collection. Cataloging video or film can be particularly taxing, as moving images demand more of the viewer's attention compared to a photograph. Naturally, some staff may be uncomfortable working with pornography. If an archive knowingly acquires pornography, curators have a responsibility to make staff aware and to make accommodations if they are not comfortable working with it. Failure to do so is disrespectful and should not be tolerated. At the same time, if pornography is unknowingly acquired and later discovered by staff, they need to be allowed to opt-out if they want to.

## Access

Preservation is not preservation without access. There would be no point in preserving something if no one is allowed to see it. Archives have a responsibility to at least try and make everything in their collections available to the public in some way, whether in-person or online. This sentiment is outlined in the Universal Declaration on Archives, which states that “[o]pen access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens’ rights and enhances the quality of life”<sup>82</sup> While there may be exceptions to this, open access is something that every archive should strive towards. Obsolescence is often one of these exceptions that can prevent the materials from being seen. Magnetic tape media is an unstable

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<sup>82</sup> International Council on Archives. “Universal Declaration on Archives - Archives Record Decisions, Actions and Memories.” International Council on Archives, September 2010.

format compared to analog film and therefore the materials must be digitized prior to being made accessible to a user. Any media in an advanced stage of decay, such as vinegar syndrome or sticky shed, often cannot be digitized. Reformatting can also be an expensive and time-consuming process and some larger collections can take years to finish.

But what if the media is already digital or has been digitized? Surely then open access is a possibility? This may not always be the case, especially with pornography. To illustrate, JSTOR's Reveal Digital project digitized and published full issues of *On Our Backs*, a lesbian porn magazine in 2016. This project caused a stir in the archival community after it was revealed that despite having permission from the copyright owner, they had not consulted anyone who appeared in the magazine prior to the digitized scans being made public online. Following this revelation, librarian Tara Robertson spoke with the project director about this decision, who stated that there needs to be a "balance of interests" between the users accessing the collection and the subjects of the materials.<sup>83</sup> As Robertson says in her case study on the situation, the phrase "balance of interests" suggests that access to this collection by researchers is "on even ground" with the subjects who could potentially face professional and personal consequences if the materials are made public. Reveal Digital also cited the 2008 court case *Greenberg v. National Geographic Society*, which gives them "the legal right to create a faithful digital reproduction of the publication, without the need to obtain permissions from individual contributors."<sup>84</sup> This court decision is very much in line with traditional archival practices - that is, only concerned with copyright - and while Reveal Digital was not violating anyone's

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<sup>83</sup> Robertson, Tara. "Not All Information Wants to Be Free: The Case Study of On Our Backs." In *Applying Library Values to Emerging Technology: Decision-Making in the Age of Open Access, Maker Spaces, and the Ever-Changing Library*, 225–39. *Publications in Librarianship* 72. American Library Association, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

copyright by publishing these materials online, doing so without the permission of the subjects was unethical.

Does this also apply to born-digital materials? After all, *On Our Backs* was an in-print magazine with limited circulation during its run. It makes sense that some of the subjects would be concerned about their privacy, especially since every issue is freely available on the internet. But if something is already available on the internet, or is in a format that makes sharing on the internet easy, do archives then have to be concerned about the privacy of the subjects if permission from the copyright holder is obtained? Further, is someone's participation in porn, which was meant to be circulated and seen widely, consenting to preserving their likeness in an archive? Archivists, in acting as caretakers, have a responsibility to consider the perspectives of the subjects of the materials, and these perspectives need to be considered when making archival decisions, including the decision to make the materials openly available. This is a responsibility that extends to digital video and porn, regardless of its commercial status. If subjects signed an agreement with the creator regarding the material's distribution, this agreement should be a determining factor. If there is no paperwork, archives would need to try to find the subjects and get consent prior to sharing the materials widely. It may not always be possible to locate the subject for a good number of reasons. Still, it is important that archives consider a subject's potential point of view when it comes to making materials widely available.

With the discussion of limited access also comes a discussion of how this may affect a user of the collection. Why take the time to preserve something if no one can access it? Furthermore, why make digital materials available on a limited basis when they could easily be shared? And if porn is truly worthy of preservation, why limit access to users who may otherwise go online to find other, similar material? It should first be understood that there is no

standard user of the archive; those who wish to do archival research come from different backgrounds and seek information for various purposes. However, often priority is given to “qualified researchers” who are affiliated with some sort of institution. The Kinsey Institute is somewhat notorious for this rule, sometimes requiring researchers to submit a reference letter and description of their project before being granted access to the collection.<sup>85</sup> COVID-19 has also caused many institutions to further restrict their collections out of necessity, with many university libraries limiting access to students and faculty.

Restricting access out of necessity due to a global pandemic is one thing but restricting access to a collection of pornography because it is pornography is another. Not only does restricting access effectively censor the materials, but it also separates them from their immediate community. Much discussion has been dedicated to the value that scholars may see in pornography, but they are also not the only users of an archive. Many people unaffiliated with academia conduct research in archives, often for personal research projects. Sex workers could certainly make use of these materials being available, but would they be able to, or feel comfortable enough to do so? Making connections with the sex work community will make this answer more apparent.

## Funding

The biggest challenge facing any archive today is the lack of funding and staff. Funding is what will ultimately decide if porn sites like OnlyFans are able to stay in business and will ultimately decide if porn will ever end up in an archive. Digital storage - whether that be cloud

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<sup>85</sup> Kinsey Institute. “Policies / Registration and Confidentiality Agreement,” April 2021.

storage, LTOs, or hard drives - can cost a lot, especially if archives follow standard practice and migrate media to new formats every few years. While there may be donors who are willing to fund the preservation of the materials they are donating, this cannot be assumed in every case. Potential donors also need to be aware of how funding for preservation works, and it should be made clear from the very beginning that the archive may not have the funding to take care of these materials, at least without outside assistance.<sup>86</sup>

Here arises a critical issue - many archives, especially those with non-profit status, rely on federal funding or federal grants. Born-digital work is excluded from most film preservation grants and there are few grants today dedicated to preserving born-digital media. With born-digital art is on the rise this could very well change. Unfortunately, the United States government also does not like pornography, whether it is being hosted online or on display at a museum. Alex Palmer writes that in 1990, the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center became the first museum to be charged with obscenity after opening a retrospective exhibit on the works of Robert Mapplethorpe, who is well-known for his provocative photographs of BDSM culture.<sup>87</sup> While a jury found the museum not guilty on all counts, this case remains relevant today because of its threat to both free speech and public funding for memory institutions. Conservatives have continued to challenge the use of public funds for so-called obscene material; in 2010, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery caved to pressure from conservative lawmakers and removed the video *A Fire In My Belly* by David Wojnarowicz from an exhibit. Republican Representative Eric Cantor called the exhibit an “outrageous use of taxpayer money” and accused the museum of purposely staging the exhibit to offend Christians during the Christmas

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<sup>86</sup> National Film Preservation Board. “Depositing Films with Archives”

<sup>87</sup> Magazine, Smithsonian, and Alex Palmer. “When Art Fought the Law and the Art Won.” Smithsonian Magazine. Accessed March 4, 2022.



season.<sup>88</sup> Ironically, the portion of the video that was shown at the exhibit was relatively tame and did not even include the scene of a man masturbating in front of the camera; what got everyone talking was a shot of ants crawling on a crucifix. With all this in mind, it is doubtful Congress will change its attitude anytime soon and likely that any attempt to get funds for porn preservation will be denied.



Figure 5 - Still from *A Fire in My Belly*, dir. David Wojnarowicz. Source - Carnegie Mellon University

There are several institutions in the United States that do collect and exhibit pornography without the help of government funding. One example is the Museum of Sex (MoSEX), which was denied non-profit status by the state of New York state in 2002.<sup>89</sup> Care of their collections is therefore funded through corporate memberships and ticket sales. MoSEX has often been criticized as being nothing more than a tourist attraction for straight people and to some degree, these critics are right; just look at the museum's crown jewel *SuperFunLand*, an interactive exhibit filled with sexually themed carnival games that at times feels more like a photo opportunity for social media influencers than a learning experience. MoSEX does have a very diverse collection of audiovisual materials in their archive that ultimately cannot be used in

<sup>88</sup> David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base. "A Fire in My Belly Controversy - David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base," April 21, 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Hines, Claire, and Darren Kerr, eds. *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*. London: Wallflower Press, 2012.

exhibits or events due to their funding. According to Emily Shoyer, a curator at the museum, MoSEX does not have an audiovisual archivist on staff and cannot afford to employ one to inspect their audiovisual materials. Most of the time, elements are borrowed from other archives in the New York metropolitan area, such as the Filmmaker's Co-Op, for use in display or screening. All this considered, MoSEX is still very capable of curating thought-provoking exhibits about taboo topics, such as *Reclaiming & Making: Art, Desire, Violence* which features works by artists about topics such as sex work and female genital mutilation.<sup>90</sup> Ultimately, the decisions MoSEX makes regarding what is displayed in the museum are tailored toward its survival.

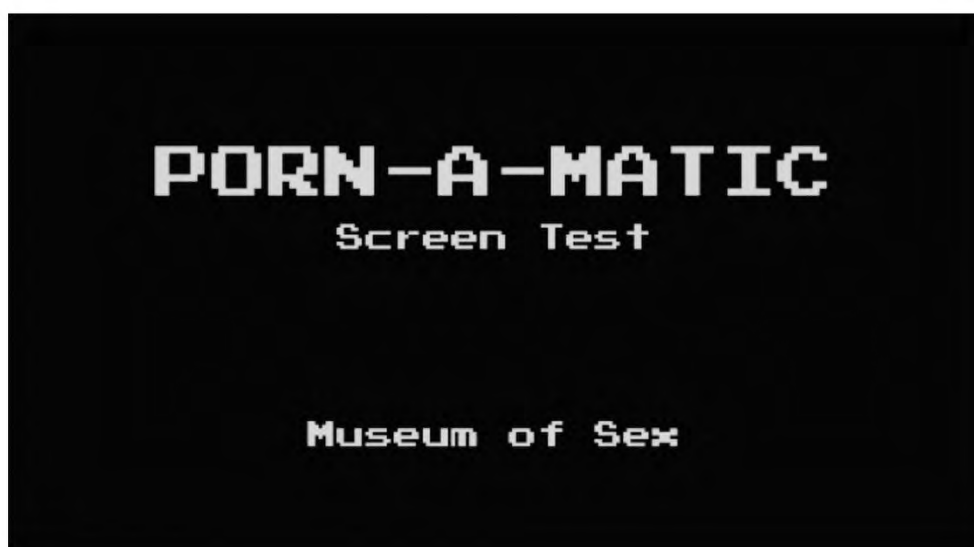


Figure 6 - PORN-A-MATIC is a simple deepfake featured in MoSEX's "SuperFunLand," that allows patrons to star in their own pornographic film. Source – Museum of Sex

Vinegar Syndrome, a film distribution company that primarily works to preserve and distribute genre films from the late 20th century, is another example of an organization that has been forced to tailor its mission to survive. Many of Vinegar Syndrome's early home video releases were adult films, which were preserved and distributed alongside other genres like

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<sup>90</sup> Emily Shoyer, curator at the Museum of Sex. Zoom conversation with author, Jan 24 2022.

horror and exploitation. This strategy was somewhat unorthodox at the time - founders Joe Rubin and Ryan Emerson saw a gap in the availability of older adult films to the general public and were quickly able to build a fanbase and reputation within the film community based on the films they added to their collection.<sup>91</sup> However, since its founding in 2012, the company has switched gears to focus on genres other than adult films, a move that somewhat echoes OnlyFans's own attempts to diversify. This shift is incredibly telling of older pornography's profitability. Despite a dedicated fanbase and a solid niche in the market, relying only on the lost pornography of the golden era is not sustainable. Yet despite pulling back from adult films, Vinegar Syndrome continues to be known as the smut peddlers of the archival world.

Are there other options? Archives could certainly appeal to a private donor; *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner funded several film preservation projects and donated money to UCLA and USC prior to his death in 2017.<sup>92</sup> Several private foundations offer grants in arts and humanities, such as the Mellon Foundation or the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.<sup>93</sup> And there is of course the DIY option. Crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter and GoFundMe have assisted in numerous film production and preservation projects over the years. Sites like Patreon also allow users to give money over extended periods of time, which can allow for internal growth within a project. But is DIY funding sustainable, especially for pornography preservation? Most of these sites forbid adult content from being posted, limiting access and possibly even incentive to donate.

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<sup>91</sup> Piepenburg, Erik. "Smut, Refreshed for a New Generation."

<sup>92</sup> Dino Everett, Archivist at USC.

<sup>93</sup> Mellon, Foundation. "About." Mellon Foundation, 2022; The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. "About – The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts." The Andy Warhol Foundation, 2022.

## Conclusion

John Water's *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) are recent inductees into the Library of Congress's National Film Registry.<sup>94</sup> While a film being inducted into the National Film Registry does not necessarily guarantee the film's preservation, it does help cement its status within the film canon which can help with preservation in the long run. Both films are not classified as pornography - exploitation and blaxploitation, respectively - but they both feature unsimulated sex scenes. Is this perhaps a sign that things are changing, that sex is no longer a taboo in cinema? Or perhaps even a sign that institutional archives are turning a cheek to their past prejudices?

Hard to say. While there has been a renewed interest in erotica over the past few years, pornography (and sex in cinema in general) continues to be shunned and questioned. Articles are published every week by major news outlets, proclaiming the death of the sex scene or focusing on how porn has destroyed American sex lives. The #MeToo movement brought awareness to past abuses within the entertainment industry but also reignited a new chapter in the feminist sex wars. And Congress, as already discussed in Chapter One, continues to persecute sex in any way possible, whether that be online or in Americans' private lives. This is certainly discouraging and puts a damper on any sort of conversation about porn preservation.

Still, porn preservation is a topic that needs to be discussed despite its stickiness and one's personal point of view, and it's a topic that needs to be discussed even after this thesis has been published. There is still much work to do, and it is first important to understand

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<sup>94</sup> Zongker, Brett, and Maria Peña. "'Return of the Jedi' Among 25 Eclectic Films Joining National Film Registry." Web page. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, December 14, 2021; Zongker, Brett. "National Film Registry Spotlights Diverse Filmmakers in New Selections." Web page. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, December 14, 2020.

pornography's place within American society, and more importantly, to understand the labor that goes into creating porn before making grand sweeping statements on its value. Moreover, archives need to reexamine the pornography in their collections to make responsible, informed decisions about the material going forward. Does this mean deaccessioning all orphan pornography or all pornography donations from private collectors? No, a move like that would truly be unproductive. Rather, archives need to recognize how collections were acquired, assess the ways these materials have been cataloged, and take steps to challenge previous narratives and politics that may have influenced these decisions.

I know, I know...easier said than done. As already demonstrated, archives and their staff are stretched thin as is and many lack the funding necessary to even get through their non-pornographic backlogs. However, there are organizations and individuals - in America and across the world - who are already having conversations about porn preservation and who should be looked to as a resource in the future. I want to take the time to highlight a few organizations that were incredibly helpful to my own research.

Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto holds the Sexual Representations Collection, which is an absolute treasure. There is a lot of pornography found in the individual collections and it comes from a variety of places, including sex workers and private collectors. This is also one of the few archives that I found during my research that actively collects porn from the 21st century. Kink.com, an iconic BDSM and bondage porn production company, has its digital archive as part of the collection.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, this archive has made many connections with the sex work community in Canada

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<sup>95</sup> Patrick Keilty, Archive Director of Sexual Representations Collection. Zoom conversation with author, March 2 2022.

and its director, Patrick Keilty, emphasized that sex workers have open access to view its materials.

PinkLabel.TV is an online streaming platform dedicated to hosting adult films, ranging from recent independent productions to old classics. PinkLabel.TV takes piracy very seriously and has been incredibly outspoken about the damage it can do and the importance of paying independent creators. In addition to the resources it provides creators featured on the site, PinkLabel.TV has also written numerous resources for creators on other sites on how they can protect their work.<sup>96</sup> Up-and-coming creators are often showcased as part of their programming, and they also host the San Francisco PornFilmFestival annually.

OldPros is a production company that works to tell the stories of sex workers and aims to challenge previous narratives that have come to rule how sex work is perceived by the public. One of their projects is the Oldest Profession Podcast, which tells the stories of important figures in the sex work movement such as Maya Angelou, and features interviews with sex workers of today.<sup>97</sup> Old Pros is also very active in surveying the landscape on a global scale and disseminating that information via their newsletters.

Urban Justice Center is a non-profit legal organization based in New York City. One of their ongoing projects is the Sex Workers Project, which provides free legal assistance to sex workers and human trafficking survivors. Urban Justice Center also assists in policy research and works to share this information within communities to destigmatize sex work. The organization also recently premiered a new docuseries, entitled *Sex(ual) Healing*, which features voices from the

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<sup>96</sup> PinkLabel.tv. "CRASH COURSE: 5 Ways to Protect Your Film Against Porn Piracy." PinkLabel.TV, December 2, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Fletcher, Charlene. "Maya Angelou: Sex Worker Is Part of Her Esteemed Legacy." Old Pros (blog), February 2, 2022.

NYC sex work community and tells their story.<sup>98</sup> The first episode was featured at the *Reclaiming and Making: Art, Desire, and Violence* exhibit at the Museum of Sex in 2022.

This discussion would also not be complete without addressing the current political climate surrounding sex work, whether that be online or in-person. FOSTA-SESTA did a lot of damage to the sex work community, and they are still dealing with the ramifications. EARN IT will only continue to hurt the community and can lead to more sex work-positive sites being shut down in the future. The only way for this damage to be amended is to decriminalize sex work. Decriminalization cannot be achieved without the support of the masses, but it is also key to listen to and amplify the voices of sex workers first and foremost in this fight. Anyone with an interest in pornography, whether that be vintage or new, owes it to the sex work community to stay up to date on these issues and to push for their involvement in policymaking.

There is one more thing that I want to address and that is pornography education. Ultimately, pornography needs to be discussed alongside sex education. Porn's retreat to the private sphere is doing no favors for the youth of America, who are already given the bare minimum in terms of what they are allowed to learn about their bodies in public and private schools. Most teenagers today turn to the internet when they have questions about their own sexualities and have likely already been exposed to porn, yet no one - not a parent or a high school - seems to want to educate teenagers on what porn is, why it exists, and that one can have a healthy relationship with it. And if these conversations are happening, I imagine they are short and disapproving, likely out of fear or embarrassment. This was my experience growing up during the 2000s and I am confident that many of my peers have similar stories. Yet this is a

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<sup>98</sup> Sex Workers Project, Max Skaff, and Zola Bruce. *Sex(ual) Healing*. Urban Justice Center, 2021.

radical thing to propose and such attempts to educate students on pornography are often met with an outcry, even if said classes are at a collegiate level.

Early in the research process, I was confronted with the fact that many in academia do not consider pornography to be a taboo topic. Even the suggestion that it was taboo was met with criticism, mainly because much scholarly research has been done on the subject. This may be true, but the dismissal of the taboo label shows a serious disconnect between academia and the rest of the world. What perhaps surprised me the most was the fact that the archival community seemingly subscribed to this as well, even though pornography has barely been touched within their own collections. Pornography is, in fact, a taboo topic and insisting it isn't based on academia's own progress is complacent; that nothing else needs to be done. All of us - every archivist or scholar - have a responsibility to our own communities to propel knowledge forward. Education is what allows for progress. Archives can no longer be neutral spaces and should be taking advantage of the resources at their disposal when it comes to education. Perhaps these attempts will be shut down by larger forces but that does not mean the effort cannot still be made.



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