

New book shines light on the pornography industry's unchecked power

The mindset behind pornography is changing. Once considered a distasteful taboo, 21st-century pornography has become a serious health concern for millions of Americans — both for adults and youths who can access it easily online.

In its recent [cover story](#), Time magazine profiled the damage pornography can inflict on ideas about manhood, intimacy and relationships through the eyes of the first generation who grew up in the age of online porn and are now speaking out against it.

This month, Utah became [the first state](#) to declare pornography a public health hazard amid growing evidence and concern that pornography erodes self-esteem, body image and normalizes violent sexual behaviors such as rape.

"We realize this is a bold assertion not everyone will agree on, but it's a full-fledged truth," Utah Gov. Gary Herbert [tweeted](#) of the measure.

In her new book, ["The Pornography Industry: What Everyone Needs to Know,"](#) Cal State Long Beach professor of gender and sexuality studies Shira Tarrant delves into the complex nature of the porn industry — a massive online business designed to attract and keep users with virtually no accountability or oversight.

Deseret News: What did you learn about the porn industry that surprised you the most?
Shira Tarrant: How hard it is to get the actual data on the industry itself. When it comes to political debate or laws up for consideration or religious perspectives on porn, there's plenty of opinions and resources. But when it comes to how much traffic, what is the revenue, how are these companies structured, it's really hard to pin down those numbers. That's because if porn was still about magazines or tape rentals, you could keep track of it. But now the main people tracking this are the people who run these websites.

The other problem is that when it comes to porn and academics, people snicker and don't want to fund the research about it and think it's not important. But given that it's global and how many people it employs, legal issues raised and health issues raised, sexism and racism, it's stunning to me how little info there is. Considering how many people are potentially impacted, it doesn't seem to be a research priority.

**DN: **Tell me why you wanted to write this book.

ST: Porn is an important lightning rod for several issues and where they converge. It's especially important to talk about and research because as subject matter, people push it aside and don't consider it scholarly.

Here's this media that everyone has quick access to and nobody wants to talk about, but it has implications for sexual consent, politics, sex education and also these sort of ideas that are important to us as a democracy like free speech and subjugation. All these things are embodied in porn.

DN: A lot of people think that if they don't watch porn, the industry doesn't affect them. What do you say to that?

ST: I don't think that's accurate at all. Even if you don't eat at McDonald's, it's still impacting a lot of people around you in ways you may not realize.

If someone down the street says I don't watch the porn, so it's not my problem, that's not true when teens are getting confused about what's consensual and what is bullying. This matters because we live in collective communities. If bullying is happening using sexuality and recordings, that becomes our collective concern. I'm not suggesting that porn is to blame, but porn is a big factor in our cultural landscape.

DN: Why do you think it's important for the public to know about the business side of porn specifically?

ST: There are aspects of the industry that are helpful for people to be aware of because it's an industry and media genre just like any other. It helps us understand the pieces that make up the puzzle.

For instance, if we're shopping on Amazon or eBay and we put in certain books we want and the website tells us you'd like this product, too, people aren't surprised. But for some reason, when they're going online to use porn, they forget they're on a business site that's based on algorithms and keyword searches that collect information on users — searches, time of day, geographic location. So people are in their own bubble thinking the interface is just about them and their own desire without realizing there's a company feeding them their own desires back to them.

**DN: **What do you want readers to take away from the book?

ST: That it's incredibly important to have more information and increasing conversation in our society about this issue without major reactions, but really smart, educated conversations about sexuality, consent and pornography. I'm hoping the book contributes to that in some way.

DN: What do you think needs to change here?

ST: In a perfect world, all businesses would have ethical business practices, porn included. But more research would help. We also need to have more education and cultural discussion about consent, pleasure, sexism and racism and if porn depicts these things realistically. In my experience, the first time many of my students talk about porn publicly is in my classroom. That's profound to me given how widespread porn is now. That, to me, speaks to the fact that there's a huge need for us to talk about this together.