FOR ADULTS · NOTHING EXPLICIT

The Tech-Porn Hookup

Is pornography a driver of technology or just a parasite? A close — but tasteful — look at an entwined relationship.

New York Amateur Computer Club · November 12, 2026

BEFORE WE START

House rules

For adults, informally

Mild jokes and the odd double entendre. Nothing explicit.

Black bars applied

Historical images are shown as documents, with the candid parts covered.

Out of scope

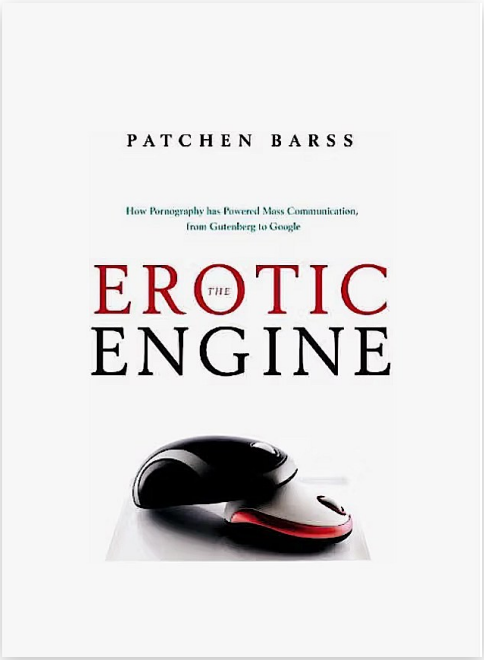
The dark web, and anything definitely illegal in nearly all jurisdictions.

No sermon, no links

Neither advocacy nor condemnation. Sites may be named; none are linked.

CREDIT WHERE DUE

The book behind this talk



Patchen Barss, *The Erotic Engine* (2010)

How Pornography has Powered Mass Communication, from Gutenberg to Google

- Great writing, broad coverage, good taste throughout
- No illustrations — and never sensationalistic
- Latest book: The Impossible Man, a biography of Roger Penrose
- Next: Smarter Than Us, with Geoffrey Hinton — due March 2027

WORKING DEFINITION

What are we talking about?

PORNOGRAPHY

Any form of representation intended primarily to provide sexual stimulation

(FOR MONEY)

The law, 1964

“I know it when I see it.”

Justice Potter Stewart, declining to define it

The platforms, today

“intended for sexual gratification”

YouTube policy — plus a long list of specifics

THESIS

Older than the internet, older than us



Sex

With us since before we were human.



Novelty

A persistent craving for variety.



Commerce

Somebody will sell you the novelty.

Rule 34 predates the internet. (Written down in 2003: “If it exists, there is porn of it.”)



PREHISTORY

Exhibit A: about 30,000 years old

Venus of Willendorf. Limestone, 11 cm tall.

Charm? Goddess? Self-portrait? Nobody knows.

Portable, private, fits in the palm: the first handheld device.

Found in Austria, 1908. Natural History Museum, Vienna. Black bars: the speaker's.

THE PATTERN

Every new medium, almost at once

79 CE

Pompeii

Frescoes so frank they were locked in a “Secret Museum.”

1520s

Print: I Modi

Engravings and sonnets, some 70 years after Gutenberg.

1748

The novel: Fanny Hill

Prosecuted for two centuries; never out of print.

1839+

Photography

Nudes at once; by the 1850s, in stereo 3D.

1896

Film

A striptease within a year of the first movie shows.

1980s

Telephone

976 and 900 lines: billing by phone bill.



JAPAN, C. 1831

You know this one

Hokusai, The Great Wave off Kanagawa.

Colour woodblock printing: cheap, fast, and sold by the thousand.

So what else did they print?

Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849)

SHUNGA: “SPRING PICTURES”



Same technology, different catalogue

Same blocks, same pigments, same workshops.

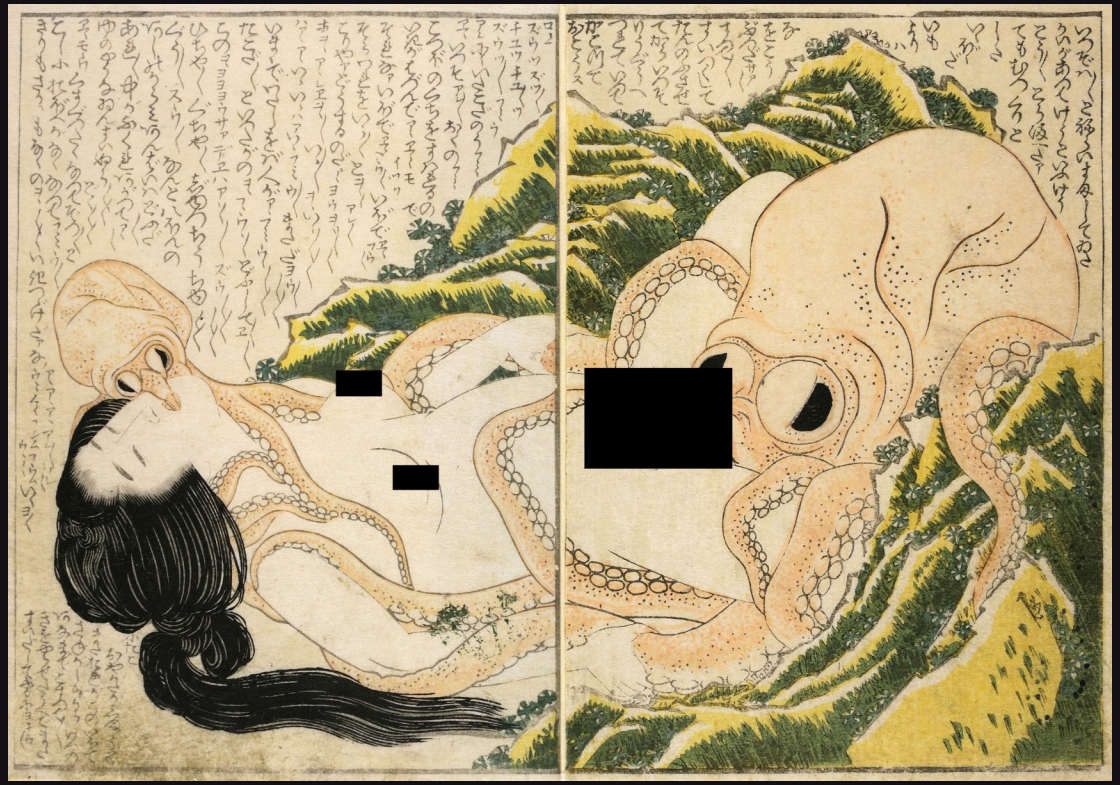
Mass-produced, technically superb, bought by all classes.

Made by the leading artists of the day.

Edo-period woodblock print. Black bar: the speaker’s.

RULE 34, EARLY

Same artist, 1814



Hokusai again: The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife.

The Great Wave’s artist, 17 years before the Wave.

Ancestor of an entire modern genre.

From Kinoe no Komatsu, 1814. Black bars: the speaker’s.

THE QUESTION

Driver or parasite?

“Porn drives technology” is really three claims. They are not equally true.

1 ?

Adoption

Porn gets to every new medium early.

2 ?

Acceleration

Its money and impatient customers make a technology grow up faster.

3 ?

Invention

It actually creates new technology.

CASE STUDY: HOME VIDEO

The Betamax legend

THE LEGEND

“Betamax was better. But Sony banned porn, the studios went to VHS, and that’s why VHS won.”

MOSTLY FALSE

THE RECORD

Betamax porn existed. Sony made the format, not the content.

Tape length. One hour on early Beta; two and up on VHS.

Price and licensing. JVC licensed VHS to everyone; Sony kept Beta close.

Barss checked his own best story — and found porn’s role overstated.

THE SURVIVING EVIDENCE

What the record does support

1977 Explicit tapes on sale a year before Hollywood's regular releases.

>50% Share of pre-recorded tape sales that were X-rated in the VCR's first years.

1994 A Dutch adult company streams video online — a decade before YouTube.

~70% Share of consumer spending on online content going to adult sites, c. 2000.

Figures as reported by historian Jonathan Coopersmith and others. Every number in this field deserves a raised eyebrow.

BUSINESS MECHANISMS

The real innovation was getting paid

1980s: the phone bill

976 and 900 numbers put the charge on your phone bill. Micropayments, before the word.

1990s: cards on the web

Subscriptions, age and card checks, fraud screening, chargebacks, affiliate programs.

ONE FAMILY TREE

CyberCash
1994: early web card payments

›

VeriSign
2001: buys the remains

›

PayPal
2005: buys VeriSign's gateway

FROM HOBBY TO BUSINESS

Porn turns free into paying

1996

JenniCam

Jennifer Ringley leaves a webcam on in her dorm room. Free to watch — then a paid tier.

FREE

Late 1990s

Cam sites

Live performers; customers pay by the minute, then by tips and tokens. A new job.

PAY PER MINUTE

2016

OnlyFans

Monthly subscriptions paid to the performer. Now called the creator economy.

SUBSCRIPTION

SECOND LIFE, 2003–

Virtual parts, real dollars

$1M

Real-dollar revenue claimed for one maker of virtual sex gear, as of 2009.

$45

Price of his best-known product: an animated bed.

Netsex came first

Unpaid encounters in text-based virtual worlds.

Avatars shipped smooth

Built like Ken and Barbie, out of the box.

Residents made the parts

And made them work. Then sold them.

Linden dollars cash out

Followed by trademarks and lawsuits.

BLIND ALLEYS

Not everything gets lucky



Haptics

“Teledildonics”: a 1970s word, still a very small niche.



Stereoscopy

Big in the 19th century. 3D film, 3D TV and VR: not so much.



Format wars

The adult trade leaned to HD-DVD. Blu-ray won.



Graphics chips

Built by games, then crypto, then AI. Not by porn.

Corollary to Rule 34: pornography will use any technology it can. Using it is not rescuing it.

THE PIONEER GETS DISRUPTED

Too much free?

“If you pay for porn online, you’ve failed the internet.”

A saying of the tube-site era

Too much free

2006–07: free tube sites plus piracy. What Napster did to music, the tubes did to the studios.

But some will always pay

For convenience, quality, and something made for them. Pictures are free; attention is not.

PAYMENTS AS REGULATOR

The rails bite back

Nov 2019 — PayPal stops payouts to Pornhub performers.

Dec 2020 — Visa and Mastercard cut Pornhub off. Millions of videos deleted in days.

Dec 2020 — Pornhub Premium goes crypto-only.

Aug 2021 — OnlyFans announces an adult-content ban, then reverses within a week.



The crypto connection?

Porn didn't build it or grow it. It reached for it when the cards were cut off.

A lifeboat, not an engine.

CASE IN POINT

Sixty years of virtual girlfriends

1966

ELIZA

A pattern-matching "therapist." People confided in it anyway.

1980s

Virtual Woman

A chat companion for the home computer. Terrible conversation; it sold.

2020s

Candy.ai and kin

Language model for personality and voice, image model for her picture. Billed monthly.

Sixty years of the same wish. The technology finally caught up.

GENERATIVE AI

AI: stimuli for any kink



Rule 34, automated

- Text, images, voice and video, made to order
- Almost no cost per item
- No need for anyone else to share your enthusiasm



The nasty end

- Upload a photo of a real person as a “character prototype”
- Get explicit video of someone who never agreed
- US Take It Down Act (2025) makes publishing it a crime, AI-made included

The verdict

Adoption	First into every new medium, woodblocks to chatbots.	YES
Acceleration	Home video, streaming, and above all online payments.	OFTEN
Invention	Mostly business mechanisms, not gadgets.	SOMETIMES
Parasite	Will use any technology it can, helpful or not.	ALSO YES

NOW

Leading, or just following?

Still leading?

- AI companions: a busy corner of consumer AI
- Pay-the-creator subscriptions spread everywhere
- Demand isn’t going anywhere

Just following?

- The AI models came from research labs
- Payment firms and app stores set the rules
- Age-verification laws bring back the witness

The legacy industry will probably stay healthy. Innovation doesn’t stop.

PENULTIMATE WORDS

“...drawn to the sexual applications of new forms of communication.”

Patchen Barss, The Erotic Engine

 Woodblock prints

 VCRs

 Chat rooms

WRAP-UP

Is porn still leading tech — or just following it?

If you find out, let me know.

Questions?

SOURCES

Further reading

Books and papers

- **Patchen Barss, The Erotic Engine (2010) — start here**
- Jonathan Coopersmith, “Pornography, Technology and Progress,” ICON 4 (1998)
- Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum (1987)
- Peter Alilunas, Smutty Little Movies (2016)

Images

Venus of Willendorf: Natural History Museum, Vienna

Hokusai: The Great Wave off Kanagawa (c. 1831); The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife (1814)

Shunga print, Edo period

Book cover: The Erotic Engine