Abstract

While libraries and librarians pride themselves on their classification systems and their ability to use cataloguing systems to organize and access information, new technologies have forced changes onto the knowledge management landscape. Tagging and "trending topics" have become ubiquitous ways to organize the web, and give users a sense of control over the content presented to them. On websites like facebook.com, pornhub.com, and xhamster.com, users upload content and add tags in order for other people to find it, but are often restricted in the categories available to them. This leads to what Jodi Dean (2012) calls "communicative capitalism," wherein users are given the feelings of freedom and democracy, but actually come across many Foucaultian surveillance mechanisms and limitations. This paper specifically focuses on the role of categories and tags for the discoverability of pornographic web content, and the impact that hegemonic categorization practices have on marginalized bodies, desires, and ideas.

Keywords

knowledge organization, cataloguing, pornography, porn, web categories

Sexuality is an important aspect of life, and has been represented in one way or another in many different media formats. However, while everyday television, movies, radio, and video games provide regular representations of sexuality, they usually adhere to clichés. For instance, popular movies and television are just recently being celebrated for and challenged to provide more diverse sexual representations. A timeline from infoplease.com (n.d.) titled “Gays in Popular culture” show how limited queer representations have been in TV and movies throughout the 20th century. Similar criticisms can be made about the lack of representation of racial diversity. The hashtag “#OscarsSoWhite” (n.d.), and to a lesser extent “#GoldenGlobesSoWhite” (n.d.) show the way that Oscars and Golden Globe consumers are finally voicing displeasure with how white the awards shows and associated industries are and have been in terms of those nominated. In contrast, pornography is a medium that provides artistic representations of identities, desires, and scenarios that are not shown in any depth or with any regularity in other popular media, allowing consumers to explore aspects of themselves or their interests that might otherwise be repressed. The pornographic movie industry has been producing gay and queer content in large volumes for decades. Pornography also has a lot of racially diverse content. However, while there is a large quantity of diverse pornographic content, it is often betrayed in the way it is organized. Most pornography sites are divided into “straight” and “gay” sections, both of which are defined around men and usually represented by intertwined male-female and male-male symbols. With-
in the gay and straight sections, there are often large subsections of marked, racialized categories, with a white, Western man being the only unmarked category. The categories used by major pornographic websites assume and cater to a white male audience, and define almost all categories in terms of their relation to straight white men or gay white men. The categories used, and the ways that the categories are arranged on sites like xhamster.com, pornhub.com, spankwire.com, and redtube.com, limit the possibilities of people other than white men to be able to identify with the porn they consume.

While a lot can be said about pornographic videos, images, and .gifs, I will primarily be focusing on the metadata that organizes pornographic artefacts. Bill Katz (1991) defines pornography as content which means to entice sexual stimulation. However, for my purposes, the masturbatory functions of porn are secondary to my argument, and I am instead interested in the ways that pornography is consumed as a way to shape and explore aspects of identity and selfhood, or as mere curiosities. As such, I will define pornography simply as the searchable and browse-able content presented on pornographic websites.

With porn on the web, accessed through a desktop, laptop, or other internet-connected device, there are various accepted and frowned upon cultural practices. Just as Hollywood films are no longer solely watched in cinemas, porn films have branched out to DVDs and the internet, now rarely being screened in theatres. While most of us have probably never been to a porn theatre, there are still many extra-filmic rituals associated with modern porn, as well as any modern film. Pornography is not safe for work in most workplaces and many public libraries and public-access internet terminals block pornographic websites. As pornography has been defined as that which is meant to entice sexual stimulation, by Katz (1991) and others, the artistic or discursive qualities of porn are often ignored. Christian Metz in Language and Cinema, writing about general film viewing, says, “What is referred to globally as ‘cinema’ (and to a lesser degree as ‘film’) is, in reality, a vast and complex socio-cultural phenomenon” (1974, p. 292). Similarly, pornographic films provide a whole lot more than their masturbatory function. Metz continues to say that the films themselves are:

only a small part of cinema, for the latter represents a vast ensemble of phenomena some of which intervene before the film..., others after the film ..., and finally, other during the film but aside from and outside of it (the social ritual of the projection of the film - less formal than in the classic theatre, but retaining its sobriety even in everyday sociocultural situations - the furnishing and decoration of the theatre, the technical methods of operation of the projectionist, the role of the theatre attendants - that is to say their functions in various economic or symbolic systems, which does not detract from their practical in-utility - etc.) (1974, p. 12).

With pornography, these conventions vary greatly, but there is still a role for them in the impact of porn-viewing practices. Particularly, the browsing and searching for a suitable porn video or series of videos, images, etc, is a familiar practice to anyone trying to make their way through the billions of pornographic items online.

For some scholars, the move from porn theatre viewership to internet pornography represents a democratization of pornography. Where porn theatres required a person physically go to a place and be noticed and potentially judged for their attendance, internet porn viewing allows for more anonymity. Edward Cone said “…the Internet represents nothing if not the great democratization of smut—bringing skin to millions of homes, dorm rooms, and offices around the world” (quoted in Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2004, p. 36). While it may be the case that pornography is much easier to come across, and easy to do so in private, the largest websites still show an overwhelming “androcentrism” (2004, p. 38) that Dilevko and Gottlieb note. Dilevko and Gottlieb focus on the use of a penis-shaped vibrator in videos of women masturbating (2004, p. 36), but androcentrism is much more ubiquitous. This includes the way that most categories are either categories of types of women (by race and ethnicity) meant to appeal to straight men, or categories of men (again, by race and ethnicity) meant to appeal to gay men. Porn categories give agency to men and their desires, and repeatedly objectify women and racialized men. Laura Mulvey in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” writes, “In contrast to the woman as icon, the active male figure (the ego ideal of the identification process) demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalized his own representation of his imaginary existence…” (1975, p. 2090). Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, Mulvey notes the ways that male spectators of
Hollywood film are able to narcissistically identify with the agency of the male protagonist, while everyone else is left to identify with the one-dimensional female characters.

With pornographic videos, female actors are regularly given a lot more agency than Mulvey’s Hollywood films, and made the central character. For example, in the video “Japanese amateur141 by siitake2” (2012), a woman in the centre of the screen undresses, masturbates, and later commands the camera man to undress before they have sex. In “Cowgirl gets caught fucking herself,” (2013) a woman masturbating gets ‘caught’ by a man, and they decide to have sex. Yet, this agency and exploration of female desires in the videos is not represented in the categories. On the porn site xhamster.com, the category “Female choice” is defined as “scenes are selected by our users for their appeal to women,” as if any of the other hundred-plus categories were specifically not meant for women. Additionally, the category is said to “cover a wide range of topics, though there is often a more erotic and sensual dynamic at play. Lesbian sex is common, as is the exploration of sexual desire between amateurs.” At xhamster.com, the description of female choice seems to make it out to be a substitute for softcore porn. However, browsing through the videos tagged “female choice” shows a range of videos including ones containing BDSM and other kinks, including “Kinky Girlfriend Dominates Her Man With A Strap On” (2014) and “Captive girl used in a cell for conjugal visits” (2016). Clearly, the designers of xhamster’s categories have oversimplified or misidentified female desires.

Instead of honestly exploring female desires, women are more often represented in categories as objects. Categories like “18 year old girls,” focus on “18 year old girls,” “Austrian Porn Videos” says “Austrian porn scenes show the girls come in all shapes and sizes, but they do share a desire to please in the bedroom,” and “Blue hair” shows “a remarkable number of girls dye their hair blue and play naughty on camera to show it off” (Xhamster.com “Categories,” n.d.). Looking at the gay porn categories, and specifically focusing on the identity categories, there are ones for Asians, bears, black gays, emo boys, fat gays, hunks, interracial, Latin, and twinks. On pornhub.com, the gay categories include Asian, bear, black, college, euro, Japanese, Latino, muscle, and twink. In all cases, the unmarked or uncommented-upon presence is that of white American or British men. Deborah Tannen writes, “The term ‘marked’ is a stable of linguistic theory. It refers to the way language alters the base meaning of a word by adding a linguistic particle that has no meaning on its own” (1993, p. 392). In the case of porn categories, the marked categories of different female and gay-male identities do have meaning on their own, but here are given their contextual meaning in the way that they provide arousal to the white male spectator. Tannen continues, “The unmarked form of a word carries the meaning that goes without saying – what you think of when you’re not thinking anything special” (p. 392). In many porn videos, white men are present but are unremarked upon.

Outside of xhamster, similar patterns are repeated, with some variations between different sites and publishers. All of pornhub.com, pornmd.com, spankwire.com, and porntube.com have categories separated by straight, which overwhelmingly include categories of presumed straight male desires, such as women of different race, big boobs, women with big butts, etc., or gay (two men having sex, or men masturbating). Some include “tranny” or “shemale” categories, which are meant to cover trans porn, but often only include trans women (and no trans men or gender-fluid people). Redtube.com does not separate out gay or lesbian from its straight categories, but requires users to leave the home page and go to Redtube.com/redtube/gay to browse videos of men having sex together or masturbating. Male porn consumers are able to browse porn websites knowing that they will likely find something they are interested in watching with ease, and homophobic straight men are able to browse websites without having to worry about accidentally watching, and potentially identifying with, gay porn. Returning to Laura Mulvey’s essay, she writes:

Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular) and camera movement (determined by the action of the protagonist), combined with invisible editing (demanding realism), all tend to blur the limits of screen space. The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (2090)

While porn films often make the editing noticeable, there is still a sense that spectators are meant to view porn through the perspective of the camera operator, who is almost always male (when their presence is made known), and often involved in the sex acts. Beyond the camera work, the categories of porn websites extend the effects described by Mulvey.
Before internet pornography, video stores and video distribution networks also followed similar categories of those for straight men, and those for gay men. The Scarborough collection of porn videos, included in the University of Toronto’s Sexual Representation Collection, has similar categories to Redtube.com, with most categories of various types of women, and small sections of “Lesbian,” and “Gay” videos (Sexual Representation Collection, 2012). The intro to Al’s Male Video Guide (1986) states, “For too long, men had no way to determine what they’re getting into when they look for a gay male video” (p. 1). While the guide only presumes male readership and not explicitly a gay male readership, the exclusion of women, trans-, and gender-non-conforming porn viewers makes no sense when there are male masturbation videos, bisexual videos, and so on; this also ignores the potential appeal of the standard gay male videos to other audiences. In the guide X-Rated Videotape Star Index III (Riley, 1999), the author insists on enforcing strict distinctions of gay and straight. On a frequently asked questions page, the question is asked: “You have a listing for Paul Smith but you don’t list the dozens of gay movies he has appeared in. Why not?” Answered: “With the exception of John Holmes, I don’t list any gay movies for males even if the performer is primarily a heterosexual star” (p. 16). However, the guide itself includes categories “Compilations, Gay – includes bi-sexual, shemale, gay, B&D..., Female – includes all-girl and single girl, Simulated, and All the others” (p. 14). X-Rated Videotape Star Index includes classifications of millions of videos, yet insists on giving agency to male readers and enforcing a sexuality defined as a binary of man wanting to have sex with women, and man wanting to have sex with man, with everything else being superfluous or an after-thought.

The pornographic industry, represented by websites, video distribution networks, and a Scarborough video store studied here, cater their content based on presumed preferences similar to Amazon or Facebook, but do so without any actual user input. Gilles Deleuze, responding to Michel Foucault, writes “The socio-technological study of the mechanisms of control, grasped at their inception, would have to be categorical and to describe what is already in the processes of substitution for the disciplinary sites of enclosure, whose crisis is everywhere proclaimed” (Deleuze, 1992, 141). In pornography that is compiled and on large websites, disciplinary sites of enclosure and socio-technological mechanisms work together to delimit sexuality into the categories of those for straight men, and those for gay men, with small exceptions, such as bisexual or BDSM categories, despite the diversity of the content. Of course the act of categorization itself requires that limits, barriers, binaries, and discrete spectrums are produced. However, the categorization of porn betrays the potential of the content.

Notes

1. ♂♀, ♂♂. See xhamster.com for example

2. This study focuses on a few pornographic sites with a large quantity of videos as samples

3. Xhamster is heavily featured because it provides a brief description for each of its categories

References


