

## Why we all need pornography

Porn fans are the driving force behind technologies that we might one day all rely on to protect our identity

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THE makers of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* are facing an investigation by the US Federal Trade Commission after it emerged that explicit sex scenes were hidden inside the popular game's software.

The discovery provoked a wave of condemnation from politicians, including an accusation by Republican congressman Fred Upton that GTA's publisher, Take-Two, had "blatantly circumvented the rules in order to peddle sexually explicit material to our youth".

But it is not the first time technology has been used to offer

people a sneaky peek at sex. The "adult entertainment" industry embraced video cassettes, DVDs and the web more quickly than its mainstream counterparts because these media are tailor-made for private viewing. Consumers eager for a glimpse of skin, but afraid of being found out or of being spotted in a seedy blue-movie cinema, helped drive the demand for more of these technologies.

In the process, they are making the internet a more hospitable place for those promoting racial, ethnic or religious hatred, or even organising terrorist attacks. But it will also help political dissidents and whistle-blowers, so technologies created to help porn

enthusiasts today are the human rights' tools of tomorrow.

Nick Mathewson, a Boston-based software developer working on a cutting-edge internet anonymity network called Tor, says privacy is not just a porn problem. "It's for issues like health information and political speech. We're trying to offer privacy and anonymity to everyone - we don't distinguish what we feel that people should and shouldn't have access to."

Like many new tools that promise privacy online, Tor is a response to the fact that the internet does not guarantee anonymity any more. Website software often creates logs full of information about who you are and what you click on, even after you've left the site. And new analytical techniques make it easier for eavesdroppers to figure out where you're going online, and where you're coming from.

That's why the next decade may usher in a progression from the physical privacy of the web, which hides what you're doing from your next-door neighbours, to systems such as Tor that give you online anonymity, hiding what you're doing from snoopers on computer networks.

But publishers of online porn aren't just facing new technological challenges - there are legal ones too. Several high-profile internet obscenity cases are working their way through the US courts. Barbara Nitke, the plaintiff in one of them, is a New York-based photographer of adult images who has challenged the definition of obscenity in US law. The Communications Decency Act says it is illegal to transmit content via the internet that "appeals to the prurient interest" and is deemed offensive by "contemporary community standards".

Nitke argues that this law restricts free speech. Because her website of explicit photographs can be viewed by anyone in the US, she feels there is a constant threat that some community might deem it offensive by their local standards and charge her with



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obscenity. Her suit challenges the idea that "community standards" that follow real-world borders can be applied to the internet, as it is a global entity.

When Nitke's case was heard in a New York court last year, the US government argued that community standards could be maintained online through the use of geolocation software. Most such software works by checking the unique internet protocol (IP) address on a website visitor's computer, and matching it to a geographical place using a variety of methods, such as the registered location of the visitor's internet service provider (ISP).

The court announced on 25 July that it had failed to make a decision on the use of geolocation software to maintain community standards, and the case is now on appeal to a higher court.

## HOME SEX CINEMA

The fact that people have used new technologies to watch pornographic films in private at home has been crucial to those technologies' success in the mainstream. So says Steven Hirsch, president of "adult" film company Vivid.

The company, which plans to produce 60 movies this year, has remained a front runner in an industry known for the high turnover of businesses. Hirsch says Vivid has succeeded because its products have always been about privacy, about "getting it into your house".

In the early 1990s, Vivid sold CD-ROMs that let people look at explicit photos on their computers at a time when internet porn was mostly ASCII artwork - symbols and characters from a keyboard arranged to make pornographic pictures. Then, in 1997, it released the first "multi-angle" DVDs, which allowed viewers to choose from several camera angles on the same scene. Now Hirsch says the company is interested in mobile applications that could bring videos of porn stars such as Jenna Jameson straight to your cellphone.

