

An Analysis of the Use of Public Opinion Data by
the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography

by

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As part of its general analysis of social and behavior science research on pornography, the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography examined public attitudes towards pornography and how they have changed since the report of the earlier Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1970. In its review of public opinion on pornography, the Commission focused on three areas: "(1) public exposure to sexually explicit materials; (2) perceptions of the effects of pornography; and (3) opinions on the regulation of pornography (Commission, 1986; 912)."¹ While paying some attention to the distribution of opinion among the population as a whole and to sub-group differences by gender and age, the Commission focused in particular on how opinions changed from 1970 to 1985 (Commission, 1986; 910, 912).

This report examines the Commission's analysis of public opinion data, pointing out certain weaknesses and limitations in their report and presenting additional data and analysis on trends in public opinion on pornography.

The Commission's analysis of public opinion on pornography is marred by several factors. The most serious of these are 1) inappropriate comparisons between variant samples and question wordings, 2) omitting statistical tests of significance when comparing survey results, and 3) failure to use the best available data.

Inappropriate Comparisons

The Commission is sensitive to the problem of comparing samples and questions that are not fully comparable (Commission, 1986; 912, 915, 924), but at several points abandons its self-counselled warnings and makes comparisons that are methodologically untenable and therefore substantively questionable.

¹For brevity we will cite, Attorney General's Commission on Pornography: Final Report as Commission, 1986.

The following examples illustrate the range of problems encountered in the Commission's Report.

1) Gebhard's Study on the Acquisition of Basic Sex Information (1977)

The Commission cites Gebhard's study on age and source of initial information about various sexual matters such as intercourse, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. Gebhard concluded that people were learning about sexual matters at an earlier age and that informational sources have changed. Gebhard's conclusions are based on a comparison of Kinsey data collected between 1938 and 1960 for whites with some college education and a convenience sample (N=114) of undergraduates from a single university in 1975. Since the original Kinsey data represent a series on convenience samples accumulated in various ways from sundry groups over two decades (Cochran, Mostellar, and Tukey, 1954; Benson and Bentley, 1957; and Wallin, 1949), they hardly offer a basis of comparison to anything, much less to a small, convenience sample from a single university. The Commission is aware of the problematic nature of the comparisons and notes, "These results, however, are simply suggestive because of the difficulty of generalizing beyond these particular groups of respondents and the limited size of the 1975 sample."

We have no strong quarrel with the Commission's handling of this particular comparison since they do qualify its findings and note its inadequacies, but given the weakness of the original study we wonder if the results were worth citing at all and in particular worth a full page of discussion.

2) Trends in Reading "Pornographic" Magazines

As a general rule for comparing similar, but not identical questions, the Commission formulated the following rule,

"Where questions were examining similar issues but were not worded the same, only questions which were more narrowly defined for the 1985 survey were included and any resulting error would be on the side of conservatism (p. 912)."

First, let us consider the how good this rule is. If we have set AB that consists of subsets A and B and if we have a measure of subset B at Time 2 and it shows more members than a measurement of set AB at Time 1, then it is possible to state with assurance that set AB has grown between Time 1 and Time 2 since even if subset A reduced to zero set AB is greater at Time 2 than at Time 1 since subset B by itself is greater than the total of set AB at Time 1. Now this procedure only works when the subsets are exclusively part of the larger set, that is all A and all B are in set AB. In addition, we are assured of a clear interpretation of change only when the smaller subset exceeds the larger set. If not, we are left with no clear inference about change unless other assumptions are made. For example, if we assume that the ratio of A:B is the same at Time 2 as it was at Time 1, then we could estimate that incident of AB at Time 2 with only information on the incident of A or B at Time 2 and thus estimate how AB compares at Time 1 and Time 2. This would of course rest on an unproven assumption. The Commission applies their subset comparison rule to the following questions from the 1970 and 1985 surveys:

1970

During the past year, have you seen or read a magazine which you regarded as pornographic?

1985

Have you ever read Playboy magazine or Penthouse magazine? Please tell me if the following apply to you or not?
 Sometimes buy or read magazines like Playboy.
 Sometimes buy or read magazines like Hustler.

The Commission notes that 20% reported reading a "pornographic magazine" in 1970 while, "In contrast, two thirds of the 1985 respondents had read Playboy or Penthouse at some time (p. 913)." The Commission applies its subset comparison rule and draws the conclusion that exposure to sexually explicit magazines increased from 1970 to 1985. They note, "This is a loose comparison, only afforded by the fact that the 1985 question is more specific in nature, and therefore, a more conservative estimates (p. 913)."

But the Commission is wrong on this point. First, the 1970 question refers to the "past year" while the 1985 question refers to "ever". The 1985 question clearly covers ^{a longer} ~~an~~ time span than the 1970 question and therefore is not a subset of the former and the subset comparison rule can not apply. Nor do the separate questions about Playboy and Hustler provide an appropriate base of comparison. They refer to a vague "sometimes" rather than the past year. Even if the time frames were the same, it is unlikely that the 1985 questions would refer to a subset of the 1970 question. Many people may not consider "Playboy magazine or Penthouse magazine", or even "magazines like Hustler" to be "pornographic". For example, in 1970 readers of "magazines like

Playboy" may well have responded in the negative to the 1970 "pornographic" question.²

Also, we can not be at all sure of the differential impact on reporting of mentioning specific magazines (Playboy, Penthouse, Hustler) as compared to an abstract categorization such as "a magazine which you regarded as pornographic." It is likely that these two forms of questioning would trigger different cognitive processing and therefore result in differences in the response distributions.

Overall, for the above reasons, it is impossible to draw any conclusions on trends in reading sexually explicit magazines from the above two surveys. Similarly, the Commission's comparison of items on sexually explicit movies from these two surveys is inappropriate for reasons similar to those cited in regards to magazines.

3) Trends in the Regulation of Movies and Magazines

The Commission also compared questions from the 1970 and 1985 surveys on the governmental regulation of sexually explicit movies and magazines. The wordings are as follows:

²The 1970 report (Abelson, et al., 1971; 23) notes that people saying yes to the pornographic magazine questions named a "substantial number" of "general or special interest magazines of wide distribution" and the list they give includes many that would not be judged as "pornographic" by most people and most objective standards (e.g. Good Housekeeping, Ladies Home Journal, Life, Look, McCall's, Reader's Digest, Vogue). As they noted, "The range of content embodied in what different people consider pornographic appears to be extremely wide." They however lack any information on what magazines people had read but did not consider as pornographic. We suspect that many people reading sexually oriented magazines such as Playboy may have not classified their reading material as "pornographic." We suspect that there is a high degree of individual variation in interpretation of the term "pornographic" in the context of this question.

1970

On the top of this card are descriptions of sexual material sometimes shown in movies in regular theaters. On the bottom of this card are some opinions about who it is all right to admit to movies showing such materials.

For each description on top tell me which, if any, group on the bottom it is right to admit to these movies.

Let's start with Number 1. Which statement comes closest to your opinion about who it is all right to admit to these movies? Just tell me the letter.

1. Scenes which are mainly for the purpose of showing the sex organs of a man or a woman.
 2. Mouth-sex organ contact between a man and a woman.
 3. A man or a woman having (or appearing to have) sexual intercourse.
 4. Sexual activities between people of the same sex.
 5. Sex activities which include whips, belts, or spankings.
- A. None-there is no one it is all right to admit.
 - B. It is all right to admit people like me but no others.
 - C. It is all right to admit adults 21 and over but not persons under 21.
 - D. It is all right to admit persons 16 or older but not persons under 16.
 - E. It is all right to admit anyone who wishes to be admitted.

1985

For each item that I read, tell me, if you feel it should be totally banned for sale to adults, sold to adults as long as there is no public display, or should be sold to adults with no restrictions.

Magazines that show nudity
 Magazines that show adults having sexual relations
 Magazines that show sexual violence
 Theater showings of X-rated movies
 Theater showings of movies that depict sexual violence
 Sale or rental of X-rated video cassettes for home viewing
 Sale or rental of video cassettes featuring sexual violence

The Commission (1985; 923-924) concludes that "while some of the categories between 1970 and 1985 are not directly comparable, a reasonable comparison can be made for the category describing depictions of sexual intercourse." They assert that the percent favoring no restrictions on magazines depicting sexual intercourse rose from 4% in 1970 to 12% in 1985. Similarly, the percent favoring no restrictions for movies rose from 4% to 20%. They add the qualification that "The assumption we make here, of course, is that most respondents associate X-rated movies with depictions of sexual intercourse, but these comparisons are made with this caveat in mind."

The Commission should have had more caveats in mind. The questions are so different in form that it is hard to describe the multitude of ways in which they vary and we cite only some major differences. First, the 1970 wording talks of "who it is all right to admit to movies". It does not directly refer to any governmental/community restrictions to enforce such preferences of respondents and we can not be at all sure that respondents thought in terms of such regulations. The 1985 question on the other hand refers to having the object "totally banned...no public display...no restrictions", a formulation that at least strongly implies government action. Second, even assuming that respondents are both referring to legal restrictions, the phrasing of the questions are quite different. In an approximate fashion, the difference between these questions resembles the classic distinction between the forbid/allow questions (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Hippler and Schwarz, 1986). Studies show that questions asking about "forbidding" an activity usually produces dramatically different results than questions asking about "allowing" the same activity (i.e., the percent wanting to forbid the activity is usually much lower, typically 15-25% lower, than the percent "not allowing" the same thing). The difference in these questions between "all right to admit" and "should totally ban...or impose no restrictions" are both different enough from one another and similar enough to forbid/allow examples to warn that similar wording effects could be present. Third, what the Commission counts as the "No Restrictions" option in 1970 (Option E) clearly implies that children under 16 would be allowed to view the movies and magazines in question, while in the 1985 question the "No Restriction" option explicitly refers to selling only to adults. Numerous other differences totally mar any possible comparison of these questions, but those are listed above are sufficient to document the problem.

4) Changes in Community Standards

The Commission (1986; 924) compared nearly identical questions asked by Gallup on community standards in 1977 and 1985:

Do you think the standards in your (1977:this) community regarding the sale of sexually explicit material should be stricter than they are now, not as strict, or kept as they are now?

	<u>1977</u>	<u>1985</u>
Should be stricter	45%	43%
Kept as now	35	48
Should be less strict	6	4
Don't know	14	5

They draw the following conclusion from the above data, "The numbers who prefer to see local community standards applied remained about even in 1977 and 1985 -- about four in ten respondents. There were as many who indicated standards should be stricter in 1977 as in 1985 -- forty-five percent versus forty-three percent." This analysis is correct as far as it goes, but it completely ignores the large and statistically significant (prob.=<.001, see note 7 below) increase in the "kept as now" category which rose by 13% points and the moderately large drop in the "Don't know" category. There are several ways to interpret this switch. Taken at its face value, it suggest that more people made up their minds about this issue and that this group as well as small segments of both extremes (the stricter and less strict groups) moved toward the middle and the status quo. However, the untypically large shift in levels of Don't know may signal some measurements artifact, perhaps a result of the shift from personal interviewing in 1977 to telephone interviewing in 1985.³

³Item non-response levels are sensitive to various measurement artifacts and in particular to house effects (Smith, 1978; 1982). However, the DK level for telephone interviews have not usually been found to differ greatly from personal interviews and usually tend to be slightly higher on telephone interviews than in person (Smith, 1984).

A second aspect of this question important to the evaluation is that it asks people to express their satisfaction with what they perceive to be current community standards. The judgment is a relative, not an absolute expression. For example, if community standards (e.g. laws and law enforcement practices) were actually becoming stricter and thereby confirming more closely to pre-existing public opinion, then the percentage saying stricter would decrease and the percent saying about right would increase. This shift would not indicate that people were more permissive on pornography, but only that the community standards had come into greater accord with the standards of more of the citizenry.

The possible relationship between community standards and standards of the community as expressed by the sample of citizen is both complex and controversial (Herrman and Bordner, 1983) and we simply note that several things could be changing-most notably the objective standards of the community, the popular perception of these standards, and the popular evaluation of whether the standards are or are not strict enough and with this question it is impossible to know which of these elements is changing.

5) Changes in Perceptions of Pornography's Effects

The Commission (1986; 932, 933) compared questions asked in 1970 and in 1985 regarding perceptions of the effects of sexually explicit material:

1970

On this card are some opinions about the effects of looking at or reading sexual materials. As I read the letter of each one please tell me if you think sexual material do or do not have these effects. Let's start with letter a.

- a. Sexual materials provide entertainment
- b. Sexual materials make people bored with sexual materials
- c. Sexual materials provide an outlet for bottled up impulses
- d. Sexual materials make people sex crazy
- e. Sexual materials give relief to people who have sex problems
- f. Sexual materials lead to a breakdown of morals
- g. Sexual materials improve sexual relations of some married couples
- h. Sexual materials provide information about sex
- i. Sexual materials excite people sexually
- j. Sexual materials lead people to commit rape
- k. Sexual materials lead people to lose respect for women
- l. Sexual materials make men want to do new things with their wives

1985

Thinking of sexually explicit magazines, movies, video cassettes, and books, tell me if you believe the following are true or not true:

- a. They provide information about sex
- b. They lead some people to commit rape or sexual violence
- c. They provide a safe outlet for people with sexual problems
- d. They lead some people to lose respect for women
- e. They can help improve the sex lives of some couples
- f. They provide entertainment
- g. They lead to a breakdown of morals

In comparing, these two questions the Commission felt it was on solid ground noting that the "1970 and 1985 data in this case were directly comparable since the same categories of effects were used (p. 932)" and the "Item choices provided the 1970 respondents were worded in the same way or were reasonably similar...(p. 933)." They conclude that several notable changes occurred in the public perceptions of the effects of sexually explicit materials and stress the increases in the percent believing that these materials lead to less respect for women (43% in 1970 to 76% in 1985) and more sexually motivated violence towards women (49% in 1970 to 73% in 1985) (pp. 933, 937).

But once again the Commission is off-the-track. First, the 1970 question refers only to "looking at or reading sexual materials" while the 1985 question is mentions "sexually explicit magazines, movies, video cassettes, and books." It is unclear whether the 1970 question covers both written and audio-video presentations. The inclusion of movies rests on a respondent interpreting "seeing" as covered films. Also, the 1970 question refers to "sexual" materials while the 1985 question uses the term "sexually explicit". In both cases, the 1970 question offers a weaker stimulus, probably not including movies in the minds of many respondents and perhaps also making respondents think of a less provocative range of materials.

Second, several of the compared categories differ in notable and biasing ways between surveys. The item on respect for women (k in 1970, and d in 1985) is significantly qualified by the insertion of the word "some". It is obviously much easier to agree to the 1985 wording with this qualification than the 1970 wording that implies "most" or "in general". The item on rape/sexual violence is compromised in a similar fashion. In addition, the adding of the phrase, "or sexual violence" probably also makes it easier to agree with the 1985 wording. Since in both cases, the question is easier to answer in the affirmative in its 1985 version, it is not possible to interpretate the increase in percentages as representing true change for these highlighted questions. Notable changes also occurred on the items about relief from sexual problems (1970e and 1985c) and improved sex relations for couples (1970g and 1985e).

In sum, virtually every over time comparison that the Commission carried out is extremely suspect, suffering from serious incompatibility of questions and other measurement variations.

Significance Testing

In none of the comparisons across time or across age and sex sub-groups did the Commission apply tests of statistical significance to see if the differences could be inferred as resulting from the true variation rather than chance differences resulting from sampling variations. This neglect occurs even though the Commission elsewhere questions research findings that failed to apply such tests (p. 153, n. 25)⁴ and showed an awareness of the rudiments of applying such tests to surveys (p. 911, n. 1119 and p. 925, n.

⁴This calls for tests of significance comes in the individual Commissioner statements section in a piece by Father Bruce Ritter, "Nonviolent, Sexually Explicit Material and Sexual Violence."

1120), None of their comparisons, including those that refer to "significant" differences or changes (e.g., pp. 923, 932) appear to have been subjected to appropriate test of statistical significance and the conclusions are suspect on this ground.

Other Data, More and Better Evidence

The Commission failed to include in their report a large part of the existent public opinion data, ignored data that they had in their possession, and, as a result, in a number of instances failed to present the best evidence available on the issues they examined.

In its report the Commission primarily used the 1970 survey conducted from the earlier Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (Abelson, et al., 1971) and the 1985 Newsweek/Gallup survey ("The War against Pornography", 1985). Some use was also made of two questions from a 1977 Gallup survey and one question from a 1986 Washington Post/Associated Press poll. In addition, the Commission cited data from a survey in Canada (Check, #85) and the Gebhard (1977) study noted earlier. This inventory of surveys and questions represents only a small fraction of recent survey questions on the topic of pornography. The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research listed as of September 15, 1986, 96 questions appearing in national, United States surveys and catalogued under the subject "pornography".⁵ Many of these questions dealt with the very topics that the Commission chose to focus on in their review of public opinion data.

⁵As determined by using the computerized POLL (Public Opinion Locating Library) system. See also, "A Pornography Report," 1986.

1) Trends in Viewing X-rated Movies

The Commission noted that "The marked difference between the questions asked at both time points [1970 and 1985] precludes any conclusion about any increase or decrease in film viewing in the last fifteen years...(p. 914)." Table 1 shows however that information does exist on this trend. The item on having viewed an X-rated movie in the last year shows a non-constant, non-linear trend⁶, with viewing monotonically dropping from 1973 to 1978 and then rising in a similar fashion from 1978 to 1986. Both the 1973-1978 decline and the 1978-1986 increase are significant linear trends (-1.95 percentage points per annum from 1973 to 1978 and +1.31 percentage points per annum from 1978 to 1986). It is widely believed (but not testable with this question) that the decline from 1973 to 1978 resulted from changes in the application of the movie rating system during this period. While the "X" designation originally applied to such major motion pictures at Last Tango in Paris (1972) and Midnight Cowboy (1969), since the mid-seventies it has been used almost exclusively for sexual explicit movies aimed at the adult theater trade. The rise since 1978 is generally associated with the increase in the homeviewing of X-rated movies on VCRs.

⁶The statistical procedures applied here are described in detail in Taylor, 1980. In brief, the procedure tries to model trend data by testing constant and linear fits to the observations. There are four possible outcomes of these tests: (1) constant, (2) significant linear component, (3) significant linear trends, and (4) non-constant, non-linear. The constant model is accepted when there is no significant variation from the constant or pooled proportion. The significant linear component model is accepted when a) the constant model is rejected and b) the linear model is also rejected, but c) the linear model is a significant improvement over the constant model. The significant linear model is accepted when a) the constant model is rejected, and b) there is no significant variation from the best linear fit. The non-constant, non-linear model is accepted when a) the constant model is rejected, b) the linear model is rejected, and c) the improvement between the constant and linear models is not significant. Slopes for the linear fit are the expressed in changes in percentage points per annum.

The second item (Table 1b), on ever having seen X-rated movies, illustrates the problem of using variant wordings. A comparison on the 1971 point with the March, 1977 point shows a significant decline (prob=.01)⁷ of 0.8 percentage points per annum. Using the 1971 and April/May, 1977 points show a significant (prob. = .002) increase of 1.0 percentage points per annum. The reason for this disagreement over even the direction of change is that the two 1977 points differ significantly (prob. = <.001). This large difference underscores the danger of working with variant wordings and demonstrates that no meaningful inference about trends in X-rated viewing can be draw from these variants.

⁷ Rather than use the SRS assumptions, we adjust the sampling variance by 1.3 to account the design effects arising from the multi-stage, cluster designs used by national personal interviews. The 1.3 design effect was based on studies of the GSS in 1975-76 and 1983 and we do not know the actual design effect of other surveys. They may have design effects greater than or less than this figure. In every case the data were analyzed using both SRS assumptions and this 1.3 design effect adjustment and there were no substancial or substantive changes in conclusions.

Table 1

Trends in Viewing Sexually Explicit Movies

A. Have you seen an X-rated movie in the last year?^a

	<u>YEAR</u>							
	<u>1973</u>	<u>1975</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>	<u>1986</u>
Yes	25.4 (1491)	18.9 (1482)	18.2 (1492)	15.0 (1524)	16.0 (1462)	19.6 (1588)	23.6 (1464)	24.8 (1460)

B. Ever seen an X-rated movie?^b

	<u>10/1971</u>	<u>3/1977</u>	<u>4-5/1977</u>
Yes	39.0%	33.9%	45%
No	57.2	64.6	54
Don't Know, No Answer	3.9 (1499)	1.5 (1507)	1 (2002)

^aData from the General Social Survey (GSS) of NORC. Surveys conducted in February/April of each year. Don't knows and no answers are excluded from the base. For full details see Davis and Smith, 1986.

^b1971=Now here is a list of a number of things. Would you read down the list and for each one tell me whether you have ever done it or not? You can just read the number and the answer "Yes" or "No".

1. Won a prize in a contest or lottery.
 2. Been interviewed in a poll (before today).
 3. Worn a wig.
 4. Grown a mustache or beard.
 5. Dyed your hair.
 6. Been held at gun or knife point.
 7. Spent the night in jail.
 8. Smoked marijuana.
 9. Gone swimming nude or "skinny dipping" with a mixed group.
 10. Gone to an X-rated movie.
 11. Been to a psychiatrist.
 12. Ridden on a motorcycle.
- (Roper Commercial #524)

3/1977 = Have you ever happened to have seen an X-rated movie? (Gallup, AIPO #969)

4-5/1977= Have you ever seen an X-rated movie? (Roper Report 77-5)

2) Trends in Attitudes Towards Government Regulation of Pornography

The Commission concluded on the basis of its comparison on the 1970 and 1985 surveys that public permissiveness towards pornography increased over the last decade and a half. Table 2 presents three time series that question that conclusion. From 1973 to 1986 there was no change in the percent favoring "laws against the distribution of pornography whatever the age", but there was a significant linear decline in the percent favoring "no laws forbidding the distribution of pornography" (0.5 percentage points per annum). For the period of 1975 to 1982, the question on a government crackdown also shows a complex pattern. Over all, the trend is non-constant, non-linear. Support for a crackdown rises rapidly from 1975 to 1977 and then falls between 1977 and 1982. If we look at only the two end points (1975 and 1982), we find a significant decline in disagreement with a government crackdown. This trend is buttressed by the significant (prob.=002) shift between 1976 and 1982 in approval of banning pornographic bookstores from residential shopping areas. In brief, there are at least three time series with identically worded questions on various aspects of government regulation of pornography that the Commission could have drawn upon. If they had done so, they would probably have come to the conclusion that support for government regulation of pornography rose from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties.

Table 2

Trends on Government Regulation of Pornography

A. Which of these statements comes closest to your feeling about pornography laws?

There should be laws against the distribution of pornography whatever the age.
 There should be laws against the distribution of pornography to persons under 18.
 There should be no laws forbidding the distribution of pornography.

	<u>1973</u>	<u>1975</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>	<u>1986</u>
Laws whatever the age	41.8%	40.4%	40.0%	43.2%	40.3%	41.1%	40.6%	42.6%
Laws for under 18	47.1	47.6	49.8	48.5	51.4	53.1	54.0	52.8
No laws	9.2	10.7	8.1	7.3	6.1	4.5	4.2	3.6
Don't know	1.9	1.2	2.1	1.0	2.2	1.3	1.2	1.0
	(1498)	(1489)	(1496)	(1531)	(1468)	(1595)	(1464)	(1469)

Source: GSS, NORC. For full details see Davis and Smith, 1986.

B. A number of controversial proposals are being discussed these days. I'd like you to tell me for each one whether you strongly agree with it, partially agree with it, or disagree with it.

The government should crack down more on pornography in movies, books, and nightclubs.

	<u>5/1975</u>	<u>1/1976</u>	<u>7/1977</u>	<u>6/1982</u>
Strongly agree	45%	47%	56%	50%
Partially agree	19	22	20	22
Disagree	36	32	24	28
	(1014)	(951)	(1044)	(1010)

Data from Yankelovich, Skelly and White for the Time. Don't know or no answers excluded from the base. Surveys conducted by telephone. For details contact the Roper Center, University of Connecticut.

C. Here is a list of laws that have been proposed. Would you read down that list and for each tell me whether you would be for or against such a law?

A law banning pornographic book stores in residential shopping areas.

	<u>12/1976</u>	<u>7/1982</u>
For	70%	75%
Against	25	23
Don't Know	5	3
	(2000)	(2000)

Data from the Roper Organization. Surveys were conducted in person. For details contact the Roper Center, University of Connecticut.

3) Trends in Public Perceptions of the Effects of Pornography

The Commission also failed to utilize the single best available time series measuring public opinion on pornography's impact. Modelled after the original question of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, the General Social Survey has tracked public attitudes on this topic from 1973 to 1986.⁸ Changes have not been large, but for each effect, we find a significant linear trend. The two items that clearly referred to negative effects show increasing belief that pornography is associated with these results. Agreement that pornography breakdowns morals rose 0.8 percentage points per annum, while the belief that it leads people to commit rape increased by 0.4 percentage points per annum. The one clear positive impact of pornography, that it provides information about sex, declined by 0.3 percentage points per annum. The final effect, that pornography provides "an outlet for the bottled-up impulses," was originally classified by the earlier Commission (Abelson, et. al., 1971. p. 53) as a "socially desirable" effect, but we suspect that many people probably see it as negative. They probably consider it an inappropriate "outlet" in the same sense that getting drunk might be an outlet for bottled-up stress.⁹ In any event, belief in this effect increased by 0.4% percentage points per annum. If we consider the trend in the outlet item as uninformative because of its ambiguous nature, we find a consistent pattern that the public has become less sanguine about the effects of pornography.

⁸These items are much closer to the original 1970 survey items than the 1985 items, but there is enough differences to possibly compromise comparisons between the 1970 survey and the 1973-1986 series. For that reason, we have restricted our analysis to the later series.

⁹The ambiguous nature of this item is shown by the fact that it positively associates with both negative items (gamma = .409 with rape and .274 with moral breakdown) and with the positive item (.373 with information). It has no association with gender, viewing X-rated movies, or regulating pornography, while the clear negative and positive items have associations with these items that are opposite in sign.

Table 3

Trends in Perception of Pornographic Material

The next questions are about pornography--books, magazines, and photographs that show or describe sex activity.

A. Sexual materials provide information about sex

	<u>1973</u>	<u>1975</u>	<u>1976</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1980</u>	<u>1983</u>	<u>1984</u>	<u>1986</u>
Has Effects	61.9%	62.2%	56.5%	61.4%	58.3%	59.9%	57.6%	57.0%
Doesn't Have	32.6	29.2	36.4	32.6	34.4	35.1	37.4	37.9
Don't Know	5.5	8.5	7.0	6.0	7.3	5.0	5.1	5.1
	(1499)	(1486)	(1493)	(1529)	(1465)	(1591)	(1463)	(1466)

B. Sexual materials lead to breakdown of morals

Has Effects	52.9%	51.4%	55.0%	56.9%	60.3%	58.7%	61.8%	62.2%
Doesn't Have	41.5	39.5	37.6	38.0	32.6	36.1	33.1	32.5
Don't Know	5.6	9.0	7.4	5.1	7.0	5.2	5.1	5.3
	(1500)	(1487)	(1490)	(1529)	(1461)	(1589)	(1462)	(1463)

C. Sexual materials lead people to commit rape

Has Effects	50.0%	52.0%	52.7%	56.7%	54.0%	55.4%	55.1%	56.8%
Doesn't Have	42.9	37.9	38.1	35.9	36.8	37.5	37.1	36.3
Don't Know	7.0	10.0	9.1	7.3	9.2	7.1	7.8	6.9
	(1495)	(1484)	(1492)	(1528)	(1462)	(1589)	(1462)	(1461)

D. Sexual materials provides an outlet for bottled-up impulses

Has Effects	54.7%	56.3%	55.6%	58.9%	59.2%	57.4%	60.6%	59.5%
Doesn't Have	35.2	27.8	28.6	29.1	26.9	31.5	27.3	30.6
Don't Know	10.1	15.9	15.8	12.0	14.0	11.1	12.1	9.9
	(1499)	(1485)	(1491)	(1527)	(1462)	(1588)	(1463)	(1462)

Source: GSS, NORC. For full details see Davis and Smith, 1986.

In sum, the Commission's analysis of trends was greatly hampered by failing to utilize time series that are readily available from public data archives, widely employed in the social science literature,¹⁰ and even known to the Commission's staff.¹¹

Conclusion

The Commission's analysis of public opinion towards pornography is seriously flawed. It rested on a series of comparisons between variant wordings that provide little useful insight since true change and measurement variations are completely confounded. While the Commission expresses wariness about the use of variant questions, they repeatedly proceeded to make inappropriate comparisons. Second, their analysis ignored statistical test for significance. This makes both their sub-group and time-trend analysis problematic. Third, they either were unaware of or ignored relevant time series that employed consistent wordings and would have provided a solid empirical base for their analysis of recent trends. For these and related reasons,¹² the Commission's analysis of public opinion is methodologically unsound and therefore substantively suspect.

¹⁰For uses of various items appearing in Tables 1-3, see Klenow and Crane, 1977; Taylor and Smith, 1978; Jelen, forthcoming; Stephan and McMullin, 1982; Wood and Hughes, 1984; Grassel, 1980; Koch and Davidson, 1985; Peek, 1985a, 1985b; Peek, Brown, and Witt, 1978; Peek, Grassel and Reid, 1980; Reiss, 1986; Rushing, Garibay, and Grassel, 1979; and Reiss, 1981.

¹¹The Commission requested from NORC the GSS data on pornography and was sent same (Einsiedel, 1985a, 1985b).

¹²Among other minor problems in the Commission's handling of public opinion data, we cite as examples the following: 1) sample size is not given for the 1977 Gallup survey (p. 931), 2) sample sizes are not given for sub-groups (pp. 919-921, 928-930), 3) errors (generally small) appear in reporting the wordings of various questions (e.g. the mediums listed in Table 4, p. 926 are shortened approximations and "sex" not "sexual" is actually used in the same question), 4) question wordings are not reported for some items (e.g. pp. 920, 921), and 5) miscitations occur (e.g. "Glassman, M.B. (1978). Community standard of patient offensiveness: public opinion data and obscenity law. Pub. Op. Res., 161-170" is actually from Public Opinion Quarterly and "Gebhard (1980)" is actually 1977).

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