“We need multi-pronged, mutually reinforcing strategies”: Maree Crabbe of It’s Time We Talked on shaping public discourse, changing narratives, and building awareness among policy makers.

Lissa Harris

July 31, 2024

Lissa Harris: Please introduce yourself and your organization, say a little bit about the problem that you're addressing and how you're addressing it and who your audience is.

Maree Crabbe: I'm Maree Crabbe. I'm director of It’s Time We Talked, which is a violence prevention initiative that's focused on addressing pornography's impacts on young people. We also work more broadly in gender-based violence prevention. Our focus is not specifically on child sexual abuse prevention, but it certainly overlaps significantly with that. Our work on pornography and young people uses largely a primary prevention of gender-based violence framework, but we also do work that is supporting early intervention and response or tertiary prevention work.

As is the case with any violence prevention issue, we need multi-pronged, mutually reinforcing strategies to prevent pornography’s harms to children and young people, so our work includes multiple strategies. There are four main components:

We develop education resources to support conversations about pornography and its impacts on young people. For example, we have developed education resources that support tailored,

whole of school or whole of organisation approaches to addressing this issue—through policy development, equipping staff, parent engagement, and education with young people.

We work to develop the capacity of the adults in young people's lives—parents and carers, teachers and other school staff, and people from a wide range of others sectors, including youth workers, psychologists, social workers, health workers and police—to understand and address pornography's influence as part of gender-based violence prevention. We have developed a suite of online and in-person professional learning and parent education resources to support this component of the work. And I deliver conference presentations for different sectors—from the judiciary to youth worker, mental health and sexual violence conferences around the world.

We seek engagement in public conversations about pornography and young people. We've produced documentary films that have been broadcast. We have written articles for mainstream news media, we've been interviewed for television, radio and podcasts. We also have a social media presence and post regularly about the issues. Through this component of the work, we try to open up public conversations and contribute to public understandings of pornography and its impacts on young people.

Finally, we also engage in advocacy with policy-makers and shapers and advising work with different government and non-government organizations. Those are the key components of the work on pornography and its impacts, which we've been doing for 15 years.

We have used audiovisual content throughout our work. We did interviewing as part of the documentary film production, but we have also used video interview excerpts through all of our different components, including in our social media presence, our web content, our presentations, our professional learning and our education resources. We have conducted hundreds of extended filmed interviews with young people, with experts and with professionals from the international pornography industry as part of telling the story, helping people understand the issues with the texture and insights that can be provided through that audiovisual format. That's been a key strategy in our work. We bring together the best academic research, an analysis of key headlines and clear analysis of the issues and use the voices of young people and others to help elucidate the issues.

We are a very small and agile group, there's only three of us. We've been primarily philanthropically funded. Other than consultancy work, we haven't had government funding for

our work on pornography and young people. Part of what that has meant is that we've had a lot of freedom to do and say what we think needs to be said and done on this issue.

We have also developed three spin-off projects after identifying particular needs. One is about autism and porn, supporting autistic young people to navigate pornography's influence. This group came up repeatedly in our work with the harmful sexual behaviors treatment sector as a group that are over-represented among young people who have engaged in sexual harm, and the need for tailored support to support them to navigate pornography's influence because pornography appeared to be playing a role in that over representation. We developed a project called “Porn is Not the Norm.” We have just finished delivering the funded components of that multi-strategy project.

We also have one project that is based in Central Australia where we are adapting content to a specific cultural context. There are lots of First Nations people in central Australia, and the organisations we work with in that region identified the need for resources that are tailored for central Australian communities. That project is not just about porn. It steps back and looks more broadly at gender-based violence prevention and includes content about pornography that's integrated into a context in which it's appropriate to have that conversation. It focuses on respectful relationships and media literacy, and addresses themes such as social media, sharing nudes, sexual pressure and consent, relationship violence, gender stereotypes and jealousy. So the content on pornography is only a small component of that project. The project includes a resource package and supporting professional learning.

Then we have another project that is called “Breathless.” It is a campaign that addresses the substantial and rapid increase of the practice of sexual strangulation, which emerged as a strong theme in our most recent round of interviews with young people. There's data increasingly in different countries illustrating that it's an incredibly common practice and a very dangerous practice. Those are the core parts of our work.

Lissa Harris: Could you talk about how different cultural contexts come up in your work? What are your different audiences when you're working on the international stage?

Maree Crabbe: Unfortunately, the issue of pornography and its impact on young people is a global issue in that young people from around the world are seeing porn that is produced around the world and there are no boundaries. There are limited barriers to young people accessing that content. Australian young people and Fijian young people and Mexican young people are all being shaped by this multi-billion dollar, global porn industry.

My work internationally has largely been around raising awareness about this issue and what it looks like. I've delivered conference presentations and workshops in various parts of the US, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, Brazil, South Africa, and Latvia, for a range of different sectors.

I have also been engaged by the Council of Europe to lead the drafting of a guidance note addressing pornography's influence. The goal is to support member states in consideration of this guidance and provide recommendations around the actions they could consider taking to prevent pornography's harms to children and young people in their countries.

Lissa Harris: What recommendations are you making in the policy sphere? What are the best practices here?

Maree Crabbe: It's partly about that multi-strategy approach. There are different components to it. We need regulatory responses that prevent children and young people from being exposed to content that in any other context is deemed not appropriate for children and young people. In the online economy, huge companies have made the case that they are not broadcasters and are not responsible for the content that they develop, nor for gatekeeping those who can access it through steps like age verification or some other form of age assurance.

What we're seeing is that after an extended period of allowing the porn industry and social media and other companies free rein online, there is a growing appetite around the world and awareness of the need for some regulatory response. People want safety by design, so that apps and devices and online services are designed to feature more ways of safeguarding children and young people from exposure to inappropriate content or from any number of other harms that occur online or that are facilitated through online connections. There's policy reform around how to ensure that is a requirement that is baked into design.

There is also growing demand for more education for parents, schools and a whole range of practitioners who work with young people to support them and implement strategies like filters on modems and devices. There is also a need to have conversations with children and young people that build their capacity to support the prevention of porn's harms to them, which might, when they're very young, include critical media literacy about other forms of media, online safety knowledge and behavior, body safety, respectful relating, sexuality, education, all the components of foundational learning—where we don't necessarily talk about pornography with children, but we support them to develop related competencies.

Then, as they get older, their education needs to include more overt conversations about pornography and its influence. We seek to achieve that capacity building with all the different stakeholders who live and work with young people that will ensure the incorporation of content addressing pornography into comprehensive relationships and sexuality education and other educational contexts where it's appropriate.

We need to offer leadership and an authorizing environment to support those conversations to happen in evidence-based, age and developmentally appropriate, careful ways. We need to acknowledge that this is a sensitive and challenging issue to address, as s anything related to child sexual abuse. We need leadership that supports that, because currently what we have in many places is this strange, dichotomous approach. On one hand, we have this incredibly loud, aggressively marketed online content that says the most extreme and bizarre things; that normalizes and eroticizes gender-based violence, degradation, and lack of consent in the most mainstream porn context. Then, on the other hand, there are many contexts in which people struggle to talk openly about relationships, sexuality, consent, and pleasure or want to deny that children and young people are being exposed to harmful content.

Ultimately, we need to integrate ourselves better as a society so we don't have this huge chasm between what the evidence indicates are healthy ways to nurture young people's relationships and sexuality and what's currently happening.

Lissa Harris: What do you think makes your approach distinct? What makes you different and where did you take inspiration from in this approach?

Maree Crabbe: There aren't that many people talking about pornography and its impacts on young people around the world. In a global context, there are only limited people who've prioritized this work. There are some people across different sectors. There are certainly academics who've been working for a long time on pornography and young people. There are a few organizations around the world that have tried to take that multi-strategy approach that includes resource development, capacity building, public discourse, and engagement. We've been doing that for a fair while.

The approach that we've taken has had fairly mainstream traction, at least in Australia. Part of the feedback that we get is that the way we have approached the issue—through the headlines, the storytelling, and our orientation towards the issue—has helped mainstream audiences engage with our critique. We don't position ourselves as anti-pornography. Our focus is on mainstream pornography and what it conveys and how it's impacting young people. We don't

focus on more marginal porn that may or may not be conveying better messages about relationships and sexuality. We're not having that argument because that's not what young people and children see.

We've sought to be careful to not overstate what's happening, drawing on the evidence base. And to be warm and invitational. We're talking about a challenging issue, but we're trying to model in our modes of communication and our approach to the issues more broadly that this is something that we can talk about and indeed that we must talk about. Here's how we can do it. We are talking about something that's about sex and therefore is sensitive, but it's also about freedom, exploitation, violence, racism, misogyny, homophobia, all the different things that emerge when you look at pornography. They're all issues that push people's buttons.

Part of what we've tried to do is develop approaches where we are saying the hard things that need to be said, but saying it in a way that people feel okay to enter into the conversation. Australia has a relatively small population in a big country. It's more challenging to speak into echo chambers here than it is in more populous countries.

We've wanted our work to get mainstream traction, and we've been invited to contribute to national policy approaches to prevention of violence against women and their children and online safety approaches and key policy contexts in Australia that are really mainstream. That's partly because of the approach that we've taken. It is not alarmist as in, it's not for the sake of stirring people up. The topic we're talking about is alarming, but it's not deliberately provocative.

We deliberately speak very positively about sexuality, pleasure, and the importance of consent. We believe that sex can be fantastic and that children and young people should have the opportunity to grow into sexual beings whose experiences are positive, not exploitative and harmful, degrading and aggressive. We position ourselves as positive about sexuality and clearly inclusive of diversity, that's what we do because that's what needs to happen.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example that illustrates the impact of the work that you do, and how did you know it was working?

Maree Crabbe: The examples happen in different ways. In the professional learning that I deliver about autism and porn with an autistic autism expert, people in the training sometimes describe the transformative nature of the training. They feel like a light went on for them around understanding an issue that's been challenging for them, and that's rewarding.

In the training about porn and young people more generally, which I've been doing for 15 years, people commonly describe the significance of what the training has meant for them. People from different sectors talk about how they have not understood this issue, the scale of it, the level of it and what that means for the work that they'll do with young people going forward and what they'll incorporate into their work around respectful relationships.

Or, for example, sexual assault service providers sometimes mention that they have not been as aware of the scripts from porn that might be being reenacted, but with education about the issues, they can then open up conversations in a different way. We get all sorts of reflections from people who are working on the ground with young people and their families. That feedback is useful to understand how our work's landing.

Additionally, we're seeing the traction in online engagement or in the viewing of our documentaries. For example, one of our documentary films has been broadcast in about 37 countries, so there are many people that have access to thinking about that issue and hopefully can reflect on the policy implications. We have had opportunities to influence and impact policy and policymakers' understandings. For example, I have contributed to Australian government violence prevention and online safety policies.I have presented for Supreme and Federal court judges in Australia and New Zealand, and at multiple conferences for judges. It's also great being in a position to prompt the thinking of people who are making decisions and shaping the directions of the ways that sexual assaults are understood.

The level of engagement from a whole range of different audiences is high. It is a topic that people often find interesting. We've taken journalistic approaches to supporting people to engage with a difficult issue, and that's repeatedly being fed back to us that people value those approaches.

Lissa Harris: Do you have an example of something that you tried that did not go the way you hoped it would and something you learned from that?

Maree Crabbe: It took us six years to get funding for the autism and porn project. We could see that it's an issue. We were hearing it everywhere. Part of it is getting the opportunities to make the case. One of the biggest challenges for us has been engaging people with creative expertise early on when we hadn't developed some of that technical expertise ourselves. In other words, working with people who don't have content expertise, but have creative expertise. The challenge is determining how to work positively with people so that the people with the content expertise are shaping the development of the content rather than the creative people.

Something might be a great story that people would love to hear, but if not done properly, it won't at all reflect the evidence base.

Lissa Harris: Where is the evidence that you're drawing on? Is this coming out of academia? Is it your own? Both?

Maree Crabbe: Both. The evidence that we are drawing from is academic research from around the world, and I've written a couple of academic papers in the last five years. And we also have conducted our own interviews with young people, experts and pornography industry professionals.

Lissa Harris: Is it mainly studying the impact of viewing pornography on later outcomes, or what is the shape of that research?

Maree Crabbe: It's a whole range of things. It's understanding levels of exposure and access. The fact that half of boys have seen pornography by the age of 13, for example, tells us a whole lot about the need to address the role of pornography in young people's lives, as does the fact that over half of young men are using pornography weekly and one in six are using it daily. That's what the prevalence data says in Australia, and that boys see porn on average three years before their first sexual experience or partner sexual experience. So, there are a lot of opportunities for porn to shape their understanding.

There's a body of research on what mainstream porn looks like. It's not, by the way, the centerfold that it used to be. In every single study, the research about the levels of aggression and who that aggression is directed towards indicates it is overwhelmingly women. Different studies find that 97%, or 94% of the aggression is directed towards women. Other research looks at the significant levels of non-consensual behaviors in mainstream pornography; behaviours that constitute sexual violence legally are in 1 in 8 titles of the videos on the homepages of the most popular sites.

Then there's how pornography is impacting young people. That it's become a default sexuality educator, what young people say about that, what the evidence says about associations. Most of the research is correlational, so that research can tell us about associations between pornography use and behaviours but not causation. But there is longitudinal or experimental or qualitative research that can point towards causation, its relationship to gender-based violence and the gendered drivers of violence.

Then there is an evidence base around what we can do to address it. What do we know about whether education is effective or whether parents are implementing parental controls? So there are different bodies of research. Then we would also draw upon other related bodies like critical media literacy research or research into sexuality and relationships education to inform our approaches to this issue, which is a relatively recent issue.

Lissa Harris: What are the main challenges that you faced?

Maree Crabbe: One of the key challenges is the sensitivity of the issue and how to have the conversations in ways that feel okay for people and have them in a mainstream enough context to create the level of change that is needed on this issue. It's a challenging issue to discuss on television or radio. We do it, but it's something that needs to be sensitively navigated. The conflation of porn and porn use with being positive about sex and the conflation of being critical of porn with being anti-sex is problematic. Or of being anti-diversity or anti-women's rights to sexual freedoms or anti-LGBT rights.

Those are real challenges—that the porn industry and its advocates have positioned porn as a liberating influence without there being the acknowledgement or discussion of what it means to have content that is eroticising gender inequality and lack of consent; mainstream pornography also regularly includes child sexual abuse material. There's a lack of honesty about the nature of the content, which is why the research about the nature of the content is such an important part of the work.

It's a framing challenge. There's a battle to be had about the ways that people understand the issues and what the common ways of understanding it are. We encounter a hesitation from people to be prepared to be critical of porn because you might be viewed as prudish or as anti-diversity or getting in bed with people with agendas that you might abhor.

I did an interview with Professor Simon Hackett from the U.K.. He was talking about research where they'd reviewed cases of young people who have engaged in harmful sexual behavior. I was specifically asking him about porn and how porn is appearing in these cases and what it means. He talked about an explosion in child sexual abuse among young people and children. Not just adolescents, but children under ten, as well, engaging in harmful sexual behavior. And he said that it's clear from the evidence that porn is playing a significant role in that increase.

He talked about porn being a form of proxy victimization, where historically it might've been much more likely that children engaging in sexual harm had been sexually harmed themselves

by others, and then were reenacting what they'd experienced on someone else. But now they're seeing children doing that from what they've seen in porn, not what they've experienced. There's strong evidence that porn is an issue that needs to be addressed, if we're wanting to end or prevent child sexual abuse. But if discourses that conflate critiques of mainstream online pornography's impacts with conservative and oppressive views about sexual diversity undermine our capacity as a sector to tackle porn, then that's a real issue. It's to the advantage of an extremely powerful global industry that would like to continue having the freedoms that it's had for a long time.

Lissa Harris: What strategies do you think are most effective at shifting the societal view of the problem?

Maree Crabbe: All the kinds of things that I mentioned, but having those multiple approaches, rather than a single conversation is key. We have to be evidence-based, careful and considered, and be warm. We have to have policy reform occur in the context of public conversations and consultations with experts. It needs to be that multi-pronged strategy for it to be effective. That's certainly what the gender-based violence prevention research indicates more broadly, so I'm not sure why it would be any different on this issue.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk a little bit about the role that partnerships or coalitions play in your work and who your main partners are?

Maree Crabbe: They've been key to the work. We've had partnerships with domestic, family and sexual violence services, and with disability services. As a consultant, I work with a lot of different organizations. Recently, I've been working with the Council of Europe. I'm working with two or three schools in the next week and with ABC documentary filmmakers. With a whole range of different stakeholders.

Some of those have been intensive partnerships like where we've developed a project proposal together and sought funding together, and then we've worked together over years to deliver a particular component of the work. Others are much more fleeting relationships where an organization engages me to facilitate the implementation of a component of the work in their region or to speak at a conference or whatever it is.

They've been key for the development and the delivery across the work and across different sectors. We've collaborated with academics, for example, around the strangulation work. We've

collaborated with academics who've conducted national prevalence research in Australia and in the U.S. We are consulting with health services with forensic medical examiners.

We're hoping to work with some sex workers who've done work in their collective around the policy, the approach that they take if clients want to engage in strangulation. We've worked with education departments, government departments, and non-governmental education organizations. We've worked with a whole range of different stakeholders from different sectors that we then bring together, and integrate those approaches and that work.

Lissa Harris: What are the main insights that can be taken from your work that people who want to do similar work could use? What are the lessons here?

Maree Crabbe: The use of video has been a noteworthy component of our work. It moves our work from beyond our own voices to incorporating a whole diverse range of voices. To have a young person saying that strangulation has become a mainstream sexual practice, that it happens without people asking, and to have young women saying that they felt like their life has been at risk, is important for us to hear. One young person said, "I've been in situations where I feel like I'm genuinely about to be murdered." Those voices provide a different insight than just me standing there presenting at a conference or delivering training. To have people in the porn industry themselves describe the significant levels of gendered aggression is crucial.

We benefit from engaging in that more public conversation and working across those different layers deliberately. Sometimes academics can be doing fantastic work, but if the work is not understood by broader audiences, policymakers or by the public, it doesn't get the same value that it could. So we speak with everyone from people who live and work with young people through to policymakers, and we help tell the stories to those different layers, as well.

You have to be ambitious. To Zero's aim of ending child sexual abuse is breathtakingly ambitious. I'm up for having ambitious visions. When we started this work, we didn't have expertise on this issue. We could just see that it was an issue. I didn't have any expertise around strangulation, either. I could just hear that it was rapidly becoming an issue in a different way. We just went, all right, well, what will we do and how do we pull together our skill bases, our areas of expertise, what do we need to learn? Who do we need to get onboard? Let's just do this.

Sometimes, we've done that work without funding. For example, we haven't gotten funding for the "Breathless" campaign yet. We've just been able to incorporate elements of that wherever we can within our other work, and then build it as we can. We've been a bit bold and aimed high,

and we've surprised ourselves sometimes. The international porn industry opened its doors and did great interviews with us, which have provided the basis for a whole range of different spin-offs.

Lissa Harris: What do you think has the potential to make a significant impact on this issue in the next five years?

Maree Crabbe: Building awareness among government policy shapers in the public discourse. Building people's understanding, sharing the narrative that this is what mainstream porn looks like and this is how it's impacting children and young people. That it is not acceptable. It's like the way the tobacco industry was so unregulated and promoted itself so widely, and it was something that we knew caused significant harms to broad numbers of people as a commercial interest that was allowed to do whatever it wanted. We needed to rein it back in.

There is a narrative piece about that that can help create the authorizing environment for governments who are the only stakeholders that can implement those regulations. But you have to do that carefully. We've seen some less-than-careful approaches happening in a regulatory way, as well. Maybe it's not clear to everyone, but we need to manage privacy, security, and people's rights to access information. That includes adults' rights to access content while protecting children and young people from the high levels of unintentional exposure that happen, as well as limiting their access to intended exposure to content that they wouldn't be allowed to walk into a cinema and watch.

In most parts of the world, we're still in a place where people need help to understand the issues before there can be an authorizing and accountable environment created for governments to ensure that the actions that they take are based on sound principles and they're not conflating all of these issues.

Once we start to see the implementation of some regulatory approaches in countries that have done it well, then it's likely that other countries will get onboard with those approaches, as well. Some countries don't have the resources to lead the development of these approaches, and some countries don't have the political environment to facilitate the careful implementation of things like age verification. However, the countries that do that well, there'll be a relatively rapid uptake from other countries that see the value in that.

Lissa Harris: What do you think it would take to get governments or some of the more local level stakeholders that you work with—educators, communities, the agencies doing

outreach—to move the needle on this issue? How can you get them to feel responsible for the issue and engage with it in what you think is a productive way?

Maree Crabbe: I'm very conscious that I work in places that people engage me to work in. I do work in public conversations, as well. But much of the time people engage me as a consultant to go and speak to them. Not always to audiences that all want to hear this story, but I do think that a key step is in helping people understand the issues. Once they hear children and young people are seeing this content, even when they don't want to, and here's how it's impacting them, they're more likely to understand that we have to shift some things. We need to support the children. That we need to implement a range of strategies is pretty hard to argue with. The stories from young women or from young gay men talking about oppressive sexual experiences that have been shaped by their partner's use of porn are pretty hard to argue with. What are you going to say?

Unless people are hearing that analysis, they might be hearing that we are now living in a sexually liberated culture where, thank goodness, we've got porn that helps us. That people should have access to whenever they want to, and it's not harming anyone. If that's the narrative they've got, then they're not going to want to act. If they have a narrative that says children and young people aren't really being exposed, or it's just really marginal, then they're not probably going to want to act, either.

But if they see the prevalence, they understand the nature of the content, and they understand the impacts, it's pretty hard to argue. I presented recently for the Council of Europe and for their member states. They have reflected that part of what it did was help people understand the need for comprehensive relationships and sexuality education. If we're not at least doing that, then we're leaving young people's sexuality education up to the porn industry. That's just what it looks like currently. The storytelling is a key piece.

Lissa Harris: Excellent. Thank you for your time, and this has been terrific.

Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter, science writer (MIT '08), and former local news entrepreneur based in upstate New York. She is currently working as a consultant on capacity-building and local solutions-oriented community projects in the rural Catskills.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*