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# Regulating online erotica – ethnographic observations of a UK-based adult entertainment provider

Axel Klein

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to throw a new light on the online adult entertainment industry and help remove the stigma associated with it.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *An ethnographic approach was taken, with participant observation and in-depth interviews with a number of informants.*

**Findings** – *This is an environment where female performers can enjoy good income opportunities and work in a safe environment. It also provides a high level of job security for technical support staff.*

**Research limitations/implications** – *The study used a sample size with no access to clients.*

**Practical implications** – *It is important that UK regulation remains light handed to avoid pushing the industry off shore.*

**Originality/value** – *The paper provides new data on the working environment in camming studios and positive aspects of job security and the equitable distribution of profits.*

**Keywords** *Regulation, Online, Sex work, Adult entertainment, Camming, Erotica*

**Paper type** *Viewpoint*

One of the first things that a Studio 66 performer has to establish with a client is that they will never meet. For some punters this is a deal breaker and they take their fancies elsewhere. But enough find the prospect of a digital relationship sufficiently satisfactory to make this TV channel a profitable enterprise. The services provided range from daytime chat through to one-to-one explicit adult interaction with striptease and simulated masturbation after 11 p.m. In return clients pay between £1.50 and £5 per minute.

Filmed at the company's studio in London the shows appear on three live satellite TV channels. There are also a website and webcam channels that allow the performers more flexibility as they can work from home or any other location. For them, modern erotica provides a rare opportunity for cashing in on good looks and the defiance of social convention to achieve life style aspirations. Pay-to-view real life erotic performances by a single performer[1] that are transmitted via web camera have become the latest and hottest development in the adult entertainment sector. The sheer scale of the industry has confounded social commentators and is setting a new challenge to regulatory authorities. The activities are continuously derided as pornography or prostitution, terms that according to Primetime TV[2] (UK)'s Managing Director, are deeply injurious because of their negative connotations[3], arguing that men have celebrated the physical beauty of women since time immemorial.

Not shying away from classical comparisons, he suggests that the Studio 66 platform has sprung from the same impulse that inspired Botticelli to paint Venus stepping out of a shell. They work in a different medium perhaps, and to different social mores, but there is the same relationship between viewer and viewed, client and performer and the same frisson.

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Technology is driving the development of the sector and leading to adaptations. Just as the proliferation of pirate recordings led to the revival of live concerts in the music industry, so has the glut of freely available online porn pushed adult entertainment sector towards live interactive erotic entertainment. It has also re-balanced power relations between service providers and performers. "The technology allows a performer a lot of independence. All they need is a laptop, a web camera, a platform and a bank account. This is why you have a lot of independents working from home or anywhere in the world they happen to be"[4].

Today's performers are increasingly confident and mobile. They can, for instance, take their web camera into a public space like a park or the British library and connect with their customers who will then ask – and pay for – services. Feeding on such visual stimuli from a "virtual girlfriend" the client can act out the fantasy of having sex in the park without risk or contact.

The web camera produces a continuous stream of fresh imagery. Studies show that male customers are always looking for fresh images, even while remaining "loyal" to particular performers (Moxon, 2009). Many clients are in virtual relationships as is evident in the adulation fans pay to their favourite "stars".

But the medium also allows performers to "tailor" services to customers' needs. The first is in the attitude towards the clients. Success lies in treating clients for what they are: customers paying good money to indulge their legitimate desire.

Part of the management's job is to remind the staff that "this is a customer service business and as such the quality of the service is what determines the businesses success. The callers are not perverts, they are customers and are someone's father, son or brother". As in any other service industry making the customer feel special is key. "It is just like going to a restaurant and being given a great welcome by the Maitre D".

Successful performers manage to project that positive customer care and give special attention to their regular callers. She will, for instance, remember personal details like a nick name, the cars he drives or his birthday. It makes him feel that she cares for him, and in a way she does. But it is also a way of ensuring return calls, and the most skillful of the women are excellent in convincing or deluding the client that he really is the object of her affection. A typical example would be a daytime telephone one-on-one where as part of the "real girlfriend experience" the client asks her how she is doing. "Terry! Thanks goodness you've called, its been so boring today, I'm so glad to hear your voice".

In their "special" relationships the men can also make requests, for special items of clothing – a blue skirt, pink knickers, etc. – or for certain scenarios. Sometimes the performer is sent a script, "what if your wife catches us" to go with a particular fantasy. At other times they want the women to talk dirty or humiliate them.

The adaptation of technological advances where performers and clients can remain anonymous, has opened up an entirely new arena of social intercourse, sexual gratification and economic activity. It provides a spicy twist to virtual relationships.

While the set up has empowered performers, and especially female performers, there are challenges for the corporate players. The model developed by Studio 66 is to combine conventional linear TV broadcast accessible on Sky "adult" section of the Sky electronic programme guide ("Sky EPG"), alongside bespoke webcam interactivity into a single bundle. Performers can use the platform of Live TV, web cams and on demand video content from the company website to create and build a brand. They can then jointly monetise that brand from home or any site they wish, with the option of working from the studio always available.

Constantly harassed by moral crusaders and scrutinised by intrusive regulators, the adult entertainment industry has always been an early adopter of technological innovation. Disruptive technological changes, like videos in the 1970[5], internet in the 2000, the webcam today, have helped the sector avoid undue of legislative interference, but it is a cat and mouse game.

Sitting in his control room by the battery of monitors, Brendan[6], the gallery operator and compliance officer, keeps an eye on the studios and regularly checks on the phone conversations. Occasionally he will alert a performer by intercom to pull down a wayward dress. Brendan explains

that if a girl inadvertently or not becomes too explicit, he has to switch the camera off and log the incident to show that they immediately took action. An Ofcom report from 2013 notes a regulatory breach when a daytime “female presenter” was seen exposing her nipples, gyrating her hips suggestively and caressing her inner thigh, breasts and buttocks. They informed the licensee that they were minded to consider imposing statutory sanctions in case of recurrence[7].

The business responded with alacrity, holding meetings with performers and issuing a code of conduct. Paul, a producer and cameraman, explains the need for caution. “There are people lining up to pounce on this business so we have to self-regulate”. This also means setting ceilings of 20 minutes for callers after which they cannot renew. But the performers themselves also keep an eye out, saying things like “you have called me four times now, you should really hang up now”. These defensive measures are in place to pre-empt regulatory intervention. They also give them a sense of being cared for, which further ensures his return.

### Career choices

As with many TV studios, the action takes place behind windowless walls, the irony of a media business built on the appeal of visual imagery. Apart from the technical requirement, this hermetic isolation helps produce the privacy required. Privacy is a contested term here, because what the studio sells is the inversion of social norms by allowing a paying stranger to enter the bedroom of beautiful young women and vicariously engage in the most intimate acts.

For the crew however, privacy, team spirit and a pleasant environment are preconditions for producing a quality product. “Many of the girls expect this to be a really sleazy place when they first arrive. They are pleasantly surprised by what they find, the place is clean and light and everybody is respectful”, explains Robert. He has been working with the founder since the beginning, when they met at a different channel that was far less well organised. He has stuck with the job for over six years now. A graduate in social anthropology who began work in the publishing industry he never thought of becoming a “producer” in adult entertainment. But, he explains, “my old position was morphing increasingly into a sales job. That was not for me, so when this opportunity came up, I left”.

Precisely because of its ambivalent status the erotica industry is less structured than other professions with opportunities for people short of vocational qualifications or technical expertise that are expected elsewhere. Most of the staff came on board by accident, often joining initially “while looking for something else” and find themselves in the same post years later. “I am not sure what my job actually is” Robert explains. The manager left him to come up with his own title and he is still looking. The tangible part of this job specification is organising the rota. It is not always easy ensuring that all the shifts are covered in a 24/7 business. But the most demanding side of the work is looking after the performers.

“Managing a lot of women is challenging at best of times, but looking after 50 glamour models can just be impossible”, he sighs. The downside of the around the clock business is that someone has to be on call. Robert receives texts at all hours of the day, which also puts a strain on his own relationship. He relishes the fact that he has managed establishing a good rapport with the performers. To some he is a confidante and he mentions examples where he was informed of one young woman’s pregnancy before she had told her own mother.

It is by providing some form of pastoral care that Studio 66 (see footnote 6) is managing to hold on to their performers when the competition is becoming intense. After all, anybody can set up a technological platform, and there is a growing volume of free erotica on the internet.

This is one of the reasons why Mick, the director of studio 66, supports better regulation. He believes that the government’s commitment to protecting children from pornography can work in their favour. Age verification technology will ensure that the client is likely to stay after having gone through the process and that he is able to pay. He thinks further that with the requirement in place punters are more likely to entrust their details to a reputable private company.

But beyond questions of access the regulator is also interfering with content, which Mick Jordan thinks lamentable. The vast majority of people, in his view, have no desire to watch a model

urinating into someone's mouth, but for those who do, and provided the video was filmed between consenting adults, let them watch it. If it is pushed underground then people will migrate to the dark web, where the production methods may well be less civilised than at Studio 66.

### The strive for respectability

The functionality of the night-time shows with striptease, "implicit nudity", and simulated sex is captured by the *noms de guerre* adopted by regulars like "Gonnacum". Puzzling, however, is the popularity of the daytime service when the girls keep their clothes on and do little other than stretch and chat. Much of it is mundane, but some of it personal. One guy is telling Donna about his mother who is not well and might have to go to hospital. Donna coos sympathetically and wants to know more about the circumstances with the seconds ticking away.

To Robert this is a mystery, "what does he think is going on there, we are not the Samaritans". What the customers buy into is the fantasy of being in a relationship with a stunning partner. That is why they send letters, sometimes with photographs of themselves, as if they were in a long distance relationship. It follows that customers try to take it further, having revealed so much themselves and after spending a fortune on phone charges, they want a date. When this does not happen they take their desire elsewhere. Nothing is more revealing about the capture of some of these men than the fact that they often return at a later point. The rupture can even reinforce the compulsion by giving it the appearance of a tiff in a normal relationship.

To the crew in the studio the explanation is loneliness and social alienation. But some of the men are in relationships and establish camaraderie on the chat lines where they discuss the performers. Reassuring against the backdrop of social anxiety over the alleged misogyny inherent to pornography is the quality of the exchanges on UK Babe Channels[8]. The prevailing attitudes are classic fandom with pretensions of connoisseurship and genuine affection. A few lines garnered from the first page of Lola Knight's page provide an insight into the viewer's mindset:

- "My personal opinion is that she is stunningly attractive, and deserved a regular place [...] But all in all. What a babe! And what a signing by studio 66 yet again! Looking forward to this beauty more often".
- She would have fitted in at elite, can give no higher praise than that, she is so cute, hope she is on her own next time.
- Finally S66 have signed a proper naturally assetted nightshow performer; I was mesmerised by her beauty, only two questions spring to mind; when is she on again and more importantly can S66 hold on to her, whatever happens she wins BOTN[9] from me[10].



Arguably this is a consequence of the quest for respectability pursued by the operators and their engagement with the regulator. It allows performers, support crew and clients to preserve their dignity. Writing about the US porn industry in the late 1990, David Foster Wallace noted how the psycho dynamics of shame and self-loathing coupled with the rising acceptability of porn (sex) in mainstream culture were pushing the industry to extremes to retain its edgy sense of unacceptability[11]. Studio 66 illustrates a very different trajectory for adult entertainment, with the normalisation of commercial sexuality and a pride in setting standards.

In the gallery the operator keeps an eye on the competition. A series of monitors are tuned into competing channels like Storm Babes. Gregory speaks dismissively of their poor lighting and inept camera work. He also reports the failure of a contracted special interest channel "Deep filth". These outliers reinforce the sense of Studio 66 respectability, with in-house rules restricting nudity (breasts) to the 11-5:30 night slot (different rules for webcam viewers).

Social attitudes still raise forbidding barriers to the carefree socialising of Studio 66 employees. Most staff have cover stories, often pretending to be working in gambling or shopping channels, but do run the risk of being caught out when stumbling into aficionados. For the cameramen, producers and gallery operators social stigma and night work is the price for a rare luxury in the media industry – stable full time employment. For the performer, of course, the challenge is all the harder. Most of the women therefore work part time in mainstream occupations, often as beauticians, which provides an alternate identity.

## A save haven

The flexibility of the studio provides ready opportunities for women to assume a sexualised fantasy persona without disrupting lifestyles. Bella starts her shift at 10 a.m. and works until 6 with regular tea, toilet and lunch breaks. She is a beautiful, slim woman in her mid 20s, who works lying on a bed in the studio. Occasionally she will throw a kiss at the camera, stretch and curl her lovely legs asking all those “sexy boys out there” to give her a call. She has an easy smile, wide open eyes and an expression of being truly interested in what he is telling her. The main skill, however, is to keep talking about very little for minutes on end. Bella’s average caller time is 7.14 minutes. Much of it will be routine, “do you like what I am wearing?” or the customised chat for regulars like Colin, who gets a special smile. The gift for easy patter, stunning looks and a great deal of patience seem to be the key qualifications for Studio 66 models.

Some come from other sectors of the adult entertainment industry while others start out and stay in the chat rooms. Most are part time like Lara who comes in from the West country to work 10-6, overnighing in the bedroom, then working the 5:30-12:00 shift, and going home. Average earnings are hard to calculate as each girl negotiates a different hourly rate and cuts the takings from each session on a 40/60 basis with the studio. Some of the best performers make over 100k a year – part time.

It’s the money that make it so hard for the girls to leave. The insularity and stigma also work against exit strategies, moreover, a career spent posing and chatting does not help diversify the performer’s skill set. Leaving the industry therefore means crashing from a professional income to an unskilled hourly rate. According to Samantha, who herself has just come out of retirement, most girls cannot do it. They are so used to the spending power they do not save up. She and her boyfriend, a film performer, now want to save up for a mortgage, and like many a woman in her late 20s, finds she has to go back to work.

Another obstacle to re-integration is the complex identity that comes with being a glamour model. The adulation of their clients, the regular customers, and for some, a fan base, feeds fragile egos. As object of myriad fantasies the girls are simultaneously superbly confident in their powers to manipulate and yet lacking in self-esteem. Some, especially as they get older, go back to school for better qualifications while others prepare for business, usually in the personal beauty sector. But changes in demographics, plus good body care, are extending the life span of erotic performers. Studio 66 has a Golden Girl channel for the over 40s and only recently retired a working girl in her 60s.

## Industry futures

The commercial director of Studio 66 has strong views on the regulatory framework. He believes there are advantages in having age and credit card checks early on at the browsing stage, as those who persist in filling in details are more likely to convert into customers. Eliminating some of the profusion of free pornography available on the internet is also likely to benefit the remaining, access controlled, commercial channels. He strongly objects to interference with content, however. While “golden showers” may not have universal appeal, there are niche markets that should be catered for. Overly zealous restrictions only run the risk of driving the providers underground and the studios off shore with possibly very different working conditions and profit sharing arrangements. Keeping the business in the UK has allowed them to create an environment that meets high working standards without compromising the quality of the product.

The long-term future of the performers is less easy to ascertain. Spending a life time fearing exposure, fabricating a web of pseudo identities to explain income and absences, must impose a psychological burden. The social stigma attending to any involvement in the sector draws a veil over successful passages out of erotica, leaving us to speculate about the successful slide into alternative careers or the returns on invested earnings. There may well be other costs, such as arrested personal development, or the prolonged strain of acting out a one-dimensional fantasy with little room for self-expression. And yet, the telephone and on line relationships that the models do establish with their clients have created a new communicative dimension that remains unexplored.

Male clients, in turn, may find that exposure to sexual titillation, feeding onanistic fantasies, may get in the way of forming relationships. It may impede sexual development and certainly impose a financial burden. In both cases, however, these are risks that adults need to assess for

themselves. Regulators can set standards and mitigate the risk of erotic content spilling over into wider other channels where they are more accessible. The greater stringency of controls comes at the invariable cost of pushing the industry underground, with a more sordid product and greater risk for models, producers or clients.

For the moment “camming” has shifted the balance of power between performers and “facilitators”, clients and workers, and reconfigured the relationships between punters and performers. Eevie, a performer interviewed in Seattle last year, observed that camming has changed sex work. “I think it’s really humanized us. We’re not just an idea of a person, we’re actual people. Even if you come for the fantasy and just to see boobs and stuff, you’re gonna have to work through me first” (McGehee, 2015). Most interesting perhaps is the combination of web camera encounters, erotic pics and videos with performance, graphic art and short stories pioneered by Aellea[12] who has her own website. Here erotica becomes a cultivated form of self-expression using technology as a platform for purveying a product, promoting a body centred aesthetics and promoting a philosophical ideal. In the opening credo the artist declares herself “I am an INTP, a libertarian, a gun-owner and a loather of religion”. It’s a rare instance of turning the tables on a constituency that has been persecuting the erotic art for millennia.

How the regulatory arrangements work out is quite unclear, as the arguments of reason are conventionally drowned by apocalyptic warnings of moral decay. While this may succeed in closing particular sites and business models the industry has always managed to adjust. For the moment, however, camming seems to have achieved an equilibrium between performer safety, client anonymity and a social relationship that makes good business sense with minimal external costs.

## Notes

1. The performers are on their own, the erotic performances are simulated, there is no actual sex.
2. The holding company that owns the station.
3. Greek, from *pornē* prostitute+*graphein* to write.
4. Interview with managing director.
5. Staff recount the popular explanation for the demise of the Betamax video format as due to the adoption of VHS as the standard video format by the porn industry.
6. All names have been changed.
7. Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin Issue 235, 5 August 2013.
8. UK Babe Channels [www.babeshows.co.uk/index.php](http://www.babeshows.co.uk/index.php). Studio 66 had 140,959 posts on 27 May 2016.
9. Blog of the night.
10. [www.babeshows.co.uk/showthread.php?tid=65795](http://www.babeshows.co.uk/showthread.php?tid=65795)
11. David Foster Wallace, 1998, *Big Red Son*.
12. <http://profiles.myfreecams.com/Aella>

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