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Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Porn By [Xeni Jardin](#)

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The first thing you notice in Larry Flynt's office is the scent of roses. A bouquet the color of flesh sits on the corner of an imposing, intricately carved wood desk -- next to framed family snapshots and an oversized book of Helmut Newton photos.

Then, you notice dozens of magazines stacked neatly in parallel rows with titles like *Hot Couples*, *Barely Legal*, *Busty Beauties* -- and of course, *Hustler*. [Flynt](#) launched *Hustler* magazine 30 years ago this coming July, but his increasingly multimedia adult empire now includes websites, a casino, retail stores and an ever-expanding library of videos. Not bad for someone who didn't graduate from high school.

Flynt's brand of populist porn has both fans and opponents. He has been the subject of numerous legal battles over porn and First Amendment issues, as well as a failed assassination attempt. Wired News spoke to Flynt in Los Angeles about the impact of technology on the adult industry and the state of free speech in America.

Wired News: How has the Internet changed porn?

Larry Flynt: It's had a dramatic effect. In the 1980s, publishing was 80 percent of my business. Now it's about 20 percent, and the rest is Internet or video. I don't think many people anticipated how the Internet was going to revolutionize the way we disseminate information. Now everybody does -- but some did in time, and some didn't. That's one of the reasons *Penthouse* filed for bankruptcy. They were relying totally on publishing. We knew in the early 1990s that we needed to diversify and branched out into a lot of different areas.

Technology still has many surprises for us down the road, particularly in the wireless area. It's going to be absolutely phenomenal. In the next two to five years, you'll see the computer and your home television set merging. You'll have one remote control, and they'll effectively be one device.

WN: How does the wireless Internet change things?

Flynt: Wireless is extremely intriguing because it has no bounds and provides constant, easy access. What's very popular in Europe right now, which we're a part of -- people can download a video or still photos onto their cell phones. That hasn't become a fad in America yet, and I don't know where it's going to go.

But we're also tampering with something I don't think we really want -- the end of privacy as we know it. The paparazzi were nothing compared to this.

WN: In the last couple of years, you've made purchases that changed the adult industry -- you bought VCA Pictures and domestic distribution rights to Vivid Entertainment's video, and you've been bidding on a number of other porn companies. Is the shopping spree about obtaining content that can be delivered more easily online?

Flynt: Content is important. I'm only interested in buying companies with large libraries that have been around 15 to 20 years. There's a great deal of profit in re-editing compilations from old videos made in the '80s and '90s. But we're also doing a lot in video on demand, and we're a major provider for satellite companies and for the Playboy Channel.

WN: In 2001, the Los Angeles Police Department made three obscenity busts in Porn Valley (San Fernando Valley), a move widely seen as heralding a new conservative crackdown on porn. Recently, ultra-hardcore adult moviemakers Robert Zicari and Janet Romano of Extreme Associates were charged with two federal counts of obscenity. How do you view their case?

Flynt: Most of the obscenity cases being brought today involve pretty rough stuff that's demeaning and humiliating to women -- pedophilia, rape, necrophilia. They're aberrations and they're out of the norm. I like to think that we stick to plain old vanilla sex ... it seems to keep us out of trouble. When guys like Extreme Associates push the envelope, they have to realize they're inviting prosecution. I went through all of that 30 years ago.

But this is an election year, and Bush doesn't look too good in the polls. He has to pull a rabbit out of a hat, and that could very well be the adult industry. His base is the religious right, and he wants to keep them happy.

When I went into this business in the 1970s it was a \$600 million a year business. Today it's an \$11 billion a year business. It's not going away. People aren't interested in others controlling what they can do or read or see in the privacy of their own homes.

Paul Cambria, the attorney who's been with me over 20 years, just tried a case for another client in St. Louis. This client had some really rough stuff, and a jury of 12 women with an average age of 60. He thought he was going to lose the case.

The jury was out for two hours and returned a not guilty verdict. The overwhelming consensus was that "this isn't my cup of tea, but I don't want tell other people how they should live their lives."

WN: The Justice Department recently appointed anti-porn advocate Bruce Taylor as special counsel -- a sort of porn czar. He fought smut during the '80s and early '90s, and opposed you in *Larry Flynt v. Ohio*. Your thoughts on his reprisal role?

Flynt: I know Bruce Taylor. He prosecuted me 30 years ago in Cleveland and I beat him. He's a nice man, a good lawyer and a good prosecutor, but I think he may be missing the point on the most important issue.

In 1973, the Supreme Court ruled that individual communities should set obscenity standards. Whenever a case is tried, it will be based on a community standard for that particular place. A prosecutor can have all the fantasies he wants about prosecuting an obscenity case, but if he can't get the consensus of 12 jurors, he can't get a conviction. This is what the Justice Department will run into. I'm not saying they won't get some convictions on the sort of far-out material that companies like Extreme Associates and others are producing, but mainstream porn will be tough.

WN: Why do you feel that the right to anonymity -- online and offline -- is important? How does privacy relate to porn?

Flynt: Privacy is not explicitly spelled out in the Constitution as freedom of speech is in the First Amendment. But the right to privacy has always been something that lawmakers and the judiciary have taken into consideration in the course of our country's 200-year history. You know we're going to be giving up more and more of it, though. But there are still a lot of people who want to be able to remain anonymous, and some lawmakers who also feel that way.

WN: What are your thoughts on the current state of civil liberties and individual rights in the United States?

Flynt: Benjamin Franklin once said that those who would trade liberty for security deserve neither. I think Bush and Ashcroft could learn a lot by taking a page from Ben Franklin's book. I just can't believe that our lawmakers actually voted for it (the Patriot Act). We basically gave away all of our civil liberties.

A lot of Americans think, "I'm not Arab, so it doesn't affect me." But the Patriot Act has no color barriers. They just used part of the Patriot Act to bust a strip club owner in Las Vegas. The law is on the books, and you don't need a judge's authority to do wiretaps, and you don't have to provide a person you arrest with an attorney, and the books you check out of a library can be placed in question, and attorney-client conversations can be monitored. Ashcroft went to Capitol Hill and intimidated lawmakers into passing this by effectively saying "Blood will be on your hands if you don't pass it."

The one good thing about the Patriot Act is that it includes a sunset clause -- it's supposed to go away at the end of 2004. I don't think they'll find the support to renew it now.

WN: How does the changing state of civil liberties in America affect the adult industry?

Flynt: You have a right to buy whatever you want. You may not be able to afford a printing press to print it, but you have a right to buy it. That's not something that's often talked about in relation to the First Amendment. But civil liberties and individual rights are all we really have in this country.

That's what upset me so much about the Patriot Act. We got right down in the mud with the terrorists. What we were doing was reducing ourselves to their level. We are the beacon of freedom in the world. For us to give up all of these freedoms to wage war with lunatics just isn't necessary.

WN: Do you ever get tired of having to answer for the actions of some of your more extreme colleagues in the industry?

Flynt: No. I let them do their thing and I do mine. I try to set an example for them. But I've been to prison, and I don't think some of them have. Let them try it, maybe it will change their attitude.

WN: What legacy do you hope to leave the world?

Flynt: That I fought to expand the perimeters of free speech, and that I didn't waver on that issue. I'm proud of the contributions I've made in that area.

WN: What's next?

Flynt: (laughing) Oh, I've got plenty to do.



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