Coronavirus and the Ethics of 'Pandemic Porn'

By Alex Berezow, PhD — May 28, 2020

People are hungry for information about the coronavirus. But are some media outlets exploiting the situation to promote themselves?

Thanks to the COVID-19 lockdown, pornography use is up. But that's not what is meant by the term "pandemic porn."

In modern Internet parlance, porn no longer necessarily refers to naughty pictures and videos. The word has taken on the meaning of "really interesting and engaging pictures," which is why the social media platform Reddit has groups like "Earth Porn" (amazing pictures of natural landscapes) and "Space Porn" (beautiful images of outer space).

Pandemic Porn

Along similar lines, "pandemic porn" refers to compelling photos of the coronavirus pandemic. But its connotation is negative, with the implication being that media outlets that publish it are trying to exploit a national tragedy for clicks.
Consider the New York Times. It made a large splash when its front page was essentially a wall of text, listing the names of the COVID-19 deceased along with short obituaries. Some (most?) people thought it was a moving tribute.

Ever the cynic, I found it a distasteful, exploitative, politically motivated cash grab. Where is the tribute to the far greater number of people who die every year from heart disease or cancer? Or how about suicide or opioid overdoses? Or what about the flu, which kills thousands every year? Those deaths don't fit any ideological agenda or political narrative at the moment, so they're deemed unworthy of individual recognition.
Musical artist Jackie Kamel jumped aboard the bandwagon as well. In a Facebook post that went viral, she let the world know how grief-stricken she was. She’s so grief-stricken, in fact, that it appears she’s taken up smoking. (And those may not be regular cigarettes, if you catch my drift.)

Call me a cynic, but it looks to me as if she is using this national tragedy to promote her own brand. People who are actually grief-stricken don’t pose artistically for cameras. (Coincidentally, she just released her first ever full-length album!*)

The Ethics of Pandemic Porn

It's nearly impossible to know truly a person’s motivations. What appears to be a self-serving act of virtue signaling may actually be a heartfelt expression of sadness. But I’m cynical because I’ve been in the media for 10 years, and I know how people in the media operate. It’s all about the eyeballs, clicks, and ad revenue. Those who use social media to promote themselves or sell products often behave similarly.

After 9/11, we all felt as if we had been punched in the gut. A friend of mine (who I don’t believe had been to New York City before) visited the World Trade Center and cried. We all felt that way. Nobody was virtue signaling or trying to score political points because we were all too shocked, sad, and scared to do that. (Social media also didn't exist, which certainly made virtue signaling harder.)
9/11 united us as a country. The coronavirus divided us further. That is very telling.

*Note: She has a good voice, I must admit.*