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‘Sexting’ and the First Amendment

by JOHN A. HUMBACH*

Introduction

Two Florida teenagers took over one hundred photographs of themselves naked and engaging in unspecified but lawful¹ “sexual behavior.”² The two were subsequently charged with “promoting a sexual performance of a child,” a second degree felony under Florida law, for “producing, directing or promoting a photograph or representation that they knew to include the sexual conduct of a child.”³ For her role in photographing the lawful conduct, the 16-year-old defendant A.H. was adjudged delinquent on a plea of *nolo contendere*,⁴ and the judgment was upheld on appeal.⁵ In justifying the felony delinquency judgment, the court observed, among other things, that if the pictures ever got out, “future damage may be done

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1. *B.B. v. State*, 659 So. 2d 256, 260 (Fla. 1995) (holding that the state constitutional right of privacy prevented prosecution of sexual activities between minors and criticizing the prosecution’s theory under which the law would have been utilized not “as a shield to protect a minor, but rather, . . . as a weapon to adjudicate a minor delinquent”).

2. *A.H. v. State*, 949 So. 2d 234, 235–36 (Fla. Dist. Ct. App. 2007). At the time, the defendant A.H. was sixteen years old and her boyfriend was seventeen. *Id.* Both were charged as juveniles. *Id.* See also Declan McCullagh, *Police Blotter: Teens Prosecuted for Racy Photos*, CNET NEWS, Feb. 9, 2007, http://news.cnet.com/Police-blotter-Teens-prosecuted-for-racy-photos/2100-1030_3-6157857.html.

3. *A.H.*, 949 So. at 235; FLA. STAT. § 827.071(3) (2007). “Sexual conduct” includes various form of sexual intercourse or contact as well as “actual lewd exhibition of the genitals.” FLA. STAT. § 827.071(1)(g) (2007).

4. *A.H.*, 949 So. 2d at 236.

5. *Id.* at 239 (holding that, even assuming sexual intercourse between two minors is legal, the state’s constitutional right of privacy did not protect the defendant’s act of photographing her own sexual conduct). It should be noted that no First Amendment issues were considered or, apparently, raised in the appeal.

to these minors' careers or personal lives."⁶ The court did not mention "the potential impact on their lives from a child pornography conviction."⁷

In Ohio, a fifteen-year-old girl used her cell phone to send nude photos of herself and was charged with "illegal use of a minor in nudity-oriented material."⁸ The charges were based on a statute⁹ that the United States Supreme Court had previously considered and upheld.¹⁰ Although the Supreme Court's earlier decision indicated that, to be constitutional, the statute would have to be limited to pictures going beyond mere nudity (for example, "involving a lewd exhibition or graphic focus on a minor's genitals"¹¹), the prosecutor proceeded against the girl anyway. The girl agreed to enter a plea to a lesser felony, apparently hoping to avoid the risk of conviction on charges that could have led to a twenty year registration requirement as a sex offender. However, the court refused to accept her plea and, instead, put the case over for six months on the condition that the girl comply with conditions set by the prosecutor. After she was caught violating one of the prosecutor's conditions (by using a cell phone), she was sentenced.¹²

In New Jersey, a fourteen-year-old girl was arrested on child pornography charges after the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported her to the authorities for thirty or so

6. *Id.*

7. Nancy Rommelmann, *Anatomy of a Child Pornographer*, REASON, July 2009, available at <http://www.reason.com/news/show/133863.html>.

8. Russ Zimmer, *Student to Admit to 1 Charge in Cell-Phone Nudity Case*, NEWARK ADVOCATE (Ohio), Nov. 11, 2008; Kim Zetter, *Teen Girl Faced Child Porn Charges for E-Mailing Nude Pictures of Herself to Friends—Update*, WIRED BLOG NETWORK, Oct. 22, 2008, <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2008/10/teen-girl-faces/>.

9. OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 2907.323(A)(3) (West 2008).

10. *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 126 (1990) (concluding that the First Amendment does not prevent the states from criminalizing the private possession of child pornography). *But cf.* *Stanley v. Georgia*, 394 U.S. 557, 568 (1969) (holding, by contrast, that the First Amendment does prevent prohibitions on the private possession of obscenity). *See infra* text accompanying notes 96–114.

11. *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 107 and discussion *infra* note 113. Press reports of the case give no indication that any of the pictures went beyond mere nudity but, then again, the standard of "graphic focus" is not exactly self-explanatory and capable of varying interpretations.

12. Russ Zimmer, *Court: Teen Accused of Texting Nude Photos Violated Deal*, NEWARK ADVOCATE (Ohio), Apr. 21, 2009; I have found no report of what, exactly, the girl's ultimate sentence was.

nude pictures of herself posted on her MySpace page.¹³ She was charged with possessing and distributing child pornography. As a condition of withdrawing the charges, the prosecutor required the girl to undergo at least six months of counseling and probation and to “stay out of trouble.”¹⁴ Otherwise, if convicted, she would be required, after serving her sentence, to register as a sex offender.¹⁵

Factual situations like these are not isolated. A recent study shows that about twenty percent of U.S. teenagers (including eleven percent of teen girls ages thirteen to sixteen) admit to producing and distributing nude or semi-nude¹⁶ pictures of themselves.¹⁷ Today's

13. Jennifer H. Cunningham, *14-Year-Old Girl Faces Pornography Charge*, NORTHJERSEY.COM, Mar. 25, 2009, available at http://www.northjersey.com/passaic/14-year-old_girl_faces_pornography_charge.html.

14. *N.J. Teen Won't Face Child Porn Charges for Posting Nude Photos of Self on MySpace*, ASSOCIATED PRESS, June 23, 2009, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,528602,00.html>.

15. *Id.*

16. While the Supreme Court has said that “depictions of nudity, without more, constitute protected expression,” *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 112 (citing *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 765 (1982)), lower court decisions both before and since have held that, even without nudity, photographs can constitute child pornography as “lascivious display of the genitals.” See, e.g., *United States v. Knox*, 32 F.3d 733, 754 (3d Cir. 1994) (genital areas covered); *United States v. Dost*, 636 F. Supp. 828, 832 (S.D. Cal. 1986), *aff'd sub nom. United States v. Wiegand*, 812 F.2d 1239 (9th Cir. 1987). For a discussion of these latter cases and of what “more” is required to make nudity lose its constitutional protection, see Amy Adler, *Inverting the First Amendment*, 149 U. PA. L. REV. 921, 946–61 (2001).

There do not seem to be studies showing the proportion of sexually explicit self-produced teen photographs that are actually illegal, as opposed to depicting only “nudity, without more,” and it easy to see why. It is a serious crime to possess or view even a single image that goes over the line. See *infra* notes 71–72. No researchers in their right minds would want to incur the long prison terms that empirical studies could bring. As a practical matter, therefore, state and federal laws effectively prohibit independent scientific research into the various empirical questions that arise in this area. In any case, given the haziness of the line between legal and illegal images (with even non-nude photos being potentially illegal), it may be virtually impossible to do a reliable count. With prosecutions already occurring, however, it seems a fair presumption that any pictures showing teen nudity will result in a substantial legal risk for the teens who take and possess them even if the pictures might, after a trial and possible appeals, turn out to be constitutionally protected as merely nudity “without more.”

17. See NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY, SEX AND TECH: RESULTS FROM A SURVEY OF TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS 1 (2008), available at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_Summary.pdf. With their ubiquitous cell phones, it must be extremely easy for teens to just step in front of a mirror, pop the shot, and send it. In addition to pictures made and distributed using cell phones, an estimated 5% of the child pornography images found on the Internet, amounting to “hundreds of thousands of images,” are self-produced, according to statistics quoted by Professor Leary. See Mary Graw Leary, *Self-Produced Child Pornography: The Appropriate Societal Response to Juvenile Self-Sexual Exploitation*, 15 VA. J. SOC. POL'Y &

young people no doubt want to be popular and interesting to their contemporaries as much as any prior generation. But the youth of today do not stay in touch with pens and scented paper. They text. They do not send each other little portraits in lockets. They snap photos on their cell phones. And, for better or worse, they do not regard sexuality as the monopoly of older generations but as a part of their lives.¹⁸ Even if they personally abstain, they know that they are literally surrounded by classmates and friends who do not, and (as compared with recent generations) sexual encounters within their peer group are already a familiar and normal aspect of life.

Along with the burgeoning phenomenon of teenagers' taking sexually explicit pictures of themselves and sending them to friends by cell phone and other digital gadgets, a new word, "sexting," has been invented. There are reports of sexting prosecutions against teens across the country.¹⁹ As the teenagers learned in the cases described above, taking sexually explicit pictures of persons under the

L. 1, 19 (2007). Professor Leary also cites a New Zealand study that found "the largest group of child pornography offenders to be between the ages of fifteen and nineteen years old." *Id.* at 20.

A more recent Pew survey shows somewhat lower numbers. Amanda Lenhart, Pew Internet and American Life Project, *TEENS AND SEXTING* (2009), available at http://pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2009/PIP_Teens_and_Sexting.pdf. The Pew survey was, however, conducted by telephone and so the respondents (who were apparently not anonymous) may have been reluctant to confess a potential felony to stranger on the line. The Pew survey itself concedes that its study may "underreport the actual incidence" inasmuch as sexting is subject to a "relatively high level of social disapproval." *Id.* at 4, n.10.

For a discussion of sexting in its socio-political context, see David Rosen, *Sexting: The Latest Innovation in Porn*, COUNTERPUNCH, Mar. 25, 2009, available at <http://www.counterpunch.org/rosen03252009.html>. For an illuminating mix of teen comments on the National Campaign's study, see *Sex and Tech*, COSMO GIRL BLOG, Dec. 10, 2008, available at <http://www.cosmogirl.com/blog/sex-and-tech> (linked from the National Campaign website).

18. Roughly half of U.S. high school students have had sexual relations, with the percentage slightly higher for boys than for girls. See KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION, U.S. TEEN SEXUAL ACTIVITY 1 (2005), available at <http://www.kff.org/youthhivstds/upload/U-S-Teen-Sexual-Activity-Fact-Sheet.pdf>.

19. Reportedly, child pornography prosecutions against sexting teens have been commenced in at least ten states. *Texting Trouble; Trouble While Texting*, ABC NEWS TRANSCRIPT, Mar. 13, 2009. See Rommelmann, *supra* note 7; Kim Zetter, *Child Porn Laws Used Against Kids Who Photograph Themselves*, WIRED BLOG NETWORK, Jan. 15, 2009, available at <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2009/01/kids/>; *Naked Photos, E-Mail Get Teens in Trouble*, FOXNEWS.COM, June 5, 2008, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,363438,00.html>.

age of eighteen, even of oneself, are state and federal felonies.²⁰ Under federal law, moreover, any person who “produces” sexually explicit images, including “lascivious exhibition of the genitals or pubic area,” is required to maintain certain detailed records and to keep his or her home available for FBI inspections.²¹ Failure to comply is also a felony.²² Since it is unlikely that very many teens are keeping the required records, this law alone means that millions of American teenagers are felony sex offenders.

In addition to the prohibitions on producing child pornography, it is a felony under both federal and state laws to *possess or distribute* images showing, among other things, “lascivious exhibition of the genitals or pubic area” of persons under the age of eighteen.²³ Thus, in addition to the twenty percent of teens who are “producing” sexually explicit images of themselves, there is, perhaps an even greater number of teens who are guilty of felonies for having *received* such images and retained or forwarded them to others (i.e., “possession” and “distribution”).²⁴ Receiving just one picture carries a mandatory minimum sentence of five years.²⁵ On the conservative assumption that, for each teen who photographs herself, an average of two or three classmates receive copies of the pictures, it is a plausible estimate that as many as forty to fifty percent or more of otherwise law-abiding American teenagers are already felony sex offenders under current law and as such are subject to long-term imprisonment followed by “sex offender” registration requirements for decades or for life.²⁶

20. See, e.g., 18 U.S.C. § 2251 (2008). For a discussion of the applicability of state child pornography laws to minors, see Stephen F. Smith, *Jail for Juvenile Child Pornographers?: A Reply to Professor Leary*, 15 VA. J. SOC. POL'Y & L. 505, 512–15 (2008), pointing out that these laws do not exempt minors.

21. 18 U.S.C. § 2257 (2006); see *Connection Distrib. Co. v. Holder*, 557 F.3d 321, 325 (6th Cir. 2009). The law and its registration requirements also apply to persons who take explicit pictures of persons over eighteen. *Id.* So sexting teens, who are legally adults, can also be felony sex offenders under this statute.

22. 18 U.S.C. § 2258 (2006).

23. See, e.g., 18 U.S.C. §§ 2252 & 2252A (2008); Smith, *supra* note 20.

24. Thirty-one percent of teens ages thirteen to nineteen say they have received a sender's nude or semi-nude picture or video of someone, and twenty-nine percent say they have had such a picture or video “shared” with them (though not meant for them). NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY, *supra* note 17, at 11.

25. 18 U.S.C. §§ 2252(a)(2), (b)(1) (2008).

26. A sex offender label, Illinois State's Attorney James Glasgow recently explained, “means your economic viability is zero for the rest of your life.” Elizabeth Martin,

Whatever else one may make of all this, there is certainly reason to suspect something is profoundly amiss when a system of laws makes serious felony offenders of such a large proportion of its young people. The fact that most of them will probably never be prosecuted is a hardly redeeming point. What kind of justice system turns a blind eye to millions of violators while selectively prosecuting a few? If the laws are sound as written, how can the authorities justify a systematic failure to uncover and prosecute the legions of young felons in our midst? If on the other hand the laws are not sound, how can they be left on the books, a kind of Sword of Damocles for youth, nominally making serious crimes out of conduct that may be deemed, de facto, too harmless to pursue? Arguably, at least, a self-respecting legal system should either enforce its laws or admit they are wrong and fix them.²⁷

This Article considers whether people, particularly teenagers, have a constitutional right to record and document their own legal activities, in particular, sexual conduct and nudity. Such “autopornography” may sometimes be considered legally obscene, a category that is not, of course, protected by the First Amendment.²⁸ But even pictures and videos that are not obscene may still be illegal if they fall into the broad constitutional category of “child pornography.”²⁹ However, the constitutional questions are more complicated than simply placing pictures and videos in the correct legal category.

Sexting, SOUTHTOWN STAR, Sept. 26, 2009, available at <http://www.southtownstar.com/lifestyles/1790868,092709sexting.article>. The Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006, which includes the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act, effectively makes it mandatory for states to impose registration requirements on anyone fourteen years or older who is convicted of a child pornography offense. See 42 U.S.C. § 16911 (2006) (defining “sex offenders” required to register) and 18 U.S.C. § 2250 (2006) (penalties for failure to register). See Britney M. Bowater, *Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act of 2006: Is There a Better Way to Tailor the Sentences of Juvenile Sex Offenders?* 57 CATH. U.L. REV. 817 (2008).

Some observers see the prosecution of sexting teenagers as a good thing. See, e.g., Leary, *supra* note 17. Others disagree. See Smith, *supra* note 20 (advocating handling by child protective services). For the view that it is *not* good policy to force sexting teens to register as sex offenders and to force them out of their homes under the often accompanying residency restrictions, see Smith, *supra* note 20, at 535–40.

27. Compare Amy Adler, *All Porn All the Time*, 31 N.Y.U. REV. L. & SOC. CHANGE 695 (2007), in which Professor Adler provides an eloquent review of embarrassments in the efforts to rein in obscenity even before emergence of the current “sexting” phenomenon.

28. See *infra* Part II.

29. See *infra* Part III.

Obscenity is a fraught concept whose legal definition depends significantly on the “value” of the content being expressed. It remains to be seen whether definitions devised decades ago, for a different technological context and under different social circumstances, can sustain a blanket constitutional exclusion for expressive content that now may have far more than “slight value”³⁰ to large numbers of people. Child pornography presents a different class of questions: The broad categorical exclusion established for child pornography in 1982 seems, in its verbal formulation at least, to easily include teen sexting and other autopornography. That categorical exclusion was, however, motivated by a pressing need to address a particular set of serious harms: Adults’ sexual exploitation and abuse of children used in the production of sexually explicit materials.³¹ It is a serious question, therefore, whether the categorical exclusion should be understood to include materials produced under entirely different circumstances, where the originally motivating harms are absent and the brunt of the suppression can savage the lives and future prospects of the very people whom the laws are supposed to protect.

I. Autopornography as Obscenity

For nearly 170 years, the Supreme Court never considered the question of whether there is an implicit obscenity exception to the protections for speech and press guaranteed by the First Amendment.³² Then, in *Roth v. United States*,³³ the Court discovered

30. *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476, 485 (1957) (quoting *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568, 571–72 (1942)). See generally *infra* Part II.

31. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 757 (1982); see generally *infra* Part III.C.

32. “[T]his is the first time the question has been squarely presented to this Court, either under the First Amendment or under the Fourteenth Amendment . . .” *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 481. In *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568 (1942), the Court stated in passing that “lewd and obscene” utterances (along with “the profane, the libelous and the insulting or ‘fighting words’”) are “no essential part of any exposition of ideas,” and that their prohibition has “never been thought to raise any constitutional problem.” *Id.* at 572 (upholding a conviction for uttering “fighting words”). It is not completely clear, however, what content the *Chaplinsky* court was attributing to the word “obscene,” since (as the Court has since admitted) the actual meaning of the word has proved to be a bit elusive. See *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 19, n.2 (1973) and *infra* text accompanying notes 50–51.

This is not to say, however, that there was no considerable effort to suppress books, mostly literature, in the lower courts, largely under the influence of an English case, *Regina v. Hicklin*, [1868] 3 Q.B. 360, 371, which condemned a religious tract as obscene citing its supposed “tendency . . . to deprave and corrupt” the minds of the vulnerable.” See Stephen Gillers, *A Tendency To Deprave And Corrupt: The Transformation Of American Obscenity Law From Hicklin To Ulysses II*, 85 WASH. U. L.R. 215 (2007). Noting the

that such an exception indeed exists. The Court held that obscenity was, like blasphemy,³⁴ profanity,³⁵ and libel,³⁶ a kind of expression that was simply “outside the protection *intended* for speech and press.”³⁷

While the Court asserted that obscene utterances have only “slight social value,” which is “clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality,”³⁸ this low value was not the rationale for recognizing an obscenity exception.³⁹ Indeed, the Court expressly dismissed the notion that the obscenity exception needed to be justified.⁴⁰ The stated legal basis for the obscenity exception was flatly historical: “The rejection of obscenity,” wrote the Court, “is *implicit in the history* of the First Amendment.”⁴¹ At no point, moreover, did the Court make the least suggestion that it was creating the obscenity exception right then and there, in 1957. On the contrary, the *Roth* opinion clearly took the view that the scope of First Amendment

many decades of self-censorship that *Hicklin* test had induced, Professor Gillers remarked that “[n]o judicial pronouncement from an American or British court in the last 140 years has been as harmful to creative artists as Cockburn’s single sentence.” *Id.* at 221.

33. *Roth*, 354 U.S. 476.

34. *But cf.* *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 103–09 (1968) (quoting *Watson v. Jones*, 80 U.S. 679, 728 (1872)) (“The law knows no heresy.”).

35. *But cf.* *Cohen v. California*, 403 U.S. 15 (1971) (striking a conviction for uttering “Fuck the Draft”). *Cf. also* *FCC v. Pacifica Found.*, 438 U.S. 726, 744–48 (1978) (distinguishing broadcast speech from speech elsewhere).

36. *But cf.* *N.Y. Times v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964) (severely curtailing suits for defamation in cases of public figures).

37. *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 483 (emphasis added) (citations omitted). “[T]here is sufficiently contemporaneous evidence to show that obscenity, too, was outside the protection intended for speech and press.” *Id.* (citations omitted).

38. *Id.* at 485 (quoting *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568, 571–72 (1942)). The Court has also asserted the existence of competing state interests in later cases, as well. *E.g.*, in *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 19 (1973) (“This Court has recognized that the States have a legitimate interest in prohibiting dissemination or exhibition of obscene material when the mode of dissemination carries with it a significant danger of offending the sensibilities of unwilling recipients or of exposure to juveniles.”) (footnote omitted) (citations omitted).

39. *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 485 (“The protection given speech and press was fashioned to assure unfettered interchange of ideas for the bringing about of political and social changes desired by the people.”).

40. *Id.* at 484–87 (citing dicta from *Beauharnais v. Illinois*, 343 U.S. 250, 266 (1952) (“Certainly no one would contend that obscene speech . . . may be punished only upon a showing of such circumstances,” for example “a clear and present danger of a serious substantive evil.”).

41. *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 484 (emphasis added).

protection and, hence, the scope of the exception for obscenity, “was fashioned”⁴² at the time of the Bill of Rights.⁴³

Thus, relying on history, the Court in *Roth* placed a serious constitutional cloud over not only teen sexting and autopenography⁴⁴ but over a branch of the publishing industry that is now worth billions of dollars per year,⁴⁵ denying to both the full force of the free press guaranty. It is as though somebody suddenly realized that, as a matter of history, the Framers had never intended to protect motorcycle magazines and so, from then on, the First Amendment’s protection ceased to apply to motorcycling content.

The historical evidence for an early obscenity exception is, however, quite a bit more sketchy than the *Roth* Court seemed to assume when it “squarely held”⁴⁶ that “obscenity is not within the

42. *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 484.

43. The Court continued to insist on this “originalist” source of the obscenity exception 25 years later when it again asserted that “rejection of obscenity . . . was implicit in the history of the First Amendment.” *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 754 (1982) (citation omitted) (emphasis added) (without, however, citing any historical authority from the time of First Amendment’s ratification). And the Court reconfirmed this view that original intent is the basis of the obscenity exception just last year in *District of Columbia v. Heller*. See *Dist. of Columbia v. Heller*, 128 S. Ct. 2783, 2821 (2008) (“The First Amendment contains the freedom-of-speech guarantee that the people ratified, which included exceptions for obscenity, libel, and disclosure of state secrets.”).

One consequence of this purely historical foundation for the obscenity exception is legislative bodies have the power to enact laws restricting obscenity “on the basis of unprovable assumptions.” *Kaplan v. California*, 413 U.S. 115, 120 (1973) (citing *Paris Adult Theatre I v. Slaton*, 413 U.S. 49, 60–63 (1973)).

44. Which was then, of course, still in the future.

45. One fairly recent industry source placed U.S. pornography revenues in 2006 at about \$12.45 billion per year for “adult entertainment.” FREE SPEECH COALITION, STATE-OF-THE-INDUSTRY REPORT 2007-08 1 (2008). Another source, apparently an industry critic, put the 2006 figure at \$13.33 billion. FAMILY SAFE MEDIA, http://www.familysafemedia.com/pornography_statistics.html. The total for sixteen industrialized countries was given as \$97 billion in 2006. Jerry Ropelato, *Internet Pornography Statistics*, available at <http://internet-filter-review.toptenreviews.com/internet-pornography-statistics.html#anchor2>. These figures represent, of course, not the value of the industry to those who run it (whose net profits are much lower) but to the consumers who buy it.

The industry’s annual revenues would probably be even greater were it not for the damping effect of the obscenity laws on copyright enforcement. “Many adult businesses have been hesitant to . . . pursue prosecution of those pirating their materials . . . concerned that prosecuting for piracy will bring about unwanted government attention.” FREE SPEECH COALITION, *supra*, at 13. An “estimated . . . 50% of online materials consists of pirated content.” *Id.* By muting the effectiveness of copyright monopolies, the nation’s obscenity laws apparently do much to assure the abundant supply of inexpensive pornography on the Internet.

46. *United States v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 754 (citing *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 485).

area of constitutionally protected speech or press.”⁴⁷ Justice Douglas (who presumably had clerks to look into the matter) could not find any such evidence,⁴⁸ nor apparently has anyone else. The Court cited a few state cases and statutes in support of its historical claim, but these are poor evidence of the thinking at the time that the First Amendment was drafted. After all, until well into the twentieth century, nobody even thought the amendment had anything to do with the states.⁴⁹ And then there is the awkward fact that neither the *Roth* definition of obscenity nor today’s definition “reflect the precise meaning of ‘obscene’ as traditionally used in the English language.”⁵⁰

47. *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 485.

48. *Paris Adult Theatre*, 413 U.S. at 70. See also *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 40 (1973); *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 514; *United States v. 12 200-Ft. Reels of Super 8mm Film*, 413 U.S. 123, 130–37 (1973) (Douglas, J., dissenting).

49. Compare *Barron v. Baltimore*, 32 U.S. 243 (1833) (Bill of Rights does not apply against the states) with *Gitlow v. New York*, 268 U.S. 652 (1925) (freedom of speech and press, as fundamental liberties, are protected from state impairment by the Fourteenth Amendment).

Another reason why early cases and statutory prohibitions, even federal, shed little light on the original understanding of the First Amendment’s scope is that, during the first century or more following the adoption of the Bill of Rights, it was thought that the Free Speech Clause only prohibited *prior restraints*, and prosecutions after the fact were generally permissible. *Patterson v. Colorado*, 205 U.S. 454, 462 (1907) (“[T]he main purpose of [the First Amendment] is ‘to prevent . . . previous restraints upon publications . . .’ and they do not prevent the subsequent punishment of such as may be deemed contrary to the public welfare.”) (quoting *Commonwealth v. Blanding*, 20 Mass. 304, 313–14 (1825)).

50. *Miller*, 413 U.S. at 19 n. 2. As used in ordinary English, the Court explains, the term “obscene” has a meaning that generally encompasses whatever is disgusting, revolting, offensive, or the like. *Id.* The Court could not, however, embrace this meaning without also embracing as “implicit in the history of the First Amendment” a denial of protection to *all* disgusting, revolting and offensive speech. *Roth*, 354 U.S. at 484. Such a reading would, of course, limit the First Amendment to *inoffensive* speech, making it just about nugatory.

Recognizing its earlier misapprehension of the word “obscenity,” the Court observed in *Miller* that the material discussed in *Roth* was “more accurately” defined as “pornography.” *Miller*, 413 U.S. at 19 n.2. However, the Court did not adopt this term in place of “obscenity,” probably because, if it did, it would risk disconnecting modern obscenity doctrine from its supposed historical foundation. The Court’s way out of this conundrum was to assert that “[p]ornographic material which is [legally] obscene forms a sub-group of all ‘obscene’ expression,” namely, “obscene material ‘which deals with sex.’” *Id.*

But mysteries remain. The Court did not explain why, given the historical pretensions of *Roth*, some but not all historically “obscene” material should be denied First Amendment protection, or why the only kind of obscenity that should be denied protection is the kind that “deals with sex.” The implicit reason for the distinction is that material that “deals with sex” is of such “slight value” that little or nothing is lost by banning it when it is offensive, whereas offensive materials dealing with other subjects may be worthy of protection despite being offensive. Of course, the empirical fact and/or value judgment

So even if we had evidence that the Framers meant to deny protection to something they called “obscenity,” that evidence would not mean they intended to exclude what *we* call obscenity under the “specific judicial meaning”⁵¹ that the courts use today. The contours of a legal rule cannot both have a deep historical origin and, at the same time, be newly minted.

Thus we see that the constitutional status of a widespread form of teen communication is thrown into doubt by a historical reading that may be more inventive than accurate. As a practical matter, however, the Court since *Roth* has treated early Americans’ understanding of the obscenity concept as being, in the words of Justice Scalia⁵² “entirely irrelevant.”⁵³ And this is probably just as well, for even if one’s “originalist” commitments are strong, it may fairly be questioned whether, as a historical matter, the Framers actually gave much thought at all to excluding obscenity, especially pictorial materials, from the First Amendment’s protection. The First Amendment was after all drafted and ratified decades before the invention of photography, in an era when the only pictographic obscenity would have been paintings, engravings, drawings, and statuary. Works of this sort are very labor-intensive and, therefore, expensive to produce and relatively rare—never a big part of the overall communications mix. Digital photography has changed everything. If, therefore, the true foundation of the obscenity exception is, indeed, in history, then the whole basis for the exception is open to question. Perhaps for this very reason, combined with realities set in motion by technology, today’s complex obscenity doctrine will one day be looked back on as a late twentieth century detour, just another one of those constitutional mistakes, like *Lochner*,⁵⁴ *Chrestensen*⁵⁵ and *Bowers v. Hardwick*.⁵⁶

that this distinction presupposes is that material “dealing with sex” has *ipso facto* slight value.

51. *Miller*, 413 U.S. at 19 n.2.

52. In another but analogous context.

53. *Lucas v. S.C. Coastal Council*, 505 U.S. 1003, 1028 n.15 (1992); cf. David A. Strauss, *Freedom of Speech and the Common-Law Constitution*, in *ETERNALLY VIGILANT: FREE SPEECH IN THE MODERN ERA* 33, 33–47 (Lee C. Bollinger & Geoffrey R. Stone eds., 2002) (describing the large disconnect between original understandings and modern free expression doctrine).

54. *Lochner v. New York*, 198 U.S. 45 (1905) (entrenching economic due process), effectively *abrogated* by e.g., *Nebbia v. New York*, 291 U.S. 502 (1934); *United States v. Carolene Products Co.*, 304 U.S. 144 (1938).

In the meantime, however, it certainly is possible that at least some sexting and other teen autopornography falls within the Court's current definition of obscenity and therefore falls outside the protection of the First Amendment. It is hard, though, to be too definitive about this because the definition of obscenity is so difficult to apply. As is well known, the Supreme Court has had more than a little trouble deciding what should count as obscene once it concluded that "obscenity" is unprotected speech.⁵⁷ Since the 1973 case of *Miller v. California*,⁵⁸ however, the Court has stabilized its definition of obscenity. Under the Court's current definition, expressive materials are deemed obscene if "the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest, is patently offensive in light of community standards, and lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."⁵⁹

Taking these three definitional elements in order, it seems highly likely that some substantial part of sexually explicit teen communications would meet the *Miller* criteria. It is plausible, for example, that teens who make and send sexually explicit images and videos of themselves do so with the intention of titillating their friends and classmates. If "appeal to the prurient interest" means anything, it means something like that.⁶⁰ The *Roth* case specified that

55. *Valentine v. Chrestensen*, 316 U.S. 52 (1942) (excluding "commercial speech" from First Amendment protection), *abrogated by* *Virginia Pharmacy Bd. v. Virginia Citizens Consumer Council, Inc.*, 425 U.S. 748 (1976).

56. *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186 (1986) (citing traditional sexual values in upholding a law that banned, among other things, sexual intercourse by same-sex couples), *overruled by* *Lawrence v. Texas*, 539 U.S. 558 (2003). If the obscenity exception were deprived of its historical rationale, the Court would presumably have to justify it in the same way and the by the same standards as would apply to create or shape any other categorical exclusion from the protection of speech and press. *See infra* Part III.G.

57. *See* *United States v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 754–55 (1982); *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 20–23 (1973); *Paris Adult Theatre I v. Slaton*, 413 U.S. 49, 78–114 (1973) (Brennan, J. dissenting).

58. *Miller*, 413 U.S. at 24.

59. *Id.*

60. Actually, not everything that "turns on" other people is necessarily prurient. *Brockett v. Spokane Arcades, Inc.*, 472 U.S. 491, 498 (1985). The distinction accepted by the Court seems to be between, on one hand, material that excites only "normal, healthy sexual desires" and, on the other hand, material that excites "sexual responses over and beyond those that would be characterized as normal," such as "a shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion." *Id.* The Court of Appeals in *Brockett* had elaborated a bit further, seeming to say that material is not "prurient" for constitutional purposes if "taken as a whole, [it] does no more than arouse 'good, old fashioned, healthy' interest in sex," citing the "healthy, wholesome, human reaction common to millions of well-adjusted persons in our society." *Id.* at 499. But the question is what, in this day and age, cannot be

the material must appeal to prurient interest of the “average person,”⁶¹ but not long after *Roth*, the Supreme Court clarified this point by saying that, when material does not actually appeal to the average person’s prurience, then it does not have to.⁶² Under the current rule, it is apparently enough that the materials can inspire the requisite prurient thoughts in their intended audience.⁶³ This last qualification is fortunate, since it lets obscenity prosecutions sidestep the sticky question of whether child pornography appeals to the sexual interests of the “average” adult. To the extent that most sexting and other teen autopornography are intended to inspire classmates and friends, it would seem to readily meet the “prurient” prong of the *Miller* definition. It is likewise easily conceived that such pictures and videos would often meet the second *Miller* prong as well: being “patently offensive in light of community standards.”⁶⁴ In fact, a significant portion of teen-produced material may even be *intentionally* so.⁶⁵

counted as “good, old fashioned, healthy” sex but would, instead, be condemned as “shameful or morbid?” Necrophilia comes to mind, but what else? Back in 1985, when *Brockett* was decided, things might have been easier. Cf. *Bowers*, 478 U.S., *overruled by Lawrence*, 539 U.S. But today’s climate is a good deal more tolerant (mercifully, in my view). At any rate, the immediate question is whether teens’ depictions of teenage sexual activity for a teenage audience are better understood as appealing to “normal, healthy sexual desires” or as “shameful or morbid.” I think we can agree that casual teen sexual relations probably did not fall within the 1986 heartland of “good, old fashioned, healthy” sex. Predicting tomorrow’s judicial consensus is, however, another matter.

61. *United States v. Roth*, 354 U.S. 476, 489–90 (1957). See also *Miller*, 413 U.S. at 24–25, 33–34.

62. Sellers who catered to non-mainstream erotic tastes nearly escaped the obscenity exception until the Court moved to fill this loophole, in 1966, by supplementing the “average person” with the members of any “clearly defined deviant sexual group” likely to receive the material in question. *Mishkin v. New York*, 383 U.S. 502, 509 (1966) (emphasis added).

63. “We adjust the prurient-appeal requirement to social realities by permitting the appeal of this type of material to be assessed in terms of the sexual interests of its intended and probable recipient group.” *Id.* The *Mishkin* supplement apparently survived *Miller*’s reworking of the obscenity definition. *Miller*, 413 U.S. at 33.

64. Of course, in state juvenile proceedings, the “lay jurors” that *Miller* assumed would normally decide this issue will not ordinarily be present, so the determination of “patently offensive in light of community standards” will be left to judges.

65. “Everybody knows somebody who either sent or has seen those kinds of pictures,” said a 17-year-old female. “[B]oys . . . do it for the shock value or because they think it’s funny, and girls are trying to . . . I don’t know, impress their boyfriends, like, ‘I’m gonna reel you in with my bait.’” Bret Buckner, *Teens Often Don’t Grasp the Consequences of Sexting*, LEDGER-ENQUIRER.COM, Oct. 11, 2009, available at <http://www.ledger-enquirer.com/news/story/869865.html>.

As for third *Miller* prong, the lack of “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value,” it must be remembered that we are talking about creative works that are made *by teens*. To be sure, teenagers may excel in some fields (e.g., gymnastics), but the arts, literature, science and politics are not normally among them. Accordingly, one may fairly doubt whether teens’ sexually explicit creations are more likely than any other teen creations to possess the high values deemed important and “serious” by the much older individuals who would judge them.

Of course, teens’ communications may have a very high value to the teenagers themselves, playing a crucial role in their everyday lives, social interactions, quest for acceptance, personal self-discovery and, in general, defining for themselves who they are and where they fit in their world. But while a young person’s life is a thing of drama, her elders may see only “sound and fury, signifying nothing.”⁶⁶ If the courts deprecate values that are of importance to large numbers of young people, and characterize common kinds of teen communications as “no essential part of any exposition of ideas [and of] slight social value as a step to truth,”⁶⁷ then it should be easy enough for prosecutors to satisfy this third *Miller* prong.

Nonetheless, in the years since *Miller*, prosecutions for obscenity of all kinds have, for whatever reason, been occurring at a declining rate.⁶⁸ In the child pornography laws prosecutors seem to have found a much more serviceable alternative. Unlike the Court’s obscenity standards, child pornography laws involve no fuzzy facts like “community standards” or “artistic value,” and prosecutors can make a case with little more than proof that the defendant possessed or made of a visual depiction of sexual conduct by a minor.⁶⁹ So rather than further belaboring the status of teen productions under obscenity analysis, we turn now to consider its constitutional status as child pornography.

II. Autopornography as Child Pornography

Even when teenage sexting and other autopornography is not legally “obscene,” it still might be viewed as “child pornography” and,

66. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *MACBETH* act 5, sc. 5.

67. *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476, 485 (1957).

68. *See Adler, supra* note 27, at 700–05 (2007).

69. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 764 (1982) (emphasis in original).

therefore, unprotected by the First Amendment.⁷⁰ This means that Congress and state legislatures may impose penalties for producing, distributing, possessing or even just viewing it.⁷¹ And the penalties can be severe.⁷² So the crucial question is: to what extent can teenage sexting and other autopenography be constitutionally treated as “child pornography”?

A. The Creation of the Unprotected Category

The case that paved the way for prosecuting teens who make sexually explicit pictures of themselves is *New York v. Ferber*.⁷³ Prior to *Ferber*, such pictures would have been protected by the First Amendment unless constitutionally “obscene.”⁷⁴ However, the Supreme Court in *Ferber* carved out a new First Amendment exception that withdraws protection from “child pornography” images and films whether they are obscene or not.

Ferber originated as a prosecution against a bookseller under a statute that prohibited knowingly “promoting a sexual performance” by an underage child.⁷⁵ The statute defined the term “sexual performance” as a performance⁷⁶ that includes any of several

70. *Id.* at 764–65 (upholding a ban on producing and distributing visual depictions of sexual conduct by minors, whether or not obscene). The defendant in *Ferber* was acquitted on the obscenity charges but nonetheless convicted of distributing child pornography. *Id.* at 751–52.

71. *Id.*; *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103 (1990); see generally *infra* Part III.A. Child pornography prosecutions currently “account for about 2 percent of the entire federal criminal caseload,” and is “one of the fastest-growing segments of the federal court docket,” amounting to “more than 2,200 [new cases] in fiscal 2008.” Mark Hansen, *A Reluctant Rebellion*, 95 A.B.A. 54, 56 (June 2009). For an excellent and informative treatment of legal and constitutional questions surrounding child pornography, see Adler, *supra* note 16.

72. A point stressed in *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234 (2002), which overturned a portion of a federal statute under which a “first offender may be imprisoned for 15 years A repeat offender faces a prison sentence of not less than 5 years and not more than 30 years in prison” *Id.* at 244. Currently, the maximum periods for the surviving portions of the statute have been increased to 20 and 40 years, respectively. 18 U.S.C.A. § 2252A(b)(1) (2008). “The [sentencing] guidelines operate like a rocket ride into the sentencing stratosphere.” Hansen, *supra* note 71, at 58.

73. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747 (1982).

74. *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S., 15 (1973). As noted *supra*, text accompanying note 70, not all child pornography is necessarily “obscene” under the *Miller* test.

75. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 751. The present version of the statute is New York Penal Law section 263.15.

76. A performance was defined as “any play, motion picture, photograph or dance” or “any other visual representation exhibited before an audience.” N.Y. PENAL LAW § 263.00(4) (McKinney 2008) (present version).

specified kinds of “sexual conduct” by the child,⁷⁷ including masturbation and “lewd exhibition of the genitals.”⁷⁸ The defendant’s specific conduct consisted of selling two films that showed young boys masturbating.⁷⁹

The “single question” in *Ferber* was whether, “to prevent the abuse of children who are *made* to engage in sexual conduct for commercial purposes,” the state can constitutionally prohibit the dissemination of material that shows children engaged in sexual conduct “*regardless of whether such material is obscene.*”⁸⁰ The Supreme Court ruled in the affirmative, reasoning that

[w]hen a definable class of material . . . bears so heavily and pervasively on the welfare of children engaged in its production, we think the balance of competing interests is clearly struck and that it is permissible to consider these materials as without the protection of the First Amendment.⁸¹

The Court in *Ferber* made clear that it was not simply deciding the facts of the case before it but, rather, carving out a whole new category of expressive content that would from then on be denied constitutional protection.⁸² That the *Ferber* ruling was meant to encompass not only the two particular films at issue but all of child

77. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 751 (citing N.Y. PENAL LAW §263.00(1) (McKinney 2008) (present version)).

78. *Id.* (citing N.Y. PENAL LAW § 263.00(3) (McKinney 2008) (present version)).

79. *Id.* at 752. Both *Ferber* and the Supreme Court’s other landmark withdrawing protection from child pornography, *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103 (1990), involved apparently gay-oriented pornography, a surprising disproportion considering the relative representation of gays in the population as a whole. However, it is consistent with what Professor Adler has described as the “[a]nti-homosexual fervor [that] also fueled the movement.” For example, an expert testified before the House in 1977 that “most agree that child sex and pornography is basically a boy-man phenomenon.” Amy Adler, *The Perverse Law of Child Pornography*, 101 COLUM. L. REV. 209, 230 n. 116 (2001).

80. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 753 (emphasis added). The defendant in *Ferber* was acquitted of promoting an “obscene” sexual performance, but found guilty under the provisions cited *supra* notes 75–78, which did not require proof that the material was obscene. *Id.* at 752.

81. *Id.* at 764.

82. The Court’s decision to carve out a new “category” of unprotected speech and press apparently overlooked one of the two “cardinal principles of our constitutional order,” namely, “never to formulate a rule of constitutional law broader than is required by the precise facts to which it is to be applied.” *Id.* at 767–68, 768 n. 20 (quoting *United States v. Raines*, 362 U.S. 17, 21 (1960), which in turn was quoting *Liverpool, N. Y. & Phila. S.S. Co. v. Comm’ns of Emigration*, 113 U.S. 33, 39 (1885)). See also *Brockett v. Spokane Arcades, Inc.*, 472 U.S. 491, 501–02 (1985); and *infra* Part III.G.

pornography was confirmed in several places in the *Ferber* opinion.⁸³ The Court wrote, for example, of the “the *category* of child pornography which . . . is unprotected by the First Amendment.”⁸⁴ At another point, it said that “[r]ecognizing and classifying child pornography as a *category* of material outside the protection of the First Amendment is not incompatible with our earlier decisions.”⁸⁵ The words “not incompatible” signal that the unprotected category is a new one: No prior case had to be overruled, but the choice of words also acknowledges that there was no precedent for the category.

In giving its holding in *Ferber* a broad, “categorical” reach, the Court explained

it is not rare that a content-based classification of speech has been accepted because it may be *appropriately generalized* that within the confines of the given classification, the evil to be restricted so overwhelmingly outweighs the expressive interests, if any, at stake, that no process of case-by-case adjudication is required.⁸⁶

83. There is no real doubt that the Court in *Ferber* created a categorical exclusion, but since our question now is whether sexting and autopornography are in the unprotected category, it may pay to see what the Court said it was doing at the time.

The Court has since confirmed that *Ferber* was meant to withdraw constitutional protection from a whole *category* of expression. *United States v. Williams*, 128 S. Ct 1830, 1836 (2008); *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 245–46, 257 (2002) (“the categories recognized in *Ferber* and *Miller*”). *Accord* *United States v. Bach*, 400 F.3d 622, 698 (8th Cir. 2005) (“Congress may regulate pornography involving all minors under the age of eighteen if it has a rational basis for doing so.”); *United States v. Freeman*, 808 F.2d 1290, 1292 (8th Cir. 1987) (“Recognizing that states have compelling interests in protecting children from sexual abuse, the Court held that visual depictions of sexual conduct of children are not protected by the First Amendment.”).

Somewhat confusingly, the Court in *Ferber* sometimes chose wording that implied it was narrowly deciding only the case before it, *viz.*: “[W]e hold that child pornography as defined in [N.Y. Penal Law] § 263.15 is unprotected speech subject to content-based regulation,” *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 766 n.18; “We hold that § 263.15 sufficiently describes a category of material the production and distribution of which is not entitled to First Amendment protection,” *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 765; and, “[T]here is nothing unconstitutionally ‘underinclusive’ about a statute that singles out this category of material for proscription.” *Id.* In the last two quotations, the Court uses the word “category” to mean that which is defined in the New York statute and not a broad “category” of constitutional dimensions. However, even if the Court meant to limit its holding the particular facts and statute before it, the *Ferber* case has not been so interpreted in the later cases that are cited this footnote.

84. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764 (emphasis added) (“There are, of course, limits on the category of child pornography which, like obscenity, is unprotected by the First Amendment.”).

85. *Id.* at 763 (emphasis added).

86. *Id.* at 763–64 (emphasis added).

Though a bit roundabout, this statement makes the conclusion almost inescapable that the Court regarded child pornography as one of those “not rare” categories of content for which the balance is so overwhelming that “case-by-case adjudication” is unnecessary.

To be sure, before closing its opinion the *Ferber* Court conceded that “case-by-case analysis”⁸⁷ might continue to be needed after all, a concession that seems at odds with the very concept of a “categorical” exclusion. If the Court was correct in its earlier assertion that child pornography requires “no process of case-by-case adjudication,”⁸⁸ why did it feel impelled to build in almost immediately a role for case-by-case analysis?⁸⁹ One is reminded of Justice Stevens’ remark: “Like many bright line rules, the categorical rule established in this case is only ‘categorical’ for a page or two in the U.S. Reports.”⁹⁰

Teens who find themselves prosecuted as child pornographers may or may not ultimately receive constitutional protection under the escape valve of “case-by-case analysis,” but even if they do the categorical exclusion can still have potentially devastating impacts on their lives: The reason is that the existence of the exclusion effectively reverses the presumption of *unconstitutionality* that normally applies to content-based regulations of speech.⁹¹ What is more, the categorical exclusion lets the courts bypass the exacting requirements of strict scrutiny under which, ordinarily, the prosecution must prove the constitutionality of the government’s action.⁹² As a result, the categorical exclusion puts speakers of protected speech on the

87. *Id.* at 773–74.

88. *Id.* at 763–64, quoted more fully *supra* text accompanying note 86.

89. *Id.* at 773–74.

90. *Lucas v. S.C. Coastal Council*, 505 U.S. 1003, 1067 (1992) (Stevens, J. dissenting) (“No sooner does the Court state [its new category] . . . than it quickly establishes an exception.”).

91. *United States v. Playboy Entm’t Group*, 529 U.S. 803, 817 (2000) (“When the Government seeks to restrict speech based on its content, the usual presumption of constitutionality afforded congressional enactments is reversed.”) (citing *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377, 382 (1992) (“Content-based regulations are presumptively invalid.”)). *Cf.* *City of Los Angeles v. Alameda Books, Inc.*, 535 U.S. 425, 434, 449 (2002) (plurality opinion & Kennedy, J., concurring) (recognizing rule); *Renton v. Playtime Theatres*, 475 U.S. 41, 46–47 (1986) (recognizing rule). *See* further discussion *infra* Part III.G.

92. *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 813, 816–17 (A “content-based speech restriction . . . can stand only if it satisfies strict scrutiny,” and “the Government bears the burden of proving the constitutionality of its actions.”) (citing *Sable Commc’ns of Cal., Inc. v. FCC*, 492 U.S. 115, 126 (1989)).

defensive.⁹³ Even when their speech is “protected,” teens who are prosecuted for sexting or autopornography may be faced with a very hard choice: either mount a case-by-case “as applied” challenge to a prima facie valid law (and risk decades in jail)⁹⁴ or plead guilty to a lesser charge.⁹⁵

Eight years after *Ferber* created the new categorical exclusion for child pornography, the Supreme Court extended the scope of the exclusion to reach mere possession and viewing of the illicit materials.

93. The extent to which the government can constitutionally place the speakers of protected speech on the defensive in the context of severe criminal penalties aimed at speech itself is an open question. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 255 (2002) (“The Government raises serious constitutional difficulties by seeking to impose on the defendant the burden of proving his speech is not unlawful.”). Placing the speaker on the defensive seems, first of all, to run afoul of the principle that “[w]hen the Government restricts speech, the Government bears the burden of proving the constitutionality of its actions.” *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 816. Moreover, this shift in the burden of persuasion can be expected to have a particular chilling effect on protected speech where “[f]ailure to establish the defense can lead to a felony conviction.” *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 256. *See also* *Dombrowski v. Pfister*, 380 U.S. 479, 486 (1965) (“The assumption that defense of a criminal prosecution will generally assure ample vindication of constitutional rights is unfounded” [because] “otherwise, the contours of regulation would have to be hammered out case by case—and tested only by those hardy enough to risk criminal prosecution to determine the proper scope of regulation.”). *Cf.* *Virginia v. Hicks*, 539 U.S. 113, 119 (2003) (recognizing the “the considerable burden (and sometimes risk) of vindicating their rights through case-by-case litigation”); *Perez v. Ledesma*, 401 U.S. 82, 118 (1971) (absence case; Brennan, J. concurring in part and dissenting in part) (“[T]he opportunity to raise constitutional defenses at a criminal trial is inadequate to protect the underlying constitutional rights.”). In short, from the standpoint of the defendant (and of free speech), a process of case-by-base analysis is sharply inferior to the presumption of unconstitutionality and strict scrutiny that would normally apply.

While one would not want to endorse the teenage practice of taking and sharing naked pictures of themselves, the fact of the matter is that, if not obscene, the pictures may constitute constitutionally protected expression, particularly if they show only nudity, without more. *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 112 (1990) (citing *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 765, n. 18. In *Ashcroft*, the Court wrote that

this case provides a textbook example of why we permit facial challenges to statutes that burden expression. With these severe penalties in force, few legitimate movie producers or book publishers, or few other speakers in any capacity, would risk distributing images in or near the uncertain reach of this law.

535 U.S. at 244. Teens may be more willful, daring and ready to defy convention than movie producers and booksellers, but they are also even less in a position to defend themselves from the catastrophic punitive consequences that are threatened in the child-pornography laws. *See Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 772 (“[T]he bookseller, with an economic incentive to sell materials that may fall within the statute’s scope, may be less likely to be deterred.”).

94. *See supra* note 72 and accompanying text.

95. Which could still be a felony. *See supra* text accompanying notes 11–12.

The case was *Osborne v. Ohio*.⁹⁶ Although technically only dicta,⁹⁷ *Osborne*'s conclusion that states are allowed to punish the possession and viewing of child pornography has since acquired the status of law.⁹⁸ This means that, absent some other limiting factor, the millions of teenagers who receive and look at their friends' autopenography⁹⁹ can be constitutionally treated as felony sex offenders and prosecuted under the child pornography laws.

The central analytical point of the *Osborne* dicta was to distinguish the earlier case of *Stanley v. Georgia*.¹⁰⁰ The Court in *Stanley* had held that the states could not, on First Amendment grounds,¹⁰¹ prohibit the mere private possession of *obscene* material. What the Court said in *Osborne* was that the *Stanley* rule for possession of obscenity did not extend also to child pornography.¹⁰²

In distinguishing *Stanley*, the *Osborne* dicta explained that the reason for prohibiting the possession of child pornography¹⁰³ was not to control private thoughts (apparently the legislature's aim in *Stanley*)¹⁰⁴ but "to protect the victims of child pornography . . . to destroy a market for the exploitative use of children."¹⁰⁵ "Given the importance of the State's interest in protecting the victims of child pornography," the Court wrote, "we cannot fault Ohio for attempting to stamp out this vice at all levels in the distribution chain."¹⁰⁶

96. *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103 (1990).

97. The Court held that the defendant's conviction could not stand even if the challenged statute were constitutional. Therefore, the Court did not need to resolve the First Amendment question in order to decide the case. In reaching out to opine on a constitutional point that the facts did not require it to decide, the Court therefore rendered what amounted, in the circumstances, to an "advisory opinion" on that subject. Cf. *Keystone Bituminous Coal Ass'n v. DeBenedictis*, 480 U.S. 470, 484 (1987). Indeed, the Court wrote, perhaps significantly, "we *find* [rather than we *hold*] that Ohio may constitutionally proscribe the possession and viewing of child pornography." *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 111 (emphasis added).

98. *United States v. Williams*, 128 S. Ct 1830, 1836 (2008)

99. According to the National Campaign, "25% of teen girls and 33% of teen boys say they have had nude or semi-nude images—originally meant for someone else—shared with them." NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN AND UNPLANNED PREGNANCY, *supra* note 17, at 3.

100. *Stanley v. Georgia*, 394 U.S. 557 (1969).

101. "[O]ur decision in *Stanley* was 'firmly grounded in the First Amendment.'" *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 108 (quoting *Bowers v. Hardwick*, 478 U.S. 186, 195 (1986)).

102. *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 108–12.

103. Under OHIO REV. CODE ANN. § 2907.323(A)(3).

104. *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 111 (quoting *Stanley*, 394 U.S. at 566).

105. *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 109 (emphasis added).

106. *Id.* at 110.

The Court in *Osborne* also pointed out that enforcing penalties for possession would encourage possessors to destroy their child pornography, something that would advance two “other interests” of the state, namely (a) preventing materials that “permanently record the victim’s abuse” from causing “continuing harm by haunting the children in years to come,”¹⁰⁷ and (b) preventing pedophiles from using the material “to seduce other children into sexual activity.”¹⁰⁸ (Never mind that such “destruction of evidence” to stave off prosecution would now be a serious federal felony.)¹⁰⁹ The Court has, in any case, since questioned these two “other interests,” expressing doubt that either would have been constitutionally compelling enough on their own to justify a suppression of speech.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the latter was explicitly declared feckless in *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*.¹¹¹

Although the Court’s *Osborne* dicta talked of child pornography as a class,¹¹² it did not describe the *Ferber* “categorical” exclusion as such, focusing instead on the problematically overbroad wording of the Ohio statute at issue.¹¹³ Nevertheless, subsequent decisions leave

107. *Id.* at 111.

108. *Id.* “A child who is reluctant to engage in sexual activity with an adult or to pose for sexually explicit photos can sometimes be convinced by viewing other children having ‘fun’ participating in the activity.” *Id.* n.7 (quoting 1 ATTORNEY GENERAL’S COMMISSION ON PORNOGRAPHY, FINAL REPORT 649 (1986)) (footnote omitted).

109. See 18 U.S.C.A. § 1512(c)(1) (“20 years”). See also Alison Leigh Cowan, *Lawyer Admits Destroying Evidence of Pornography*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 28, 2007, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/28/nyregion/28lawyer.html>. Even at the time of *Osborne*, one might wonder to what degree the states have a legitimate interest in encouraging such obstructions of justice. Congress also apparently thought that encouraging the destruction of child pornography was a good idea before deciding to make it a serious crime. See 110 Stat. 3009–26, 18 U.S.C. § 2251 (2006) (findings).

110. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 250 (2002), discussed *infra* text accompanying notes 157–225.

111. *Id.* at 251–54. Congress has also evidently found it rather feckless as well. In enacting the PROTECT Act of 2003 (Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today Act of 2003), it wrote “the production of child pornography is a byproduct of, and not the primary reason for, the sexual abuse of children.” 117 Stat. 650, 678, 18 U.S.C. § 2251 (2006) (findings).

112. *E.g.*, *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 108 (“the interests underlying child pornography prohibitions far exceed the interests justifying the Georgia law at issue in *Stanley*”). See also *id.* at 109, 110, 111, 114 n. 9, 115.

113. “The Ohio statute, on its face, purports to prohibit the possession of ‘nude’ photographs of minors. We have stated that depictions of nudity, without more, constitute protected expression.” *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 112. However, the Court concluded, the overbreadth problem was cured because the Ohio Supreme Court had limited the statute’s prohibition to cases where “such nudity constitutes a lewd exhibition or involves a graphic

no doubt that the categorical exclusion created by *Ferber* is recognized by the Court as an exception to the First Amendment's protection when it comes to production, distribution and possession.¹¹⁴ So the question is: Would teen sexting and other autopornography fall within this unprotected category?

B. Basic Content of the Unprotected Category

Although factual scenarios of teen sexting and autopornography were surely not in the Court's contemplation when it decided *Ferber*,¹¹⁵ there is little doubt that its newly fashioned category could easily be read to include them.¹¹⁶ Pictures of explicit conduct that teenagers take of themselves and send to their friends, classmates, and others would first of all come squarely within the wording of the statutory prohibition that the *Ferber* case specifically upheld.¹¹⁷ And the Court's "category of child pornography which . . . is unprotected by the First Amendment,"¹¹⁸ is evidently larger still.¹¹⁹

At its outer limits, the *Ferber* exclusion from constitutional protection could conceivably include anything that a broad reading of

focus on the genitals, and where the person depicted is neither the child nor the ward of the person charged." *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 112–13. As explained by the Court, "once a statute is authoritatively construed, there is no longer any danger that protected speech will be deterred and therefore no longer any reason to entertain the defendant's challenge to the statute on its face." *Id.* at 115 n.12.

114. See, e.g., *United States v. Williams*, 128 S. Ct 1830, 1836, 1839 (2008); *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 245–46 (2002).

115. The case came down long before the era of ubiquitous cell phones and cheap digital photography. If teens of the *Ferber* era wanted to share naked pictures of themselves, they had to either locate a compliant pharmacy or photo lab to process their films or get a hold of a Polaroid.

116. While the Supreme Court has said, as noted earlier, that "depictions of nudity, without more," are protected, the lower courts have held that, even *without* nudity, photographs can be deemed to show a "lascivious display of the genitals" and therefore constitute illegal child pornography. See *supra* note 16. Obviously, with all this flux and blur around the meaning of "nudity, without more," any teen who takes nude or semi-nude pictures of herself is, as a practical matter, in definite legal jeopardy.

117. See *supra* notes 75–78 and accompanying text.

118. *New York v. Ferber*, 485 U.S. 747, 764 (1982).

119. For example, the statute in *Ferber* defined the prohibited material as visual representations that include certain specified kinds of "sexual conduct" (actual or simulated sexual intercourse, deviate sexual intercourse, sexual bestiality, masturbation, sado-masochistic abuse, or lewd exhibition of the genitals). *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 751. But the Supreme Court nowhere indicated that it meant to limit "sexual conduct" to only those acts described in the statute before it. And, obviously, the generic term "sexual conduct" could include a wider range of actions than was specified in the *Ferber* statute; e.g., fondling, voyeurism, and lascivious exhibition of female breasts, just to name a few.

the words “child pornography” would connote, thus encompassing any pornography¹²⁰ that depicts sexual conduct or lewdness by minors, whether by means of images or words. This reading would by definition include all autpornography and sexting by teens under eighteen. It is clear, however, that the Court did not intend to create so broad an exception from First Amendment protection: “There are, of course, limits,” it wrote, “on the category of child pornography which, like obscenity, is unprotected by the First Amendment.”¹²¹ While the Court did not undertake to fashion a comprehensive definition of child pornography, analogous to the *Miller* definition of obscenity, it did give some guidance.

For instance, the Court said that “the nature of the harm to be combated requires that the . . . offense be limited to works that *visually* depict sexual conduct by children below a specified age.”¹²² And, the Court added, “descriptions or other depictions of sexual conduct . . . which do not involve live performance or photographic or other visual reproduction of live performances, retain[] First Amendment protection.”¹²³ This limitation indicates that teenagers’ sexual text messages, text-only emails and the like, no matter how lurid or suggestive, would normally¹²⁴ not be constitutionally punishable.

On the other hand, the Court made clear that the legal definition of child pornography is not limited by the various criteria set out in the test of legal obscenity from *Miller v. California* (prurient appeal, patently offensive, no serious value).¹²⁵ Accordingly, images and

120. In *Miller*, the Court quoted a definition of “pornography” that included any “portrayal of erotic behavior designed to cause sexual excitement.” *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 20 n.2 (1973); *but cf.* *Brockett v. Spokane Arcades, Inc.*, 472 U.S. 491, 498 (1985) (comparing “good, old fashioned, healthy” sexual excitement with “shameful or morbid” excitement). *See supra* note 60.

121. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764.

122. *Id.*

123. *Id.* at 764–65 (anticipating a point that was at the core of a later case, *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 264 (2002), which held that Congress would not constitutionally prohibit “virtual” child pornography, made without using actual children).

124. The word “normally” is due to *United States v. Williams*, 128 S. Ct 1830, 1842 (2008). The *Williams* case held that “offers to provide or requests to obtain child pornography are categorically excluded from the First Amendment,” thus upholding 18 U.S.C. section 2252A(a)(3)(B), which punishes anyone who “advertises, promotes, presents, distributes, or solicits” child pornography. So under *Williams*, a text message that says “Hey! Check my hot nude pics on Facebook! CUL8R” could put a teen in prison for five to twenty years. *Williams*, 128 S. Ct at 1837.

125. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764–65. *See supra* text accompanying note 59.

video can fall within the Court's new unprotected category even if they have serious value, are not "patently offensive" and totally lack prurient appeal.¹²⁶ The Court's reasoning was that the presence or absence of, for example, prurient appeal "bears no connection to the issue of whether a child has been physically or psychologically harmed in the production of the work."¹²⁷

Perhaps the Court's most laden specification of scope for the new category came when it said, ambiguously, "[t]he category of 'sexual conduct' proscribed must also be *suitably* limited and described."¹²⁸ The Court did not elaborate on what kinds of scope limitations the word "suitably" might refer to or allow. Nonetheless, the insertion of this capacious adverb has left the door open, at very least, for courts to later decide that whole classes of depictions deserve constitutional protection and need to be kept outside the broad reach of the new categorical exclusion. Already for example the Court has consistently recognized that, even in the child context, "depictions of nudity, without more, constitute protected expression."¹²⁹ The question inevitably poses itself: Would it be constitutionally "suitable" for legislatures to make it a crime, with severe penalties,¹³⁰ for a teenager to visually record and document her own *lawful* sexuality?¹³¹

C. Are the Contours of the 'Categorical Exclusion' Limited by the Harms to be Combated? The Answer in *Ferber*

The reason the Court carved out a categorical exclusion for child pornography in *Ferber* was, as it later put it, "the State's interest in protecting the children exploited by the production process."¹³² More

126. *Id.* at 764.

127. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 761. In the passage quoted from, the Court does indeed speak to the prurient interest of the "average person," but its point seems to be that the focus should be on the harm to the child, not on the excitations experienced by the media consumer. *Cf.* Adler, *supra* note 16, at 946-61 (describing how a number of lower court decisions seem to lose sight of this distinction).

128. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764 (emphasis added).

129. *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 112 (1990) (citing *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 765, n.18). *See supra* notes 16 & 113.

130. *See supra* note 72 and accompanying text.

131. An alternative and much less capacious reading of "suitably" is that it merely meant to require the wording of the statutory prohibitions to be appropriately precise. *Cf. Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 765.

132. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 240 (2002). *Accord* *United States v. Williams*, 128 S. Ct 1830, 1838 (2008) ("[T]he child-protection rationale for speech restriction does not apply to materials produced without children."). *See* quotations from *Ferber* itself in text immediately following.

particularly, the *Ferber* court gave several reasons why “the States are entitled to greater leeway” in regulating the production and distribution of “pornographic depictions of children.”¹³³ In summary, these reasons are:

1. The “sexual exploitation and abuse of children” that occurs in the *production* of the materials.¹³⁴
2. The intrinsic relationship between the sexual abuse of children and the *distribution* of the materials.¹³⁵ Not only are the materials themselves a circulating “permanent record” of the child’s “participation” and degradation, but drying up the market may be the only practical way to stop “the production of material which requires the sexual exploitation of children.”¹³⁶
3. The fact that it is a crime to employ children in producing child-pornography (“illegal throughout the Nation”), meaning that advertising and selling child pornography provides “an economic motive for and are . . . *an integral part of*” an illegal activity.¹³⁷
4. The lack of any *countervailing need* for “visual depictions of children performing sexual acts or lewdly exhibiting their genitals” as an “important and necessary part of a literary performance or scientific or educational work.”¹³⁸

Based on these reasons, the *Ferber* Court concluded that “the evil to be restricted . . . overwhelmingly outweighs the expressive interests, if any, at stake” and “it is permissible to consider these materials as without the protection of the First Amendment.”¹³⁹

133. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 756.

134. *Id.* at 757 (describing this as a “government objective of surpassing importance”).

135. *Id.* at 759.

136. *Id.* at 760 (“The most expeditious if not the only practical method of enforcement may be to dry up the market.”).

137. *Id.* at 761–62. Note that the illegal activity the Court was referring to in this third factor was the *production* of child-pornography materials, which might seem to assume the very point in issue. However, it appears clear from the opinion’s subsequent discussion in the same paragraph that the crucial illegality was the “employment of children” in creating the media (which is, of course, conduct and *not* speech or expression) rather than the illegality of the recording process itself (which is essentially pure “speech”).

138. *Id.* at 762–63. The reason for the lack of need, the Court suggests, is that a “person over the statutory age could be used” or simulation could “provide an alternative.” The Court also listed a “fifth” reason, one which justifies the “categorical” character of the exclusion from First Amendment protection. It is, however, of a different order from the other four listed in the text and is discussed *supra* Part III.A.

139. *Id.* at 763–64.

But do these reasons for creating the categorical exclusion also serve to limit its scope? That is, did the Court intend the categorical exclusion to encompass broadly all visual “pornographic depictions of children,”¹⁴⁰ or did it intend the exclusion to be tailored, so it would only cover media produced in ways that caused the harms that the Court actually identified?¹⁴¹ Suppose, hypothetically, that there is *no* resulting harm when teenagers take non-obscene but sexually explicit pictures of themselves (say, a teen at a mirror with a camera phone), neither the kinds of harms referred to in *Ferber* nor otherwise. Would it follow that such “harm-free” autopornography would *ipso facto* fall outside of the *Ferber* categorical exclusion (and, therefore, be constitutionally protected) on the ground that it causes no harm? *Cessante ratione legis cessat ipsa legis*.¹⁴²

There is good reason to think the answer to this hypothetical is no. A conservative reading of *Ferber* is that its unprotected “category” would include any “visual depictions of children performing sexual acts or lewdly exhibiting their genitals,”¹⁴³ irrespective of whether the process of producing the depictions caused harm to the children involved.¹⁴⁴ In other words, *Ferber* seems to say that the scope of the child-pornography “category” is not limited to materials whose production would generate the harms that the categorical exclusion was based on.¹⁴⁵

The *Ferber* opinion provides several reasons that cumulatively seem to support this interpretation. First, the Court repeatedly described the new unprotected category by reference to *content* (e.g., “pornographic depictions of children”¹⁴⁶ or, simply, “child

140. *Id.* at 756.

141. *See supra* text accompanying notes 132–39.

142. “The reason for the law ceasing, the law also ceases.” *United States v. McLaughlin*, 170 F.3d 889, 895 n.1 (9th Cir. 1999). As applied here, the maxim would refer to the reach of the law in coverage, not in time.

143. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 762. The opinion describes the category using several different verbalizations, but this one seems to best capture all the essential ingredients.

144. Note that all we are talking about at the moment is what speech falls into the category, not whether particular “harm-free” sexting or autopornography might ultimately receive constitutional protection anyway. *See Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 773–74 (acknowledging that some protected speech may be swept into the unprotected category and need to be “cured through case-by-case analysis”). *But cf. supra* notes 92–95 and accompanying text.

145. It might be added here that in the federal appellate courts the contours of the child-pornography “category” have *not* been limited to materials whose production generates the harms at which the categorical exclusion was aimed. *See Adler, supra* note 16, at 946–61.

146. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 756.

pornography”¹⁴⁷), not by reference to the harms to be prevented, *viz.* “materials produced by exploitation” or the like. Second, the Court likened the “category of child pornography” to the category of obscenity,¹⁴⁸ which is, of course, “unabashedly”¹⁴⁹ content-based.¹⁵⁰ Finally, the Court as much as conceded that a statute within the unprotected category could conceivably “forbid the distribution of material . . . which does not threaten the harms sought to be combated by the State.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, noting that the state court below “was understandably concerned that some protected expression, ranging from medical textbooks to pictorials in the National Geographic would fall prey to the statute,”¹⁵² the Court specifically provided for this eventuality when it said that “whatever overbreadth may exist should be cured through case-by-case analysis.”¹⁵³

True, at one point in the opinion, the Court thickly implied that the constitutional contours of the child-pornography category should be limited by the Court’s child-protection rationale for creating it. It wrote “the nature of the harm to be combated requires” that the offense be limited to *visual* depictions of sexual conduct.¹⁵⁴ However, this statement provides at best only ambiguous support for the notion that the Court meant to tailor the categorical exclusion *overall* to cover only materials whose production threatened the harms relied on in *Ferber*. Although the statement can be read to *imply* that such

147. *E.g., id.* at 763, 764.

148. *Id.* at 764 (“the category of child pornography which, like obscenity, is unprotected . . .”).

149. *Id.* at 756.

150. As defined in *Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 24 (1973). *See supra* text accompanying note 59.

151. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 766.

152. *Id.* at 773.

153. *Id.* at 774. Strictly speaking the Court is talking here about possible overbreadth of the state’s content-based *statute*, not overbreadth of its own content-based *category*. However, if the content banned by the statute is within the Court’s unprotected category, then there could be no possibility of statutory overbreadth (i.e., no need for case-by-case cure) *unless* the category were defined by something broader than the harm-prevention in view. Put the other way, if the Court’s category were limited by harm-prevention in view, a statute falling within it could not be “overbroad.” Therefore, this statement shows that the Court must have understood that its new unprotected category could be potentially broader than (i.e., not limited by) the harm-prevention in view.

154. *Id.* at 764 (emphasis in original). And, as likewise noted earlier, it stipulated that the proscriptions of child-pornography statutes must relate to “sexual conduct” that is “*suitably* limited and described.” *Id.* (emphasis added). This leaves open the possibility that an exclusion whose scope exceeded the harm-prevention rationale might not be “suitable.” *See supra* text accompanying notes 128–31.

a harm-based limitation exists, the last three passages quoted in the preceding paragraph¹⁵⁵ practically say flat-out that statutes falling within the categorical exclusion might forbid content that “does not threaten the harms sought to be combated.”¹⁵⁶

In sum, *Ferber* provides little reason to doubt that the new categorical exclusion was defined by content (albeit justified by harm-prevention). Accordingly, it seems fair to conclude that, even in situations where the *Ferber* harms do not apply (for example, pictures that teens take of themselves), the materials would fall within the categorical exclusion. By its terms, at least, the *Ferber* decision would seem to deny First Amendment protection just as much to the teen with her cell phone at the mirror as it does to the most exploitative and abusive adult producer of commercial child pornography.

D. Does *Ashcroft* Modify the Way the Categorical Exclusion is Defined?

In *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition*,¹⁵⁷ the Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of a federal statute that criminalized so-called “virtual” child pornography, i.e., “sexually explicit images that appear to depict minors but were produced without using any real children.”¹⁵⁸ The Court concluded that virtual child pornography is (unless obscene) fully protected by the First Amendment.¹⁵⁹ The attempt by Congress to expand the Federal pornography definitions to ban virtual child pornography, wrote the Court, “finds no support in *Ferber*.”¹⁶⁰

Because teenage sexting and autopornography are, of course, not virtual but depict real people, the actual holding of *Ashcroft* would give no constitutional shelter to teens who make explicit pictures and videos of themselves. Indeed, in striking down the attempt to ban virtual child pornography, the *Ashcroft* Court did not need to modify the scope of the categorical exclusion or to define its content in any way that *Ferber* had not already anticipated. *Ferber* had already

155. *Supra* text accompanying notes 151–53.

156. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 766.

157. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234 (2002).

158. *Id.* at 239. Images generated totally by computer are an example. *Id.* at 241. The congressional enactment in question was the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1966, specifically the portion of that act codified as 18 U.S.C.A. sections 2256(8)(B) and (8)(D). The first provision expanded the definition of child pornography. The second was an anti-pandering provision, which will not be separately discussed here.

159. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 256.

160. *Id.* at 251.

made clear that “the distribution of descriptions or other depictions of sexual conduct, not otherwise obscene, *which do not involve live performance or photographic or other visual reproduction of live performances*, retains First Amendment protection.”¹⁶¹

Even if *Ashcroft* did not go beyond what *Ferber* had already held, however, its language and reasoning were very different. Throughout the opinion, the Court uses wording and reasons that seem to presuppose that the unprotected category of child pornography is not merely justified but also shaped by reference to the particular harms that motivated its creation. The differences between *Ferber* and *Ashcroft* in their language and reasoning suggest that the later case represents a clarification or adjustment of the basis on which the scope the categorical exclusion is to be defined.

For example, in distinguishing virtual child pornography from material falling under the *Ferber* categorical exclusion, the *Ashcroft* Court wrote that “*Ferber’s* judgment about child pornography was based upon *how it was made*, not on what it communicated.”¹⁶² At another point the Court said of *Ferber*: “The production of the work, not its content, was the target of the statute.”¹⁶³ Further, the Court described the post-*Ferber* holding in *Osborne v. Ohio*¹⁶⁴ as being based on “these same interests” and as having been “anchored . . . in the concern for the participants [in the production], those whom it called the ‘victims of child pornography.’”¹⁶⁵ Finally, the Court in *Ashcroft* noted that *Osborne* “did not suggest that, absent this concern, other governmental interests would suffice.”¹⁶⁶

These repeated references to how the pornography is made, as opposed to what it depicts, are particularly notable in view of what the *Ashcroft* decision actually did, namely, it struck down the Congressional ban on virtual pornography saying it “prohibits speech that records no crime and creates no victims by its production”¹⁶⁷—

161. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764–65.

162. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 250–51 (emphasis added).

163. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 249.

164. *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103 (1990).

165. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 250.

166. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 250. Other examples include: “[*Ferber*] distinguished child pornography from other sexually explicit speech because of the State’s interest in protecting the children exploited by the production process,” *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 240; and, “Where the images are themselves the product of child sexual abuse, *Ferber* recognized that the State had an interest in stamping it out without regard to any judgment about its content,” *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 249.

167. *Id.* at 250.

i.e., stressing that the invalidated ban did not address the concerns underlying *Ferber* and *Osborne*. It is hard to resist the conclusion that the Court struck down the virtual pornography ban *because* it did not address those concerns.

There are also other salient differences between *Ferber* and *Ashcroft* in their language and analysis. Whereas *Ferber* acknowledged only grudgingly that there might be value in depicting the sexual aspects of young people's lives,¹⁶⁸ the *Ashcroft* opinion devotes considerable space to that value, discussing the "enduring fascination" that our society has "with the lives and destinies of the young" and "the vital interest we all have in the formative years we ourselves once knew, when wounds can be so grievous, disappointment so profound, and mistaken choices so tragic, but when moral acts and self-fulfillment are still in reach."¹⁶⁹

Perhaps the most important difference between *Ferber* and *Ashcroft* is the way in which the *Ashcroft* Court viewed the nexus between the unprotected category and crime. In a nutshell, the *Ashcroft* opinion seems to view crime prevention as the core reason why the Court should deny constitutional protection to child-pornography materials. The Court seemed to expect moreover that there should be a rather close connection between targeted speech and imminent criminal acts before the speech can be justifiably suppressed.¹⁷⁰ In *Ferber*, by contrast, although the Court mentioned illegal activity,¹⁷¹ it primarily justified the suppression of speech on the basis of preventing harm.¹⁷² In short, while *Ferber* stressed child

168. "The value . . . is exceedingly modest if not *de minimis*." *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 762–63 (1982). *Cf. Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 108 n.3 (accord on "the value of permitting child pornography").

169. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 246–49. The resonant passage, from which these quotes are taken, penned by Justice Kennedy, quite possibly qualifies as the Supreme Court at its literary best.

170. *See, e.g., id.* at 253–54 ("The Government has shown no more than a remote connection between speech that might encourage thoughts or impulses and any resulting child abuse. Without a significantly stronger, more direct connection, the Government may not prohibit speech on the ground that it may encourage pedophiles to engage in illegal conduct.") For more quotations from *Ashcroft* indicating the importance of a "crime" connection to the unprotected category, *see infra* text accompanying notes 206–08.

171. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 761.

172. The Court referred to "advertising and selling" as an "integral part" of the crime of producing child pornography, *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 761–62, but the Court's decision to uphold the crime of producing was itself predicated on harms alone, *viz.* that "the use of children as subjects of pornographic materials is harmful." *Id.* at 758. Therefore, the *Ferber* Court's ultimate justification of the categorical exclusion rested on harm-prevention. *See supra* text accompanying notes 132–39. As discussed *infra* text

sexual abuse and exploitation as *harms*, the stress in *Ashcroft* was on exploitation and abuse as *crimes*.

So what, if anything, may have changed as result of *Ashcroft's* differing approach to the categorical exclusion? In the two parts that follow, we will first consider whether *Ashcroft's* interpretation of *Ferber* has tied the legitimate reach of the categorical exclusion to the concerns that actually motivated its creation and, if so, what that might mean for the constitutional status of teen autopornography. We will then consider whether *Ashcroft's* repeated references to the objective of preventing imminent crime¹⁷³ reflect a developing view that (ordinarily, at least) the harmful acts defining the categorical exception must be serious enough to be crimes—meaning that legislatures could not constitutionally prohibit minors from making non-obscene photographs of their own bodies or visual depictions of their own legal acts.

E. Limiting the Scope of the Categorical Exclusion to the Concerns Relied on in *Ferber* and *Osborne*

As noted above, the Court in *Ashcroft* struck down the federal law on virtual pornography stating it “prohibits speech that records no crime and creates no victims by its production.”¹⁷⁴ This statement implies a view that the legitimate reach of the categorical exclusion is narrower than may have been previously thought, a difference that could dramatically affect the constitutional status of teen sexting and autopornography. No longer would sexting teenagers be confronted with the position, apparently accepted by some courts and prosecutors,¹⁷⁵ that the unprotected category includes any content that visually depicts sexual conduct by minors, i.e., much or most of teen autopornography. Instead, the categorical exclusion would have a somewhat tidier scope, one that takes in only those materials which are actually produced in ways that the categorical exclusion was intended to address.

accompanying notes 195–205, this de-emphasis of the need for a criminal nexus in *Ferber* is understandable considering that, at the time *Ferber* was decided, at least three states neither prohibited the use of minors in producing pornographic materials nor prohibited the distribution of materials depicting minors. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 749.

173. See *infra* text accompanying notes 206–08.

174. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 250.

175. For example, in the cases described at the beginning of this Article. See *supra* text accompanying notes 1–15.

On the other hand, if the categorical exclusion is broadly viewed to include (contrary to the implication of *Ashcroft*) even autopednography that “records no crime and creates no victims by its production,”¹⁷⁶ the result could be a categorical exclusion that overshoots by a wide margin the assumptions and justifications that support it. Within such a broad categorical exclusion, it may well turn out that the *Ferber* balance between “the evil to be restricted”¹⁷⁷ and “the expressive interests . . . at stake”¹⁷⁸ can no longer be “appropriately generalized,”¹⁷⁹ and that would of course jeopardize the categorical exclusion’s core factual predicate.

Almost certainly the most significant difference between teenage autopednography and “traditional” child pednography, like the material in *Ferber* and *Osborne*, is the circumstances under which the two genres are produced. It is highly probable, moreover, that these different circumstances of production greatly affect their respective potentials for harm. The harms described in *Ferber* include various deleterious effects both immediate and long-range on the children depicted, but the common theme throughout the case is *exploitation*. Indeed, in the *Ferber* opinion the Court uses or quotes the word “exploit” and its derivatives more than twenty times¹⁸⁰ “[T]he State’s particular and more compelling interest,” it wrote, is “in prosecuting those who promote the sexual exploitation of children.”¹⁸¹

The Court did not define “exploitation,” but it seems clear enough from context that the Court meant the word in its usual meaning,¹⁸² which connotes a significant disparity in power, misuse of this disparity, a denial of another’s autonomy, disregard of the

176. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 250.

177. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 763.

178. *Id.* at 764.

179. *Id.* at 763.

180. *E.g.*, *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 757 (“The prevention of sexual *exploitation* and abuse of children constitutes a government objective of surpassing importance.”). “[T]he distribution network for child pednography must be closed if the production of material which requires the sexual *exploitation* of children is to be effectively controlled.” *Id.* at 760 (emphasis added). *See also id.* at 761 (“the State’s particular and more compelling interest in prosecuting those who promote the sexual *exploitation* of children”) (emphasis added). Likewise, *Osborne* described the state’s aim as “to destroy a market for the *exploitative* use of children,” *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 109 (1990) (emphasis added), and referred at least five times to the subjects of the kind of pednography at issue as “victims,” *e.g.*, *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 109, 110 and 111.

181. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 761.

182. “To make unethical use of for one’s own advantage or profit.” WEBSTER’S NEW WORLD DICTIONARY 494 (2d College ed. 1970).

victim's wishes or concerns, and a general degradation or impairment of the victim's personal dignity—all as a means to accomplish, in this case, a physical invasion. If the Court was using the word “exploitation” without the usually associated connotations of power and abuse, there is nothing in the opinion to indicate it. To say from the *Ferber* opinion that the Court meant to include teenagers taking pictures of themselves would be quite a stretch.

There are several specifics in *Ferber* tending to confirm that the Court was using the word “exploitation” in its usual sense, *viz.* people taking undue advantage of *others*—in particular, adults taking advantage of children. To begin with, the “single question” in the case concerned “the abuse of children who are *made* to engage in sexual conduct for commercial purposes.”¹⁸³ The word “made” in this sentence obviously connotes an improper use of disproportionate power—and it certainly does not bring to mind an idea of people making photos of themselves, on their own initiative.

In addition to using the word “made,” the question in the case (like the facts before the Court) notably refers to the “commercial” purposes for which the pornography at issue was created. To be sure, the opinion does not limit its reach to commercial pornography, but the Court does seem to presuppose a commercial context as a paradigmatic case—another feature implying that the Court's focus was on the situation of adults taking advantage of children, not just children misbehaving on their own. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, of the many studies and reports that the Court cited and relied on in reviewing the “balance of competing interests,”¹⁸⁴ all seem to have investigated the exploitation of children by adults. If any of these studies investigated or revealed evidence of harm from anything like teen autopornography, the Court did not mention it.¹⁸⁵

By contrast, whatever may be the psychological or other harms of self-motivated and uncoerced acts of sexting or other teen

183. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 753 (emphasis added) (“To prevent the abuse of children who are made to engage in sexual conduct for commercial purposes, could the New York State Legislature, consistent with the *First Amendment*, prohibit the dissemination of material which shows children engaged in sexual conduct, regardless of whether such material is obscene?”).

184. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764, n.9, n.10, n.11, n.13.

185. Professor Smith points out that neither the influential Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography of 1986 nor the more recent 2001 ABA report prepared for the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children mentions the phenomenon of underage persons taking sexually explicit pictures of themselves. Smith, *supra* note 20, at 517–18.

autopornography, there is no reason to think they are similar in nature or degree to the outrageously exploitative and abusive harms relied on in *Ferber*. The use of children in the production of “traditional” child pornography entails by its very nature a most egregious misuse by adults of significant power disparities, coercive oppression of the child’s autonomy and an assault on the child’s dignity—not to mention her body. By contrast, teenagers taking pictures of themselves, on their own initiative for their own purposes, involves no power relationships, no invasion of autonomy and no attacks on dignity (not, at least, until the government intervenes).¹⁸⁶

There is, to be sure, one *Ferber* concern that might apply, at least in some measure, to the teen sexting situation, namely, that “the materials produced are a permanent record of the children’s participation and the harm to the child is exacerbated by their circulation.”¹⁸⁷ As explained in *Osborne*: “The pornography’s continued existence causes the child victims continuing harm by haunting the children in years to come.”¹⁸⁸ However, the “haunting” described in both *Ferber* and *Osborne* clearly presupposes that there has been underlying “sexual abuse of [the] children”¹⁸⁹ Because teen autopornography lacks this major element of sexual abuse, any “haunting” that may follow is factually distinguishable. Of course, even people who have not been sexually abused may be “haunted” by images that show them doing things they later decide were foolish. And the government may arguably have an interest in protecting people from reminders of their own youthful silliness. Whatever one may say of this governmental interest, however, it is likely not on par with the serious concerns that underlay *Ferber*. It hardly seems an interest “of surpassing importance.”¹⁹⁰

186. It is possible, of course, to talk of “self-exploitation.” See Leary, *supra* note 17, at 4. But when the prefix “self-” is appended to “exploitation,” it deprives the word of its usual interpersonal context and thereby causes it to lose its usual negative connotations of power disparity, coercion and assault; it becomes, rather, a mere metaphor for a lack of good judgment and deficit of appropriate personal discipline. Indeed, Professor Leary offers a definition of “self-exploitation” in which picture-taking itself is the essence, with none of the negative features that are normally associated with an abusive individual taking unconscionable advantage another. *Id.* at 20.

187. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 759; see also *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 249 (2002).

188. *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 111 (1990).

189. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 759. *Ferber* cites this permanent record as one of the ways that the films were “intrinsically related to the sexual abuse of children.” *Id.*; accord *Osborne*, 495 U.S. at 111.

190. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 757.

The main point for present purposes is, however, that exploitation-produced pornography and the self-produced variety are, in terms of the harms they involve, two very different genres. They have entirely different circumstances of production. Because the whole justification for the categorical exclusion rests on “a balance of competing interests”¹⁹¹ based on certain underlying facts, the exclusion lacks its rationale in cases where those underlying facts are absent. In the case of autopornography, the *Ferber* rationale for impinging on free expression is missing. Both *Ferber* and *Osborne* are, in short, factually distinguishable from cases of teen sexting and autopornography, and their reasons do not justify the suppression of materials made by teens acting on their own.

Of course, it may turn out that sexting and autopornography are, in fact, harmful to teens, possibly even harmful enough to outweigh the teens’ own interests in expressing themselves as they wish. At the moment, however, this is a question that has not received much study. Whereas the Court in *Ferber* had stacks of evidence documenting the harmful effects of exploitatively produced materials such as the two films there at issue, we still do not know if anything comparable will ever be presented on the wholly distinct phenomenon of sexually explicit pictures that teens take of themselves.

Until evidence is presented that harms of “surpassing” concern are caused by sexting and autopornography, the Court’s analytical approach in *Ashcroft* gives good reason to doubt that the categorical exclusion can be simply extended to them. The *Ashcroft* analysis seems to say that the law should not impinge on expressive matter whose production does not implicate the concerns that the categorical exclusion was intended to address. In repeatedly stressing the way that “traditional” child pornography is produced,¹⁹² *Ashcroft* seemed to acknowledge that the categorical exclusion for child pornography should be tailored to address those concerns. Indeed, as noted earlier, *Ashcroft* specifically remarked that *Osborne* “did not suggest that, absent this concern, other governmental interests would suffice.”¹⁹³ Thus, *Ashcroft* appears at very least to presuppose, if not hold, that the reach of the categorical exclusion does not extend to “speech that records no crime and creates no victims by its

191. *Id.* at 764.

192. *Supra* text accompanying notes 162–65. As mentioned earlier, *Ashcroft* also seemed to identify the acts that cause these harms as crimes. *Infra* text accompanying notes 206–08.

193. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 250 (2002).

production”¹⁹⁴—the evils that *Ferber* and *Osborne* identified and relied upon.

F. Linking the Scope of the Categorical Exclusion to Crime Prevention

“It rarely has been suggested that the constitutional freedom for speech and press extends its immunity to speech or writing used as an integral part of conduct in violation of a valid criminal statute.”¹⁹⁵ Thus, for example, in a state where sexual relations between fifteen-year-olds are considered to be a crime,¹⁹⁶ the visual recording or documenting of such relations might also be made a crime. If a purpose to record is what prompted the illegal relations, the crime-prevention link would be there. The only limitation recognized in *Ashcroft*¹⁹⁷ was the longstanding one which, as reformulated in *Brandenburg v. Ohio*,¹⁹⁸ would require that the targeted communicative acts be “directed to inciting or producing imminent lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action.”¹⁹⁹

Even though there was clear prior authority for denying constitutional protection to expressive acts that are an “integral part” of crime, the Court in *Ferber* made little of it.²⁰⁰ Instead of crime, the Court chose to stress *harms*, namely, the harms that the production of “traditional” child pornography inflicts on the children who are depicted.²⁰¹ It is understandable why: The Court in *Ferber* almost surely did not want the legitimacy or applicability of its new categorical exclusion to depend on whether the production of the pornography involved some independent crime, such as child abuse.

For one thing, the two films at issue in *Ferber* showed boys masturbating,²⁰² and it is by no means clear that masturbation or asking others to masturbate was necessarily everywhere a crime.

194. *Id.*

195. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 761–62 (quoting *Giboney v. Empire Storage & Ice Co.*, 336 U.S. 490, 498 (1949)).

196. *E.g.*, in Massachusetts. See *Commonwealth v. Bernardo B.*, 900 N.E.2d 834 (Mass. 2009) (illustrating selective prosecution of one participant only under Mass. Gen. Laws c. 265, § 23).

197. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 251–53.

198. *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969) (per curiam).

199. *Brandenburg*, 395 U.S. at 447.

200. It mentioned the criminal nexus in connection with only one of its several rationales for creating the categorical exclusion. See *supra* text accompanying note 137.

201. In particular, sexual exploitation and abuse of children, and the continuing harms generated by ongoing circulation of the record of the abuse. See *id.*

202. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 752.

Even more importantly, at the time *Ferber* was decided there were at least three states that neither prohibited the use of minors in producing pornography nor restricted the distribution of pornography that had been made with minors.²⁰³ This is not to mention the possible legal status of such production in various foreign countries from which child pornography might be imported.²⁰⁴ Whatever the Court's reasons, however, the main point is that the *Ferber* Court gave no hint that it attached pivotal constitutional significance to the fact that particular child pornography was the product of a crime or not. All the Court needed to uphold the suppression of child-pornography content was the legislature's judgment that "the use of children as subjects . . . is harmful to the physiological, emotional, and mental health of the child."²⁰⁵

The language used by the Court in *Ashcroft*, by contrast, repeatedly presupposed that the validity of child pornography laws requires a sufficiently close connection between the materials being suppressed and a crime, specifically the crime of child abuse. For example, the Court practically began its First Amendment discussion by stating that "[t]he sexual abuse of a child is a most serious *crime*,"²⁰⁶ effectively identifying sexual child abuse with crime. Then, *Ashcroft* distinguished "virtual" child pornography from unprotected content saying that, with unprotected content, "the creation of the speech is itself the *crime* of child abuse" whereas with virtual child pornography "there is no underlying *crime* at all."²⁰⁷ And again, in summarizing the reasoning of the "distribution" part of *Ferber*, the Court wrote: "Under either rationale, the speech had what the Court

203. *Id.* at 749. As the Court stated, "virtually all of the States and the United States have passed legislation proscribing the production of or otherwise combating 'child pornography.'" *Id.* at 758. Virtually all is, of course, not quite all.

204. The Court specifically confirmed that "the State is not barred by the First Amendment from prohibiting the distribution of unprotected materials produced outside the State," *id.* at 765–66, partly because it is "often impossible to determine where such material is produced and partly because "maintenance of the market itself 'leaves open the financial conduit by which the production of such material is funded and materially increases the risk that [local] children will be injured.'" *Id.* at 766 n.19. The second of these two reasons is, of course, probably not germane to the casual teen autopornography context. However, the fact that the Court regarded the place of production as irrelevant seems to be a confirmation that the Court did not mean to limit *Ferber* to materials that were produced illegally. See *United States v. Stevens*, 533 F.3d 218, 247–48 (3d Cir. 2008) (dissenting opinion).

205. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 758.

206. *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 244 (2002) (emphasis added).

207. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 254 (emphasis added).

in effect held was a proximate link to the *crime* from which it came.”²⁰⁸ In sum, it looks very much as though the *Ashcroft* majority, at least in its choice of words, has replaced mere *harm*-prevention with *crime*-prevention as the normal constitutional requisite for suppressing speech. No concurring or dissenting opinion in *Ashcroft* objected to this re-interpretation of *Ferber*.

Linking the scope of the categorical exclusion to crime, as opposed to mere harm, could of course have a major impact on the constitutional status of teen sexting and autopenography. It is not a crime to be naked at home, or even to be lewd. Nor, usually, is it even illegal for persons between sixteen and eighteen to engage in sexual relations with each other or (depending on the state) with people who are older.²⁰⁹ When sexting and autopenography are used to record and document entirely legal conduct, there is, in the words of *Ashcroft*, “no underlying crime at all.”²¹⁰ So to the extent that statutes purport to ban teen autopenography depicting completely legal activities, the only behavior that the statutes end up criminalizing are the acts of recording, documenting and communicating—in effect making crimes out of essentially pure expression.

In fact, even when teens record their own *illegal* sexual conduct, it is not a foregone conclusion that there is a sufficient nexus to “crime” to justify a ban on the recording. “The prospect of crime . . . by itself does not justify laws suppressing protected speech.”²¹¹ The crucial *Brandenburg*²¹² connection would presumably need to be shown,²¹³ and this may not be easy. While a purpose to produce “traditional” child pornography may give deviant adults an incentive to sexually exploit and abuse children,²¹⁴ it is doubtful that the modern

208. *Id.* at 250 (emphasis added).

209. *See id.* at 246–47. In most states, the age of consent is sixteen. *See* Avert.com, Worldwide Ages of Consent, <http://www.avert.org/age-of-consent.htm>.

210. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 254. “If the law considers a minor to be old enough to choose to engage in the adult act of having sex, they should also be treated as old enough to decide to record their own sexual exploits.” Smith, *supra* note 20.

211. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 245 (“Among free men, the deterrents ordinarily to be applied to prevent crime are education and punishment for violations of the law, not abridgment of the rights of free speech.” (quoting from *Kingsley Int’l Pictures Corp. v. Regents of Univ. of N. Y.*, 360 U.S. 684, 689 (1959))).

212. *See supra* notes 198–99.

213. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 253–54, recognized *Brandenburg* to be good law in this very context.

214. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 761 (1982).

teenager's interest in sex depends on being able to record it. If laws forbidding inter-teen sex acts are not enough to deter teenagers' sexual conduct, it is not likely that bans on taking pictures would make it "dry up"²¹⁵ either. Conceivably there may be some underage sexual activity that is prompted by the presence of a camera, but even at that, "[t]he mere *tendency* of speech to encourage unlawful acts is not a sufficient reason for banning it."²¹⁶ In terms of the familiar *Brandenburg* requirements of imminence and likelihood,²¹⁷ the idea is risible that a "likely" factor motivating underage sex is the chance to make a recording.

In addition to *Ashcroft's* implicit presupposition that a crime nexus should normally be required to ban non-obscene pornography, there is a trend in a group of analogous cases that also supports this conclusion. The analogous group begins with a case from the *Ferber* era, *Posadas de Puerto Rico Association v. Tourism Company of Puerto Rico*.²¹⁸ In *Posadas*, as in *Ferber*, the Court upheld a ban on speech that was an intrinsic part of a harmful but lawful activity. The harmful but lawful activity in *Posadas* was casino gambling, and the prohibited speech was casino advertising. The Court in *Posadas* upheld the prohibition on speech as a harm-prevention measure and, in doing so, was consistent with *Ferber*: Neither case required there to be a nexus between the prohibited speech and crime; harm-prevention alone sufficed to ban speech.

Since 1996, however, the Court has retreated from its *Posadas* position, generally holding that truthful promotion of lawful activities is constitutionally protected—even if the activities being promoted might easily be deemed harmful.²¹⁹ While this line of cases is, as noted, only analogous, it does provide a historical perspective on

215. *Cf. id.* at 760 (asserting that law enforcement was constitutionally permitted to indirectly attack the problem of child pornography production by bans of advertising and distribution that would "dry up" the market).

216. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 253 (emphasis added).

217. *See supra* text accompanying notes 198–99.

218. *Posadas de P. R. Assoc. v. Tourism Co. of P. R.*, 478 U.S. 328 (1986).

219. *See Greater New Orleans Broad. Assoc. v. United States*, 527 U.S. 173 (1999); *see also* 44 *Liquormart v. Rhode Island*, 517 U.S. 484 (1996). Perhaps the most important change from *Posadas* was the repudiation of the idea that the legislative power to regulate an activity includes within it the power to restrict speech that tends to stimulate that activity. *Compare Posadas*, 478 U.S. at 345–46, with *Greater New Orleans*, 527 U.S. at 182–83, and 44 *Liquormart*, 517 U.S. at 508–14. Since legislatures have the power to prohibit almost anything (subject only to "rational basis" review), the *Posadas* "greater includes the lesser" idea would have essentially spelled the end of higher levels of scrutiny for any law curbing speech as a means of addressing some other social ill.

Ferber. It shows a history in which the Court seems to have lost its onetime enthusiasm for legislative strategies that impose bans on speech as a way to regulate non-speech behavior. Whereas the Court in *Posadas* seemed to see speech regulations as a valid tool for dealing with harmful non-speech conduct, the cases since 1996 have instead been protective of free expression, requiring legislatures to address non-speech evils by means that are more direct: If a legislature wants to ban certain conduct, then it should ban it outright, and not just ban speech that is thought to promote it—in effect, a rule of “no crime, no ban.”

Indeed, apart from the short-lived *Posadas* detour, the constitutional legitimacy of content-based restrictions for pure “harm prevention” reasons, is not well developed.²²⁰ Except for child pornography and protecting various aspects of government administration,²²¹ it is hard to think of examples. This is understandable. After all, the Framers were surely aware that free speech and press could have downsides. They certainly knew that competing interests would continually arise and present themselves as being more worthy than free speech and press. However, the judgment embodied in the First Amendment is that, with rare exceptions, the interest in free expression should prevail.²²² True, the Court has recognized that certain categories of content were, from the outset, never meant to go unrestricted (among those commonly mentioned are threats, incitement to crime, “fighting words” and obscenity²²³). However, the asserted interests in preventing evils from harmful-but-lawful acts are a particularly dangerous basis for restricting free expression. For if all the courts and legislatures need to do to withdraw First Amendment is to convince themselves that

220. “One scholar notes that ‘a majority of the Court has never sustained a regulation that was strictly scrutinized for content discrimination reasons.’” See Barry P. McDonald, *Speech and Distrust: Rethinking the Content Approach to Protecting the Freedom of Expression*, 81 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 1347, 1365 n.63 (2006), quoted in *United States v. Stevens*, 533 F.3d 218, 247–48 (3d Cir. 2008) (striking down a federal statute prohibiting depictions of cruelty to animals). And the Court itself has said “we readily acknowledge that a law rarely survives [strict] scrutiny.” *Burson v. Freeman*, 504 U.S. 191, 200 (1992) (upholding a law, indeed, withstood strict scrutiny). Of course, the reason that content discrimination has rarely survived strict scrutiny may simply be that, in any situation where there is a non-speech harm to be addressed, it should be relatively easy (and make good sense) to draw or construe the legislation to be content-neutral, so that it calls for “intermediate” rather than strict scrutiny. See *infra* note 233.

221. *E.g.*, courts’ gag rules. See *Gentile v. State Bar of Nev.*, 501 U.S. 1030 (1991).

222. See *infra* text accompanying notes 231–33 and 241–42.

223. See *Stevens*, 533 F.3d at 224 (en banc).

some non-expression interest is more worthy than speech, the basic judgment embodied in the First Amendment is in trouble.²²⁴

So, with this background in mind, we return to the question: Do the Court's repeated references in *Ashcroft* to crime²²⁵ reflect an emerging principle that visual recordings, documentation and communication about *legal* activities will normally be entitled to First Amendment protection? For millions of otherwise law-abiding teenagers, the answer to this question could mean the difference between already being a felony sex offender (albeit unindicted) or, alternatively, ordinary Americans enjoying their constitutionally protected rights of free expression. The language of *Ashcroft* and the parallel analogous trend in the post-*Posadas* line of cases, along with the very rarity of pure non-crime rationales for speech suppression, all would support an affirmative answer, namely, that statutes suppressing speech must ordinarily be justified by a purpose to prevent acts that are not merely harmful, but criminal.

G. Scrutiny Needed to Define the Scope of Categorical Exclusions

The Court in *Ferber* gave compelling reasons for concluding that the statute in that case was constitutional as applied to the particular films at issue. However, the Court did not confine its conclusions to the particular statute or films but, instead, extended its holding to embrace a whole broad "category" of content—all visual depictions of sexual conduct made involving minors. Moreover, the Court rejected contentions that the statute in question was overbroad, saying "we seriously doubt" that the "arguably impermissible applications of the statute amount to more than a tiny fraction of the materials within the statute's reach."²²⁶ Although the new categorical exclusion would reach even more content than the statute,²²⁷ the Court evidently did not believe that the exclusion was "overbroad," either.²²⁸

But what if the reasons and factual basis for the *Ferber* categorical exclusion, so well documented and substantiated in 1982, do not necessarily apply to an extensive new class of communications—sexting and autopornography—whose current

224. This point is discussed further *infra* text accompanying notes 236–43.

225. See *supra* text accompanying notes 206–08.

226. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 773 (1982).

227. See *supra* notes 119 and 153.

228. See *supra* notes 143–56.

popularity, and even existence, were probably not imagined when *Ferber* was decided? The *Ferber* Court said it was able to create a broad “categorical” exclusion because the balance of interests could be “appropriately generalized . . . within . . . the given classification.”²²⁹ It is possible that, since 1982, new social facts have emerged, and we cannot be sure that the original balance of interests, from 1982, can still be “appropriately generalized”²³⁰ to much of the content now falling within the categorical exclusion. This question of the balance of interests is, of course, one that goes to the very heart of the justification for creating and continuing the *Ferber* categorical exclusion. It must then be asked, what level of scrutiny is appropriate for considering and answering such a question?

Ordinarily, when a statute imposes “content-based” restrictions on speech or press, the restrictions are presumptively unconstitutional,²³¹ and the courts are supposed to use strict scrutiny in reviewing the legislature’s determinations.²³² Strict scrutiny means that the content-based restriction “must be narrowly tailored to promote a compelling Government interest,” and “[i]f a less restrictive alternative would serve the Government’s purpose, the legislature must use that alternative.”²³³

229. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 763–64.

230. *See supra* Part E.

231. *See United States v. Playboy Entm’t Group*, 529 U.S. 803, 816–17 (2000) (“[T]he Government bears the burden of proving the constitutionality of its actions.”); *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377, 382 (1992). *Cf. City of Los Angeles v. Alameda Books, Inc.*, 535 U.S. 425, 434, 449 (2002) (plurality opinion and Kennedy, J., concurring) (recognizing rule); *Renton v. Playtime Theatres*, 475 U.S. 41, 46–47 (1986) (recognizing rule). *See also Carey v. Brown*, 447 U.S. 455, 461–62 (1980) (“When government regulation discriminates among speech-related activities in a public forum, the Equal Protection Clause mandates that the legislation be finely tailored to serve substantial state interests, and the justifications offered for any distinctions it draws must be carefully scrutinized” (citing *Police Dep’t of Chicago v. Mosley*, 408 U.S. 92, 97–98 (1972) (explaining equal protection origins of using the strict scrutiny standard for reviewing content-based discriminations of speech))).

232. A “content-based speech restriction . . . can stand only if it satisfies strict scrutiny.” *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 813 (citing *Sable Commc’ns of Cal., Inc. v. FCC*, 492 U.S. 115, 126 (1989)).

233. *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 813 (citations omitted). By contrast, a more relaxed “intermediate” level of scrutiny and greater deference applies when a legislative burden on expression is “content-neutral,” i.e., based not on what is communicated but on its secondary effects, *see, e.g., Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, 491 U.S. 781, 791 (1989) ([R]estrictions must be “justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech, . . . narrowly tailored to serve a significant governmental interest, and . . . leave open ample alternative channels for communication of the information.”); *Playtime Theatres*, 475 U.S. at 41. *See Alameda Books*, 535 U.S. 425, 440 (plurality opinion) (“[M]unicipal ordinances

Due to the categorical exclusion, however, this presumption of unconstitutionality is effectively reversed for sexually explicit visual depictions of minors.²³⁴ By placing such depictions into an unprotected “category,” the Court has removed the requirement of strict scrutiny that would otherwise apply. Child pornography falling within the categorical exclusion is, in other words, essentially like any other kind of product, and statutory restrictions on it require only “rational basis” review—thus leaving legislatures effectively free under the police power to regulate or ban it as they see fit.²³⁵ As a

receive only intermediate scrutiny if they are content neutral.”), or on the harms incurred in its production. The distinction between content-based and content-neutral is delineated in some detail in *Turner Broadcast System v. FCC*. *Turner Broad. Sys. v. FCC*, 512 U.S. 622, 641–42 (1994) (Apparently this is the first majority-subscribed opinion to refer to “intermediate” scrutiny as the proper standard for content-neutral speech). For further discussion of the intermediate scrutiny standard in relation to *Ferber* and *Osborne*, see *infra* note 254.

A statutory restriction on child pornography, such as that in *Ferber*, could conceivably be considered “content-neutral,” rather than content-based, inasmuch as it is aimed not at what is communicated but at the secondary effects that are caused by the manner of production. See, e.g., *Playtime Theatres*, 475 U.S. at 41; *United States v O’Brien*, 391 U.S. 367 (1968); see *Alameda Books*, 535 U.S. at 425 (plurality opinion). There is indication in *Ferber* that the Court in fact saw the restrictions on child pornography as content-neutral. For example, the Court described the “context” of the case as “involving the harmful employment of children” to make the films at issue—clearly referring to conduct (“employment”), which is regulable under the police power, rather than “pure” expression. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 771. Likewise, it was clear that the Court saw the statute’s primary aim as being to stop the “use of children as subjects of pornographic materials.” *Ferber*, 458 U.S. 758. And throughout the opinion there are repeated references to what could now be called the “secondary effects” of sexual exploitation and abuse of children as the concerns that underlay the holding. Had the Court treated the *Ferber* restriction as content-neutral, a modern consequence would be that strict scrutiny would not be called for in reviewing the statute; the proper standard of review would, instead, be “intermediate” scrutiny—more relaxed but still probably more rigorous (on the question of alternatives) than the standard that the Court actually did employ. By openly treating the *Ferber* statute as content-neutral, however, the Court would have not been readily able to justify the creation of a new content-based categorical exclusion—and thereby authorize sweeping statutory bans of *all* child pornography.

234. Compare *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 817 (presumption of invalidity of content-based restrictions) with *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476, 486–87 (1957) (no justifications need be shown if a categorical exclusion applies). It is actually not clear who has the burden of persuasion or what the standard is for the “case-by-case analysis” that the Court provided for in *Ferber*. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S. 747, 773–74 (1982). However, the practical effect of a categorical exclusion is to reverse the presumption in favor of free expression and to place the speaker of protected speech on the defensive. This practical effect would be felt as chilling on protected speech irrespective of the speaker’s precise technical posture while later defending himself in court. Given the severe criminal penalties involved, it may even, indeed, have an unconstitutional effect on speech. See *supra* note 93.

235. Well, perhaps not quite. As the Court said in *R.A.V.*, 505 U.S. at 377 (racist-type “fighting words”), unprotected categories of expression are not “entirely invisible” to the

result, statutes that prescribe severe penalties on teen sexting and autopenography require virtually no scrutiny at all insofar as the teen-produced material is unprotected speech.

But there is an important threshold question here: How high should the bar be when Court itself creates a content-based category²³⁶ of unprotected speech?²³⁷ If the Court uses a standard of strict scrutiny to review content-based impingements on speech by legislatures, what level of scrutiny should the Court “require” *itself* to observe when it defines and maintains an unprotected category? Although the Realpolitik of the matter may be that the Court can do anything it wants, elementary principles of legality would require that, before the judicial branch withdraws constitutional protection from a whole category of expression, there needs to be a well demonstrated reason for doing so. After all, in taking the initiative to create the unprotected category, the Court is not only frankly acting as a lawmaker writing new law. It is cutting a piece out of the Constitution.

The analytical role played by categorical exclusions suggests the degree of scrutiny that would logically apply when the Court creates such an exclusion and defines its scope. Normally, “[w]hen the Government restricts speech, the Government bears the burden of proving the constitutionality of its actions.”²³⁸ The most basic effect of a categorical exclusion is, as just stated, to reverse this presumption of invalidity for content-based regulations.²³⁹ Operationally, the categorical exclusion allows the courts to skip the usual process of strict scrutiny (demanding a compelling interest, narrow tailoring and

Constitution. Based on *R.A.V.*, one might suppose, for example, that strict scrutiny could be invoked to strike down a child-pornography law that banned depictions of homosexual but not heterosexual conduct.

236. It perhaps needs emphasis that a content-based categorical exclusion, such as the Court created in *Ferber*, must not be confused with a content-based regulation created by legislation. Their effects and consequences for speech are exactly opposite. The function of a *content-based regulation*, such as a statute, is to suppress the targeted speech, and, as such, it is presumptively unconstitutional and subject to strict scrutiny. *See supra* text accompanying notes 231–33. By contrast, a *content-based categorical exclusion* suppresses nothing at all in itself, but it effectively reverses the presumption of unconstitutionality that would otherwise apply, and thus relieves the government of the need to satisfy the usual tests of strict scrutiny.

237. Not that the Supreme Court creates new categories all that often. It has not, for example, done so in the 25 years since *Ferber*. *United States v. Stevens*, 533 F.3d 218, 244 (3d Cir. 2008)(en banc).

238. *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 816.

239. *See supra* text accompanying notes 234–35.

absence of less restrictive alternatives).²⁴⁰ And this is a lot of protection to skip.

For example, when a regulation on speech has a broad reach, the government ordinarily has an “especially heavy burden . . . to explain why a less restrictive provision would not be as effective.”²⁴¹ A categorical exclusion operates to relieve the government of this burden. And whereas a governmental body that wants to impose content-based restrictions ordinarily has to “demonstrate that the harms it recites are real and that its restriction will in fact alleviate them to a material degree,”²⁴² a categorical exclusion allows the affected speech to be suppressed without demonstrating anything at all.

In short, a content-based categorical exclusion effectively short-circuits the strict scrutiny that otherwise normally protects expression from content-based restrictions. This being so, the only way to preserve the integrity of the presumption of unconstitutionality (i.e., the presumption in favor of free speech) is to provide at the beginning what will be lost down the line. That is, in creating and shaping a categorical exclusion, the courts should use the same degree of strict scrutiny that the categorical exclusion will displace. This would mean that, in defining a categorical exclusion, a court should have a strong basis for concluding that (1) there are compelling interests that outweigh the interest in free expression across the entire category, (2) the category is narrowly defined to serve those compelling other interests, and (3) there are no less restrictive alternatives for achieving the same purpose.²⁴³

If the Court in *Ferber* and *Osborne* used strict scrutiny in establishing and applying the categorical exclusion for child pornography, it did not give voice to the process.²⁴⁴ In *Ferber*, for

240. See *supra* text accompanying notes 231–33.

241. *Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 844, 879 (1997).

242. *Edenfield v. Fane*, 507 U.S. 761, 770–771 (1993).

243. Cf. *supra* text accompanying note 233.

244. For a discussion of the Court’s rather anomalously low rigor of review, see Adler *supra* note 16, 936–38 (characterizing the Supreme Court as “strangely acquiescent” “in *Ferber* compared with its more typical approach, under which “when the Court eliminates a category of expression from constitutional protection, it carefully defines the speech that can be banned; the definition then serves as a limit on legislative enactments”). See also *Bose Corp. v. Consumers Union*, 466 U.S. 485, 505 (1984) (“In such cases [of categorically unprotected speech], the Court has regularly conducted an independent review of the record both to be sure that the speech in question actually falls within the unprotected category and to confine the perimeters of any unprotected category within acceptably narrow limits in an effort to ensure that protected expression will not be inhibited.”)

example, no standard of review was actually mentioned, and the Court simply said: “We shall not second-guess this legislative judgment” and “[t]hat judgment, we think, easily passes muster under the First Amendment.” Similarly in *Osborne*, the Court mentioned no level of scrutiny and concluded, deferentially: “we cannot fault” the state for making the choice that it did.²⁴⁵ These rather acquiescent locutions do not, of course, capture the current constitutional rigor of strict scrutiny. Moreover, the *Osborne* opinion apparently relied significantly on the state’s bald assertion that the Court’s earlier *Ferber* decision had made it “difficult, if not impossible, to solve the child pornography problem by only attacking production and distribution”—along with the fact that a minority of states had “found it necessary” to prohibit possession.²⁴⁶ All in all, the analysis in neither case showed anything more than a kind of partial strict scrutiny, essentially focusing only on the element of “compelling” state interest.

Given the historical context of *Ferber* and *Osborne*, however, we should not be surprised that the Supreme Court’s scrutiny in those two cases was so relaxed and deferential compared with the standards of strict scrutiny currently applied: After all, both decisions came well before the Court had definitively declared that strict scrutiny is the standard of review for content-based regulations affecting sexually themed materials.²⁴⁷ In a case decided four years before *Ferber*, the

245. “Given the importance of the State’s interest in protecting the victims of child pornography, *we cannot fault* Ohio for attempting to stamp out this vice at all levels in the distribution chain.” *Osborne v. Ohio*, 495 U.S. 103, 110 (1990) (emphasis added).

The problem with “acquiescent” scrutiny that so largely defers to legislative judgments is, of course, that it sets the bar so low that it amounts, in the words of Justice Scalia, “to a test of whether the legislature has a stupid staff.” *Lucas v. S.C. Coastal Council*, 505 U.S. 1003, 1025 n.12 (1992).

246. 495 U.S. at 110–11. Justice Brennan found the last point utterly unconvincing, observing that a “restriction on speech cannot be justified by such self-referential reasoning.” *Id.* at 143 n.17 (Brennan, J., dissenting).

247. Despite *Sable Communications*, the applicable standard of scrutiny seems to have still been up in the air until after 1996. Compare *Denver Area Educ. Telecomms Consortium v. FCC*, 518 U.S. 727, 741–43 (1996) and *id.* at 781–88 (Kennedy, J. dissenting) with *Reno v. ACLU*, 521 U.S. 844, 868 (1997) (giving the challenged restriction “the most stringent review of its provisions”); *cf. also* *United States v. X-Citement Video, Inc.*, 513 U.S. 64, 84 (1994) (Scalia, J. dissenting). Indeed, between the time of *Ferber* and *Osborne*, the Court’s focus was more on reserving strict scrutiny for content-based bans on “political speech” and settling into the idea of (as yet, unnamed) “intermediate” scrutiny for other speech restrictions. Compare *Boos v. Barry*, 485 U.S. 312 (1988) (political demonstration) with *Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, 491 U.S. 781 (1989) (time, place and manner). See also *Riley v. Nat’l Fed’n of Blind*, 487 U.S. 781 (1988) (regulations on solicitation of money by charities subject to “exacting” scrutiny). *Cf.* Justice Scalia’s observation,

plurality opinion of the Court expressed the view that materials of largely erotic interest are not entitled to the same degree of constitutional protection as other expression:

[E]ven though we recognize that the First Amendment will not tolerate the total suppression of erotic materials that have some arguably artistic value, it is manifest that *society's interest in protecting this type of expression is of a wholly different, and lesser, magnitude* than the interest in untrammelled political debate Even though the First Amendment protects communication in this area from total suppression, we hold that *the State may legitimately use the content* of these materials as the basis for placing them in a different classification²⁴⁸

This deprecatory view towards sexually themed materials, though never drawing a majority of the Court, appeared in other earlier opinions as well.²⁴⁹ It seems, in other words, that *Ferber* and

written several years later in 1996: “We have no established criterion for ‘intermediate scrutiny’ either, but essentially apply it when it seems like a good idea to load the dice.” *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 568 (1996) (Scalia, J. dissenting).

Nowadays, however, it is clear that a “content-based speech restriction . . . can stand only if it satisfies strict scrutiny.” *United States v. Playboy Entm’t Group, Inc.*, 529 U.S. 803, 813 (2000). “As we consider a content-based regulation, the . . . standard is strict scrutiny. This case involves speech alone; and even where speech is indecent and enters the home, the objective of shielding children does not suffice to support a blanket ban if the protection can be accomplished by a less restrictive alternative.” *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 814; *accord* *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 262–63 (2002).

Not that drive-by “strict scrutiny” does not sometimes seem to still occur in the post-*Playboy* era. For example, Justice O’Connor essentially repeats uncritically the conclusions of the congressional findings and expresses some free-floating unease about what might occur “given the rapid pace of advances in computer-graphics technology.” *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. at 263–64 (2002) (O’Connor, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part). Like the Chief Justice, Justice O’Connor based her standard of scrutiny on a case that involved “content-neutral” regulations and that preceded by several years the case, *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 814, that definitively established strict scrutiny as the proper standard. *Ashcroft*, 535 U.S. 264, (citing *Turner Broad. Sys., Inc. v. FCC*, 520 U.S. 180, 195 (1997) (stating that it is proper to “accord substantial deference to the predictive judgment of Congress” in First Amendment cases)).

248. *Young v. American Mini Theatres*, 427 U.S. 50, 70–71 (1976) (emphasis added) (plurality opinion). Also, “there is *surely a less vital interest* in the uninhibited exhibition of material that is on the borderline between pornography and artistic expression than in the free dissemination of ideas of social and political significance.” *Id.* at 61 (emphasis added).

249. *See, e.g., FCC v. Pacifica Found.*, 438 U.S. 726, 743 (1978). “While some of these references [to excretory and sexual organs and activities] may be protected, they *surely lie at the periphery* of First Amendment concern.” *Id.* (emphasis added); *United States v. X-Citement Video, Inc.*, 513 U.S. 64, 84 (1992) (Scalia, J. dissenting) (“[T]he First Amendment protection accorded to such materials is not as extensive as that accorded to other speech.”).

Osborne, in their relatively deferential level of scrutiny, simply reflected the tenor of their times. They do not, however, accord with the Court's more recent holding announced in *United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc.*, namely, that "the . . . standard is strict scrutiny."²⁵⁰

In sum, while the relatively passive scrutiny in *Ferber* and *Osborne* was fitting for their times, a substantial movement in the surrounding legal terrain has occurred since the two cases were decided. As a result, content-based restrictions, including those on sexually-themed expression, are presumptively unconstitutional, and strict scrutiny is the normal standard for reviewing such restrictions.²⁵¹ Given this move to align and harmonize the protection that is accorded to various expressive themes and to clarify the standards of review, the scrutiny that sufficed in 1982 to define the scope of the categorical exclusion in *Ferber* should not be expected to suffice today. Indeed, for the Court to employ its former deferential approach to define the scope of categorical exclusions today would build a road around the modern strict-scrutiny standard.²⁵²

The Court's relaxed level of review in *Ferber* and *Osborne* does not mean, of course, that the legislative judgments in those cases could not have withstood strict scrutiny. Given the exploitative factual background in both cases, they almost surely could have. It is not, however, so obvious that those judgments, if applied to genres of materials produced under completely different factual circumstances, could satisfy strict scrutiny²⁵³ or even, intermediate scrutiny²⁵⁴ review.

250. 529 U.S. at 813. See *supra* note 247.

251. *Id.*; *supra* notes 231–33 and 247, and text accompanying note 238.

252. It would eviscerate the rule that "[w]hen the Government restricts speech, the Government bears the burden of proving the constitutionality of its actions." *Playboy*, 529 U.S. at 816.

253. See *supra* notes 231–33.

254. The problem with satisfying intermediate scrutiny is that laws of the sort that were upheld in *Ferber* and *Osborne* impose a complete ban, not a mere restriction, on the speech content at which they are directed. They would not, therefore, meet the usual requirement of intermediate scrutiny that the law "leave open ample alternative channels for communication of the information." *Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, 491 U.S. 781, 791 (1989); *Renton v. Playtime Theatres*, 475 U.S. 41, 47, 53–54 (1986). See *supra* note 233. There is, however, also an alternative formulation of the intermediate scrutiny standard, one which does not require "alternative channels," yet laws like those in *Ferber* and *Osborne* would not (as applied to self-produced genres) seem to satisfy it either. Under this alternative formulation, a content-neutral regulation will be sustained "if the incidental restriction on alleged First Amendment freedoms is no greater than is essential to the furtherance of that interest." *Turner Broad. Sys. v. FCC*, 512 U.S. 622, 662 (1994) (quoting *United States v. O'Brien*, 391 U.S. 367, 377 (1968)). This requirement of "narrow

As observed earlier, the Court in *Ferber* had abundant evidence to substantiate the exploitative and abusive harms to children that resulted from the circumstances of production of “traditional” child pornography, such as the two films there at issue.²⁵⁵ But teen sexting and autopornography today are produced under radically different circumstances.²⁵⁶ It is the difference between, on one hand, vicious exploitation and sexual abuse that virtually (or even literally) amounts to servitude versus, on the other hand, young people doing what they themselves are moved to do, acting on their own initiatives and expressing themselves as they wish in the ways they deem important. Given this wide difference in the circumstances of production, it would be extremely coincidental if the harms from teen sexting and other autopornography, whatever they may be, happened to resemble in kind or degree the harms that animated *Ferber* and *Osborne*.²⁵⁷ It is, in other words, a new and undecided question whether the unprotected category initially declared by *Ferber* can be simply allowed to subsume, without further ado, genres of material

tailoring” does not mean the law must adopt the least restrictive alternative, *Ward*, 491 U.S. at 799–800, but presumably a complete ban on certain content (which leaves no “alternative channels for communication”) could be considered narrowly tailored, “only if each activity within the proscription’s scope is an appropriately targeted evil.” *Frisby v. Schultz*, 487 U.S. 474, 485 (1988). That is, the law “may not regulate expression in such a manner that a substantial portion of the burden on speech does not serve to advance its goals.” *Ward*, 491 U.S. at 799–800. If, therefore, the goal of a given law is to prevent the kinds of harms relied on in *Ferber* and *Osborne*, the application of that law to large quantities of self-produced materials, which do not involve those harms, would seem to go too far—reaching activities not demonstrated to be “appropriately targeted” evils.

255. See *supra* note 184.

256. See *supra* text accompanying notes 174–94.

257. *Id.* Professor Leary cites a number of sources asserting that harms can flow from extant child pornography quite *apart from* the production processes because, for example, offenders can use pornography to “fuel” their assaults and seduce children and also because the presence of the pornography in mass circulation can lead to an evolution in social attitudes and values in unwholesome directions. Leary, *supra* note 17, at 9–17. There are, however, at least three problems with these kinds of evidence of harms: First, the Supreme Court has explicitly rejected them as bases for suppressing expression, citing standard First Amendment grounds. See *supra* note 110 and accompanying text. Second, the objective of preventing an evolution in social attitudes and values sounds like, at bottom, an effort to use censorship “to control men’s minds,” which is not among the legitimate objectives for restricting free speech and press. *Stanley v. Georgia*, 394 U.S. 557, 565 (1969). *Accord* *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coal.*, 535 U.S. 234, 253 (2002). Third, a court applying strict scrutiny needs to take care not to simply accept the products and publications of advocacy groups as though they are valid social science data. Nor can it necessarily draw reliably balanced conclusions about social effects from the reports of psychology and medical practitioners who deal primarily with patients beset by clinical conditions.

that were not even contemplated by the legislature or the Court in the case.

Perhaps, to be sure, the Court might someday be presented with a body of research and studies, such as those relied on in *Ferber*, that will substantiate that harms can flow from non-exploitative self-production of non-obscene sexual materials. Although such research and studies may be long in coming,²⁵⁸ to conjecture about such harms in the meantime, without supporting studies or research, would not be strict scrutiny.

In summary, in prosecutions of teens for sexting and other autopornography, the crucial opening question is whether these forms of expression fall within the scope of the categorical exclusion that *Ferber* and *Osborne* defined for “child pornography.” On one hand, teen sexting and autopornography fall easily within the verbal formulation of the categorical exclusion: they “visually depict sexual conduct by children below a specified age.”²⁵⁹ On the other hand, nothing in either *Ferber* or *Osborne* even hints that the Court actually ever meant to withhold the Constitution’s protection from teenagers who make non-obscene pictures and videos of themselves and their own legal activities. Nor can it be said that the Court meant to put the teens who produce them on the defensive, deprived of the presumption of unconstitutionality and of strict scrutiny review and forced to risk life-shattering penalties as the price for pressing their constitutional claims.²⁶⁰ It is still, therefore, an unaddressed question whether teenage autopornography can be suitably lumped together with “traditional” kinds of child-pornography materials.

III. Four Possibilities

At the moment, the constitutional status of teen sexting and other autopornography remains uncertain. Whether the Court will apply standards of strict scrutiny to decide what is “suitably”²⁶¹ within

258. As noted earlier, *supra* note 16, under current laws, independent researchers have no ability to correlate or connect particular kinds of teen autopornography content with possible harmful results and, therefore, no credible research can be done on the subject of whether and to what degree the production of teen sexting and autopornography might result in harmful consequences.

259. *New York v. Ferber*, 458 U.S.747, 764 (1982) (emphasis in original).

260. As described earlier, it is at least an open question whether the government can constitutionally place the speakers of protected speech on the defensive by this sort of massively threatening direct burden aimed at speech itself. See *supra* note 93.

261. See *supra* text accompanying notes 128–31.

the scope of the categorical exclusion cannot be said with confidence. Based on what the Court has already said, however, four major possibilities can be identified. They are:

1. The categorical exclusion created in *Ferber*, now that it has been established, will be viewed as having a life of its own, no longer limited by the concerns that led to its creation. It will continue to exist as defined in *Ferber*, applying to all materials, including teen sexting and other autopornography, that “visually depict sexual conduct by children below a specified age.”²⁶² Based on the acts of sexting and autopornography that have already occurred, millions of teens will remain subject, in principal at least, to prosecution and lifetime disability as felony sex offenders.
2. The categorical exclusion created in *Ferber* will be applied to sexting and other teen autopornography but such application will be based on new research and studies (yet to appear) showing that these activities by teens generate serious harms comparable in magnitude to the child exploitation and sexual abuse relied on in *Ferber*. Again, due to the acts of sexting and autopornography that have already occurred, millions of teens will remain subject, in principal at least, to prosecution and lifetime disability as felony sex offenders.
3. Sexting and other teen autopornography will be subsumed into the categorical exclusion established in *Ferber*, which will prima facie apply, subject, however, to “as applied” exceptions determined case by case as provided for in *Ferber*. Teens who have engaged in sexting and autopornography will remain subject to prosecution but will have the possibility of asserting “as applied” challenges in defense. Nonetheless, given the monetary and other costs of defending and the life-shattering consequences of not succeeding, most who are prosecuted will enter pleas to lesser charges, with varying negative impacts on their lives.
4. The scope of the categorical exclusion established in *Ferber* will be clarified and adjusted so that it does not impinge on teenagers’ interests in free self-expression, on one of the following bases:
 - a. The categorical exclusion will be deemed closed, limited to the exploitative genres of child pornography that were actually before the Court in *Ferber* and *Osborne*.
 - b. The categorical exclusion will be deemed in principal to encompass all genres of child pornography that cause harms

262. *Ferber*, 458 U.S. at 764 (emphasis in original).

of the magnitude of those relied on in *Ferber* but the Court will, based on strict scrutiny, declare non-obscene teen autopornography to be a protected category (based, for example, on teenagers' strong interest in being able to express themselves freely).

- c. The categorical exclusion will be deemed to include only those depictions of underage sexuality whose production has a relationship to crime sufficient to satisfy the standards of imminence and likelihood laid out in *Brandenburg*. The recording and documentation by teens of their own legal activities will be treated as constitutionally protected expression.

VI. Conclusion

"Sexting" and other teen autopornography are becoming widespread phenomena that are beginning to result in criminal prosecutions. Given the reality of changing social practices, mores and technology utilization, today's pornography laws are a trap for unwary teens and operate, in effect, to criminalize a large fraction of America's young people. As such, these laws and prosecutions under them represent a stark example of the contradictions that can occur when governmental policies and initiatives built on past truths and values collide with new and unanticipated social phenomena.

While some teen sexting and other autopornography may be technically "obscene," the focus of anti-pornography enforcement in recent years has been the child pornography laws. The landmark cases of *New York v. Ferber* and *Osborne v. Ohio* have established and defined a categorical exclusion that denies First Amendment protection to child pornography materials. Even though *Ferber* and *Osborne* may not strictly speaking require a conclusion that sexting and other autopornography are unprotected speech, at least some lower courts and prosecutors appear to regard them that way.

By contrast, the language and reasoning of the more recent case of *Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition* gives strong reason to believe that the scope of the categorical exclusion for child pornography should be closely aligned with the governmental objectives that *Ferber* and *Osborne* relied on. Such a limitation would allow constitutional protection for teen sexting and autopornography that occur on the teens' own initiative. *Ashcroft* strongly implies that the categorical exclusion should be limited to materials that are produced by means of criminal child abuse and exploitation. Also, current

standards of strict scrutiny for content-based regulations, if applied, would probably prevent (on the present state of the studies and research) self-produced teen materials from being subsumed into the *Ferber* categorical exclusion. How this issue will be decided, however, remains to be seen.

In the end, it cannot be ignored that there are also generational factors at work in the prosecutions of teens for sexting and autopornography. The prosecutorial and judicial personnel who are acting in these prosecutions are typically two or more generations removed from the teenagers whose sexual expression is condemned and whose prospects are drastically affected. Ultimately, however, efforts such as these are generally futile. The future and its values belong to those whose lives lie mostly ahead of them.
