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Pornography celebrities stage a 'Great Debate'

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In front of 600 Yale students and five TV cameras, celebrity moderator Martin Bashir started "The Great Porn Debate" on Friday night with a question: "Is America addicted to pornography?"

But despite the screams of disagreement, the four industry experts — that is, pornography celebrities — who were on hand for the Sex Week at Yale event and the previous staging of the debate at over 25 other universities, debate participants here at Yale never arrived at a final conclusion. Instead, the 600 spectators saw — and perhaps wanted — an exhibition of pornography icons, not an intellectual debate.

"I really came to see Ron Jeremy," Ben Simon '10 said.

"Porn Pastor" Craig Gross of XXXChurch.com, a support site for pornography addicts, and Jeremy, star of about 2,000 racy films, butted heads during the debate, held at LoRicco Ballroom. Although they did not specifically address the original question, they did dish out their conflicting views on the social effects of pornography, such as its exploitation of women and its detrimental impact on real-life sexual relationships. Aiding the two keynote debaters for the first time were two others involved in the pornography industry — pornography actress Monique Alexander and pornography-producer-turned-opponent Donny Pauling.

Several students who attended the event said they came to hear what both sides had to say and to enjoy what Sex Week at Yale organizer Joe Citarrella '08 called "the highlight of the week."

And also, perhaps, the cameras rolling in front of them.

For the first time, the debate — which has been staged across the country and is organized by the alternative entertainment company Wolfman Productions — was televised by the ABC network program Nightline. To make the event more television-worthy, Gross said, Alexander, Pauling and Bashir were added to the usual lineup of Jeremy and Gross.

"These are people we all know, borderline heroes," Louis Socha '09 said after the debate.

Nightline decided to film a debate after completing a segment on Gross and his Web site, Gross said. Although the filming was

originally scheduled to take place at Ohio State University, he said, scheduling conflicts forced the taping to move to New Haven. In other words, he said, Yalies lucked out.

But not if they wanted an actual debate.

Bashir, who is a Nightline co-host and has moderated other debates before, said after the show that although the structure of the talk was similar to that of a traditional debate — with opening arguments, dissenting opinions and closing arguments — the debaters sometimes digressed, and their arguments lacked non-experiential research, leading to a debate less “intellectual” than Yale students are accustomed to.

“Your professors would have picked the debate apart,” he said.

Arguing in the affirmative, Gross pointed to four main aspects of pornography: the way in which it fosters unrealistic expectations and violent impulses after viewing, is accessible to children, degrades women who participate and creates the inability to “watch porn responsibly,” instead fostering unproductive addictions.

During his speech, Gross named several pornographic films in which Alexander starred, including “I Swear I’m 18” and “Young Sluts.”

“I don’t get how that is empowering,” he said.

Pauling added in support of Gross’ stance that he “couldn’t live with the guilt” of soliciting women after nine years in the industry, so he quit. He also said the public “bought into the lie ... that [pornography] is a great industry with a lot of fun.”

Jeremy retorted by saying that pornography can sometimes help relationships, filters exist for parents to protect their children, and women are empowered by the vast amounts of money they acquire from the work.

In the shortest speech of the four, Alexander emphasized the importance of choice when arguing in the negative. She attributed the “small” number of cases in which women were exploited in the business to the “stupidity” of women who do not have contracts with pornography companies.

“When you choose to get into this industry, you have to face consequences,” she said. “I made the choice to do this in the right way.”

Alexander currently has an eight-year contract with erotic-movie producer Vivid Entertainment Group. Her contract expires in one year, but she told the News before the debate that she will probably remain in the pornography business.

Although most of the debate proceeded calmly and Bashir asked the audience to respect the views being presented, the debaters cut off, shouted at and insulted each other throughout the event.

When Pauling said his pornographic career ended his marriage, Alexander suggested that Pauling’s wife had insecurity issues. A loud groan could be heard from the crowd.

"It's not that. My wife simply felt this is not the way things are supposed to be," Pauling said in his defense.

The tension persisted throughout the audience question-and-answer session.

When asked by an audience member what the two parties have learned to agree on after doing the debates repeatedly, both said they only agreed about First Amendment rights and that the pornography industry should do more to prevent its films from reaching children.

Exchanges between Jeremy and Gross were particularly heated, at times climaxing in bouts of yelling. But off the camera, the two have become friends, especially after exchanging ideas and stories during their bus trips to different universities, Jeremy said.

"We're gay lovers," Jeremy quipped at the Yale Bookstore while signing his memoir on Friday afternoon. "We're making a movie, you see, 'Romeo and Julio.' "

Jeremy also lamented his weight gain over the years.

"I look at my earlier films and I go, where the heck did my penis go?" he told the News after the talk.

This Friday's broadcast, which will air at 11:35 p.m., will be a 20-minute edited version, Gross said, but the full taping will be posted on ABCNews.com on Thursday.