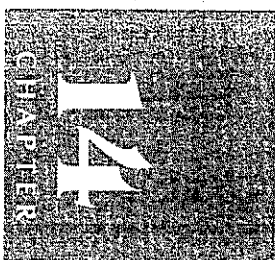


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Azy Barak  
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## The Future of Internet Sexuality

Niels Bohr, the Danish physicist, was known to remark, "Prediction is very difficult, especially about the future." Indeed, the business of forecasting future developments—known as futurism—is far from an exact science. Forecasting through extrapolation of historical trends, or through building of formal models based on mathematical equations, is essentially arbitrary, because most of the relevant data are lacking. Moreover, as cognitively active decision makers, we have some control over our destiny, and forecasting passive continuation of current trends seems to underestimate the powerful impact of human agency and imagination. At best, one can illustrate a few possible future scenarios, each using one or another set of assumptions (Rice, 1997). Such forecasts themselves may become a basis for reflection and alteration of current trends, based upon the application of human imagination and agency.

Unlike futurists, psychologists see prediction as an integral part of their scientific business, and efforts to predict outcomes—and to verify the prediction of outcomes—an essential part of the psychological scientists' activities. This can be illustrated, for example, in the fields of artificial intelligence (Johnson & Erneling, 1998), employee and organizational behavior (Sparrow, 2000), and clinical health and forensic psychology (Belar, 1997). Miller (1998), in fact, has offered a visionary perspective for the future. Based on specific predictions—such as cancer advances prolonging life; psychological testing as we know it being replaced by a complex analytic system which integrates effects of genetic factors, psychological markers, thoughts and behavior—he portrayed "a psychologist with 20/20 vision."

Modern technology and the Internet are fast-growing ventures. There are differences as to what is considered to be the length of "an era" in the computer age. Most scientists agree, however, that changes in technologies and applications are extremely rapid, a fact that requires quick a pace of personal and social adaptations, more rapid than ever before (Jones & Jones, 1998). Moreover, we now know that emerging technology and scientific breakthroughs will change most what we currently know and even what we used to know. Wireless networks, revolutionary cyber-optic-based communications, artificial intelligence, advanced expert systems, and biologically-based chips will propel demands for human adjustment and mastery of conditions and challenges not yet dreamed of. The recent discovery that metabolic networks—identical in many organisms—closely resemble the communication systems of the Internet (Jeong, Tombor, Albert, Oltvai, & Barabási, 2000) may be a signal that human-computer interactions are destined to be wed evermore closely to one another in a system of reciprocal influence.

In this concluding chapter of *Sex and the Internet: A Guidebook for Clinicians*, we have been asked to forecast future developments in Internet sexuality that have special relevance to clinical concerns. In assembling this forecast, and in line with the above premises, we must assume that future developments in Internet sexuality will reflect core characteristics of Internet sexuality that exist at the present time. Also, we must assume unanticipated technological breakthroughs in Internet capabilities and societal and individual adaptations and reactions to them. We will consider first the factors known as "the triple-A engine" (Cooper, 1998; Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997): accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of Internet sexuality. In addition to these factors, we propose that two other important engines, acceptability (King, 1999) and aloneness (Barak & Fisher, 2002), make a powerful *penis-A engine*. However, a rational analysis of existing trends and projection to the future suggests the significance of additional factors that we consider essential, including attempts to regulate Internet sexuality and generational disparities in Internet sophistication.

## □ Accessibility

Spectacular growth in Internet accessibility, with movement toward universal connectedness, is anticipated in future years. Growth in Internet accessibility will include growth in *ease of access*, with PC-independent, wireless handheld, or cable television-based Internet access becoming the easy-to-use norm. Growth in *age-inclusive access* across both younger and older segments of society not now connected is also anticipated. A recent

survey reports that the number of Internet users worldwide will nearly triple to close to 1.2 billion by 2005 (see <http://www.eforecasts.com/pr/p201.htm>). With growth in *cross-national access*, as a part of the globalization process, the Internet will penetrate presently closed societies and economically deprived third world countries.

Growth in ease of access is expected to facilitate future developments in Internet sexuality in multiple ways. For example, while current PC-based wired access to the Internet acts to restrict Internet use to work and study at a computer desk in relatively a social settings, easy access to cable-television-based Internet portals is likely to promote Internet use solely for entertainment purposes in the social environment of the living room, den, or bedroom. Given the nearly unlimited amount of sexual content already on the Internet, growth in easy accessibility will likely translate into expanded contact with Internet sexuality in social and sexual as opposed to vocational settings. Moreover, this expansion is expected to be a two-way proposition, with Internet users both accessing sexual content and originating such content via Webcams and other modalities. This may result in Internet-mediated "flashing" and individual, couple-, and group-based visually explicit sexual exchanges. Similarly, growth in wireless handheld Internet portals may make it easier for compulsive or situationally inappropriate Internet sexuality consumption.

Increases in age inclusiveness will bring with them the likelihood of increased contact with Internet sexuality for both younger and older cohorts of society than is presently the case. Whether the ultimate impact is positive or negative depends upon the degree to which the Internet provides adaptive and age-appropriate sexual information, motivational messages, and behavioral models or the opposite. Increases in cross-national access to the Internet can be expected to have a significant impact on the sexual values and expression of members of formerly closed, religiously fundamentalist, and impoverished third-world societies that may later provoke responses ranging from individual dissatisfaction and behavior change to government backlash and draconian punishment. Internet-based sexuality education could also act to focus local and international attention on culturally specific sexual patterns.

Increased accessibility across ages and cultures is also related to two other factors that lie close to the core of the experience of internet sexuality: convenience and escape (Young, Griffin-Shelley, Cooper, O'Mara, & Buchanan, 2000). Convenience refers to the ease, comfort, and perceived safety of virtual environments, while at the same time offering stimulation. It seems obvious that with the advancement of technology these characteristics of computer use will become more prominent and may well result in greater attractiveness of virtual sexual experiences and consequent personal pleasure. The escape factor refers to the envisioned

harmless flirting, or the tendency to flee from boring or threatening reality into a convenient other world—sexual cyberspace—impossible to match in “the real world.” Growing globalization of the Net, on the one hand, and improved communication networks, on the other, will facilitate the sense of escape and the individual’s ability to flee reality into a rich, rewarding, and personally constructed optimum alternative. These might contribute to either growing possibilities for innocuous pleasure or to growing difficulties with cybersex addiction (Griffiths, 2000; Young, 1998). Convenience and escape characteristics of the Internet underscore the human factor involved in exploiting new technologies and emphasize that it is people’s use and understanding of technology that is the agent of change, rather than technology itself (Grint & Woolgar, 1997).

### Affordability

At present, Internet access and Internet content are relatively affordable. However, technological advances and growth in competition are expected to make Internet access ever more inexpensive. Even at present (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; W. A. Fisher & Barak, 2000; King, 1999), there is a vast amount of cost-free explicit sexual content available at the click of a mouse. With easier access, more users, and increased competition, along with expected quantum improvements in Internet technology, the Internet’s ability to deliver exceedingly high-quality products for dramatically lower costs will be vastly enhanced. An increase in no-cost sexual “teaser” material of high quality and low-cost or no-cost sexual and relationship chatrooms, which capitalize on augmented Internet technology, will add audio and video channels for sexual communication on a routine basis. The high end of the market will offer broadcast-quality sexual videos, perhaps interactive, with paid performers in real time—virtual prostitution. Equivalently, high-quality interactive sexual counseling will become available.

### Anonymity

At present, one of the central and most attractive characteristics of the Internet experience is its anonymity (McKenna & Bargh, 1999, 2000). Individuals can surf sexually explicit Web sites devoted to female–female sex, bondage and discipline, and bestiality in complete privacy and with a feeling of complete anonymity. This despite the reality that many employers, parents, and others utilize surveillance software that makes anonymity more of an illusion than a reality (see, e.g., <http://www.enflitrator.com> or <http://www.remote-spy.com>).

Perceptions of compromised anonymity may act to limit important positive sex-related Internet developments including use of online sexual counseling and education sites and involvement with online sexual addition intervention sites. Sophisticated Web-based software will soon be provided on a commercial basis to regain anonymous surfing, and perhaps even advanced false online personas, for interested users.

### Regulation

Another characteristic of the Internet that is especially relevant to sexuality is the fact that it has proven all but impossible to regulate the content of the Internet (e.g., Lessig, 1999; Lipschultz, 2000). These attempts have and will stimulate complicated constitutional issues in regard to free speech. Inability to regulate the content of Internet sexuality communicated by widely distributed providers including corporate, “cottage industry,” and individual users, may well be related in paradoxical fashion to expected increases in ability to penetrate anonymity of Internet users. Future Internet sexuality developments may thus create the problem of individuals who have increasing access to completely unregulated Internet sexuality content but whose anonymity is regularly compromised, bringing unwanted attention from parents, spouses, teachers, employers, and criminal justice authorities.

### Generational Disparities in Internet Sophistication

Despite the fact that Internet accessibility is expected to extend to both increasingly younger and older segments of society, it is anticipated that relatively younger individuals as a group will continue to be the most facile adopters of Internet technology (Galvert, 1998; Freeman-Longo, 2000; Williams, 1999). This will provide an opportunity to impact concerns of society and clients such as early sexual behavior and coital debut and unsafe sexual practices. It may also prove to be the case that the younger individual involved with Internet sexuality may experience sexual compulsiveness problems (Putnam, 2000), relationship problems (Levine, 2000), employment problems (Furnham, 2000), and criminal justice problems in relatively greater numbers. At the same time, a generational clinician–patient disparity in Internet sophistication may represent an important clinical skill deficit that will need to be remedied in order to provide meaningful assistance to clients with Internet-related sexuality concerns.

For better and for worse, the future development of Internet sexuality will have individual, relationship, and societal impacts that clinicians must anticipate and acquire the insight and skill to manage. In anticipating this trend and the challenges it will pose, it would be inaccurate and unhelpful to convey a doomsday vision that is uniformly negative. While the future developments in Internet sexuality we have anticipated will certainly exploit sex, they will also cultivate sex, in relation to desire, function, diversity, tolerance, and assertive and self-enhancing sexuality (Barak & King, 2000). While these developments may exploit and objectify women—and men—we also expect that there will be educational elements supportive of sexual tolerance, sexual diversity, and assertive and self-enhancing sexuality for both women and men (Döring, 2000; Podlas, 2000). At present, Internet sexuality includes access to online relationships, sexual merchandise, sexual stimulation, accurate and erroneous sex-related information, and formal sexual education for the lay public and for professionals.

The following sections of this chapter address a number of specific aspects of the future of Internet sexuality; the clinical concerns that each may pose, and possible roles and strategies for the clinician in addressing challenges posed by these developments.

### □ Sexually Explicit Materials on the Internet

At present, anyone can acquire Internet materials that portray and endorse the full range of sexual activities, from the consensual to the coercive, from the enriching to the degrading. Psychological theory and research suggest that individual differences will influence the nature of the materials acquired and the consequences of exposure to them (Barak, Fisher, Bellry, & Lashambe, 1999; Bogaert, 1993; W. A. Fisher & Barak, 2002).

The future of Internet sexually explicit materials will be influenced heavily by a number of underlying factors. First, we note that unprecedented access to vast amounts of sexually explicit material was arguably the primary engine that drove adoption, growth, and utilization of the Internet during its first decade of development. By extension, we expect that the creation and consumption of these types of materials will continue to be a primary factor. Moreover, that will drive the development of new Internet technologies that will be utilized to deliver ever richer experiences. Where Internet sexually explicit materials are now more or less restricted to the relatively passive selection and consumption of "pre-fabricated" sexually explicit text, images, and sounds, soon individuals will be able to interactively construct and obtain virtual sexual stimula-

tion that represents their optimally arousing "fit" (Mosher, 1980). We also expect to see the development of a range of Internet sexual peripherals, including Internet-driven vibrators embedded within rich and individually reactive sexual stimulus arrays, and other technosexological advances. Increasingly important to the dissemination of this material will be the findings of psychological research and expert opinion in this area. As we have asserted on a number of occasions (W. A. Fisher & Barak, 1989, 1991, 2002), psychological research has had a poor and politicized track record when it comes to providing empirically strong and compelling accounts of the prevalence and effects of pornography.

Individual, couple, and societal reactions to developments of Internet sexually explicit materials will determine future clinical concerns. On an individual level they may act then as they do now, as an adjunct to sexual fantasy (Mahou & Subotnik, 2001). Like other types of sexual fantasy, experience with augmented Internet sexually explicit materials may have positive as well as negative outcomes. Individuals may use enriched Internet sexual explicitness to play safely at sexual activities they have no intention of ever enacting and offer the possibility of adaptive outcomes (e.g., "safe place to play"). Couples may draw sexual information, motivation, and behavioral skills that will enrich their sexual and emotional relationship. Alternatively, participants may retreat from reality into the fantasy world of augmented Internet sexuality and fail to discern the difference between it and reality (Givin, 2000). This might be accompanied by the possibility of seriously maladaptive behavior and amplify existing concerns about the Internet and sexual compulsivity and deviance (e.g., Barak & King, 2000; Cooper, 2000; Schwartz & Southern, 2000).

### □ Cybersex and Intimate Relations on the Internet

Cyberspace has become an ideal place to meet people and to develop interpersonal relationships (Parks & Floyd, 1996). This is true for any type of social relationship, including intimate relationships. Some of these contacts remain online while others are transformed into face-to-face relationships, especially when they seem to be attractive and gratifying (McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998). Numerous couples have met online (Baker, 2000; Gwinell, 1998) as the "side-out" process of familiarization with one another (Richardson & Richardson, 2000). Moreover, there is a clear trend to look for online partners, perhaps because of the combination of the need for relatedness, feelings of alienation, and the perceived safety of online contacts (Givin, 2000; Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). Web pages designated for self-presen-

tation have become legitimate and widespread (Chan, 2000), as have matchmaking sites (see, for example, <http://www.matchmaker.com>). While men's and women's Net behavior still differs (Sussman & Tyson, 2000; Wolf, 2000), there are speculations (still to be empirically examined) that women experience more activism, freedom, and equality than off the Net (Harcourt, 1999; Morahan-Martin, 2000). Similarly, field observations show that women, just as men, engage heavily in cybersex, that is, virtual sexual relations that involve manual masturbation (Levine, 1998, 2000).

In the future this trend will continue, as growing numbers of people find cyberspace a fascinating environment in which to enjoy intimate relations. Certain minorities—physically disadvantaged, sick, older, younger, shy, the unattractive (and those who think they are)—will crowd the Net's social meeting points in greater numbers. Many people will find the Net an easy, convenient, inexpensive, efficient place to find a partner; thus, formal and informal matchmaking will flourish. Based on the borderless nature of the Internet, this last phenomenon will inevitably increase the number of international, intercultural, and interreligious marriages, ultimately affecting global social patterns.

On the negative side, it seems that the current trend of "online infidelity" (Maher & Subotnik, 2001; Shaw, 1997; Young et al., 2000) will increase in tandem with growth in the communications capabilities of the Net, negatively affecting couple relationships and families (Schneider, 2000). If the current trend does continue, cybersex relations, often transformed into in-person sexual relations (Gwinnell, 1998), will become a major factor in deteriorating marital relations and, therefore, a cause of relationship distress and divorce. Also, the potential false nature of Internet-based relationship makes impersonating and emotional manipulating of online partners a reality, to be abused by growing numbers of malicious users. In addition, the addictive nature of Internet-based intimate relations in general, and cybersex in particular (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; Griffiths, 2000), will increase the number of people engaged in this activity at work or school, hence affecting productivity, work relations, personal achievements, and the like. Sophisticated electronic surveillance and new regulations may help in controlling this development, but their effectiveness may well be only partial.

### The Internet and Homosexuality

It is our view that the Internet's penta-A engine makes it an exceptionally suitable channel for addressing same-sex concerns and an extremely

likely area for future development of Internet sexually related capabilities. Same-sex issues are sensitive, personal, and stigmatized, and—more than is the case in other areas of sexual information seeking—comprise an area in which the very seeking of information is itself a highly stigmatizing activity (Weinrich, 1997). Similarly, cyberspace has and will become more of a common environment for transsexuals and intersexuals and other highly stigmatized and disenfranchised populations.

With its unique characteristics, the Internet will increasingly be used as an unusually safe venue for individuals with same-sex interests to meet one another, to explore same-sex attraction; to seek same-sex stimulation from sexually explicit materials, to be involved in same-sex political activity, and to explore the coming-out process (Burke, 2000; Lax, 2000; Sampson, 1998; Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). The Internet will also serve increasingly as a particularly useful venue for self-help activities, ranging from counseling about sexual orientation to online support groups, to distribution of information about safer sex issues, to dissemination of referral networks of gay-friendly service providers in psychology, medicine, or travel.

### Internet Sexuality and Children

As has been mentioned earlier, the factors projected to expand Internet use will affect children as well as adults. Children's ever greater exposure to the Internet means that their exposure to sexual content will grow as well, with both the benefits and the risks this implies (Bremer & Rauch, 1998). In addition to organizations and Web sites that emphasize creating rules and teaching cautious surfing (see, for example, <http://www.state.nv.us/ag/pub/internet.htm>), and in addition to software packages designed to limit children's exposure to Internet sexuality (e.g., Cybersitter; see <http://www.cybersitter.com>), the future will likely bring with it educational attempts to equip children with the skills of "smart surfing" (Dorman, 1997; Teicher, 1999).

One can expect several positive processes to result. First, age-appropriate and nontraumatic exposure to sexuality can help in developing more positive attitudes and a greater acceptance of sex as a normal part of human existence. This advantage may serve as an effective vehicle in counterbalancing culturally common erotophobic messages and facilitating more erotophilic tolerance of sexuality, thus contributing to the promotion of physical and mental health (W. A. Fisher, Byrne, Kelley & White, 1988; W. A. Fisher & Fisher, 1999). Second, exposure to quality sexuality education materials may contribute to a better assimilating of sex inter-

mation, promoting the knowledge factor that is necessary for healthier sexual conduct (e.g., W. A. Fisher & Fisher, 1999). Third, the growing use of chatrooms and forums as a venue for children's interpersonal communication will probably result in more conversations about sex and more intimate relations between youngsters. Although this might sometimes be considered detrimental, positive aspects of developing social skills related to intimacy should not be ignored (such as age-appropriate courting or negotiating a face-to-face meeting). Fourth, improving Internet capabilities will allow more sophisticated and effective sexuality education (Barak & Fisher, 2002). In contrast to using the Net as a resource that is basically text- and graphics-based, as presently done, dynamic and highly interactive Internet-driven sexuality education sites will be developed to enhance active and effective learning.

On the negative side, it is apparent that the growing use of the Net may be linked with withdrawal from face-to-face social interactions (Sanders, Field, Diego, & Kaplan, 2000) and with the substitutions of virtual for in-vivo relations. Second, as kids have relatively little countervailing normative sexual information, they are likely to develop distorted perceptions and norms about sexuality from exposure to age-inappropriate, extreme, and sometimes entirely erroneous sexual images on the Internet.

### Compulsive Sexual Behavior on the Net

The compulsive use of Internet sexuality—also known as cybersex addiction—is a well-documented phenomenon (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000; Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999; Cooper, Scherer, Boies, & Gordon, 1999; Griffiths, 2000; Greenfield, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Mahen, 2000; Schwartz & Southern, 2000; Young, 1998). Future developments in Internet technology will contribute to enriched, more attractive sex sites, and consequently to increases in this problem in dramatic and nonlinear ways. Instead of a 1% problematic use of Internet sexuality at present time (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000), we may, in a few years, observe a figure of 2% or 5%, or tens of millions of Internet users worldwide who compulsively use the Net for sex. Needless to say, this number of people may significantly influence social norms and behaviors ranging from work habits and job performance to sex crimes.

At the same time it is possible that virtual engagements could substitute for real encounters (Waskul, Douglass, & Edgley, 2000) and thus prevent, or reduce, a variety of negative sex-related behaviors (e.g., stalking, voyeurism, exhibitionism).

### The Internet and Atypical Sexual Behavior

Clinicians are aware that many individuals engage in what might be considered atypical sexual behaviors: sexual acts that are rare, novel, and unexpected, that are shocking or antisocial in nature, and that may have disadvantageous consequences for the individual and others. Future strengthening of the Internet's already prodigious capacity to deliver an extraordinary range of sexual stimulation poses the possibility of provoking atypical sexual behavior (see Palandri & Green, 2000, on a sadomasochist chatroom).

Consider, for example, the possible effects of the range of paraphilic sexual stimuli now available on the Internet, including bestiality, coprophilia, sadomasochism, and sexually aggressive portrayals (Kim & Bailey, 1997), when combined with preexisting limited capacity, diminished capacity, or serious mental illness. While we would emphasize that individuals who have little internal restraint or who cannot differentiate between fantasy and reality do not need Internet sexuality to provoke problem sexual behaviors (see W. A. Fisher & Barak, 1991, 2002; Waskul, Douglass, & Edgley, 2000), the future development of Internet sexuality will pose at least three challenges to the clinician. First, when working with individuals with diminished capacity or serious psychopathology, it may be incumbent on the future clinician to work out practical approaches to avoiding contact with Internet sexual stimuli that could provoke problems. Second, the clinician will assist individuals to modify patterns of atypical sexual behavior and to redirect sexual interests in the context of an Internet environment that supplies considerable stimuli that model and reinforce the behavior in question. Third, clinicians will encounter more couples in which one individual has imported what the other regards as atypical sexual desires from Internet sources. Thus, their task will be to help couples negotiate different preferences. Finally, in keeping with our assertion that nearly all future developments of Internet sexuality have therapeutic as well as pathogenic possibilities, we remind the clinician that there is an entire class of atypical sexual behavior that would not a priori be judged harmful.

### Illegal Sexual Behaviors on the Internet

Illegal online sexual behaviors are already concerns, from the distribution of and trade in child pornography (McCabe, 2000) to stalking and sexual harassment (Deirmenjian, 1999) to illegal paraphilic activity (Kim

8. Bailly, 1997) and pedophilia (Durkin, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1999). Increasing accessibility and affordability of the Internet will likely enlarge the number of sex offenders and the range and reach of sexual offenses, with cyberspace becoming a relatively congenial environment for wrongdoing. The inherent difficulty in tracking and exposing the identity of Net users undermines legislative attempts to apply criminal law to cyberspace even as sex offenders creatively develop and deploy forms of virtual sexual assault and other online sex offenses. It seems reasonable to believe, however, that governments and public organizations will attempt to implement various solutions, from "Internet police" (e.g., <http://www.web-police.org>; <http://www.internet-police.co.uk>) to making laws more strict in order to reduce Internet sex crimes. In this connection, legislation will have to develop to consider virtual sex crimes in ways that will raise a host of practical and moral issues.

There is a positive aspect to the growing use and exposure of the Internet in this regard as authorities advertise and distribute information concerning sex crimes and sex offenders (e.g., <http://www.sexualpredators.org>). In the end, this educational use of the Net may ultimately contribute to the reduction of offline sex crimes.

### Internet-Assisted Sex Therapy and Consultation

As is the case with all psychological applications on the Internet (Barak, 1999), online counseling and psychotherapy are relatively new ventures (e.g., Mahou & Gordon, 2000; Smith & Senior, 2001). Such services currently flourish and are expected to expand greatly as a joint function of improvements in Internet technology and improvements in counseling and therapeutic applications (Mahou, in press; Suler, 2000). (For a comprehensive portal, see <http://www.metanola.org/imhs>)

Internet-based or Internet-supported sex therapy is in its infancy. Although more than a few Web sites offer sex advice (see, for example, Dr. Ruth's online advice at <http://webcenter.dr ruth.aol.com/DRruth/?pg=gatopic&partner=AOW>), not many offer actual online therapy (see, for example, Sex Therapy Online at <http://www.sexology.org>) as there are a host of current, ethical, legal, and technical concerns to be overcome (see Plaut and Donahay, chapter 12). Predictions as to the future of online sex therapy opportunities are generally supportive but urge caution (Leiblum, 1997; Noonan, 1998; Ochs & Binik, 2000). Similarly, support has been provided for therapy for compulsive users of online sex (Putnam, 2000).

There is good reason to believe that with the growth of online psychotherapy and online health care in general (Mahou, in press; Mahou &

Gordon, 2000; Mahou, Whitten, & Allen, 2001), online sex therapy will flourish as well. Following the penta-A engines, anonymous interaction promotes consultations (Graugaard & Winther, 1998) while face-to-face interaction may impede those interested in sexual counseling. The Internet will allow access to qualified sex therapists and make them available essentially everywhere. And, finally, in terms of cost-effectiveness, components of the therapeutic process are expected to be increasingly automated and thereby decline in price. In addition to reducing costs, Internet-driven, diagnostic software, such as *Sexpert* (Ochs & Binik, 2000), and Web-based survey instruments (Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2000) will make Internet-assisted sex counseling more practical and effective (see Cooper, Scherer, and Marcus, this volume). Advanced video-conferencing technology will enable synchronous therapy together with the visual components specifically necessary for sex therapy. Moreover, online instructions to and feedback from clients will bring virtual therapists closer to actual sexual behaviors, allowing the therapist to become almost an in-vivo observer of problematic behaviors and a behavior change facilitator.

At the same time there may also be a growing number of both professional service providers who have not been appropriately trained and outright impostors. More emphasis on appropriate training and ethical guidelines (e.g., <http://www.ismho.org/suggestions.html>) will inevitably develop.

### Internet-Assisted Sex Education

We have emphasized elsewhere (Barak & Fisher, in press) that the Internet's core characteristics are exceedingly well suited to the delivery of expert, multimedia-rich, interactive, and individually targeted sexual and reproductive health education interventions. Internet-assisted sex education has been proposed (e.g., Barak & Safir, 1997; Flowers-Coulson, Kushner, & Bankowski, 2000; Roffman, Shannon, & Dwyer, 1997) for its strengths and suitability in this area. Such procedures will be exploited more fully to provide educational opportunities aimed at improving sexual and reproductive health.

As a two-way expert system, Internet-based sexuality education interventions, guided by theory, can be used both to assess individuals' sexual and reproductive health strengths and weaknesses and to create individually tailored intervention elements designed to address these issues. For example, a sexuality education intervention aimed at reducing risk (e.g., unsafe sexual behavior) could be structured in accord with sophisticated behavior change models (J. D. Fisher & Fisher, 1992). Future de-

ployment of Internet-based sexual and reproductive health education will be mainstreamed as an integral component of formal sexual and reproductive health education in school settings and as an integral element in the clinical care of special populations.

## Conclusions

The Internet sexuality of the future will be different: It will be more engaging, more impactful, more beneficial, and potentially more dangerous, than any communications technology advance in history. For all these reasons, future sexual expression on the Internet will require very active involvement of clinicians—as clinicians per se, and as scientists, educators, and opinion leaders. Their role will be to assist and inform the public as it struggles to accommodate quantum changes in a fashion that is individually and socially beneficial and that avoids the serious pitfalls that await the unwary.

The future of sex on the Internet is ours to engage, and in many ways it is ours to create. As clinicians, we can look forward to a challenging range of clinical assessment and intervention, using tools that currently exist and those we will have to invent. As clinician-scientists, we will be uniquely positioned to identify critical applied research topics, to provide pivotal insights concerning psychological processes, and to conduct cutting edge research. As clinician-educators, we are uniquely informed about the general concerns about sexuality that we all experience and about the special opportunities and challenges. Finally, as clinician-opinion leaders, we will need to remain calm and dispassionate, and we will need to avoid precipitous and potentially unfounded declaration of yet another sexuality-related crisis. Above all, as clinician-opinion leaders address the Internet sexuality of the future, we must never forget our scientific roots, and we must always ask, "Where's the science?"

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