

Editorial

The Two Faces of the Internet: Introduction to the Special Issue on the Internet and Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has two faces, positive and negative. Its positive aspect is that the Internet enables the enrichment and improvement of human functioning in many areas, including health, education, commerce, and entertainment. On its negative side, the Internet may provide a threatening environment and expose individuals to great risks. Paralleling this overall dual perspective, the Internet facilitates sexual exploration, education, and pleasure; on the other hand, it furnishes an opportunity for criminal and other negative and harmful sexual conduct. The current special issue presents a multi-perspective view of sexuality issues related to the Internet, reflecting its dual nature.

THE INTERNET HAS TWO FACES. One aspect is modern, advanced, progressive, efficient, friendly, and rich. It is a valuable technology that enables people to access various resources of information and to interact interpersonally in order to best meet their needs and desires, thereby, ultimately enriching and bettering their lives. Nowadays, hundreds of millions of people all over the world may retrieve information without the burden and limitations of time, location, transportation, or human mediation. They can read news flashes minutes after events have taken place, or read newspapers from around the globe right at their desk without cluttering it up. They can make hotel, car rental, or airline reservations; purchase almost anything; invest in markets across bor-

ders; or do banking transactions. Many find it easy obtain extensive information on almost everything from multiple, comparable, multimedia-enhanced sources. They may study numerous subjects offered by educational institutions across the sea. They may take part in online professional conferences with participants found coast to coast. They may visit museums and exhibitions worldwide to extend their artistic pleasure. People may watch live concerts or major sports events, or simply obtain phone numbers and (E-mail or geographic) addresses for anyone. One can easily retrieve a map to many destinations all over the globe. Many people play solitary games or compete against other Net users, regardless of location. It is easy to contact a health-related agency or

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a specialist for immediate consultation. People can take almost any psychological test or questionnaire and obtain immediate (or fast) feedback. They may receive psychological advice or engage in cybertherapy.

The other face of the Internet is that of a virtual monster, capable of ruining people's lives in numerous ways: It may be through intruding into private documents and secrets; or maliciously influencing people to change beliefs and life styles; or potentially stealing money; or enabling, and even encouraging, people to cheat on their spouses; or perhaps making people commit suicide; or disseminating perverted images and ideas; or breaking and separating families; or creating a greenhouse for crime and fraud; or distributing, pervasively and efficiently, gossip and rumors; or facilitating people to become hopelessly addictive.

These two faces of the Internet also correspond to and reflect many people's dual approach to cyberspace: from attraction, joy, and excitement to repulsion, rejection, and fear. Presumably, these dichotomous attitudes have to do with age, level of education, computer experience, and relevant personality characteristics. Nonetheless, it is clear that these extreme attitudes are not solely or chiefly determined by personal attributes; they are, however, related to the very nature and intrinsic capabilities and characteristics of the Net.¹⁻⁷

Sexuality-related materials on the Internet are similarly double-visaged. On the one hand, the Internet provides seemingly limitless, updated sexuality-related resources that may be used to enhance self-exploration and self-understanding, as well as knowledge of human sexuality. It also enables friendly, cheap, direct, and anonymous contact with numerous sexuality experts in order to obtain answers to bothersome questions. It offers wonderful meeting areas for people who would like to connect with friends and perhaps develop romantic relationships. In this social context, the Internet also provides a convenient contact zone for people with specific characteristics, such as lesbians and gay men. The Internet enables the delivery of efficient sex-education programs, importantly providing both the factor of anonymity and the ability to reach remote populations. It is also capable of supplying a vehi-

cle for easy, private, sex-related commerce (e.g., contraception, medications, sex aids). All these options available on the Internet may significantly enhance human welfare and quality of life.⁸⁻¹⁰

On the other hand, the Internet is known to be problematic in the context of sex. It is loaded with hardcore pornographic materials. It is considered to be a "paradise" for sex offenders who want to hook victims. It provides a convenient environment for cyberstalkers and sexual harassers. It enables husbands and wives to cheat on each other. It makes possible convenient, cheap, and fast distribution of "filthy" sex aids. All these functions are pervasive on the Net and are used intensively by everyday Web surfers.^{11,12}

Obviously, the two aspects of the Internet have been created and intensified as a direct result of one of its basic and essential premises: freedom of speech.¹³ In highlighting and magnifying this principle, which is so fundamental in the constitution and culture of the United States, the homeland of the Net, unavoidable processes have emerged. Freedom of speech and personal expression have facilitated and catalyzed human creativity and distribution in all sorts of ways, from fostering young artists to forming hate websites, from cultivating unknown poets to the reinforcing of suicide, from nurturing shy writers to the easy spreading of lunatic messages. While the enlightened world has welcomed the positive exploitation of the Internet, attempts to block or moderate its negative usage, however, have generally failed. The liberal social values of freedom and democracy do not readily accord with censorship and the inherent anarchy (beyond political control) of the Internet infrastructure prevents effective censorship from occurring. Regrettably, in implicitly encouraging human freedom, the Internet potentially provides the means for its abuse or, at least in the relative and normative sense, for wrong and unacceptable conduct. The dilemmas and questions involved stimulate complex debate, much beyond the scope of the issue at hand. Nonetheless, these questions directly reflect on the Internet and sexuality.

In this special issue, we have made an attempt to present a wide spectrum of sexuality on the Internet, reflecting its two faces. We

hope that the articles make a significant impact by initiating further research and writing in these areas as well as by transferring relevant ideas into applicable social services or functions. The contributors to the Special Issue have been selected from among those professionals who focus on these areas and have relevant and important messages. We specifically asked the contributors to focus on updated and emerging information, as the speed of accumulating knowledge in the Internet era is amazing. Thus, the articles reflect the latest knowledge and thinking almost at the moment of press time. In addition, we expected the contributors to highlight future directions and ideas for research, as we see the current state of the art as very tentative in nature. In addition, we have organized the special issue in such a way that the order of the articles flows in a relatively coherent fashion.

Cooper, McLaughlin, and Campbell present a comprehensive review of Internet sexuality, concentrating on five major areas: cyber-romances and cybersex, homosexual virtual communities, e-commerce of sex products, use of Internet sex at work, and online sex information and education. Cooper, one of the international leaders in the study of Internet sexuality, presents his sequel to his previous reviews on this topic. Next, Griffiths, one of the world's experts in Internet addiction, reviews this important subject and its association with the compulsive use of Internet sex sites as well as abnormal and criminal sex-related behaviors on the Web. Putnam, an expert on compulsive online sexual behavior, presents his conception of this syndrome. Based on learning theory, as well as on factors related to extensive Web usage, Putnam proposes a model by which online sexual addiction might be explained and treated. Levine, a well-known specialist in the study of cyber-romances and cyber relationships, presents an original, provocative review of this challenging and highly attractive area. She creatively uses knowledge from the social psychology of real-life relationships to extrapolate and speculate on virtual relationships, posing original ideas and hypotheses for empirical research. Fisher and Barak, who are well known for their study of psychological aspects of pornography, in general, and Internet por-

nography, in particular, present the topic of online sex shopping from phenomenological, scientific, and ideological perspectives. They argue that sex-shopping behavior may be used positively both for the study of sexuality, along the lines of a specific sex-behavior model to which they refer, and for self-exploration and the learning of sexuality. Following them, Burke offers an empirical study of a virtual lesbian community. She is able to highlight the special dynamics and interactions that such a community provides in comparison with "real life," and discusses its pros and cons. Tikkanen and Ross present their research on special Internet usage by Finnish gay men. The researchers are able to show the unique benefits of Internet communications that, in turn, contribute to coping with AIDS as well as with the difficulties of being a minority group. Ochs and Binik refer to the topic of exploiting the Net for psychological diagnostics and mental help. Specifically, they propose and discuss "Sexpert," a computer-assisted assessment system for sexual dysfunction. Last, Palandri and Green used a nontraditional, qualitative, ethnographic study to investigate a unique sexual behavior on the Net. Their observation of how bondage, discipline/domination, submission/sadism, masochism is translated and practiced in cyberspace is fascinating.

The contributions in this collection are among the first scientific attempts to take a serious look at various aspects of Internet-related sexuality issues. No doubt, this important area warrants intensive research to extend our knowledge, to be used for basic scientific purposes as well as for applying it in determining social policy, designing curricula, developing prevention programs, and offering treatment. We hope the special issue will serve as a successful springboard to achieve these goals.

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