

Typing, Doing, and Being: Sexuality and the Internet

Michael W. Ross

University of Texas—Health Science Center at Houston

The increasing salience of sexuality on the internet, whether cybersex or use of the internet to make sexual contacts, has focused interest on how internet-mediated sexuality informs social theory. This article reviews social theory and sexuality in relation to the internet, with specific reference to the development of intimacy, the association of texts with sexual scripts, the emergence of cybersexuality as a sexual space midway between fantasy and action, and the question of boundaries and the location of the person in sexual interaction. Also, the supplanting of the real by the symbolic, the internet as a sexual marketplace, its important role in creating sexual communities, particularly where sexual behavior or identity is stigmatized, its impact as a new arena for sexual experience and experimentation, and its impact in shaping sexual culture and sexuality are noted. Finally, the importance of the internet as a medium for the exploration of human sexuality and as an opportunity to illuminate previously challenging areas of sexual research is discussed.

The mechanical age is ending and the virtual age is unfolding. Stone (1995) indicated that “electronic communication networks—radio, television, computer networks—accompany the discourse networks and social formations now coming into being” (p. 20). These are characterized, according to Stone, by increasing awareness of self, increasing isolation of individuals in Western societies, less sharing of physical space, and by textuality and prosthetic communication. Sexuality, too, is in a state of flux, and one of the domains where this is particularly apparent is that of the internet. Simon (1996) argued that “all discourses of sexuality are inherently discourses about something else” (p. xvii). Sexuality in the unfolding of the virtual age is also a discourse about human interaction at the closing of the mechanical age. Indeed, what Stone called the unfolding of the virtual age is contemporary with what Simon called late modernity: even the most familiar aspects of social (and sexual) life become sites for conflicting or alternative options, and consensual meanings begin to dissolve. The internet becomes a new form of the expression of the self (or selves), and a non-traditional social and sexual setting.

The changing contexts of sexual behavior, including the internet, challenge the essentializing of the self and of sexuality. In social science, the internet itself has become a new methodology for seeing and an occasion for discussing or thinking out loud about the world (Simon, 1996). A contrary view is that the internet reflects the same old issues in a new space. Moore (1995) argued that “what is done on the internet simply mirrors what is done off the internet, the only difference being that on the internet it all happens electronically, and very, very fast” (p. 5).

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Address correspondence to Michael W. Ross, WHO Center for Health Promotion and Prevention Research, School of Public Health, University of Texas, P.O. Box 20036, Houston, TX, 77225; e-mail: Michael.W.Ross@uth.tmc.edu.

This article reviews the social literature in an attempt to assess where internet sexuality fits within social theory and which social theories offer useful directions for exploration. Secondly, it seeks to position internet sexual research as a potential method for approaching the study of sexuality in a social context; and thirdly, it questions whether the internet may have created a new domain of sexuality, cybersexuality.

Cybersex has been variously defined. Blair (1998) referred to it as erotic interactions through cyber discourse and also made the point that “net sex” does have its sensory limitations. The sexual discourse of the net may be combined with autostimulation or expand to an offline physical relationship. As she observed, offline physical coupling has in many cases been enhanced by online exchanges, and many couples have met and assumed real-time relationships as a result of net-sex encounters. There are three internet possibilities: embellishment of real-world circumstances, creation of a pure fantasy scenario, and “computer sex,” where one party describes online what he would like the other party to do and may achieve orgasm. Ross and Kauth (2002) more specifically defined it as “carrying on via computer proxy sexual activity through rich description with accompanying sexual arousal, often to orgasm.”

Intimacy and the Internet

The internet has brought a new dimension to intimacy, both by permitting intimate contact electronically over a distance and by, through that same contact, permitting intimate discussion shorn of most of the social cues present in face-to-face interactions. This electronic dimension appears to have led to a transfiguration of intimacy. Giddens (1992) argued that sex now speaks the language of revolution: it is de-centered, freed of reproductive needs, and thus transformed. I argue that the internet, while not transforming sexuality, has transfigured it: it has illuminated certain aspects of it so that they stand out from their equivalent social sexual interactions.

The internet has sheared away many of the emotional and physical attributes of the physical individual—perhaps the ultimate removal from reproduction—and allowed emotional and physical fulfillment to occur with an electronic partner who may or may not bear much resemblance to the physical partner who is typing at the keyboard. This is not just an ultimate removal from reproduction; it is also an ultimate removal from social sexuality. Giddens (1992) noted that sexuality has become a quality or property of the self that can be reflexively “grasped, interrogated and developed” (p. 14)—and the internet allows this property to be investigated as it is transfigured by the asocial, electronic format of keyboard, web cam, and distance.

Foucault (1981) suggested that modern social life is bound up with the rise of “disciplinary power,” which could be controlled and regulated (Giddens, 1992). Foucault termed sexuality “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power,” a point which can become a focus of social control. We might see internet sexuality as reflecting a change in the locus of power, where the internet has become a dense transfer medium for those relations of power. Specifically, the internet has become a place where simulation of sex, and sexual barter, occur with minimal control and regulation. Power here becomes “slippery,” because categories can change. An individual may have several sexual personae, reflecting different individuals or multiple sexual personalities, and exert different positions of power from those characters. Indeed, some of the power may reside in the individual’s ability to change form, age, gender, position, or sexual orientation.

Giddens (1992) noted that the advent of effective contraception meant that sexuality, especially for women, became malleable, open to being shaped in diverse ways, and a potential “property” of the individual. The internet appears to have taken this further, where the “property” is ultimately taken to the extreme of malleability, plasticity and transience. It is important to note, as has been previously suggested (Cherny & Weise, 1996), that the experience of sexuality on the internet appears to be very different for males and females, and that gender may be one of the most basic divisions of meaning and practice on the internet.

Power, conceptualized as control over resources, can be linked with new technologies. Stern and Handel (2001) suggested that internet users can circumvent the legal and physical boundaries that once prevented access to sexual materials and information. Now, sexual material can be distributed and downloaded for free, increasing the power of both consumers and previously unempowered providers.

Giddens (1992) noted that the Kinsey Reports, while analyzing sexual behavior, also influenced it, initiating cycles of debate and altering lay views of sexual actions and involvement. This led to an accelerated reflexivity on the level of ordinary, everyday sexual activities. Fundamental features of such reflexivity are the “open” character of self-identity (p. 30). Giddens made the point that the self today is a more or less continuous interrogation of past, present, and future, carried on amid a profu-

sion of reflexive resources. While among those resources Giddens included therapy and self-help manuals, TV programs, and magazine articles, to these we should also add the internet. To these sometimes relatively passive interrogations we can add the more active interrogation of the internet as a way to experiment without actually being. The interrogation has progressed to the point where the reflexivity of sexuality can be lived on the internet.

An additional point that Giddens (1992) raised is that the body is in some sense the domain of sexuality. In the sense that sexuality is felt in the body, he is correct. But the internet allows for a surrogate body to experiment and to be experimented upon. Not only may a false body be presented (being pictured as younger, thinner, or even represented by a picture of someone else), but “robots” may be created that act in the place of the person and advertise and respond. For example, messages may be carried and sent out by “robots” 24 hours per day, representing the person who is advertising. Giddens argued that the decline of perversion is related to the emergence of plastic sexuality. The internet illustrates this brilliantly. Here, plasticity is raised to its highest form, where personae can experiment with sexual behaviors that may be considered perversions with internet partners whose persona may or may not be perverse, without being considered “perverted.” There are stories of FBI agents, pretending to be minors, stalking pedophiles who are also pretending to be minors in order to have sexual contact with real minors. On the internet, then, there emerges a critical distinction, between typing, doing, and being!

Text and Romanticism: A Literature of Hope

It may be argued that by its emphasis on text, the internet is atypical since most sexual interaction is verbal. However, Giddens (1992) indicated that there is a long history of avid consumption of romantic novels and stories, particularly by women. He noted that “the individual sought in fantasy what was denied in the ordinary world. . . . Yet romantic literature was also (and is today) a literature of hope” (p. 44). Here, Giddens’ argument for the place of text can be applied to the internet. The internet can provide an opportunity for the participant to create his own, interactively, and to imbue it with intimacy, and make it an extension of a romantic or sexual fantasy. Thus, the text can become a vehicle for intimacy “not so much because the loved one is idealized—although this is part of the story—but because it presumes a psychic communication, a meeting of souls which is reparative in character” (Giddens, p. 45). He also suggested that one of the outcomes of such romantic love is to make whole the flawed individual. The “dreamlike, fantasy character of romance” would seem to be well-suited to textual interactions surrounding sexuality, and internet hook-ups do appear to have the character of a quest as described by Giddens: “The quest is an odyssey, in which self-identity awaits its validation from the discovery of the other. It has an active character, and in this respect modern romance contrasts with medieval romantic tales, in which

the heroine usually is passive" (p. 45). McRae (1996) has also noted the similarity of net sex to the medieval concept of courtly love.

One might contrast the internet, as one electronic medium, with the telephone, as another, to highlight Giddens' (1992) point. Why did phone sex never take off, whereas the internet has been a huge success? Both involve electronic media, both relatively common (the telephone more so than the internet). Stern and Handel (2001) argued that historically, most new technologies have usually been criticized on sexual grounds, starting with print media and pop music, often because they test traditional boundaries. Taking Giddens' arguments about the novella and its central role in romantic love and intimacy, one could argue that the "process of creation of a mutual narrative biography" (p. 46) is precisely suited to the internet. Thus, the internet provides a kind of missing link between fantasies, desires for intimacy, the traditional role of text in expressing these, and sexuality, and in addition provides the appropriate degree of distance, temporal and physical, to allow the combination to optimally respond to the desires and fantasies of the parties. It is in the provision of an adequate space between participants to remove social cues, allow time for the novella to emerge, and to enable the crystallization of fantasy, that the internet becomes such a powerful medium for sexual interactions. That the novella is a combination of romantic narrative and porn paperback (reading matter to which gay men are more likely to have been exposed) probably adds to its attraction.

Gagnon and Simon (1973) and Simon (1996) introduced the concept of the script into the study of sexuality, with the analogy that social actors are playing scripted roles in their sexual behavior. This is an apt analogy for internet sexual interactions, because what is occurring on the computer screen is the mutual construction of a script, in which the playwrights are also the actors. It is a combination of existing common sexual scripts with ad-libbing, written on screen and often played out in real life in a subsequent performance. Some concern has previously been expressed (Stern & Handel, 2001) that expectations of real-life encounters might be modeled on rewarding but unrealistic computer game or internet experiences.

Scriptwriting will privilege the more literate: on the internet, as Ross and Kauth (2002) have noted, high literacy and typing skills will balance attractiveness as a desired characteristic. Stone (1996) argued that power has been relatively ignored with regard to the internet and the virtual age, but one could posit that sexual attractiveness, at least for cybersex, will reside in the domain of the literate and the skilled typist (whether with one hand or two). The medium, as Moore (1995) noted, has another advantage: it favors a free exchange, more so than on the telephone, but the editing allows for more careful choice of words. However, Moore also commented that e-mail can appear less intimate, but that this does appear to be a matter of personal perception. For sexual content areas, where (in the case of homosexuality) it is associated with barriers

to verbal discussion ("among Christians not to be named": Fletcher, 1967, p. 96), the semi-spontaneity associated with a sufficient time-lag to allow more careful construction and editing, may be close to ideal for many users. Thus, with the avoidance of facial and verbal cues, social risk is largely averted, while communication (for the keyboard-literate) is enhanced.

This text-mediated communication makes possible an investigation of the scripts associated with cybersexual behavior. Gagnon and Simon (1973) proposed that many sexual behaviors are scripted and that sexual contacts follow closely-patterned paths in the individual. The internet provides an opportunity, by capturing typescripts of sexual interaction, of understanding the form, process, and unfolding of sexual encounters, at least on the internet. It is possible to extend the analysis of the scripting of sexual encounters beyond Coxon's (1996) innovative coding approach and into an analysis of the language and power interactions of actual scripts, including timing, word choice, source of suggestion, and response. For internet researchers at least, the equivalent gold-standard of a sexuality researcher's video camera in the subject's bedroom may be within reach.

The Internet as the Space Between Fantasy and Action

Sexual fantasies usually remain a solitary affair, culminating in daydreams or masturbation. Occasionally they may, with the discovery of a partner who has similar and reciprocal fantasies or the hiring a sex worker who is prepared to act them out, be mutual. As a marketplace for finding such mutuality, the internet is unmatched in its scope, unlimited by geography, time, or numbers in its catchment area. McLuhan (1962) noted the importance of the elimination of time and space barriers that are characteristic of electronic media, and Bauman (2003) noted that the disassociation of virtual proximity from virtual distance is a suspension of anything that linked closeness with proximity. However, I believe that the importance of the internet as a sexual medium is its placement as an intermediate step between private fantasy and actual behavior. It provides a gap between thinking, doing, and being—and especially, an opportunity to do and not be, or to type and not do.

On the internet, a participant can experiment with a sexual behavior not by just thinking about it, but by engaging in it online and with another person without actually "doing" it. The meaning of such an activity is nicely illustrated by a movie in which the wife accuses the husband of cheating on her by having an affair (including cybersex) on the internet. The husband responds, "It's only typing." The internet provides this space, previously unavailable, where a person can *type* without *doing*, or *do* without *being*. It can be both a fantasy, taken to the point of acting it through with another person, or a behavior that, through being virtual, is not actually done, and thus the person does not have to face the dissonance or stigma of actually being, or having a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). In a study of heterosexual internet sexual chat room users, McKenna,

Green, and Smith (2001) found that 41% did not consider cybersex to be cheating on a relationship partner at all, with significantly more women than men feeling this way. Crystal (2001) suggested that the nature of the internet has two advantages that are relevant for this argument: it tends to keep actual behavior at a distance, and people can engage in it without censure. Moore (1995) suggested a third: that having anonymous others read and interact with our fantasies and react to them makes it all seem more real. It is this externalization and response to fantasies that may be the most powerfully erotic, since the mind is one of the most significant of the erotic organs.

Fantasies can be engaged which cross major boundaries, such as gender. McRae (1996) suggested that gender-changing is probably the most common example. Ford (1998) described gay men having sex with other (presumably heterosexual) men while masquerading as women, and Moore (1995) gave an example of an apparently heterosexual young man who has cybersex with other men, presenting himself as a woman, for amusement. Such transient transgendered behavior, as Reid (1996) noted, is an indication of one of the fundamental issues in text-based virtual realities: that the player is the most problematic of all virtual identities. She points out that in MUDs (Multi-user dungeons, based on the role-playing game "Dungeons and Dragons"; Bruckman, 1996), characters may not be of any fixed gender, but may evolve, mutate, or morph over time at the whim of their creator. However, in MUDs gender is not usually central to the action, and cybersex is not usually an outcome. McRae (1996) noted that sex in MUDs is "quite different from, and possibly more intense than, sex in other kinds of virtual environments" (p. 247), suggesting that even within the internet, different expressions of sexuality may occur. As Reid (1996) argued, the internet is a very non-transparent medium, where gender, sexuality, identity, and corporeality are beyond the plane of certainty. The boundaries delineated by cultural constructions of the body are both subverted and given free rein in virtual environments. With the body freed from the physical, it is possible to "bypass the boundaries delineated by cultural constructs of beauty, ugliness and fashion" (p. 329). It enters the realm of symbol.

Where Are the Boundaries?

The question of the space between cybersex and real sex is one of boundaries. Stone (1995) asked exactly *where* the person is located: "the issues his [Stephen Hawking's] person and his communications prostheses raise are boundary debates, *borderland/frontera* questions" (p. 5). Are the sexual behaviors that people carry out on the internet, then, part of them, or does the person's boundary begin and end when they actually *do* the behaviors in real life? Legally, this is not a useful distinction: solicitation of a minor on the internet is still a solicitation (as also would be a threat conveyed by internet). But to the internet communicator engaging in cybersex, there can be the perception that this is not a "real" behavior because there is not a physical

interaction. As such, it is a semi-hypothetical interaction. The use of the term "IRL" to differentiate physical encounters implicitly suggests that cyber-encounters are not "real." They are perhaps seen as a more externalized fantasy acted in by two or more people.

Stone (1995) also noted the similarities between phone sex and cybersex. She described how phone sex workers "translate all of the modalities of experience into audible form" (p. 6) Also,

The sex workers took an extremely complex, highly detailed set of behaviors, translated them into a single sense modality, then further boiled them down into a series of highly compressed tokens. They then squirted those tokens down a voice-grade phone line. At the other end the recipient of all this effort added boiling water so to speak, and reconstituted the tokens into a fully detailed set of images and interactions in multiple sensory modes (p. 7).

As Stone implied, this may not be real behavior given that there are so many steps, reductions, and additives, and because the typing has passed through so many filters that the icon's deconstruction and reconstruction may sufficiently remove it from reality. This is essentially the rhinoceros/unicorn problem. Medieval explorers, coming across the rhinoceros, described it as a fierce animal like a big horse with a single horn on its nose. The heraldic artist reconstructed this accurate description as the beautiful unicorn. The essence of the deconstruction/reconstruction question on the internet is the same: how much distance (or how many filters) are required to make the typing, doing, and the doing, being? As Stone stated, the issue is one of how the meanings of these terms are produced and maintained in what she terms the "new erotics" (p. 8).

These new erotics position the computer as a form of prosthetic phallus, and developments in virtual reality almost guarantee that the internet may become a medium that extends the sexual interaction to tactile ones that electronically mimic the actions of a cybersex partner. Even assuming what can only be described as a virtual phallus (or any other part of the anatomy), is the electronic barrier between the participants in cybersex still sufficient to allow it to be construed as "not real"? While we accept that despite the electronic barrier of the telephone, we are still talking to a real person (having a real conversation), is it the real presence of another body, rather than its reconstitution, that converts the fantasy into actually doing and being? The internet, apparently, does not allow transubstantiation (where the symbol becomes the real bodily presence). Stone (1995) suggested that the internet allows repeated transgressions of the traditional concept of the body's physical envelope and of the locus of human agency.

One might question which is the more "real": the cybersexual encounter or the IRL encounter. It may be that the internet becomes more "real" than IRL sex, as Bauman (2003) proposed, for electronic communication compared with face-to-face communication: it is "left to virtual proximity to play the role of the genuine, unadulterated, *real* reality" (p. 63). Ullman (1996) posed this question:

"Which set of us is the more real: the sleepless ones online, or these bodies in the daylight?" (p. 6). This issue was developed by McRae (1996), who noted that the experience of cybersex can for one individual be disembodied, alienating, and not in the least sexy, whereas others have discovered that "it can be as involving, intense and transformative as the best kinds of embodied erotic encounters, and that furthermore, its virtuality enhances rather than detracts from the experience" (p. 245). Psychically, then, the virtual experience may be more cathected and more "real" than the embodied equivalent.

The internet, through analysis of scripts, may also allow a closer investigation of the relationships between sexual fantasies and actions than traditional retrospective recall methodologies, especially given that the scripts are generated in the relative heat of the moment rather than the cold light of recollection. On the other hand, the internet may also have enhanced the possibility of deindividuation, where people do things on the computer that they would not do in less anonymous contexts. Stern and Handel (2001) reviewed the evidence for both the isolating and deindividuating aspects of the internet, which may make the internet a less than realistic forum for the study of sexual scripts.

Giddens (1992) indicated, "Sexual fantasies, when consciously employed, can create a counter-order, a kind of subversion, and a little space into which we can escape, especially when they scramble all those neat and oppressive distinctions between active and passive, masculine and feminine, dominant and submissive" (p. 123). The internet provides that little space, between fantasy and reality, but it is decidedly not little in its breadth.

The Internet as the Reification of Sexuality?

The internet is a medium that can be considered a system of signs. Lacan (1982) suggested that systems of signs represent, and may supplant, the real. He argued, in the context of desire, that the imaginary and symbolic registers (where fantasy exists) are the site of desire. Desire is caught up in chains of language. Thus, the internet, being primarily (at this point in time) a linguistic medium, would appear to be an ideal site for the expression of desire. In cybersex, the sign has replaced the thing (in one sense, a replacement of biology with linguistics, and a system of symbols). From a Lacanian perspective, the growth of the internet for sexual purposes may be seen as a confirmation not only that desire is located in the symbolic, but also that the words and signs are a substitute, and sometimes a more satisfactory substitute, for the real. As a form of hyperreality, Simon (1996) noted, it may be "constituted never to be consumed" (p. 138). It is possible that one of the advantages of cybersex is that it functions at a symbolic, imaginary level and at some levels is a better form of expressing and fulfilling desire than "real" sex. This is consistent with Walther's (1996) description of hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication, where the computer-mediated interaction is more socially desirable than

its equivalent in face-to-face interaction. In sexual interactions, the high desirability of cybersex may be a function, as Lacan theorized, of its being constituted in the realm of the linguistic and the symbolic.

Intimacy and its Acceleration

Intimacy is one of the possible outcomes of sexual use of the internet. Indeed, discussions of sexuality would by definition involve the disclosure of intimate details. Giddens (1992) described it thus: "Intimacy means the disclosure of emotions and actions which the individual is unlikely to hold up to a wider public gaze. Indeed, the disclosure of what is kept from other people is one of the main psychological markers likely to call forth trust from the other and to be sought after in return" (p. 138). It is likely that the intimacy shared on the internet occurs much more rapidly than in most cases of conventional socially-mediated interaction (even when the goal is a sexual encounter). The absence of the necessary social cues, and thus social conventions, on the internet may lead to greater and more rapid intimacy both because the goal is a romantic or sexual encounter (and these parameters may have already been made explicit by either the site of contact or specific wording in the advertisement), and because of accelerated intimacy. Accelerated intimacy may come about because of the nature of the contact and its goal, and for those who are seeking contact IRL, sexual contact may occur more rapidly because the participants may have got to highly intimate discussion and established a level of intimate discussion (disclosure of emotions and preferred behaviors) that makes them feel as if they have known one another well for a much longer time. Thus, trust, with all its implications for unsafe sex, will also be accelerated. This is likely to be both because of the loosening of the social cues and conventions which slow intimate discussion, until those cues let individuals know that intimate discussion is safe, and because the specific goal of the internet encounter is likely to be a romantic and sexual encounter.

Conversely, the internet may function as a venue for *avoiding* intimacy. Where there is communication via the internet, issues of intimacy may be sidestepped or avoided by ignoring questions or issues which it might be more difficult to do in conversation. Where the internet is used as a venue for physical sexual contact without the accompaniments of affect or intimacy, it can also serve to enhance the physical and screen out the emotional.

The Internet as Market

Giddens (1992) noted that one of the issues of sexuality in modern culture is its commodification. "Sexuality generates pleasure; and pleasure, or at least the promise of it, provides a leverage for marketing goods in a capitalistic society" (p. 176). This consumerism might be seen as a movement from a capitalistic order dependent on labor to one which fosters consumerism and hedonism. Whatever the explanation, sex on the internet has become a consumer phenomenon, providing a huge array of sexual pos-

sibilities for cybersex all over the world, and a smaller array of more local possibilities for IRL sex.

The great attraction of the internet is the possibility of matching sexual tastes that are unlikely to be matched, or at least closely matched, locally. It might be argued that the telephone can also function as a market sexually, as when call-in phone lines may let the caller specify hair color, weight, and so on, of the person to whom one wants to talk. But on the internet, the size and scope of the market is several orders of magnitude higher. Further, it is available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, and requires minimal disclosure and identification. The cost of internet connection and membership in an online commercial organization are, at least in Western countries, minimal. Cooper (2000) referred to these commercial aspects as accessibility, anonymity, and affordability. Part of the internet's success is the linking of a high demand for a huge variety of sexual needs to a huge supply. This has occurred as sexuality is increasingly seen as private and for adult sexual contact, not subject to criminal penalties. It is not unlike a sexual version of Ebay or online catalogs, providing a globalized marketplace in place of a local sexual economy.

Part of its attraction is that sex has also become, through the internet, "fast"—it can be likened to take-out versus a sit-down meal. The advantage of the internet is that it is able to be engaged relatively anonymously, and, in the case of cybersex, without having to leave the house and at any time of the day or night. Snacking at the sexual smorgasbord for cybersex is as easy as having a candy bar while sitting at the computer. Thus, while previously sexual contact with another person was limited largely to the "eat out" or "fast food" variety, cybersex has added a new possibility of having sex that is less lonely than masturbation. In Humphreys' (1970) study of men having quick, anonymous sex in public toilets, he noted that they supplied an opportunity for men who identified themselves as heterosexual to obtain sexual release that is "less lonely than masturbation." Humphreys identified not only that there was a need for sexual release that was not auto-erotic, but also a mechanism: fast, widely available and accessible, anonymous, and affordable. It could be argued that the internet has, commercially, moved into this niche with the additional advantage of its in-home (or occasionally at-work) availability. We now, as Tikkanen and Ross (2003) argued, have technological tearoom trade.

The consumerist aspect of the internet for partner choice has become one of its defining features, according to Bauman (2003). He posited that now satisfaction is measured against cost, and that *homo sexualis* has become *homo consumens* (p. 49). Sex has become an "episode," and the isolation of sex from other realms of life has progressed further than ever before: "what is done is not important, but simply that it happens" (p. 54). Bauman argued that the ability to have "incalculable pleasures without incalculable risks attached" (p. 66) leads to the death of moral economy. It leads people to "treat other

humans as objects of consumption and to judge them after the pattern of consumer objects by the volume of pleasure they are likely to offer." Such a view of the impact of the internet is perhaps tempered by literary and social studies of gay Western subcultures. Rechy (1963) and subsequent commentators noted this consumerist aspect of gay subcultures in large urban areas, and it pre-dates the internet by many decades. What Bauman described may simply be a translation of consumerism into a medium that allows for greater amplification of the situation. However, Bauman is probably correct in his assessment that it brings the calculation of sexual cost and benefit more front-stage and distances them from existing moral economies. However, it is likely that those who use the internet for cybersex or for making sexual contacts are already distanced from conventional moral economies.

It must also be noted that the internet is like medical insurance: everybody needs it, but most people in the world don't have it (Dyson, 1999). Dyson argued that people who have the internet are privileged and have huge social and economic advantages. The problem of unequal access to the computer is part of the problem of unequal opportunity in society, and part of the problem of unequal internet access is consequently unequal access to sexual partners.

Cybersex as a New Niche in Human Sexuality

What is unique about cybersex is the opportunity to have a sexual encounter that, unlike masturbation, has a shared quality about it, in the sense that the fantasies are externalized, as in the case of viewing pornography, but also mutually constructed with a "real" person online in close to real time. Thus cybersex has become positioned midway between arousal from viewing pornography and real (in-person) sexual contact. It allows people to go further sexually, in relative anonymity, than they have gone before. For those who want real sexual contacts, it also provides a way of "dating" to ensure a degree of compatibility: virtual sex on the first date.

To distinguish why the internet, as an electronic medium which shares many of its characteristics with the telephone, has caught on to fill this niche whereas telephone sex has not caught on to such an extent, one must compare and contrast the two media. There are three differences that have made the internet a success for sexual contact in contrast to telephone sex. First is the enormous scope of the internet as a market, with an enormous and ever-changing "stock" of potential partners. Second, the internet is constantly surfable. Third, the internet offers fewer social cues. Related to this, the internet is more socially distant in the sense that the slight time gap between text and response allows for construction and interpretation. Fourth, typing is more distancing than talking: it is easier to dismiss or reject a respondent textually than verbally. Finally, textual communication is less transgressive than verbal: stating a sexual preference verbally makes it more of a personal or identity statement and is more threaten-

ing. It is probably easier to be in denial about the implications of a textual than a verbal statement.

The Internet as an Arena for Social Experience

Stone (1995) referred to computers as "arenas for social experience" (p. 15). In the context of sexuality, the internet also offers an opportunity for coming out sexually which was previously not available. Traditional models of gay and lesbian coming out (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982) move from determining that one is gay/lesbian to acting on that sexually or moving into gay venues. The internet provides the possibility of an additional stage in that coming out process: lurking on the internet (or even posing on the internet) to watch the interactions, learn some of the language, and gain an understanding of what being gay is about. In a sense, the internet is equivalent to a one-way window into a gay bar: the individual can observe but not be observed. Moore (1995) noted that only 3-5% of people who post to internet newsgroups constitute the actual readers. McKenna, Green, and Smith (2001) distinguished between people with such levels of involvement as *lurkers* and *posters*. The importance of this stage is at least twofold: first, the individual has the opportunity at an earlier stage (or age) to think about the extent to which they may be attracted to members of the same sex, and to observe the internet-mediated interaction of other gay people (or MSM) to see if it "fits." Second, the individual can absorb the aspects of the culture—language, institutions, behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs—as an activity of gay acculturation (Ross, Seibt, & Fernández-Esquer, 1995). Chat rooms, in particular, are likely to provide this one-way window into the gay bar that provides an opportunity to acculturate, possibly in advance of sexual contact. The few data available (Seibt et al., 1995) suggested that acculturation into the gay community may be associated with lower levels of HIV risk. The internet can also offer a relatively safe (from commitment, entanglement, abuse, embarrassment, stigma, exposure, and violence) environment to take the first steps toward becoming homosexual. As Moore (1995) observed, anonymity and the ability to switch off the computer make for an environment where sexual issues can be explored with little fear.

Staples (2004) suggested that teenagers are more connected to the world than ever but are more cut off from the social encounters that have historically prepared young people for the move into adulthood. While this may be true for many heterosexual teenagers with regard to general social development, one could make an opposite case: that in the absence of vertical role models such as parents, horizontal (peer) models are all that are available. It is possible that this early one-way window into the gay world—the opportunity to watch but not yet participate—will have both positive and negative aspects, even within the same individual. Nevertheless, for more stigmatized or uncommon sexual choices or for the large number of people who do not live in an urban area, the internet is a critical ele-

ment and an additional stage (seeking out similar others, but from afar) in the coming-out process.

There is an additional stage consideration that arises from the relationship between typing, doing, and being: the possibility that an individual might have cybersex with a member of the same sex, but not physical sex. Does this make the individual behaviorally homosexual? It could be suggested that the internet has allowed the existence of an additional category of people, men who have internet sex with men (MISM). This intermediate type of man who is cybersexually a MSM is interesting, and it is unclear whether he is an experimenter, a highly closeted or isolated gay man, or at some stage of coming out. And what of a man who has sex with other men, but posing as a woman? Moore (1995) described a young man who does it for "fun," and it is likely that this could be conceptualized as a case of "recreational sex" (p. 57).

Cybersexuality may also function as an opportunity to compensate for social or physical disability. Technological developments have frequently enabled people with disabilities to manage better, and for those who are at a disadvantage in the gay world through shyness or less than average attractiveness, the internet may be a compensatory medium. Moore (1995) noted the advantage of electronic communication for people who have lower social skills. He also noted the advantage of the medium where the lack of immediacy allows for a degree of editing and where things are said in a way that is different than on paper or on the telephone, in effect, having the advantages of relative immediacy with the advantages of saying things more freely absent the social cues and with the possibility of more careful construction and revision.

The socially- and sexually-isolated MSM in a rural environment or in an environment of high stigma may need the internet as a medium to acculturate to gay subcultures. Williams, Bowen, and Horvath (2005) found that three major issues arose in rural and frontier MSM: the social hostility and violence directed toward gay men in smaller and more isolated communities; self-regulating verbal and nonverbal communications to assimilate into the dominant heterosexual environment; and a need to deal with social and sexual isolation. All their interviewees in Wyoming had used the internet to access gay sites, including chat rooms, and it was a way into a larger gay society that could not be experienced in reality (and into a virtual gay life that was more complex and connected to a gay community than real life). For women, Weise (1996) called the internet the "gift of an extended family" (p. xii).

The concept of community online has been extensively explored (Ludlow, 1996; Moore, 1995; Rheingold, 2000) and raises the question as to whether the internet and cybersex constitute a "community" in any sense. To the extent that MSM identify it as a source of membership and support, it probably does not. However, to those who are developing their identity as men who have sex with men, it probably does. Rheingold (2000) described a disabled

adolescent who had difficulty communicating except, with great difficulty, by keyboard. For this person, cyberspace was the only way to socialize. For those with the greatest sexual isolation, cybersex may constitute a community of support and identification, support in the sense that it provides them with a sense that they are not alone.

Rheingold (2000) also made the point that an experience is not inauthentic because people communicate with keyboards and screens, and that for some people, internet communication may be not a luxury, but a lifeline. For MSM, especially the more isolated from organized gay communities, the internet and sexual contact on the internet may function as a community of interest or identification. It is probably a community more than one of common commercial interest (such as Ebay), but less than one in which participants have shared interests beyond the narrow one of common purpose. McKenna and Bargh (1998) and McKenna, Green, and Smith (2001) noted that people who might have hid their sexual interests for social and legal reasons can now congregate electronically and discuss these issues openly, often while still maintaining their anonymity. Such electronic congregation may not only constitute, but also create, communities of identity and interest which were previously not possible due to stigma or the relative rarity of particular sexual interests. Thus, the internet may actually shape sexual communities.

Sexual Stigma and the Internet

Wallace (1999) indicated that the internet environment is especially well-suited to stigmas that are easy to hide, and which could be embarrassing if they were revealed, such as unusual sexual preferences. The anonymous nature of the internet probably attracts a disproportionate number of people whose sexual tastes deviate from the norm, as well as those who wish to hide their sexual activity even though it may be more normative (Cooper, 2000). McKenna, Green, and Smith (2001) demonstrated that people who are hindered from acting on important aspects of their sexuality in real life will turn to the internet as a means of exploration of these important self-aspects. Further, for relatively unusual sexual tastes, without the internet it may be difficult or impossible for a person to find another person with complementary interests. Thus, the internet is likely to attract disproportionately those who might be stigmatized or disadvantaged (including facing criminal sanctions) should their sexual interests become known. The ability of the internet to transfer electronic files of erotic material or webcam images can only enhance its attraction. However, its apparent protection from legal oversight may be illusory, given the electronic expertise of many police and other regulatory authorities. Wallace (1999) appropriately noted that the anonymity of the internet has a negative side and can bring out some very troubling behavior. Perhaps the most graphic example of this was the German case that was tried in 2004, in which a case of

apparently consensual erotic cannibalism was highlighted (CNN, 2003).

Shaping Sexual Culture

The internet is not just a product or a presenter of sexual culture; it also shapes sexual culture. McFarland (1987) argued, in the context of English literature, that new languages become dominant, transmuting from a shape of culture into a new form of culture. Similarly, the internet has become, through its widespread use, a new form of sexual culture. This new form of culture has spawned a new language (e.g., surfing, lurking, cybersex) as well as a new sexual space. McFarland (1987) characterized special languages as existing in particular forms. The internet appears to combine two forms of language, "notices" (high relative readability and informational, as in internet advertisements) and, when a textual conversation is established, storytelling. Storytelling is also relatively readable, but may be more narrative and interrogative, as well as propositional. What is interesting about textual interaction on the internet is the use of shorthand symbols and abbreviations (e.g., ;-), IRL) and the continuing development of such symbols and words to fit the forms of the internet.

Barnes (2003) characterized theories about the relationships between technology and society as falling between technological determinism (where the development of technology governs its social use) and social determinism (where technological developments are seen as a product of social conditions). The sexual use of the internet has initially been a product of the technological possibilities, but it will be interesting to see where the heavy sexually-related use of the internet may spur new technological developments.

Heim (1999) noted that text processing is transforming the way many disciplines are done: "The word processor is the calculator of the humanist" (p. 1). In the same way, the internet becomes more than the calculator of the sexologist—it becomes a window into the process and one culture of sexuality. Heim suggested that each step of word processing, culminating in its automated manipulation on computers, makes writing easier because more control can be exercised over manipulation of thought as it becomes externalized (and recorded electronically). Philosophically as well as sexually, the fragmentary or dynamic approach to thinking and writing is fostered by the word processor and the internet. This is similar to McFarland's argument that complex forms of culture have been replaced with smaller, more specialized shapes of culture—and the internet could be seen as an example of a smaller and more specialized area of sexuality. Indeed, McRae (1996) has speculated that net sex may be more about sexy language than it is about the gender of the partner's body.

Heim (1999) referred to the mechanical-technical device, according to the ancient Chinese, representing "a dead and grotesque effigy of actually living occasions" (p. 12). A restricted view of internet sexuality might see this as also describing internet sexuality. However, he later

spoke (of software associated with processors) of "metaphoric attempts to alter the thought processes through a new symbolic element" (p. 16). It can be argued that the availability and wide use of electronic language via the internet has altered sexual processes through allowing a new symbolic expression of sexuality.

The Effects of the Internet on Sexuality

Sproull and Kiesler (1991) argued that new technologies may cause "deviance amplification" (p. 2), where small changes as a result of the technology amplify and cause a system to deviate permanently from its original state. They suggested that there are two levels of consequence of new technologies, and that the second-level effects are usually more important. First-level effects are the efficiency effects of the technology, including cost savings. Second-level effects are unanticipated deviance-amplifying changes in the social and organizational systems of users of the technology. They argued that the important effects of a new technology may be not to let people do old things more efficiently, but to do new things that were not possible or feasible with old technology. People may pay attention to different things, have contact with different people, and depend on one another differently. In terms of sexuality, the internet has made cybersex possible, widely expanded the possible network of contacts and times of contact, and enabled people to utilize multiple personas. It might also be postulated that there is a third level of effect, namely, sociocultural impacts of a technology. In the field of sexuality, this could include the new satellite culture that has developed on the internet, which privileges textual communication and enables the reduction of stigma through distancing. As the internet becomes increasingly popular, it is likely that the development of internet sexuality (including cybersex) will develop beyond cybersex to even more complex virtual reality systems that allow telesexuality (sex at a distance) to become a fully-developed form of sexual expression.

It has been assumed that there are limited dimensions in communication media that may account for their impact, such as the level of richness of the medium or the degree of distancing it allows. In a study of lying on e-mail, instant messaging, on the telephone, and face-to-face, Hancock, Thom-Santelli, and Ritchie (2004) suggested that there are three major dimensions that influence social deception: synchronicity, the degree to which messages are exchanged instantaneously or in real time; recordability, the degree to which it is automatically documented; and distribution, the degree to which the speaker and listener share the same physical space. They report that based on daily diaries over a seven-day period, college students lied significantly more per social interaction on the phone than face-to-face, that there was no difference in face-to-face and instant messaging, and that there were significantly fewer lies on e-mail. Their data suggested that the social distance in media does not account for lying, but that recordability and synchronicity may have an impact.

Sproull and Kiesler (1991) similarly suggested that time delays may change social relationships, in many cases providing a buffer to permit better interaction. Given the highly-charged nature of sexual interactions and the significant stigmatization associated with many forms of sexual expression, however, it is an open question as to the degree to which lying, deception, or multiple personas are facilitated or discouraged by various media, including the internet.

There may also be a more general impact of the availability of partners. Bauman (2003) suggested that the internet renders human connections "simultaneously more frequent and more shallow, more intense and more brief" (p. 62). However, it remains for empirical investigation to disentangle whether this is an effect of the internet or whether the internet provides a venue for those who prefer more transient sexual encounters. Or it may be that cybersex, by providing an additional sexual possibility that is conceived as being midway between fantasy and IRL sex, adds to the complexity of human sexual connections rather than altering their depth.

The Internet as Method

Simon (1996) argued that

The requirement of theory in this postmodern context is not, as has been proposed by the first wave of postmodern critics, the devaluing of empirical methods, but the revaluing of theory or at least an abandonment of formal theory, an abandonment of seeking for the overarching generalization. Methodologies of all types are critical; they are our ways of seeing and occasions for discussion or thinking out loud about the world. They become obstructive when they become occasions for transpiring the specifics of research into wastelands of essentialized concepts of 'theoretical relevance' (p. 16).

Although Simon acknowledged that theory and research can "simultaneously inspire and embarrass the other" (p. 16), he also argued strongly against seeing theory and methodology as distinct callings. Research on and about the internet is almost impossible to divide into theory and methodology, since the methodology is the subject of the theory and the theory simultaneously the subject of the methodology (both subject and object). Both the theory and the methodology are thus conceptual apparatuses.

Where the medium *is* the method, critical philosophical issues surround validity—internal, external, and construct validity. Central methodological questions that relate to external validity include population issues: who is using the internet? How do they differ from the broader population? How do those sampled on the internet differ from those using the internet? Construct validity questions include those relating to what the mechanism underlying internet responses is, and whether it may differ from supposedly similar constructs in a face-to-face setting. Internal validity questions are largely statistical and relate to generalizability. These have been reviewed in detail previously by Mustanski (2001) for sexuality data, along with related issues including cost, use of controls, and comparisons with other traditional samples; and by Reips and

Bosnjak (2001) for issues in internet-based survey research.

The medium creates new situations that require description, such as the question of what is actually done, the language of its doing, the mode of action, and the contribution of the internet to the psychic states and meanings associated with cybersex and sexual shopping. These create multiple possibilities for the inspiration and embarrassment of theory and research that Simon (1996) argued will arise from the study of new methodologies.

There are, however, good reasons to consider the internet in the larger historical and theoretical context, as Stern and Handel (2001) argued. They suggested that the major theoretical perspectives central to understanding internet sexuality are its efficacy, potential for alienation and depersonalization, and power and influence. However, as noted in this article, there are additional social theoretical issues to be considered: accelerated intimacy as the converse of alienation and depersonalization; the development of sexual scripts and novellas and interactions characterized by typed, rather than spoken, interaction; the development of the internet as a relatively unstigmatized social forum and as a space between fantasy and action; the consideration of cybersex as a new niche in human sexuality; questions as to where the boundaries of the individual exist in cybersex; the possibility of the symbol superseding the real; the rapid expansion of the sexual market, particularly for uncommon and stigmatized sexual behaviors, and the extension of choice; the internet as an expanded venue for social and sexual experience and experimentation; and its role in shaping sexual culture. The evidence suggests that the internet provides a new social niche for sexual expression.

The internet is a relatively new method for data collection, and it is essential to understand the ways the method shapes the empirical data emerging from its interrogation. Although no data are free of determination by the method used to extract those data, and by extension no data-based theory is free of the method, we can begin to appreciate the way our "gaze" at sexuality occurs through the electronic filter of the internet—and how it may also enable us to see things at wavelengths not previously visible.

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