

Sexuality in Cyberspace: Update for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Online sexuality has become a much discussed topic in the 90's however most people continue to have a narrow and uninformed view of what this area truly consists of. This paper provides an overview of the ubiquitous and explosive effect of the Internet on sexuality and summarizes the following key dimensions including: internet relationships and how they influence face to face relationships, alternative communities and sexually disenfranchised people, commercial aspects of internet sexuality, concerns about employee morality and productivity, and, sexual information and education in the 21st century. The internet and associated technological advances will have a tremendous influence on every aspect of sexuality in this new "information age" and thus we encourage professionals involved in this area to get informed and thereby have a say in shaping the future. In addition, those keeping current with these rapid developments will be in a position to both warn people as to the pathological aspects of cybersexual behavior, as well as educate them as to the more adaptive and expansive sex-positive opportunities offered by the internet.

INTRODUCTION

AN ESTIMATED 9–15 MILLION PEOPLE access the Internet each day at a rate that is growing by an estimated 25% every 3 months.^{1–3} Work, school, and even social activities have become increasingly dependent upon, and centered around, computers. However, much of what is said about online relating is full of paradoxes. On the one hand, it seems to epitomize the alienation of the modern world, and on the other to lead to the development of supportive and sometimes intensely intimate, even deeply erotic, relationships.⁴ Few can fathom how profound the changes will be as we increasingly spend more and more of our time connected to the information superhighway. Given its bur-

geoning growth and wide accessibility, the Internet or World Wide Web (WWW) is altering patterns of sexual behavior, sexual health and education, and social communication. At the same time, it is enhancing and complicating interpersonal relationships and is developing into an alternative place for a variety of commercial opportunities.

SEXUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS ON THE INTERNET

Sexuality is one aspect of human social behavior that is being dramatically impacted by the Internet. In fact, sex is reported to be the most frequently searched topic on the Internet,⁵

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and the pursuit of sexual interests on the Internet, or "cybersex," is a remarkably common activity for users. A recent study reported that approximately nine million users (15% of the online population) accessed one of the top five "Adult" Websites⁶ in a 1-month period. Cooper¹ suggested that there are three primary factors that "turbocharge" online sexuality and make it such an attractive venue for sexual pursuits. He called these factors the "Triple-A-Engine." They include accessibility (i.e., millions of sites available 24/7), affordability (i.e., competition on the WWW keeps all prices low and there are a host of ways to get "free" sex), and anonymity (i.e., people perceive their communications to be anonymous).

The Internet has also become a fertile ground on which intimate relationships can be sown and grown. Computer mediated relating (CMR) contains several characteristics that are unique to the online medium that can enhance attempts to create positive interpersonal contacts and healthy romantic relationships. However, these same characteristics can also complicate or become an obstacle to interpersonal connection. Specifically, CMR reduces the role that physical attributes play in the development of attraction, and enhances other factors such as propinquity, rapport, similarity, and mutual self-disclosure, thus promoting erotic connections that stem from emotional intimacy rather than lustful attraction.

In a culture that emphasizes physical attractiveness, the Internet provides a different way of developing attraction. It is a world where what you write, not how you look or sound, is who you are. Online communication allows individuals more control over how they present themselves and what they tell others about themselves. This opens the possibility of people becoming acquainted before evaluating each other based upon physical appearance. Likewise, stereotypical assumptions about the personality of the individual based upon physical attributes, which are often inaccurate, may be postponed until more factual knowledge is known about that person. This provides a model of intimate yet separate relating and it allows adult (and teen) men and women more freedom to deviate from typically constraining

gender roles that are often automatically invoked in face-to-face interactions.⁴

The Internet can also enhance erotic connection by focusing on emotional aspects of sexuality instead of the physical. This may also reduce limitations of gender roles; allow each partner to feel autonomous within the relationship; encourage open, intimate, and direct communication; and provide a safe environment for the inexperienced to practice flirtation and experimentation with different sex roles and personas. However, at the same time, Internet relationships can foster superficial erotic contacts and online relating that may then lead to destructive results such as people acting on or compulsively overindulging in an accelerated, eroticized pseudo-intimacy.⁴

Electric communication as a mode of relating may foster other unique benefits and characteristics including a greater sense of closeness and community, time to compose a response that accurately conveys the intention, and the ability to "go further" or take more of a risk than one otherwise might. It can create a feeling of greater spatial proximity and connection with others, regardless of their actual geographic dispersion. Virtual worlds with unique cultures can develop online and foster a sense of community.⁷ The Internet can also be a convenient mode of communicating and relating because participants do not have to be concerned about how they look when online and can engage in conversations at any time of the day or night. Although it may seem that the ability to express oneself emotionally online is limited, emotion can be expressed with a variety of symbols or string of characters called "emoticons." These provide a way to clearly express an emotion, that might be missed or downplayed in an offline interaction.⁸

EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET ON FACE-TO-FACE (FTF) RELATIONSHIPS

It is already clear that the fascination people have with sexuality and sexual relationships is being prominently manifested on the Internet in a multitude of ways.⁹ For those with great sexual relations, the Internet will provide an-

other dimension for them to explore together, as well as a tool for them to create new ways to increase their intimacy. It is just as possible to send an erotic E-mail to a partner as to a stranger. Couples can be encouraged to use this particular communication medium to stretch and invigorate an ongoing relationship. Some may find the Internet facilitates their ability to initiate a sexual encounter with their lover, share a sensitive fantasy, or stay in contact during the day.¹⁰ The Internet may also be helpful when one partner in a couple desires to engage in a particular sexual activity and the other partner is unable or unwilling to comply. Internet newsgroups exist that deal with virtually every legal (as well as many illegal) sexual variation. Online services and "virtual meeting places" provide users with the chance to be exposed to those activities, to learn why others find the experience enjoyable, and subsequently may be more open to the behavior themselves. Particularly around sexual issues and accompanying concerns of normalcy, finding others who share the same interest may facilitate self-acceptance.¹¹ In addition, the online world is a great place to experiment and to have a "virtual trial" of the behavior before deciding whether it is something to engage in real time.

However, for those whose emotional development is evolved enough to find a partner but not quite evolved enough to fully relate in an ongoing and intensive manner, the Internet may provide the perfect venue for these types of "quasi-relationships." This could prove helpful if these relationships are a transitional practice step toward the more difficult face-to-face (FTF) relationships. Or it could be deleterious if the person becomes "stuck" in cyberspace and finds that his or her motivation to further stretch themselves in FTF relations is reduced.

There are also increasing numbers of reports of Internet infidelity. These online relations may interfere with conflict resolution in FTF relationships or lead to triangulation. Partners struggling with conflict in their FTF relationships may seek comfort, understanding, and sexual intimacy in online relationships instead of working out the conflict in the FTF relation-

ship. Other negative consequences of Internet infidelity include secrecy and shame that oftentimes accompanies the dishonesty of the infidelity and the draining of energy from the primary FTF relationship. This prevents the type of open communication and feelings of distress between people that catalyze and often lead to discussions and working through of problems ultimately resulting in growth and improvement in the primary relationship.¹² Cybersex use can be a symptom of deeper problems with closeness, dependency, and abandonment and can cause difficulty in couple relationships. One partner may be heavily involved in cybersex use, leaving the other partner feeling shut out, ignored, and deprived of time alone with their partners.¹³

ONLINE SEXUAL COMPULSIVITY

As the use of adult websites for the purpose of sexual expression is becoming increasingly popular, the power of the Triple A engine may challenge the internal defenses and coping skills of individuals with a vulnerability to, or proclivity, for sexual compulsivity. There is little point in denying the obvious dark side to the seductive temptations offered by the Internet when it comes to sexual behavior online. Individuals may increasingly rely on the Internet for their social and sexual needs and wind-up spending greater amounts of time there, rather than investing energy in real-world relationships.

Leaders in the field assert that sexually compulsive behavior has reached epidemic proportions.^{5,14} The National Association of Sexual Addiction Problems estimated that 6–8% of Americans are sex addicts, which is 16–21.5 million.¹⁵ The exact numbers are difficult to estimate, as people with these issues are often fearful of the reactions of others, feel ashamed, and thus are more likely to hide the frequency and details of their behavior. The Internet further complicates this by facilitating anonymity and enabling sexual activities to be pursued in an even more isolated and hidden fashion.

The National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity¹⁵ defined sexual addiction

as "persistent and escalating patterns of sexual behavior acted out despite increasing negative consequences to self and others." Cooper¹⁴ defined sexually compulsive behavior as "an irresistible urge to perform an irrational sexual act" (p. 1). Cooper identified five hallmarks of sexual compulsion. Early indications are that these appear to be particularly prevalent in online users. They include the following, which must be present for a duration of at least 6 months: (1) denial; (2) unsuccessful repeated efforts to discontinue the activity; (3) excessive amounts of time dedicated to the activity; (4) the behavior having a negative impact on social, occupational, and recreational functioning; and (5) repetition of the behavior despite adverse consequences.

Young¹⁶⁻¹⁸ warned about the dangers of excessive Internet use and found that there appears to be a correlation between time online and negative consequences. She reported that the "Internet addicts" in her sample used the Internet an average of 38 hours per week for nonacademic and nonprofessional purposes.¹⁶ Greenfield¹⁹ noticed a similar trend. His survey indicated that those with excessive usage patterns spent nearly double the amount of time on the computer as nonaddicts, and were far more likely to report negative repercussions. Finally, the Cooper, Scherer, Boies, and Gordon⁶ study also found a strong correlation between time spent online for sexual pursuits and measures of sexual compulsivity and distress scores. They also noted that users who did not appear to have a problem with online sexual activities (46.6%) reported spending less than 1 hour a week doing so. On the other hand, the 8.5% of respondents who acknowledged spending at least 11 hours a week in online sexual pursuits reported the most distress and highest scores on a measure of sexual compulsivity.

Internet sexuality, like other forms of sexuality, is best viewed as falling along a continuum ranging from normal and life-enhancing forms of sexual expression and exploration, to problematic and pathological expressions.^{6,13} Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boies²⁰ identified three distinct profiles of individuals who go online for sexual pursuits using data from the first large-scale study of Internet sexual-

ity.²⁰ They labeled these profiles: Recreational, Compulsive, and At-risk users.

Recreational or nonpathological users refers to those who simply aim to satisfy their curiosity about available online sexual material, to occasionally experiment or gratify a sexual urge, or to search for specific sexual information. A substantial number of people (46.6%) reported visiting Internet sexuality sites in a recreational way, less than 1 hour per week, with few reported negative consequences.

Compulsive users were described as individuals who exhibit sexually compulsive traits and experience negative consequences as a result. Compulsive users may have previously established patterns of unconventional sexual practices, such as: preoccupation with pornography, multiple affairs, sex with several or anonymous partners, phone sex, frequenting prostitutes, or any one of the more conventional paraphilias listed in the DSM-IV.²⁰ A large number of people with these proclivities are aware of the Internet and the abundant sexual opportunities that exist there. Thus, the Internet provides a new forum for them to act out their issues and often further exacerbate their problematic behaviors.

At-risk users included online users without a prior history of sexual compulsivity, but who experienced some problems in their lives from their online sexual pursuits since discovering the Internet. At-risk users may be the most interesting group in the study of online sexual behavior, as they may never have had difficulty with problematic sexual behavior if not for the seductive power of the Triple-A engine.

As a result of these new variations of sexual compulsivity, clinicians are now faced with the opportunity and challenge of treatment in this new area of practice. Cooper, Putnam *et al.*²⁰ recommend an individually tailored combination of group, individual, and systemic interventions, with medication used in more severe situations. In addition, they posit that the aforementioned treatment might be facilitated in certain cases through E-mail, interactive Internet mediated treatment modules, along with the use of online education and group social support. This approach provides patients with greater access to services and clinicians with new ways to impact their patients outside of

the therapy session. Finally, there is little doubt that there needs to be many more opportunities for therapists to participate in comprehensive training in the assessment and treatment of the constellation of problems resulting from cybersex compulsivity.

ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITIES AND DISENFRANCHISED PEOPLE ON THE INTERNET

Meeting other people on the Internet also increases one's chances of connecting with like-minded others due to the computer's ability to rapidly sort along many dimensions simultaneously. People who have a hard time connecting with others in FTF interactions may have a better chance of meeting a compatible person online.⁴ Online dating services can help minimize painful rejections. The decision to contact a particular person can be made only after both parties view the others personal profiles (these are created by various online dating services and include descriptive information about the person). Therefore, those with particular characteristics and interests might find likeminded others by searching or scanning these profiles to find commonalties. These areas of similarity can include important life issues such as health concerns, sexual abuse, disabilities, religious affiliation, etc. This type of confidential matching may be especially attractive to those in sexually disenfranchised communities including lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender communities, S/M, or fetish communities. The Internet can provide a safe means of affiliating and relating to these people when they live in areas where these communities are less common and/or visible, such as rural locations.

The Internet offers the opportunity for the formation of online or virtual communities in which isolated or disenfranchised individuals can communicate with each other around sexual topics of shared interest (e.g., gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues, transgender issues, and rape survivors^{21,22}). The Internet has functioned as a way for gay, lesbian and bisexual minorities to become majorities in their own "virtual communities." These online commu-

nities are particularly beneficial to those concerned about prejudice and discrimination because they are available to anyone, no matter where they live and accessible from the safety of one's own home. This process of community formation was accelerated by the freedom provided by gay Usenet newsgroups. In a series of Internet studies, McKenna and Bargh²¹ found that newsgroup participation during sexual identity formation lead to greater self-acceptance and disclosure of hidden sexual identity to family and friends. Lesbian women, gay men, and bisexuals use the Internet more often than their heterosexual counterparts for experimentation, networking, communication, and the expression of a variety of sexual behaviors. This is not surprising and indeed is even adaptive as the Triple-A engine provides dimensions that are particularly important to these populations (i.e., sense of safety and ready access to partners). However, this increased access is a two-edged sword and can both enhance and damage the lives of those who avail themselves of it. The Triple-A engine can pose a particular hazard for those users whose sexuality may have been suppressed and limited all their lives when they suddenly find an infinite supply of sexual opportunities. Individuals may enthusiastically embrace the opportunities provided by the Internet without considering the possible dangers associated with it. A recent study by Ross, Tikkanen, and Mansson²³ comparing gay men who used the Internet to gay men who did not provided helpful descriptive information about these populations. Those who used the Internet tended to be younger, to live in small towns, to have less sexual experience with other men, and were more likely to frequent bathhouses and video clubs. These findings support the idea that the Internet provides a medium for young individuals who are exploring their sexuality in geographically isolated places. Without Internet access, these individuals would have less opportunity to explore and become full members of these minority communities.²³

In an interesting twist, Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg²⁴ consider women to be members of a "sexually disenfranchised population." And although the Internet offers women freedom from the constraints placed on their sexual ex-

pression by community standards and expectations regarding the "proper role" of sexuality in their life, this freedom again cuts both ways. As women more freely experiment and take sexual risks²⁴ in ever-greater numbers, more of them are at risk for contracting sexual diseases, as well as developing sexual compulsions.

The Internet can also provide connection and community to a variety of other groups that are traditionally ignored and have limited options for developing romantic relationships. Clearly elderly and individuals that are confined to their homes can correspond over the Internet, sometimes taking those relations offline, leading to fuller and more rewarding lives. Similarly those with chronic illnesses and/or disabilities can reach out to others for empathy, support, and either friendship, romantic exchanges, or frank sexual discussions, if they so choose.

A final example (though there could be countless others) includes those with social phobias and chronic shyness. These people might feel safer and more comfortable disclosing on the Internet by virtue of being in a familiar place, having time to think of their words and responses, and having a buffer protecting them from their fears of another's negative reaction.

COMMERCIAL ASPECTS OF SEXUALITY AND THE INTERNET

The Internet has become an ideal place for the exploration of sex through adult websites, the purchase of sexually related merchandise, and the exchange of sexual services in a society where sex and sexuality is often a source of shame and embarrassment. The prevalence of adult websites, sex sites, and erotica has been estimated to range from less than one-half of 1%²⁵ to 83%²⁶ of all Internet sites and functions. The Internet provides an essentially unlimited array of sexual material, which is frequently changed and upgraded. It may be actively selected by the individual in accord with his or her personality and preferences, accessed anonymously, and viewed privately.²⁷ Adult websites, both those that involve still photos,

X-rated videos, and live sex shows are filled with every imaginable image and sexual act. The images are explicit and something can be found to meet anyone's particular sexual interests. Unfortunately, one can be assured that despite claims that all "models" are over the age of 18, many of the persons involved in the making of these images are in fact underage."⁵ This is of particular concern with the new interest in "amateur" sites and pictures, which are even less regulated and predictable than the traditional commercial sites.²⁸

Although erotica and sexually explicit material may not have an adverse effect on most viewers, for some it may reinforce preexisting inclinations, including objectifying, splitting off parts of one's sexuality, or antisocial or anti-woman inclinations.^{27,29,30} At the same time, it should be recognized that the small amount of empirical data we have to date finds a lack of a relationship between exposure to online pornography and misogynist attitudes. This, of course, parallels more widespread findings about exposure to offline erotica.²⁷

Another growth area for online sexuality appears to be as a place to purchase sexual products. Just as catalogue shopping continues to increase its share of the marketplace, the Internet is ideally suited for showcasing sexually related products and services because of the availability, anonymity, and affordability of the Internet (The Triple A). For example, one new type of business enterprise is known as the "condom store." The condom store is devoted to the sale of condoms and other sexually related products. The medium of the Net allows people to compare features and prices of a larger number of product lines (A for Affordability) at their convenience (A for Access). The medium of the net minimizes embarrassment by providing an alternative to furtively rushing through local drugstores and picking up whatever is quickest (A for Anonymity). "The implications for the advantageous promotion of expanded sexual products and services is obvious, with one important benefit being that facilitation of larger numbers of people having the opportunity to take adequate prophylactic measures against contraception and disease."¹

In addition to products, the Internet has also become another medium for the sale of sexual

services. Sex workers have found online chat rooms, bulletin boards, and listings on numerous search engines to be excellent venues to advertise their services. The Triple A also provides a unique context for this kind of commerce. Anonymity allows a certain amount of physical safety for both sex workers and potential sex customers to negotiate their transactions with greatly reduced concerns of intervention by law enforcement. By and large, law enforcement agencies have chosen not to direct their energies into cyberspace (with the exception of child pornography and solicitation). However, when choosing to get involved, law enforcement agencies have used that same anonymity to their advantage by posing as potential escorts, customers, and oftentimes children (most commonly to intercede with issues of child exploitation).

The Internet also provides a medium to commit sex crimes as pedophiles use the Internet to deliver and receive child pornography, find children to molest, engage in "cyber-sex" with children, and communicate with other pedophiles.³¹ In a 1999 study, Durkin and Bryant were able to conduct a sociological investigation of pedophiles at large by contacting them through an Internet newsgroup composed of pedophiles. Previously it was difficult, if not impossible, to study pedophiles outside of a clinical or correctional population because of the disease's hidden nature.³²

For better or worse, the Triple A allows for a broader range of potential purveyors of an expanded range of sexual services. Men in rural areas or situations who might not have access to areas frequented by prostitutes may now find these services easily available through their modem, either by arranging FTF meetings online or confining their sexual activities to "virtual" meetings and sexual encounters. Likewise, potential escorts (e.g., students looking for extra cash to get through school or women struggling to make ends meet financially) might find the Internet to be a more sanitary and comfortable place to arrange an exchange of sex for money. Another type of online sex is the live sex shows (often called "live video streaming") that are readily available for a fee. While using this service, customers can either E-mail or call and talk to the

model as they dance or engage in any number of sex acts. This clearly superior alternative to phone sex is an imminent threat to replace that billion-dollar component of the commercial sex industry.

Finally, another new type of business has developed to counter the pervasiveness of online sexuality. For those who want it, there are a host of ways to block access to Internet sex. From software, to hardware, to Internet Service providers who prefilter what they carry, and so on, as the availability and use of the Internet as medium for sexual pursuits increases so will the demand for technology-based means of controlling that access.²⁸

VIRTUAL MORALITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The explosion of the Internet into the workplace has put temptations squarely in the face of millions of employees. With just a few keystrokes they may all too easily travel to areas that are implicitly and even explicitly forbidden and/or at odds with the companies' mores and mission. Organizations are being forced to deal with the mushrooming ethical questions such as workers frittering away a morning shopping online or secretly viewing sexually explicit websites. Every day, companies face unexpected twists in the world of virtual morality. This is a new spin on the old concern of employees making personal phone calls at work, but with greatly magnified possibilities. For one thing, the Web can be insidious in its power, seductively lulling users to click from screen to screen for hours at a time. Productivity can indeed suffer when workers find this sexual escape to be so readily available. Some will find it so gratifying that they will develop problems with sexual compulsivity. In addition, purveyors of sex rarely call on the phone and suggest out loud that we check out some "hot teen action." But they don't think twice about large-scale spamming of outrageously prurient advertisements.

In a recent *Wall Street Journal* (October, 1999) survey of a cross-section of workers at large companies nationwide on workplace ethics, 87% of respondents said it is unethical to visit

pornographic sites at work. Thirty-four percent said personal E-mail on company computers is wrong. Cooper, Putnam *et al.*²⁰ found that the prevalence of cybersex activity at work was striking in their recent survey of 9,177 Internet users. Six out of 100 employees reported that their primary method of accessing online sexual material was via their work computers. In total, an amazing 20% of men and 12% of women are using their work computers for at least some portion of their online sexual activity. This corroborates data from other sources reporting that adult content sites are the fourth most visited category while at work (Media Matrix, February, 1999) and that 70% of all adult content traffic occurs during the 9-to-5 workday.³³

Caught off guard by the geometric growth of such issues, many companies have lost all hope of handling matters case by case. Some are using sophisticated software to monitor when and where workers are traveling on Internet. Others are having their legal teams take first stabs at setting boundaries. For example, some companies seem to accept the inevitable with a policy specifically allowing employees to use the Internet for personal reasons. Many start with the general premise that use has to be of "reasonable duration and frequency" and cannot cause "embarrassment to the company." In our litigious society it is questionable how long this type of ambiguous language will be sufficient and go unchallenged. Companies need to be cognizant that ultimately these relative terms (e.g., "reasonable" duration) will put the onus on them to define the precise parameters. Who will set these guidelines and what will they form as the foundation for their decisions. What training or expertise will these decision-makers have in sexual issues and their many meanings or potential outcomes. Many may ultimately retain independent experts in human sexuality as consultants to help inform these decisions and provide a basis in research and psychological theory.

Clearly the tensions between being an organization that trusts and fosters autonomy in its workforce will somehow need to be balanced against employees' participation in activities and using company equipment that are at odds with the preferred company image, mores, and

social values. And, of course, there are a myriad of ways that this increased presence of sexual access and material will raise concerns about issues of sexual harassment and the development of a sexually charged and biased environment.

Again, larger organizations, while slow off the block, are now scrambling to take action. The American Management Association recently found 27% of large U.S. firms have begun checking employee E-mail, a huge jump from 15% in 1997. Some routinely do this to search for obscene language or images. Once again, this raises a host of questions in terms of who will make the decision on what deserves to be censored, and based on what criteria. Is investigating fertility treatments in your region ok? How about checking the latest edition of the MSNBC column "Sexploration" written by a nationally known sex therapist answering a question on premature ejaculation?³⁴ What if a wife sends an E-mail to her husband reminding him to be home early as this is their wedding anniversary . . . If she tells him her thoughts of what might happen during the night . . . If they engage in 20 minutes of "stoking of the fire" during the day via E-mail. Inevitably, the possibilities for disaster are endless when this type of private message is accidentally forwarded to the wrong address at work. A lonely and angry coworker could decide to forward it to the whole company's list-serv or to a coworker who declined a date, and we have all the ingredients for a sexual harassment suit. Once again, the answer lies in new types of sophisticated training (as well as access to immediate expert consultation) for managers, HR personnel, EAP counselors, and others who will be dealing with these situations on a daily basis. Overly broad policies will be found to be lacking, avoiding, and denying. The policies will be found negligent. Companies who can demonstrate some good faith efforts to seriously consider these issues will be both buffered and applauded.

The issue of workplace sexual addiction and compulsivity will also be greatly magnified by the availability of Internet sex all day long. In his landmark study of nearly 1,000 sexual addicts, Carnes³⁵ found that "by far the biggest losses recorded were in the workplace" (p. 87).

The main loss was time. Most of the sex addicts studied by Carnes³⁵ were not being able to work up to their potential, and 80% reported a loss of productivity. In a more recent study, Lybarger³⁶ found that sexual harassment continues in spite of federally mandated training, reporting, and disciplinary action. According to Lybarger,³⁶ training and other prophylactic measures for dealing with sexual issues in the workplace in general are woefully inadequate. Those suffering from a range of sexually addictive tendencies may frequently be participants in harassment scenarios. In his survey, 86% of all sexual addicts (large numbers if one accepts estimates of people fitting this criteria that range from 4% to 6% of the population) act out in the workplace.³⁷ Looking at early empirical findings on the prevalence of those who have problems with online sexuality, the figures may be between 8.5%⁶ and 17%.²⁴

Once again, the best way to navigate this legally and practically is through training and education at a number of levels. Twenty-eight percent of participants in a recent workplace study reported they would have taken advantage of training in the workplace if it had been offered, and 36% indicated that they believe training would have led to an earlier recovery.³⁶ Again, appropriate personnel need to have clear criteria for deciding whether the employees' online sexual activities constitute a problem for them and/or the company or not. Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boies²⁰ provide four profiles of people who go online for sexual activities ranging from recreational to sexually compulsive. Further research to elucidate and define these types of people is needed. In addition, employers need to be sure to have trainings so that their personnel have a response that is appropriate to the situation when an employee is caught engaging in online sexual activities.

Another dimension of an organization's response to sexual surfing at work will, of course, have a heavy technological component. Advancing technology is rapidly extending the capability for electronic eavesdropping to every office that uses the Internet. There is a new set of Internet surveillance systems, with names like WEBSweeper, Disk Tracy, and Secure-VIEW. Some can conduct desktop-to-laptop

sweeps, monitoring Web use from the mailroom to the executive suite. Many companies are now blocking access to sex sites, hate sites, and gambling sites—but this is always incomplete as websites are just a small segment of online sexual activities. In addition, those who are motivated (and likely have the most serious problems) will find ways to circumvent software as fast as it is installed. In May 1999, Zona Research Inc., an Internet market researcher in Redwood City, CA, found that fully one-third of companies screen out any sites that are not on an approved list. In its survey of more than 300 companies, Zona also found that 20% of companies filter sites based on the user's job and another 13% of companies filter sites on the time of day.

But these forbidden sites are many times one step ahead of being detected. Adult, gambling, and other controversial sites are disguising or sanitizing their address names in order to continue operating under the radar of companies monitoring and blocking Internet content. For example, one site remained undetected to cybersmut police until it made headlines recently. Not to be confused with 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, www.whitehouse.com offers X-rated content. As employees become more technically savvy, it is fairly easy to bypass these programs. For example, add a virus to the directory where it is located, run the Virus Scan, the scanner deletes the entire directory, but because it has a virus, the software doesn't allow it to be deleted. Without the virus, the directory will now allow a user to delete it without a password.

An interesting alternative to traditional blocking technologies doesn't block access, but keeps a detailed and unchangeable list of where the user has gone and what material has been downloaded. No doubt it has the effect of frightening employees into being guardians of their own morals. Not unlike employees knowing that their phonecalls could be traced, however, it also introduces an Orwellian abuse of technology and again raises hosts of practical questions such as who and how often will someone monitor these lists? What criteria will be cause for further investigation? Could an unethical "big brother" use this information for personal or nefarious purposes?

Despite these great technical advances in policing and blocking employee's cybersex use, little has been implemented in the area of corporate training to educate workers in general about healthy sexuality, healthy sexual boundaries, and the consequences of sexual boundary violations in the workplace. Ideally, the workplace should not be the forum for education in healthy sexuality, but apparently other places are doing an inadequate job. When sexuality enters the workplace, the employer has no choice but to fill this void. Employers are realizing that they may literally be paying the price of this neglect in the form of large sexual harassment lawsuits or productivity losses. The cost of ignoring it may finally be greater than the expense of addressing it. Now with the first of a wave of 88 million, Internet-generation, young adults entering the workforce, corporations need to reinvent themselves. The next task at hand for our Nation's employers, with the collaboration of mental health professionals, is education, training, and public awareness about healthy sexuality and the consequences of its dysfunctional counterpart.

SEX INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY

There is an almost unlimited amount of information available to be accessed on the Internet, and a sizable chunk of it is related to sexuality. In fact, the topic most often searched on the Internet is sex.^{1,5} From the Internet's earliest days, sites for sexually explicit material took root and flourished. The Internet brings together consumers who want to know and learn with providers who want to share, teach, preach, or titillate.³⁸

The advantages of the Internet's power to communicate a staggering amount of information on sexuality education are abundant. An important development is the rapid increase in the number of specific websites that offer opportunities to educate people on sexual matters (sexual dysfunction, safe sex practices, information on reproduction, abstinence, sexually transmitted disease, etc.). Currently, a wide range of sites provides sexual education in the form of advice columns, discussion groups,

and distribution lists of innovative information. Also, people can stand back and "lurk," actively explore and ask questions, or even "try on" any type of sexual interest or curiosity that they have, all from the comfort of their own living room.¹⁰ It has been said that the lack of factual information is a major contributor to the enormous fear and anxiety many feel about sexuality.³⁹

Online communication allows experts to more easily share information with those who are interested. The Triple-A Engine¹ makes the Internet particularly conducive to the dissemination of sexual information. Similarly the enormous number of people online allows sex educators to reach enough potential participants to deliver services on very narrow and specialized topics (e.g., sex and intimacy for a couple following prostate cancer surgery) to populations that might otherwise be neglected.

The Internet provides health educators a unique opportunity to bridge this gap and speak directly to millions of people about sexuality and sexual health in the privacy of their own homes. Consequently, various medical information sites are proliferating. Audiences that have never before received information about sexual health are now potential recipients of life-enhancing and life-saving information. Again, the public needs education on how to separate the wheat from the chaff, as anyone can put up a site and offer sexual advice, but not all of it will be worth taking.

A variety of professionals are delivering information using the Internet⁴⁰⁻⁴³ along a wide range of services from simple short FAQs and advice columns, to offering classes and workshops, to helping people set up individually tailored skill enhancement. A number of directions have been suggested in Cooper's¹ review of these issues and selected examples follow. For instance, classes instructing parents how to talk with teens about safe sex could be offered via the Internet to a rural village in Mexico. Another possibility could be that the developer of a new medication for sexual problems could hold a virtual class from her laboratory in England and have the physician-enrollees scattered around the globe. Or lastly, the difficulty of filling a class on sexual enrichment for same-sex

partners in a long-term relationship due to issues of proximity and embarrassment could be countered by offering the class online.

ONLINE CLINICAL INTERVENTIONS

Despite the growth of Telehealth and media attention regarding online psychotherapy, remarkably few licensed professionals are presently offering "virtual psychotherapy."⁴⁴ Concerns regarding the practice of online psychotherapy include variable quality of patient information, lack of credentialing and accountability of professionals, and consumer's inability to determine the training and qualifications of the practitioner. The absence of patient protection alternatives available to consumers has also been noted.^{45,46} Furthermore, current technological limitations in accurately diagnosing and treating patients are making more cautious professionals wary, particularly as most Internet communications are confined to a very narrow band of information. Most computer assessments don't supply vital visual information about a patient's condition. For instance, they can be slumped in a chair, crying and suicidal, or they could be smiling. They could have a neurological condition that makes their walking unsteady. Concealment of odors or other indicators of substance abuse or dependence is easier online. Professionals need to be very selective when considering Telehealth interventions as a substitute for in-person evaluation. However, as a screening modality and the essential first step in facilitating people to get help, the possibilities are only starting to be realized.

There are a number of ways that the Internet can serve as an adjunct to more traditional FTF therapy. These include (a) using interactive computer programs to learn new information and the behavioral techniques that comprise a central place in many sex therapists' armentariums; (b) having patients do home assignments via the internet or E-mail in conjunction with weekly FTF interactions with the therapist; and (c) because the net can serve as a place to practice and/or "try on" new social skills, behaviors, or roles all in the safety and relative

anonymity of cyberspace, professionals can encourage people in couples therapy to first disclose difficult or awkward new communications over E-mail and then later discuss the content once it is "out on the table."

Resolution of ethical, legal, and regulatory issues is lagging behind current realities. Much is yet to be determined. Even those practitioners willing to venture into this new frontier are cautioned to be well prepared and provisioned prior to offering services on the Web and via behavioral telehealth technology. In addition to the suggested principles for the online provision of mental health services⁴⁷ and following the NBCC⁴⁸ Code of Ethics pertaining to the practice of professional counseling, WebCounselors shall:

1. Review pertinent legal and ethical codes for possible violations emanating from the practice of WebCounseling and supervision.
2. Inform WebClients of encryption methods being used to help insure the security of client/counselor/supervisor communications.
3. Inform clients if, how, and how long session data are being preserved.
4. In situations where it is difficult to verify the identity of the Web counselor or Web client, take steps to address imposter concerns, such as using code words, numbers, or graphics.
5. When parent/guardian consent is required to provide WebCounseling to minors, verify the identity of the consenting person.
6. Follow appropriate procedures regarding the release of information for sharing WebClient information with other electronic sources.
7. Carefully consider the extent of self-disclosure presented to the Web client and provide rationale for the Web counselor's level of disclosure.
8. Provide links to websites of all appropriate certification bodies and licensure boards to facilitate consumer protection.
9. Contact the NBCC/CEE or the Web client's state or provincial licensing board to obtain the name of at least one counselor-on-call

within the Web client's geographical region.

10. Discuss procedures for contacting the Web-Counselor when he or she is off-line with their Web clients.
11. Mention those problems believed to be inappropriate for Web counseling at their websites.
12. Explain the possibility of technology failure to clients.
13. Explain to clients how to cope with potential misunderstandings arising from the lack of visual cues from Web counselor or Web client.

SEX EDUCATION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The Web is generating much excitement among educators of teens and young people. Many agree that there is a paucity of accurate, useful, and comprehensive sexual health information in the places teens are attracted to the most: television, popular music, movies, and within peer relationships—all arenas to which sexual health educators have little or no access. For teens, traditionally underserved and undereducated about sexual health matters, the Internet provides abundant opportunities in furthering adolescent sexuality education. Information can be continually updated and designed to specifically speak to their rapidly changing interests. According to Tapscott,⁴⁹ chat moderators, teachers, parents, and community workers who spend time with young adolescent Internet users, feel that this is a confident generation who think highly of themselves. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget explained that the construction of the self occurs as the child acts on its environment—as the child takes actions to understand what he or she can do. This may explain why television is such an unproductive medium for self-esteem development—The child does not take actions but, rather, is acted upon. When contrasted with the interactive nature of the Internet it becomes possible to imagine a very different outcome. This may be particularly relevant for young women, fostering their empowerment, and feelings of mastery around

their sexuality, countering other powerful messages that imply their sexuality to be an object, often one in which they do not feel fully in control.

Self-esteem also seems to be enhanced in chat groups online because young people can always have another chance—They can adopt another self. It is possible that through the Internet, young people, have a new tool and a new environment for the construction of their identities. This quest for identity, first explained by Erik Erikson as the most important personality achievement of adolescence, is said to be a critical step in becoming a productive, fulfilled, and happy adult. The implications of children having vast new avenues of exploration at their fingertips, taking action in games, E-mailing friends for advice, searching for sources of information, would imply that the active child, rather than the passive recipient, would have a greater sense of empowerment to make informed choices.

MIT sociologist Sherry Turkle, indicates that starting around age 10, online sexuality, from flirting to outright virtual sex, is a normal part of the social lives of kids who have computers. Often their online relationships are extensions of their in-person relationships, only with fewer of the social pressures and insecurities that accompany adolescent experiences at parties or one-on-one. It allows these young people the opportunity to explore more in-depth conversational and emotional aspects of their relationships rather than focusing on getting physical. This approach is of course very different than that seen in many places in society where the development of sexual curiosity and energy by young people is dealt with by avoidance, denial, or, suppression strategies, all doomed to failure.

A radical new approach that utilizes the Internet as a virtual "practice world" protected from many of the adverse consequences likely in the real world is worth considering. Supporting this idea is research⁴⁹ in which both girls and boys found online sexual experimentation a safer and less terrifying prospect than the face-to-face versions. Critics will point to the possibility (or inevitability) that even in moderated sites young people will find themselves on the receiving end of unwanted ad-

vances (just like in real life).³¹ But as one 12-year-old girl who goes online pretending to be 18 indicates, "I feel safe because I can always just disconnect."⁵⁰ Giving young people a chance to build skills and practice dealing with difficult situations is a much more rational approach than "protecting" them from these and then hoping they will respond appropriately in a high-pressure real-time event.

The perception that cyberspace will result in uncontrolled and dangerous sexual behavior on the part of youth may be somewhat of an adult-centered projection. Most teenagers seem more interested in developing both the emotional and the physical side of real relationships, with the Internet as just one additional mode of communication and place to experiment. When a young person is found to be spending an inordinate amount of time on the computer in sexual, or other, activities it is often a symptom of larger problems. Again a more open, educative, and structured approach to online sexuality would minimize young people being seduced and deceived into moving the virtual relationship into the real world. An "eyes open" approach would teach young people the safety rules of online relationships (such as not giving out identifying information, addresses, etc) and involve adults in the process of translating those relations to face-to-face interactions when appropriate.

Whereas there are tremendous educational opportunities on the Internet, not all pursuits of sexual information on the Internet will foster growth and personal development. Some activities might reinforce negative societal stereotypes around sexuality and/or be developmentally inappropriate. However channeling the natural curiosity into more healthy and age appropriate outlets might well be the best available option. One example might be a chat room, the young person needs to sign up for (with parental consent and even intermittent structured involvement) facilitated by a trained and experienced sex educator. Because peers are a major source of sexuality information for teens and adolescents, training young people to facilitate these discussions is crucial to making the information seem attractive and relevant. The training of cadres of young people for highly coveted positions as dating, ro-

mance, and sexual survivor expert-facilitators would not only have a positive effect on the chat room participants, and the facilitators themselves, but also a much wider effect on others who they interacted with in their schools and communities. While access to information is critical to young people, developing communication, decision-making, and negotiating skills are equally important.⁵¹

As online communication rapidly gains importance in the lives of increasing numbers of Americans, there is a need for mental health professionals to be involved in these early stages of its development in order to minimize potential problems and adverse effects. In addition, there are tremendous educational opportunities to help shape, direct, and maximize the positive ways that sexuality in our society can be impacted. People are receiving more and varied information about sexuality than ever before. The Internet is already being used to address a host of sexual issues in our society. Disenfranchised minorities are meeting, forming virtual communities, and exploring sexuality and relationships online. Teens are taking their sexual questions from the locker room to their terminals. Lonely people are bringing their romantic hopes to online matchmaking services. Each group has unique questions, anxieties and fears. Psychologists and other mental health professionals can be instrumental in both disseminating information and ensuring that it is accurate, accessible, and specifically tailored to the intended sexual community, and ethically rendered. We can keep creating specially designed websites (with the capacity to address specific single-issues in great depth) that deal with anything from STDs to paraphillias. These might include detailed and comprehensive interactive behavioral treatment modules for common sexual problems (e.g., premature ejaculation) as well as frequently asked questions (FAQs). We can become expert moderators for scheduled interactive online chats. We can create online movies and animations that address the many sexual questions of the Internet populations. We can be a presence on the Internet as a critical adjunct and first line intervention for sexual concerns in the rapidly evolving Telehealth field, which promises to be increasingly important in the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

The digital media is increasingly a reflection of our world—a new culture of interaction and participation—the antithesis of the passivity of the broadcast culture. The Internet will provide a forum in which work, play, education, consumption, and socializing will merge. The implications of this evolution for our profession are just starting to be elucidated in forward-thinking articles and journals such as this. Clearly in the arenas of sexuality, sex education, and therapy, the Internet will afford unique and exciting approaches and alternatives. Internet access will allow for innovative new ways of treating a multitude of disorders via both direct and adjunct treatment options. Being aware of the technological advances and how they can be applied in novel therapeutic ways will allow us to be more proactive and a part of the evolving future, rather than simply defensive and reacting to changes that already have become realities. It will also provide another opportunity for us to explain to the general public who we are and the many types of interventions that we, as a profession, have to offer individuals and society. In doing so, we have the opportunity to not only enhance our own credibility, but also to expand the public's awareness, understanding, and application of the educational, developmental, and health concepts (including sexual health) that we most want to impart.

Clearly, if we are to have a say in shaping the future, we need to first understand the changes that are unfolding around us. For instance, understanding the nature of online relating will become increasingly important for all clinicians. As people spend more time online and look to the Internet to fulfill an ever-increasing amount of their various needs, the issues associated with online sexuality will become increasingly important and salient. We need to be involved in helping educate the public as to the ways that technology can enhance their lives and relations, as well as to warn them about, and be able to treat, the myriad of potential abuses and compulsions that may develop. Only those professionals with a grasp of the complexity of online interactions will be able to guide others to effectively use the power

of the net without "being burned." Thus there needs to be an increase in the breadth and sophistication of professional trainings around these issues.

As technology continues to advance and as the eighty million strong Net Generation enter the adult world they bring with them profoundly different ideas of love and work, reward, responsibility, and morality. It is through the use of digital media that the Net Generation will develop and superimpose its culture on the rest of society. Already these young people are loving, learning, playing, communicating, working, and creating communities very different from their parents. They are the future, a force for social transformation.

As we have detailed throughout this article, the Internet is already having a profound influence on sexuality that will only increase as technology continues to develop. Therefore, if we (the leaders in the field of mental health) are going to continue to be relevant, we will need to defeat our own technophobias. We will have to embrace and make the Internet our own (at least in the sexual realm). We hope that this article will spark thought, debate, and ultimately involvement in this emerging area. As the world enters the 21st century we invite the reader to join us in shaping the future of sexuality!

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