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Cyber Sex: Sexuality, Youth, and Cyber Space

Josephine Ho

Center for the Study of Sexualities
National Central University
Chungli, Taiwan 320
sex@ncu.edu.tw
<http://sex.ncu.edu.tw>

It is a great honor and pleasure for me to deliver this keynote speech at a conference designed for the NET generation, a generation that is growing up within an environment and a lifestyle built around the use of digital media. This new generation, along with its unpredictable but fascinating developments, has attracted the interests of educators and advertisers as well, although mostly for purposes of better supervision or better manipulation. And nowhere else are these intentions more obvious than in the area of cyber sex. World-class sociologist Anthony Giddens has described the late-modern world as one in which personal life as well as intimate relationships have become open and self-reflexive projects that involve everyday social experiments by the individual (8). And nowhere else is this self-reflexivity and self-experimentation more rigorously practiced than sexual liaisons on the net. So my talk this morning will be devoted to laying out these new formations of cyber sexuality as well as emerging efforts to curb them. I will concentrate especially on the individual-based rather than the commercially operated sexual contacts on the net.

State of “Affairs” in Sexual Cyber Space

It is well-known that while such technologies of freedom were first promoted by the state for politico-economic or military purposes, the widespread usage of the French MINITEL and the American ARPANET, both credited as forerunners of the Internet, was to a great extent facilitated by none other than their appropriation for purposes of erotic self-expression and interpersonal sexual contact by the population (Castells 343-345). It has been estimated that already more than 250 million people have joined the e-population which, growing by more than 10 million every month, is expected to multiply to one billion by the year 2005. The significant fact here is that as fast as this demography expands, a new sexual revolution is also raging on the virtual frontier of the internet, where personal anonymity and global access provide seemingly unlimited opportunities for sexual exploration. Erotic uses of the email, on-line chat rooms, interactive webcams, or the newest haptic (sense of touch) technologies have created a kaleidoscope of choices and channels through which our deepest wishes, our darkest desires, and our universal need to connect with others are constantly negotiated and played out in this virtual space, transcending boundaries of gender, age, nation, physical form, etc. Youths in particular are seeking whatever sexual knowledge or experiences that have long been denied them in the “real” world,

and the internet proves to be a powerful tool for them to experiment with their dreams and desires.

Many have defined “cyber sex” as a combination of communication and masturbation, as one net citizen puts it, “nothing more than phone sex typed out on the internet,” nothing more than a selfish act of egoistic gratification. Yet cyber sex has never been limited to such rudimentary acts that quench simple biological urges. Sex in cyber space has always included various forms of flirtation, role-playing, fantasy enactment, etc., which may or may not culminate in heterosexual cyber sex but definitely calls for intense interaction among the parties involved. And while the combination of the internet with the cell phone has made it all the more convenient for the individual to establish as well as manage multiple relationships, webcams and broadband services have helped make cyber sex an increasingly stimulating activity that increasingly approximates real-life relationships. Yet, sex in cyber space is not necessarily a paired activity, as evidenced by erotic activities in the multi-user dungeons/domains (better known as MUDs). Nor is it a simple imagined experience. Recent cyber sex toys promise to enrich cyber sexual experience by letting the person on the other end stimulate some of their net-mate's body parts. Special cyber-sex commodities—including the “virtual sex machine” that allows a remote party to manipulate sex toys attached to the home party, or the “all body cyber sex suit” with multiple sensation sensors, or the computer controlled life-like sex dolls with special motor-driven organs—are all creating new dimensions for cyber sex that may transform our commonsensical understanding of the erotic act. The sensorial channel can feel surfaces, edges, and even temperatures; and promises to compliment the sound and feedback modalities already widely used in current virtual simulations. Even though these devices may not have been created particularly with cyber sex in mind, most likely they will be adapted for erotic purposes as soon as they become available.

One important force that has made cyber sex all the more palatable to the young net citizens is the fast changing sexual attitudes of today's youths. A survey done in 2000 reveals that 60% of Taiwanese college co-eds get on the internet mainly because they want to make friends, in particular, to develop net romances. About 40% of them actively pursue one-night stands on the net—among them, women number just as many as if not more than men. About 24% express interest in conducting or having already conducted the increasingly popular form of compensated companionships (or what is better known in Japan as *enjo-kosai*). In 2001, the same trend still holds, with women's interest in net romance rising steadily. A 2002 survey reveals that almost 30% net users have had “real-life” sex with their internet acquaintances. Those who approve one-night stands have also risen to 46%. In the meantime, new forms of intimate relationships, such as net marriages, are also developing. It is estimated that in Taiwan alone, 50,000 net citizens have established some sort of net marriages, helped especially by role-playing internet games that provide the marriage function. Mainland China is reported to have more than 100,000 net couples who have registered their net marriages with various websites (source: *China Times* 2002-10-14). As internet liaisons are increasingly used to compensate for the restrictions and repressions of erotic life in the real world, a new sex revolution is obviously in the air.

Sexual Identities and Communities on the Net

When one acknowledges the proliferation of sexual tools and activities in cyber space, and the changing sexual attitudes of the net generation, one must not lose sight of the fact that these have from the very beginning transcended the scope of mainstream sexual norms of reproductive heterosexuality. In fact, practitioners of all kinds of so-called sexual deviations and perversions have found for the first time fertile ground for existence and self-empowerment in the cyber world. Many have even found political voice in internet exchanges: in Taiwan as well as in other areas, it is through the growing availability of cyber technologies and services that marginal subjects have found or founded their communities. The numerous sexually-oriented bulletin board systems and chat rooms cannot even begin to reflect the immense diversity of sexual interests and tastes that are now permeating cyber space. New forms of identity as well as intimate liaisons are being created all the time. Be it sexually active women, teenage and adult homosexuals, closeted and open bisexuals, people with multiple sex partners, part-time or full-time sex workers, learning or practicing S/Mers, cross-generation lovers, devout nudists, hard-line body modificationists, etc.—all have found a new means of communication to build their solidarity through the internet. New information is disseminated, new pleasures are exchanged, new debates are waged. The internet has become a most important channel through which individuals are fashioning their identities and embodiments, and the identities and embodiments serve to further affirm and support their sexual practices and discourses. New sexual communities, new sexual counter cultures and sexual counter discourses, and even new hybrid sexual subjects announce the arrival of an unprecedented vibrant sex revolution.

In the case of Taiwan with which I am more familiar, the internet has proved to be a most powerful tool for organizing and politicizing sexual minorities—gays and lesbians in particular. Coming out has become much more manageable and open through rehearsals on the internet; various sexual closets have been replaced by open discussions and exchanges. In the past two years, transgender persons have also built up enough rapport on the internet that they are now meeting regularly and discussing plans to start a hotline for the differently gendered. In other words, contacts established in virtual reality are now taking active steps to change the “real” world.

Furthermore, the specific qualities of cyber space liaisons make it possible for identities to be, as many gender/sexuality theoreticians put it, truly “fluid.” That is, identities are no longer fixed or innate, but actively “assumed,” taken up, fashioned and performed, mixed and matched, and eventually given up only to assume a series of other gender/sexual identities. Nowhere else is this identity formation process more actively carried out on the Internet. I recently attended a conference where a young Taiwanese gay detailed how cyber drag queens flirted with existing categories of gender and sexuality by representing femininity in such a way that it made masculinity look very queer, and the drag queens successfully established various kinds of erotic relationships with partners of all genders in the cyber world through this form of gender performativity (Lin).

When anthropologist Cleo Odzer wrote her book *Virtual Spaces: Sex and the Cyber Citizen* (1997), the use of the term “cyber citizen” in the book title carries profound implications for sexual minorities. For the internet promises a utopia

where sexual stigma and oppression would be replaced by full citizenship in a more equal and free world. And the daily practices of net citizens are to a more or less degree working toward realizing such a utopia.

Interactive Technologies and Intimate Relationships

If sexual practices and alternative discourses about them are proliferating on the internet, if sexual contacts are being established among people who would have never been able to hook up with one another in the “real” world, if the fluidity and politicization of sexual identities are now being forged on the internet, then how would net citizens’ experiences with cyber sexuality and related issues affect their intimate relationships? This is an often speculated question.

Much warning has been levied by those who worry about the impact of the new medium and technology, and many have reiterated the observation that members of the net generation seem to have loose morals and a strong indifference toward one-to-one relationships when it comes to sex. Yet, such characteristics of contemporary intimate contacts are not necessarily “created” or “brought on” by cyber technology; in fact, they can at best be said to have been “facilitated” by the use of new technologies such as the internet and the cell phone. Anthony Giddens, among others, has already noted that late modern intimate relationships are marked by unprecedented independence and equality cultivated by none other than recent developments in the capitalistic mode of production and a highly individualized consumer-oriented economy. With such strong individuality, maintaining an intimate relationship, where compromises are demanded and frequent, is becoming a formidable task for many who would now rather terminate a dysfunctional relationship than making every effort to stick with it. Serial monogamies or multiple relationships have thus become commonplace. The internet and the cell phone only function to facilitate the management of such volatile connections. In addition, people are now entering intimate relationships with a different set of expectations: they may still harbor dreams of perfect loyalty, but at the same time the hazard of possible affairs is widely acknowledged.

Such characteristics in the personality and style of the net generation have been well-noted by researchers such as Don Tapscott and it is believed that such developments may very well impact on the overall formation of intimate relationships. For one thing, cyber space is participatory space, and the emphasis is no longer on the passive reception of information but on the search--which the net generation control. On the net, blessed are those who take the initiative to locate or create possibilities. Our world of highly customized products and services, plus a highly customized net environment shaped by the individual, have made net citizens all the more individualized. They tend to value independence and autonomy much more than the previous generation and they value individual freedoms and rights. The right to be left alone. The right to privacy. The right to have and express their own views. The right to change their minds with one click of the mouse. Likewise, they have developed more emotional and intellectual openness, as well as free expression and strong views. Such transformations in individuality and the shifting boundaries of personhood are bound to impact upon the formation of intimate relationships, a formation that to a more or less extent demands the blurring of personal boundaries.

These new formations of the self are changing not only the nature of intimacy but also the way people negotiate sexual contacts. Instead of being timid and silent about their sexual desires and needs, as the older generation were brought up to be, the net generation tend to be quite direct and clear about what they want. Intentions and specificities in taste were communicated without much reservation, and rejections are brushed aside with only mild frustration as they do not carry the dire consequences and humiliations that often accompany frustrated real-life invitations. After all, there are thousands of other possibilities on the internet waiting to be explored.

Of course not every member of the net generation has attained the degree of ease that sex liberationists dream of. Still, the frequency and availability of sexual encounters on the internet do make it easier for people to deal with sexual failures or successes.

New Forces of Control over Cyber Sex

Historically, all forms of new media face suspicion and are liable to be subjected to excessive regulation as they spark fears of the potential power of transgression that the new media may incur. The invention of television triggered decades of debates over its dangers and harmful influences on the young. Now, the Internet is receiving the same kind of treatment, exception in a much stronger fashion. Various attempts to censor and control its content have been proposed in different countries and new devices of screening and monitoring are being developed and marketed all over the world. Parents, teachers and other adults seem to be extremely frightened by the fact that the powerful new tools of this digital age are in the hands of their children while adults themselves are left out of the game.

Interestingly, while censorship in previous centuries focused upon the political content of communication; for our day and age, censorship and control of internet communication in most countries concentrated on its sexual content. And the urge to control, fueled by the adults' realization of their own ineptness when it comes to new technologies, is so strong that the imposed legislations usually extend to cover a very broad area.

To begin with an obvious example. The US Communications Decency Act was passed in February 1996. It imposed broadcast-style content regulations on the open, decentralized Internet, severely restricting the right to freedom of speech and expression guaranteed by the US Constitution. While child pornography, obscenity, or using the Internet to stalk children are already illegal under law, the CDA flatly prohibits the posting of any "indecent" or "patently offensive" materials in a public forum on the Internet--including web pages, newsgroups, chat rooms, or online discussion lists. This would not only include the texts of classic fiction such as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and James Joyce's *Ulysees*, but also any open discussions, negotiations, or exchanges of experience of cyber sex—as they may very well be considered offensive and indecent by some people if not by all. This legislation thus threatened the very existence of the Internet as a means of free expression, education, and political discourse. After much debate and public outcry, the US Supreme Court in a landmark 1997 decision ruled that the Internet is a unique medium entitled to the highest protection under the free speech protections of the First

Amendment. This gives the Internet the same free speech protection as print and the outcome of this case will have a tremendous impact on the future of the First Amendment in the information age.

Legislations that monitor and regulate sexual speech on the internet had also been proposed in Taiwan but they began from a place far away from the internet. To prevent the highly-profiled problem of the trafficking of aborigine teenage girls into forced prostitution, religious women's groups had begun working on establishing a special by-law by 1993, a legislation that would include prosecuting advertising through any medium that lures young girls into selling sex for money. During the course of these efforts, the nature of teenage prostitution was also changing dramatically. Increasing numbers of teenagers are starting their own sex trade, mostly through voluntary part-time sex work, better known as compensated companionship (*enjo-kosai* in Japanese). As the internet is increasingly used in setting up communication channels between the young and other age groups, the final version of the by-law was amended in 1999 so that anyone found to transmit through electronic signals messages that may be interpreted as "hinting" at promoting or incurring sex for money (be it involving teenagers or non-teenagers, self or others) is liable to be sentenced to imprisonment under five years plus up to \$1 million in fine.

Incidentally, just to give you some idea of the disproportionate severity of this penalty--if you are caught with your pants down in bed in a love hotel doing sex for money, the penalty is three days detention by Taiwanese Maintaining Social Order Law. But if you post a message that vaguely refers to sex for money, you are liable to be sentenced to up to five years imprisonment and up to \$1 million in fine according to this Prevention of Child and Teenager Prostitution Bi-Law. Furthermore, the police merit for solution of such cases is six times higher than catching a common criminal. That's why in the past two years, many a Taiwanese police devoted most of their law and order efforts to entrapping net citizens who might consent to sex for money requests by police sting operations, or those whose postings on the internet looked suspicious of being involved in such monetary exchanges for sexual services. Over a thousand cases have been brought to court and many young students have suffered the stigma and punishment, not because they have actually conducted any form of sex work, but simply because they have posted some messages on the net that were interpreted as such. Human rights groups are protesting that such a by law is a serious violation of our basic right to freedom of speech, not to mention freedom to associate.

As the Taiwanese by-law functions to prohibit the use of the internet for negotiating sexual contacts and in some cases sexual transactions, Japanese legislators in the meantime are considering imposing laws prohibiting the use of cell phones to conduct negotiations in *enjo-kosai*. Other countries and other governments are also working to infringe upon communication on the internet. The important thing here is that the enforcement of such prohibition measures rarely makes any distinction between regular socializing interactions and money-oriented sexual transactions. And the truth of the matter is: discussions of transaction may not lead up to transaction at all. And to punish people simply for their sexual speech on the internet or the sexual interest they demonstrated on the internet is just as unreasonable and undemocratic as punishing people simply for their political dissidence. What is being punished is actually sexual dissidence.

Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society, one of the basic conditions for its progress. And the internet, as an expanding domain of social exchange, offers us a wonderful chance to create new modes of interaction and a new ethics for intimate relationships in the digital age. In that sense, unwarranted censorship and policing of the internet needs to be resisted at all costs.

Sexual Dissidence in Cyber Space

Cyber sex is changing our definition of and attitudes towards sex, but internet technologies would not have brought forth the sex revolution we are witnessing today without the various and diverse sexual practices that numerous net citizens have invented and created and practiced on the internet day and night. They stayed up later than the net monitors, they slept less than the net police, they are much more creative and imaginative than net authorities. Many cyber sex practitioners have become sex dissidents or sex liberationists because their sexual practices are being targeted by the authorities. Yet in their measures to uphold their basic rights, they are trying their best to maintain our right to anonymity, our right to freedom of speech, our right to freely disseminate information, our right to free association, our right to resist stigma against marginal sexualities, etc. As such, some of these pioneers have suffered imprisonment or other punishments because of these practices, and their sufferings make up a recent chapter in the history of sexual oppression.

These sex dissidents often create new alternative discourses from their own sexual practices and from the debates they waged against other net citizens. These alternative discourses about sex express strong resistance against existing sexual morality and sexual attitudes, reinterpreting the significance and meaning of sex as well as gender, sexual orientation, personal identity, etc. in the virtual world. And such reflections and reinterpretations of their own alternative sexual practices have provided net citizens with a wealth of different sexual views and values that serve to enrich existing erotic culture.

The Internet is a social, cultural, commercial, educational and entertainment global communications system whose legitimate purpose is to benefit and empower online users, while lowering the barriers to the creation and the distribution of expressions throughout the world. As virtual reality technology advances, cyber sex will be on the cutting edge of opening up more space for differing views and practices. As privacy and freedom of expression are fundamental human rights recognized in all major international and regional agreements and treaties, the respect for human rights should also include respect for freedom of expression, and respect for privacy of communications and personal data. And all the more in the new world created by erotic uses of cyber technologies.

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