**Sex and the Internet: how our prurient desires have diffused, driven and propelled the information highway.**

By Eze Onukwube

Email: ezeuchey2k@gmail.com

Sex and the Internet are juggernauts whose collision has precipitated a host of new sexual behavior and mores; or accentuated the agency of already existing practices. At first blush, these two phenomena might appear diametrically dissimilar, but their intersection has nonetheless opened up a Pandora’s Box, inaugurating a host of issues of that have given rise sexual disorders linked to online pornography. Their disparate nature epitomizes the dual aspects of the reality we live in today: sex’s locus is in the real world of tactile tangibility where its passions are ultimately consummated; whereas the Internet resides somewhere out there in the virtual ether referred to as cyberspace. One is a gift from nature as antiquated as history, the other is largely a creation of the 20th century innovation, a culmination of technological advances reaching back to the silicon chip and integrated circuits.

Sex has presumably been with us from the beginning of time. After all, sex how we all got here. Its antiquity notwithstanding, sex’s popularity has not waned; on the contrary, it appears to aging quite well with time. Technological advances may have grown in leaps and bounds, but the old-fashioned sex act – bodies in intimate proximity writhing together until paroxysm erupts – has done quite well on its own without any needed embellishments. The global population stood at a little over 1.6 billion at the turn of the 20th century[[1]](#footnote-1). Circa 2019, it has grown to over 7.7 billion and more than doubled in the past 50 years[[2]](#footnote-2). If sex were a tradeable commodity, Wall Street would have long declared it to be in the exuberance territory of a bull market.

For the most part, the Internet has been a boon to modern life in a myriad of ways, unleashing innovation and creativity unlike any other era in human history. It has boosted economies-of-scale, eliminated middlemen and the costs associated with intermediation, while removing media gatekeepers and providing everyone a soapbox to voice their opinion. Sex and technology are curious bedfellows, pun intended.

According to John Tierney, a fellow at Columbia University, there has always what he called an “erotic technological impulse,”[[3]](#footnote-3) whereby man uses the extant technology in furtherance of prurient desires. Tierney cited clay-fired figures dating back tens of thousands of years, which depicted “women with large breasts and behinds[[4]](#footnote-4).” Ditto for female nudes displayed on the walls of La Magdelaine caves from 15,000 BC[[5]](#footnote-5). The main precursor to what approximates our current era of depicting real-life imagery occurred in 1896, when Le Coucher de la Mariée, reputed to be the first erotic image captured on film, was released[[6]](#footnote-6). A woman in the grainy film was performing a striptease – tame by today’s standards – but nonetheless foreshadowing the deluge of erotica to be purveyed through mass communication channels. Obviously, this predilection for the prurient predated the Internet. In fact, this symbiotic relationship between technological innovation and the lurid led Frederick E. Allen to remark, “every new information technology since the printing press has spawned pornography[[7]](#footnote-7).”

This begs the question: what compels sex to drive technological evolution? Perhaps because porn, that apotheosis of the sexual eroticism, provides the momentum that pushes technology in its early, incipient stages[[8]](#footnote-8) into wider acceptance. In *Pornography, Technology and Progress*, Jonathan Coopersmith reveals the numerous ways sex has not only encouraged the acceptance of new technologies – of which the Internet is a prime example – but also facilitated further development of same technologies. Adult entertainment products are usually the impetus that pushes technology to find initial markets, consequently shifting public perceptions of it and thereby ushering it into the mainstream 5. Hindsight maybe 20-20, but the Internet’s longevity was never preordained. The porn industry first validated the use case for online credit transactions. After the Internet was launched, it was the adult industry that made sure it found enough early consumers to keep it around, in addition to birthing the streaming video, tracking devices and online credit card transaction; ultimately pioneering what we know todays as ecommerce[[9]](#footnote-9).

Coopersmith also asserts that pornography is an industry that has been able to successfully and quickly adopt, develop, and diffuse new technology[[10]](#footnote-10). As early adopters, porn consumers assist in both establishing a market, then building familiarity and expertise with the new technology[[11]](#footnote-11). They do this at the crucial incipient, phase, taking on the risk of a hitherto unproven technology and exerting “a disproportionate influence over technologies at the stage when they are new and glitchy and expensive and difficult to use[[12]](#footnote-12).”

Though technology has routinely lent its resources for the pursuit of the decadent, the Internet stands out in a rarified class of its own. It dwarfs other forms of technology that preceded it in several significant ways. For one, the sheer preponderance of R-rated material on this platform eclipses that of previous mediums. The number of websites dedicated to porn relative to the overall Internet is shrinking, but porn ultimately consumes a lot of bandwidth. While only about 4 percent of websites are considered to be porn[[13]](#footnote-13), this is in itself a considerable amount given the explosive growth of the Internet. More so when juxtaposed against the fact of the Internet’s low barriers of entry, which permits virtually anyone to launch a website if they so desire. However, what paints a clearly picture of the velocity of traffic garnered by pornographic sites is gleaned off queries from the ubiquitous smartphones, where “web and mobile searches clock in higher at 13 and 20 percent respectively[[14]](#footnote-14),” with respect to porn searches.

*A Billion Wicked Thoughts: What the Internet Tells Us About Sex and Relationships* is touted as the first such massive undertaking since the Kinsey Reports in the mid-20th century. According to the authors – computational neuroscientists Ogi Ogas, Ph.D., and Sai Gaddam, Ph.D. – in 1991 before the birth of the Internet, there were fewer than 90 porn magazines[[15]](#footnote-15). Twenty years later, the book asserts that CYBERsitter blocked more than 2.5 million porn sites[[16]](#footnote-16). Underscoring the pervasiveness of use, their study finds approximately 100 million men in North America logged on to porn in 2008 alone[[17]](#footnote-17). What distinguishes this study from others is how they use the Internet as “a digital fossil record to track the footprints of human desire,” as a treasure trove, massive in its scope.

The second manner in which the Internet has dubiously distinguished itself from previous purveyors of smut is the rate of addictive behavior it has perpetuated. Before the advent of the Internet, those desiring to view pornographic images had to go through the inconvenience of visiting adult-themed bookstores or public movie theaters. However, the cloak of anonymity, in addition to the ease of accessibility and affordability provided by the Internet has attracted a wider audience[[18]](#footnote-18). By providing a much larger audience for pornography, the Internet has provided the impetus for turning its dysfunction assume the potential of an epidemic.

Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat did an illuminating study on the impact of consuming visual sexual stimuli facilitated by the anonymity, accessibility, and affordability of the Internet. The premise of their study rested on the preposition that pornography consumption bears acute resemblance to behavioral traits such as novelty-seeking, reward-seeking and addictive behavior[[19]](#footnote-19). According to the scholars, “frequency of pornography consumption has been shown to predict various negative outcome measures in humans[[20]](#footnote-20).” Amongst the fallouts linked to frequent Internet pornography consumption were its impact on partnerships, which resulted in participants reporting a decrease in sexual satisfaction and an inclination to adopt pornographic scripts[[21]](#footnote-21). They cited a Swedish study showing adolescent boys exposed to daily consumption of pornography displayed increased interest in deviant and illegal types of pornography, with a more frequent desire to actualize these in real life[[22]](#footnote-22).

It would seem the pulsating demand for sexually explicit content on the Internet is adequately furnished. For those willing to look, the Internet is awash with sexually oriented material, offering near free access to pornography unencumbered by time and space[[23]](#footnote-23). The corollary to this trend is that sex addiction has become a problem, the most common form of online behavior among users[[24]](#footnote-24). To curb the deleterious effects of this growing epidemic, a clarion call goes out to public health officials to explore the risk factors associated with this addiction and understand how the Internet enables sexually explicit behavior to develop in order to nip the problem the bud.

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3. David Kushner, “A Brief History of Porn on the Internet,” https://www.wired.com/story/brief-history-porn-Internet/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kushner, “A Brief History of Porn on the Internet.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. “Le Coucher de la Mariée,” Wikipedia, accessed April 17, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le\_Coucher\_de\_la\_Mari%C3%A9e [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Frederick E. Allen, “When Sex Drives Technological Innovation,” *American Heritage* 51, no. 5 (2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Patchen Barss, *The Erotic Engine: How Pornography has Powered Mass Communication, from Gutenberg to Google* (Canada: Anchor, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ross Benes, PORN: The Hidden Engine That Drives Innovation In Tech, [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jonathan Coopersmith, “Pornography, Technology and Progress,” *International Committee for the History of Technology (ICOHTEC)* 4 (1998): 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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13. Katharina Buchholz, “How Much of the Internet Consists of Porn?” https://www.statista.com/chart/16959/share-of-the-Internet-that-is-porn/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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17. Ogi Ogas and Sai Gaddam. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Al Cooper, Cybersex: The Dark Side of the Force: A Special Issue of the Journal Sexual Addiction & Compulsivity. London, United Kingdom: Brunner-Routledge; 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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21. Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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