



Computers, the Internet, and New Media

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For most gay men and lesbians born before the late 1970s, their first encounter with a community of likeminded individuals is likely to have come about either via a gay magazine or through visiting a gay bar. Same-sex loving people living in rural areas, where lesbian and gay media and institutions were nonexistent or difficult to find, often experienced extreme isolation and were prevented through lack of information from networking with others who shared their interests and desires.

Since the advent of the Internet in the early 1990s, however, lesbians, gay men, and sexual and gender nonconformists of all kinds have been able to use a variety of CMC (computer-mediated communications) in order to meet and network both on- and offline. Although the existence of a "digital divide" between those with computer access and those without means that large numbers of economically disadvantaged people are still unable to make use of this technology, the Internet has undoubtedly proved revolutionary for lesbians, gay men, transgendered individuals, and a host of other queer people in a number of important ways.

Community and Identity Formation

Generally speaking, families, schools, churches, youth groups, and other community organizations are not supportive of sexual or gender difference. The mass media also tend to present stereotyped and often negative images of queer people and lifestyles. As a result, young people who feel themselves to be "different" from their peers often experience feelings of alienation, self-hatred, and depression. It is no surprise that the suicide rate among lesbian and gay youth far exceeds that of those with heterosexual orientations.

Prior to the advent of the Internet, finding positive, non-biased information about sexual or gender difference was extremely difficult, given the pathological tone that most medical and psychological textbooks--often the only books on the subject of homosexuality available in libraries--adopted in relation to queer sexualities. Finding a sympathetic mentor who could help a young and questioning person come to terms with his or her feelings of alienation and difference was even more difficult. Hence, young queers had few opportunities to manage creatively an identity judged "deviant" by those around them.

What the Internet offers is a variety of safe online or "virtual" spaces in which young people can seek out information from the many websites offering guides to such things as glbtq community organizations and help-lines, as well as safe sex and peer support groups. While taking the first step into a gay bar takes a lot of courage (and is impossible for under-age youth or those in rural areas), communicating with others via a computer network can be accomplished in the relative safety of one's home, office, or local library. Although many relationships established online remain virtual, others can develop into offline friendships and even relationships, and it is becoming increasingly common for young people's debut into the gay, lesbian, or transgender worlds to be made via a computer network.

Scholars of new media have pointed out the *interactive* nature of much CMC, which goes far beyond

searching for and downloading information. Many queers who feel different from others around them create their own home pages, which offer opportunity for self-expression and self-fashioning. The personal home page is a safe space in which queer people can communicate aspects of themselves that would be unspeakable in their offline lives (to family, teachers, bosses, or ministers).

Communication may also be done through "blogging"--the keeping of an online diary or commentary on their thoughts, ideas, or activities--or through more visual means, such as the publishing of photos and artwork on their sites. Many cross-dressers, for instance, before they have managed to network with offline communities of people who share their interests, will experiment online with their female persona, sharing photos, stories, and fantasies with other cross-dressers whose sites are linked together via web rings.

"Coming out," the definitive step toward developing a lesbian, gay, or transgender identity, increasingly occurs online for many young people, underlining the importance of the Internet as a space for self-actualization. Hence, when meeting up with others in the community for the first time, many young people are better able to negotiate these face-to-face interactions, having already tried out their gay, lesbian, or transgender identities in cyberspace.

In addition, the Internet offers a number of educational sites, including preeminently www.glbtc.com among several others, which offer a wealth of accurate information about glbtq history and culture. These sites help remedy an old, and still active, homophobic project of denial and erasure of queer history. By making people aware that glbtq individuals have made enormous contributions to the world's cultural achievements, these sites not only increase understanding of history, literature, and art, but they also help repair the damage inflicted on glbtq people by mainstream society's incessant attacks on their self-esteem.

Sex and Relationships

Sex-related websites, particularly those offering pornographic content are ubiquitous on the Internet and have made a wide variety of sexual representations available to all. While gay (and to a lesser extent lesbian) pornographic magazines have been available since the 1960s and videos since the 1970s, their sales were restricted to specific outlets. Moreover, due to their expense and other restrictions, they were generally unavailable to young people. Also, due to commercial factors, their contents were usually limited to a narrow range of "ideal types." Many people--especially those who do not conform to ideals of age, race, beauty, gender role, or desire--did not find themselves reflected in these products.

Online pornography, however, is available to all adults with computer access and is frequently free. Websites such as *BananaGuide* (for gay men) and *CyberDyke Network* (for lesbians) offer reviews of some of the Internet's best porn sites, both free and pay, and help users locate material suited to their interests without running the risk of coming across illegal material or endless porn loops that make it impossible to shut down the browser.

Internet porn offers a much wider range of body types and activities than does conventional pornography, so it is possible to find sexually gratifying images and narratives to suit almost any persuasion. Sexual interests considered "abject" even within lesbian and gay communities, such as water sports, sadomasochism, genital piercing, cross-dressing, intergenerational sex, and a variety of fetishes, are well represented in specialist galleries on many porn sites; and many amateur communities dedicated to these activities produce and disseminate their own porn.

Also, Internet users can participate in the world of pornography not simply as consumers (or voyeurs) of other people's products, but also as producers. This can range from the posting of stories, still pictures, and video clips on a personal home page, to "real time" web cameras that allow visitors to watch a site owner engaged in sexual activity, or for two or more site owners to watch each other. For many users, this can be an empowering experience and enables queer men and women to explore their sexual fantasies in a safer environment than that offered by clubs, bars, or saunas.

Research suggests that cybersex has been particularly liberating for women who have conventionally been stigmatized for showing too much interest in sex or in sexual acts considered "dirty" such as the use of sex toys for self-pleasure. While porn sites catering to gay men are overwhelmingly visual, many sites featuring erotica by and for women are more textual in nature and include a whole genre of "slash fiction" where online communities of women fans imagine sexual scenarios taking place between the male heroes of well-known television shows and movies.

Perhaps most importantly, the Internet has offered women the opportunity to explore and develop their sexualities in community with other women outside the confines of a male-dominated economy.

The Internet has also facilitated offline sexual encounters by making it easier to find partners. Sites such as *CruisingForSex* are non-commercial ventures (although this site does also offer members' areas for a fee) that cater to men who have sex with men. They offer regional bulletin boards where users can post their profiles, pictures, and preferred sexual activities and enable men to contact other men in their area or to arrange a meeting while on vacation or a business trip.

These sites are especially important for a wide range of men who enjoy sex with other men but who do not identify with the categories "gay" or "bisexual" and who would never step inside a gay bar or purchase a gay magazine. These sites are also important means of communicating safe-sex information to men who have little or no contact with the gay community.

Also included on cruising sites are advertisements from commercial sex-workers known as escorts who are available in most major cities. Particularly useful are boards that offer reviews of these workers where clients can evaluate the services offered. "Instant sex" is also offered via real-time chat sites where men can either engage then and there in textual sex (humorously referred to as "one-handed typing"), or arrange to meet up offline with participants in their locale.

Research suggests that lesbians are also using the Internet to meet partners, but that their use differs from that of gay men. Lesbians are more likely to use the chat feature of a website in order to get to know a prospective partner before organizing an offline meeting, whereas gay men often prefer to negotiate a sexual interaction immediately. Lesbians are also less likely to post pictures of themselves, particularly those of a sexual nature, due to fears about their security. This suggests that the Internet may not be experienced as a "safe" space by everyone.

Problems Connected with CMC

The above has offered an upbeat account of how new modes of computer-mediated communication have had a beneficial and empowering effect for a variety of queer people and communities. However, the Internet has come under fire from some quarters precisely because it makes a whole range of sexual activities and representations so freely available.

Firstly, concern is raised about the easy access that minors have to pornographic material. Of particular concern is the manner in which the Internet can be used by pedophiles to traffic in images of children. Internet sex is considered, too, to have a deleterious effect on some adults who may become "addicted" to online sex to the extent that online relationships supersede and exclude face-to-face relationships with other people.

Some research also suggests that the increase in sexual partners facilitated by the Internet, and the anonymous manner in which sex can be arranged, has resulted in an increase in sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis and HIV.

Moreover, if the Internet has provided opportunities for individuals to gain accurate and positive

information about alternate sexualities and glbtq history and culture, it has also afforded anti-gay activists and hate groups an opportunity to spread disinformation and defamation.

However, none of these problems is insurmountable. Filtering software can block out most material with sexual content on computers accessed by children and, contrary to media reports, child pornography is scrupulously avoided by all legitimate porn sites, which refuse to post images of minors under age 18. The few illegal sites that traffic in this material are monitored by police and citizens' groups and these sites' visitors are often traced through their credit-card details and prosecuted for their activities.

Media reports about Internet sex "addiction" and the spread of disease are also often exaggerated. On the contrary, the Internet has proven a very effective mechanism for spreading information about safe sex beyond communities of self-identified gay men. Many sites offer online discussion forums moderated by health-care professionals who can counsel and guide people with sexual health concerns and direct them to relevant offline services.

Moreover, at the very heart of the democratic faith in free speech is the belief that in the competition of ideas truth will eventually triumph. Hence, the counter to the abuse of free speech by those who propagate falsehoods, intolerance, and hatred is more speech by those who argue on behalf of truth, tolerance, and acceptance of sexual and gender difference.

In sum, computer-mediated communications available via the Internet offer great benefits to queer people that are only partially replicated by conventional print and other media. These benefits include the ability to discover accurate information, network with likeminded individuals, and establish a safe space for the development of a range of identities and communities. Most important, perhaps, is the opportunity afforded glbtq people to speak in their own voices and represent themselves--an opportunity only infrequently offered by other mass media.

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