Feminist Views of Cybersex: Victimization, Liberation, and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Cybersex can be defined as a social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied. This article first describes video- and text-based cybersex as a new kind of sexual encounter with its own particularities. Then the feminist literature on cybersex is reviewed revealing two basic perspectives: The victimization perspective interprets cybersex as a heterosexist practice, and focuses on how women and girls as individuals and as a group are harmed by online harassment, virtual rape, and cyberprostitution. From this viewpoint it is the (heterosexual) male who seeks cybersex and forces it on the female, who is supposed to be online for all kinds of reasons but surely not for sexual ones. The liberation perspective, in contrast, focuses on the options computer-mediated communication offers women and girls who actively seek sexual pleasure online: Looks don't matter, it's easy to find mates, anonymity minimizes social control, the physical distance between the parties, and the computer's off switch prevent dangerous or harmful situations. From that viewpoint, cybersex frees females to explore their sexualities more safely and to enjoy more sex, better sex, and different sex. This article criticizes both the victimization and the liberation perspective and offers an integrative empowerment perspective that acknowledges power discourse as an essential sexual issue online and offline.

INTRODUCTION

WHAT KIND OF INFLUENCE does cybersex have on gender roles? The feminist literature on the subject is controversial: some reject cybersex because it contributes to the subordination of women under men and masculine sexualities (victimization model). Others welcome cybersex, as it assists women in freeing themselves from patriarchal norms and exercising control over their own sexualities and lives (liberalization model). This paper criticizes the one-sidedness of both models and suggests combining them to an empowerment model.

CYBERSEX

What do we mean by cybersex? Unfortunately, much of the feminist literature on cybersex skips a systematic explanation of terminology as well as a detailed description of the phenomenon and immediately proceeds to

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blanket evaluations. But evaluations need to be grounded on an empirically-supported description of the subject in order to be able to claim validity. This article therefore first differentiates among the various forms of cybersex and describes them in greater detail.

Cybersex is often used as a collective term for all sorts of sexually related entertainment, information and personal contact offers available in computer Networks respective "in cyberspace." This broad term "cybersex" covers so many different activities and contents that it is of practically no use for the social scientific discourse as long as individual phenomena are not differentiated from one another. In a narrow sense, cybersex is understood to be a computer-mediated interpersonal interaction in which the participants are sexually motivated, meaning they are seeking sexual arousal and satisfaction. The terms compusex, online sex, modemsex, Netsex, virtual sex, Net-sleazing or cybering are also used. Cybersex is not a human-machine interaction and therefore clearly differs from solo sex in that it is a social happening: solitary fantasizing and/or use of erotica do not have to include an active partner, but within the course of cybersexual interactions the participants must continually adapt to one another, they experience consent, rapport, and enthusiasm as well as rejection, misunderstanding or violation of personal boundaries. They do not just participate in a shared production of text but also let each other know about their sexual motivation, arousal and perhaps even both masturbate at their computers at the same time. Cybersex is therefore not a conversation about sex, but is a form of sexual encounter in itself.

This article concentrates on cybersex in the narrower sense of the word. But even cybersex in its narrower sense is not a homogenous phenomenon. On the contrary, there are different forms of cybersex, each with its own psychosocial implications, dependent on not only the technical conditions under which it takes place, but also dependant upon the internal social conditions and the external social conditions. The analytical reconstruction of the phenomenon proposed here is based on the results of surveys,[1,2] interviews,[3–7] and field studies.[8] In addition, it also refers to personal narratives, whereby some are extensive first-hand narratives,[9–14] and some are short statements and case descriptions which can be found in fact and advice books[15–19] as well as in online forums.[20]

Technical conditions

Computer-mediated interpersonal interaction can take place by means of virtual reality technology, online video conferences or digital text exchange. Accordingly, dependent on the technical conditions under which it takes place, three forms of cybersex can be distinguished. Each of these forms allows (or does not allow) for specific ways of expressing desire. The three forms are: virtual reality-based cybersex, video-based cybersex and text-based cybersex.

Virtual reality-based cybersex. Entering into a three-dimensional, audiovisual, and tactile virtual reality via a full-body data suit and data helmet, expressively for the purpose of cybersex is a scenario that has often been discussed but is still far from being reality.[21–24] The current bandwidth of the Net is not wide enough to transmit such huge amounts of data in real time, nor do interface devices currently exist that could provide a pleasant or even orgiastic tele-stimulation of the entire body, including the sexual organs. (Computer-mediated remote control of sex toys that simulate the penis, mouth, or vagina is possible, however. These devices are marketed as teledildonics or cyberdildonics. Systematic studies or descriptions of actual experiences with these devices unfortunately are not yet available.)

Video-based cybersex. In video-based cybersex the participants make contact with one another via online video conferences. An online video conference session becomes video-based cybersex when sexually motivated participants take off their clothing, expose their bodies (especially their sexual organs), and watch each other during masturbation.[25,26] Video-based cybersex is primarily about exhibitionist and voyeurist desires. In addition to the video transmission, an audio or text dialogue may also take place. In order to participate in online video conferences, a computer networked with

a video camera, a microphone and the corresponding software are necessary (e.g., CU-SeeMe). Because online video conferences are generally used only by a small minority of the Net community (as opposed to chatting, which is very popular) video-based cybersex plays a significantly smaller role than text-based cybersex. Accordingly, it is seldom mentioned in the scientific literature on cybersex.

Text-based cybersex. Text-based cybersex is based on a very quick exchange of short and explicit text messages. A computer-mediated text dialogue becomes text-based cybersex when the participants describe body characteristics to one another, verbalize sexual actions and reactions, and make believe that the virtual happenings are real. During text-based cybersex, participants can neither see nor hear, neither smell, nor taste, nor touch each other. Instead, that which often remains unspoken must be put into words. Text-based cybersex requires the verbalization of sexual desire to an extent completely unheard of in face-to-face encounters. This verbalization includes not only detailed wording but also the written expression of sexual sensations, whereby one's own statements are mirrored for one to see on the monitor. An entire row of services for real time text exchange are available in computer networks, whereby Multi User Domain/Dimension/Dungeon (MUDs) and chats are the most relevant for cybersex encounters. Accordingly, from a technical perspective, two sub-forms of text-based cybersex can be differentiated: tinysex and hot chat.

Tinysex is the term for text-based cybersex that takes places in a MUD.[27–31] A MUD is a computer-created, interactive text environment in which many persons simultaneously interact with one another and with the objects in their virtual (i.e., nonmaterial, purely informational) environment. MUDs can be classified according to their themes and functions as well as their programming languages. The term tinysex is derived from an early family of MUDs known as TinyMUDs. If a person logs into a MUD via TelNet, World Wide Web, or a MUD-Client, she is then represented there by a virtual person or a virtual being. We can freely choose the type of virtual character we embody via our written self-descriptions, only we must adapt them to the theme of the respective MUD.

In addition to text-based MUDs, there are also graphic MUDs. In graphic MUDs the participants are represented through graphic images (e.g., a photo or a comic figure). Graphic MUDs are not, at their current level of technical development, suited to cybersexual interaction because the graphic representations (so-called avatars) are hardly capable of movement.[32]

Interpersonal text-based interactions in a MUD consist of verbal comments in first-person singular (Legion: "Hi, how are you?") and of virtual actions in the third-person singular (Legion cuddles you). In addition, every interpersonal interaction sequence in a MUD is also determined by the surroundings in which it takes place. As such, tinysex could, for example, take place on a spaceship, in a dungeon, or in a forest glade. The sexual partners would then be confronted with the special characteristics or inhabitants of those virtual locations—be it aliens, robbers, or mosquitoes. Of course, the type of virtual characters in which people are represented also determine how erotic/sexual feelings and gestures can be best expressed: the virtual embodiment of a unicorn lends itself to different gestures than does that of an elf, a female warrior, or a Siamese tom cat. But even in human embodiment, MUDs open a whole new realm of possibilities: appearance, clothing and body strength can be newly defined, interesting possessions and dwellings can be acquired. Many MUDs offer play rooms which are furnished just for sexual purposes.

Lady's Orgy Room in LambdaMOO

[telNet lambda.moo.mud.org:8888]
[Connect guest]
Logging you in as 'Blue_Guest'
[@go Lady's Orgy Room]

Lady's Orgy Room: The first thing you notice are several restraints in the room and chains hanging from the ceiling. You smell the soft scent of sex from what went on here not long ago. In fact, you can almost hear the screams of pleasure bouncing off the walls. You notice a four-post bed with silky sheets. A sign on the south wall notes: NO MEN ALLOWED!!!!

Type "help here" for features and commands on this room. Exits lead west to Sensual Respites and northwest to the Sex Room.
Faustine, Autumn and hippie_girl are here.
Blue_Guest arrives.
Autumn says, "Hi Blue!"
   [say oh, hi]
You say, "oh, hi"
Autumn smiles at you.
   [:smiles at Autumn]
Blue_Guest smiles at Autumn.
   [look Autumn]
Autumn
   About five and a half feet tall with straight hair the colour of Autumn leaves hanging just past her shoulders. She is dressed in a black and brown patterned skirt with a black sweater that is a bit too big. It constantly falls off one shoulder. She is barefoot, and you notice that she has a tattoo of a Celtic design on her left ankle. There is always a slight smile hovering around the corners of her mouth.
   [say Autumn: hey, nice Tattoo :-)]
hippie_girl hugs Faustine warmly and offers her a joint.
you say, "Autumn: hey, nice Tattoo :-)"
Autumn grins, stretches her left leg gracefully and kicks you in the butt.
   [laugh]
You fall down laughing.
hippie_girl giggles.
   [:removes her blue dress and her shoes]
Blue_Guest removes her blue dress and her shoes.
   [sit on bed]
You pull back the top silk sheet of the bed and slip under it, feeling the fabric caress your skin.
Autumn follows you to the bed.

Hot chat is text-based cybersex which takes place with the help of a chat program.[33–35] Chat programs are much more simple to use than MUDs and are therefore significantly more popular. Chat forums can be found on online services such as AOL and CompuServe as well as on the Internet, where WebChats, Internet Relay Chat-Channels, and the like are available. During chatting, the real time computer-mediated exchange takes place at a single virtual meeting place in which only those present, represented by their chosen nicknames, can be seen. In comparison to MUDs there is no an interactive environment and almost no description of persons or objects. Sometimes hot chat takes place in a forum in front of an audience, but as a rule the participants withdraw from forums to direct person-to-person Net connections.

Jointly developed hot chat scenarios[36] can be very similar to everyday life ("We are in your bedroom, on the bed. I'm slowly undressing you . . .") and may even limit themselves to the factual description of the cybersex scenario itself ("I'm in my office, the door is locked. Chatting with you makes me so hot. I am touching myself now . . ."). The explicit reference to reality may include diverse, "remote-controlled" real actions, i.e. requesting one another, via the computer, to put on certain items of clothing, to assume certain positions, follow certain rules or use certain toys. But hot chat might also be about shared fantasy scenarios that would be neither desirable or possible to live out. ("We are in a health club doing our workouts, only we're both totally nude . . .").

While the characteristics of the surroundings play an important role in the virtual actions in tinysex, direct speech is predominant in hot chat. Though with the help of a vivid fantasy it is possible to conjure up virtual surroundings even during a chat session, be it a sophisticated historical backdrop or the realistic description of a bedroom. The participants can likewise vary their virtual embodiment: the person sitting at the computer might project themselves into cyberspace in their real body, with the clothes they are actually wearing, but they might also make significant changes so that they embody the ideal beauty norms. They might take on a certain personification in the sense of a sexual role play. They might change their sex or sexual orientation. All in all, however, virtual self-presentation in chatting tends to be much more realistic than in mudding.

Excerpt from a Hot Chat

Ulrike turns the light off.
Julien takes off his T-shirt.
Julien: that's better.

Julien: ⟨kiss⟩
Ulrike: giggles
Ulrike snuggles against your warm body
Julien snuggles up against you and caresses your breasts.
Ulrike asks herself what she should do.
Ulrike decides to do nothing for now and let herself be caressed.
Julien: very gently, with only his fingertips.
Ulrike feels her nipples hardening
Ulrike squeezes Julien's thigh
Julien kisses your breasts and nuzzles your nipples with his lips.
Ulrike's heart beats faster
Julien: . . . a hand is caressing your pussy
Ulrike: it is already wet
Julien wonders whether he should type with only one hand)
Julien: (he could support his head with the other . . .)
Ulrike: I don't mind
Ulrike: (in case you need my permission)
Julien lays you on your side
Julien: and lays your leg over his hip
Ulrike lays her upper leg over his hip
Julien moves one hand downward
Ulrike: oh no, that's not right, that position was different . . .
Julien: (agrees to the position of the upper leg)
Ulrike: the lower leg belongs under your hip and you upper leg . . .

The technical requirements for text-based cybersex are minimal: a networked computer with the appropriate (usually free) MUD- or chat-software is enough. Even so, text-based cybersex is not an option for everyone with access to the Internet. Besides an affinity for erotic verbalization, quick reading and typing skills, good writing ability and a strong power of imagination are necessary requirements.

Internal social conditions

The medium itself does not determine how video- or text-based cybersex proceeds in individual incidences. Instead, just like other types of sexual interaction, the individual preferences and skills of the participants and their relationship to one another are decisive. A broad distinction can be made between prostitutive cybersex and private cybersex, whereby the lat-

ter can be part of more or less committed personal relationships.

Prostitutive cybersex. In prostitutive cybersex men, women and couples offer to participate in actions that primarily or exclusively serve to sexually stimulate the client in exchange for money. Video-based cybersex prostitution consists of online peepshows or online sexshows. In some cases the action taking place in front of the camera directly follows the client's wishes or commands, as they are communicated in real time to the performing party. While observing the cyberprostitutes and chatting with them, the clientele itself cannot be seen. On one hand, the topics and the course of the proceedings in text-based cybersex prostitution are guided by the sexual interest of the customers. On the other hand, they are also guided by the economic interests of the prostitutes themselves and/or the people they work for or are exploited by. Online peepshows and online sexshows may only be entered after a valid credit card number has been filled into an online form, as payment is calculated in units of time (e.g. 1 dollar per minute). This form of billing is simultaneously an implicit form of age control, as minors do not usually have access to credit cards.

Private cybersex. Private cybersex consists of reciprocal manifestations of desire and mutual sexual enjoyment, economic concerns are not an issue—they are at most an indirect subject of conversation. Cybersex partners can easily be found in sexually related videoconference rooms, MUDs, or chat forums. These Net forums serve as places to meet and make contact with others, they are almost always free of charge. Public actions in front of the entire forum are rare and are often prohibited. Instead a nonpublic, person-to-person connection is used for erotic/sexual interaction after meeting in the forum. Private cybersex is sometimes a matter of brief contacts between strangers. Sometimes, however, cybersex takes place within a gradually developing Net relationship. The participants may have met one another on the Net in very different manners (e.g., via online personal ads or in a scientific mail-

ing list) and gradually become ever more explicit in the expression of their desires during the course of their growing interpersonal attraction and trust. Some of these erotic/sexual cyberrelationships are exclusive, romantic relationships in which actual being together and living together is desired. Just as in real life, however, such strong emotional involvement and commitment imply not only an enormous potential for happiness but also the risk of unhappiness—virtual love is capable of breaking real hearts. Other erotic contacts in the Net have the status of less committed acquaintance or friendship relationships, especially when those involved already have a satisfying partnership outside of the Net. Cybersex participants are sometimes familiar with one another's bodies. Sexually oriented Net contacts often exchange photographs. In close online relationships, personal meetings are not unusual. In addition, people who know one another personally sometimes fall back on cybersex when separated by distance.

External social conditions

Net encounters and Net relationships do not exist in and of themselves. They are dependent not only on internal events, but also become a more or less central component of a person's already existing social network. They are often especially relevant to existing partnerships and friendships.

Cybersex and partnerships. The question of faithfulness in existing partnerships or marriages becomes virulent in connection with cybersexual encounters.[37–40] While some couples explicitly admit to having cybersexual encounters and do not take them seriously because of their virtual nature, others do not make a distinction between virtual and real unfaithfulness. Some undertake cybersex activities together—watching one another having cybersex with a third party or contacting other couples together on the computer. The type of influence that cybersex has on existing partnerships, whether it is experienced as threatening, meaningless or enriching, is not a given but always depends on the manner in which the couple in-

volved agrees on cybersex activities—or does not agree on them.

Cybersex and friendships. Cybersexual contacts and relationships may lead to an estrangement from friends, for example when these friends abstain from the Net and/or laugh at, devalue or reject the online activities of the person in question. On the other hand, sexual and romantic online experiences may set off an intimate exchange among on- and offline friends from which both the cybersexual contacts and the friendships may benefit. Systematic studies on these issues unfortunately have not yet been undertaken.

VICTIMIZATION

The portrayal of cybersex in the previous sections has almost completely avoided the question of gender, which we now turn to. If one looks at the feminist literature on cybersex, two contrasting interpretations, victimization and liberation, can be filtered from the two dominating feminist paradigms (radical feminism and liberal feminism). The two perspectives will first be introduced as convincingly as possible, each in its typical pattern of argumentation. For the construction of these two reviews the arguments from various individual contributions have been combined, structured and in some cases have been added upon. A critical assessment of the victimization and the liberation stance will be given later while developing the empowerment perspective.

According to the victimization model,[41–46] the ubiquitous heterosexist gender hierarchy is reproduced online in an especially problematic manner, as the Net is a part of the computer culture and therefore traditionally a male domain. It is especially the domain of young, sexually-oriented men, who dominate the Net by virtue of their computer competency and superior number. They enforce their sexist gender constructions in many areas, not just in sexual ones. Resistance is impossible. The Net actually encourages abusive behavior because of the anonymity it offers.

According to the victimization model, cy-

bersex merely appears to be sexual interaction on friendly terms. In reality we are dealing with online harassment, virtual rape, and cyber-prostitution, whereby it is not just the women immediately involved who are harmed, but all women as a group are damaged through the reproduction and establishment of a sexist image of women.

Online harassment

The amount and variety of sexually related (mostly pornographic) Net contents addressing heterosexual men create a sexualized atmosphere in which unwanted sexual advances become more likely. The existence of explicitly sexually related Net forums, the accompanying expectation that cybersex can be had practically at the touch of a button, as well as the characteristic anonymity of the medium intensify the already existing problem of sexual harassment. The fact that a person uses a female nickname leads to his/her receiving numerous sexualized inquiries from strangers, even outside of sexually related forums. "How large are your boobs?," "What are you wearing?," "Are you horny?," "Need a fuck?" have become the first private messages to appear on the monitor after logging on to a chat forum.[47–51] Some Net users do not stop their harassing behavior even when they are ignored or turned down. As a rule they have no negative consequences to fear.

Women often experience online situations in which they are degraded to sex objects by men interested in cybersex. Not only is their personal dignity attacked, but they also learn that the Net is a male world in which they do not have a say.[52] Female Net users are regarded as "cyberbabes," with whom one can have cybersex. They are on the same level as "Giffy Girls,"[53] those pornographic pictures of women distributed online as GIF-files (GIF: Grafic Interchange Format; also known as "Girls in Files" in Net jargon). The one-time sending of obscene or in some manner threatening messages and demands is known as online harassment. When these are sent repeatedly, whereby victim and perpetrator occasionally know each other (e.g., work colleagues, expartners), it is referred to as cyber-stalking.[54] Sexual harassment from strangers who approach any person with a female nickname occurs regularly.[55] Even men who have sometimes logged onto Net forums with female nicknames, and thus personally experienced sexual harassment for the first time, publicly lament and condemn the distressing behavior of the other members of their gender.

Virtual rape

Male power is exercised not only by means of unwanted sexual advances, but also during the course of entire virtual interactions. The widespread assertion that cybersex is a safe and controllable event, due to the fact that it is mediated, does not apply to women. They can be sexually molested and raped online in situations in which they are not aiming for cyber-sexual contact as well as in situations in which they engage in cybersex with an illusionary feeling of safety.[56]

In a typical virtual rape the victim is directly confronted with completely unexpected, massive sexual aggression. A timely reaction or avoidance is thus not possible. In some cases (especially in MUDs), the perpetrators use specific technical characteristics of the MUD system to gain control of their victim.[57,58] Even when body contact does not occur, the symbolic execution of the action is traumatic, especially because most women have already experienced sexual violence that is brought to memory by the virtual rape. Sometimes sexualized aggression on the Net is accompanied by real menace when, for example, the perpetrator announces he is going to learn the woman's real identity and locate her personally.[59] The fact that rape is generally played down or negated in a heterosexist social order applies doubly to virtual rape. The happenings are not "real" and can be dismissed as a joke or a game.[60] The supposedly controllable media context contributes to the victim's being assigned the responsibility for the act, after all, a woman's participation in online forums is voluntary and she can log off anytime. The fact that men can perpetrate anonymously and largely unsanctioned sexualized aggression on-

line means that not just the women involved are damaged, but that once again the equality and dignity of all women is undermined.[61]

Rape is not a tragic exception, as the gender hierarchy is reflected in a continuum of violence in nonsexual and sexual interactions between men and women.[62] Rape as an act clearly against a woman's will is only the final point of the continuum. More subtle forms of violence include sex with only partial or halfhearted consent, conceded to by women as they are often unable to safeguard the equality of their interests in hierarchical relationships. Thus women who engage in cybersex may soon find themselves confronted with sexist vocabulary and fantasies that they are not comfortable with. Nevertheless, insecurity, the desire for harmony, the fear of negative reactions or adaptation to sexist clichés according to which they are not supposed to give the impression of being inhibited, may lead to women's apparently voluntary submission to degrading sexual practices. It is telling that we find the following remark regarding cybersex in an advice book on cyberromance by and for women:

> If you need some ideas about what men want women to say or do to them, read a few Penthouse letters, or watch a X-rated video. Pretend to be that woman in the centerfold or porn flick. (Hey, look at all the money you'll save on implants.) Most women (if they're honest about it) have faked an orgasm or two. Just fake it on the screen.[63]

Cybersex, which reproduces the status of women as sex objects and often encourages the uncensored (supposedly just playfully) living out of violent fantasies,[64] should not be cloaked as sexual enjoyment, but should be unmasked as an expression of and medium for objectification and suppression: "hot chat is chat pornography."[65]

Cyberprostitution

Video- and text-based cybersex have created a new branch of prostitution that can be partaken of at home in the protection of anonymity and thus create an increased demand for prostitution. Cybersex prostitution will expand in the future with the improvement of virtual reality technology.[66] This will not just harm the women who are directly (e.g., via trafficking in women) or indirectly (e.g., through systematic economic disadvantage of women) forced into cyber prostitution, but all females.[67] The ubiquitous availability of female prostitutes on the Net strengthens, not only among the prostitute's customers but among all men, the idea that women are sexually available to them. Physical distance and the computer-mediatedness of the exchange do not make cybersex safe sex; on the contrary, computer-mediated communication increases the opportunity to take advantage of women and to market them, and thus manifests the gender hierarchy: "Any technology which promises to lead to an expansion of the sex industry cannot be safe for women."[68]

LIBERATION

While the victimization model conceives of female Net users as victims of men's dominance and sexual wishes, the liberalization model conceives of them as actors with their own sexual desires. The liberation model assumes that cybersex assists women to free themselves from patriarchal sexual norms.[69–73] Accordingly, behavioral norms that limit women in the expression of their sexualities no longer apply here (especially in text-based cybersex) as anonymity frees women from social control. They can seek out diverse sexual scenes from home, physical distance guarantees them protection from infringement and other physical dangers, and due to the lack of visual feedback they are no longer subject to contemporary beauty norms.

According to the liberalization model, cybersexual interactions help to undermine the heterosexist social order and the accompanying sexual suppression by making more sex, better sex, and different sex available to women at will. Thus the women directly involved are not the only ones to profit. All women profit, as women are increasingly seen as self-determined actors exercising control over their own sexualities and lives.

More sex

A number of factors in the heterosexist social order prevent women from making sexual contacts when and with whom they want. An important factor is limited mobility due to responsibilities at home as well as fear of infringement in public places. In addition, appropriate behavior is guided by social controls, according to which women are denied the open expression of their sexualities outside of marriage or committed heterosexual partnerships. Restrictive beauty norms concerning figure, style, bodily integrity and age are another factor. For the most part these norms have already been internalized by women. If a woman does not feel desirable she avoids expressing desire. And finally, sexuality is connected with greater bodily risks for women than for men (e.g. unplanned pregnancies, higher risk of infection for diverse sexually-transmitted diseases and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), bodily infringement), which represents a gender-specific hurdle.

All of these restrictions are lifted in the Net, even women tied to their homes can easily find male and female partners for cybersex. Negative sanctions in real surroundings are not to be feared, as long as one acts anonymously,[74] which especially unburdens those women who lead less self-determined lives. When visual contact is absent, concerns about one's own appearance fade into the background and concentration on one's own desire takes the forefront,[75,76] which is especially beneficial for those women who are effected by desexualization in the patriarchal social order. No longer having to worry about bodily integrity is an immense relief for all women and girls. Thus, through the dismantling of diverse gender-specific restrictions, the Net offers women the possibility to make more sexual contacts, provided they wish to do so.

Being able to collect increasing sexual experience and (re-)establishing a sexual identity as a result of cybersex are found to be satisfying and self-confirming in and of themselves. In addition, positive cybersex experiences can encourage more offensive behavior in initiating sexual activities alone or with others outside of the Net as well.[77]

Better sex

Cybersex is not a substitute for personal togetherness and skin contact. On the contrary, it is a form of sexual encounter from which the many qualities of immediate bodily contact are absent. In exchange, however, it offers special features not inherent to face-to-face or body-to-body encounters. Cybersex does not typically replace conventional sex, but it does make sexual contacts possible in situations in which sex would not otherwise take place, and it brings together people who would not otherwise have sex with each other. In this context cybersex can be considered "better" sex because, as a supplement to nonmediated sex, it opens the door to new possibilities for women in regards not only to quantity but also quality.

The special features of media (the option of anonymity, the multitude of sexually related Net forums) make it easier to freely search for and find compatible male and female partners. Unpleasant or fruitless contacts are more easily prevented and broken off in the Net than in real life, with the touch of a key one can rebuff personal inquiries or completely withdraw. Anonymity and the absence of audiovisual controls create a safe and relaxed atmosphere for text-based cybersex. Feelings that might otherwise prove an obstacle to sexual expression (shame, shyness, evaluation apprehension, and so on) are reduced and sometimes completely eliminated. Sexual sensations, fantasies, and desires can be revealed more openly and directly which, as everyone knows, increases the chances of their being satisfied. The mutual and reciprocal expression of lust during cybersex pleasantly draw it out, tension is built up and maintained over a longer period of time than in non-mediated sex.[78] The cybersex experience can be so intense that the participants have a cyberorgasm (an orgasm in their mind), meaning a mental or emotional climax without a genital orgasm reflex.[79] Genital climaxes through self-stimulation are often reached during cybersex, however.

The patriarchal sexual norm according to which sex is primarily heterosexual, vaginal intercourse and real women reach orgasm through vaginal penetration is not applicable

to cybersex. Women clearly have control over their own orgasms during cybersex, bodily penetration is out of the question,[80] arousal and satisfaction are derived from an interaction process that may be limited to text, but regarding the addressed desires and themes is often more multidimensional and complete than the act as otherwise practiced.

While nonmediated sex makes it possible to appear present even though one is mentally or emotionally absent, the dynamics of text-based cybersex demand continual activity and consciously paying attention to one another: "You can't just lie back and be a blank screen! Both individuals must participate to keep the fantasy alive."[81] At the same time, this mutuality guarantees consent: "Net sex [. . .] is predicated by mutual satisfaction and does not work if one party tries to control the imagination and sexuality of the other."[82]

Different sex

Cybersex not only makes it easier for women to put their more conventional sexual preferences into practice, but it also encourages them to manifest those sexual aspects they have kept hidden because of shame, guilt, fear or uncertainty. In virtual gestures and actions we can mutually live out even those fantasies that would be socially, emotionally and/or bodily impossible or unpleasant to live out in real life.

The cybersexuality of many of those who actively use the Net deviates from their ordinary sexuality in that they have more partners and more frequently change partners. They are thus able to dismiss the norms of abstinence and monogamy. The bourgeois double standard according to which promiscuity is more of a stigma for women than for men is more easily dismissed online than offline because cybersex is "not real," even though the potential enjoyment, intimacy, and satisfaction that it offers are not necessarily inferior to those offered by "real" sex. Some female cybersex enthusiasts openly fight double standards and the sexual shame and guilt induced on girls and women by proudly referring to themselves as "cybersluts."

A number of sexually related MUDs and Chats are differentiated according to type of sexual culture they represent. This makes it easier for those interested in a certain type of scene, e.g., the lesbian, gay, bisexual, BD (bondage/discipline), DS dominance/submission), SM (sadism/masochism) or swinger scene to actually access it. Cyberspace offers whole new possibilities for social encounters, including sexual experiments. This feature is helpful in the search for one's sexual identity and can support a coming out outside of the Net as well.[83] The Net offers theoretical and practical exploration of marginalized forms of sexuality to those who might otherwise be excluded from such discourses and scenes due to their location or other social control conditions.

Cybersexual scenarios that deviate from otherwise practiced sexual scripts but are not a part of the coming out process can be seen as an enjoyable sharing and symbolic living out of fantasies which cannot be lived out, or can only be limitedly lived out, in the material world. These include sex in various virtual embodiments (e.g., as a person of a different gender and/or another sexual orientation, as an animal or a mythical being), unusual sex practices or atypical social constellations (e.g., sex in public places, sex with several people at the same time). Restrictive patriarchal norms according to which "the" female sexuality is ever aimed at a romantic union with the steady partner are obviously overcome online. Cybersex creates a situation in which people have the ability to share previously hidden or secret aspects of their sexual desires, thus creating especially intimate relationships. The participants thereby perceive themselves and those with whom they are interacting in all of their many self-aspects, without taboos, and accept even the absurdities of their subjective sexual realities.

> For me, online encounters are most often about experiencing something new. I've been able to do things that are illegal or "immoral"—threesomes, foursomes, simulated bestiality (with a mythical beast), statutory rape from both sides—without fear of legal repercussions. [84]

EMPOWERMENT

The victimization model sees the status of women ever as objects and victims, and thus fails to acknowledge the existence of (hetero)

sexual (online-)activities that are mutually consented and enjoyed. In contrast, the liberalization model idealizes women's control and choice in heterosexual (online-)interactions, and thus fails to acknowledge the existence of a structural power imbalance between the genders. This leads, within the current cybersex-discourse, to the continuing reproduction of the split into a radical feminist "antisex" perspective and a liberal feminist "prosex" perspective that traces back to the feminist "sex wars of the 1980s."

In the past few years attempts have increasingly been made to overcome this ideological split, to see respect and freedom from violence on the one hand and sexual expression and the search for enjoyment on the other not as alternatives to one another, but as two equally ranked feminist goals. Today's approaches for overcoming ideological one-sidedness often lead to an additive combination of controversial positions without putting this combination in perspective. However, the empowerment concept, which originally arose from the context of social movements, can assume this integrating function. As the empowerment perspective has not been very popular in the feminist sex discourse it has seldom been applied to cybersex.[85,86] This article therefore puts forth a model of sexual empowerment that takes up the concerns of both the victimization and the liberalization models.

Sexual empowerment

From a feminist perspective, sexual empowerment is a process that takes place on both an intellectual level and an experiential one. It is a process by which girls and women learn to make sexual interactions (especially those with men) both safe and satisfying at the same time.[87] In order to do so, it is necessary to stake out boundaries, to articulate needs and based on these terms to come to a mutual agreement about the course of the interaction. Taking into consideration the structural gender hierarchy, as is often revealed in the asymmetrical power balance in personal relationships as well as an unquestioned focus on andro- or phallic-centered sexual norms, mutual agreement is not necessarily a given. In fact, many girls and women have had experiences in which mutual

consensus was not upheld. The first step in the empowerment process is coming to an intellectual understanding of how these experiences were influenced by the gender hierarchy instead of just attributing them to personal failure or bad luck. Individual and collective strategies to prevent them from happening again should then be developed, rather then limiting oneself to the helpless and isolated role of a victim through self reproach and shame. The second step is to put the behavioral strategies thus developed into practice, whereby the degree of their success depends on individual disposition, the specific partner and other relationship conditions. Exchanging thoughts and experiences about negotiating boundaries can aid clarification. The same applies to sexual needs, which should not be merely discovered and enjoyed, but should also be critically examined. Our sexual conceptions and desires are not developed independently of the prevailing andro-centered concepts of sex and women, simply regarding them as personal preferences would therefore be affirmative of these concepts. On the other hand, it would not be empowering to judge women whose sexualities are still developing and changing by precut feminist sexual norms established primarily by academic authors. Besides the fact that we cannot deliberately shape our actual desires (even if we may want to in certain respects), the question arises to what extent the enforcement of specific feminist norms—dictating how the "right" (female) sexuality should be—would not also imply restraint and suppression.

From a feminist viewpoint, sexual empowerment is an individual learning process as well as a political emancipation process, directed toward positive female (and male) sexualities. It can be assumed that the potential for achieving emancipation is the greatest when both the victimization and the liberalization paradigms are willing to discuss their conceptions of sex, men, and women openly and admit that it is of yet still unclear just what self-determined sexuality for girls and women of various ages, religious persuasions, ethnic groups, social classes, or lifestyles might even be like. The victimization model negates this fundamental need for discussion by prejudging certain forms of sexual expression as violence (e.g., the

use of explicit vocabulary during cybersex). Such judgmental definitions rebuff critique as condoning or promoting sexist violence. This hinders an open theoretical and practical exploration of taboos. The liberalization model also reveals itself as being closed to discussion in that it welcomes every consensual, freely chosen sexual activity (e.g., living out rape fantasies in virtual reality) as emancipation. Critical objections are rebuffed as being conservative and restrictive, an exploration of the more or less obvious boundaries of self-determination and the possible dangers of the respective social practices is not undertaken.

By taking the concerns of both the victimization and the liberalization model seriously while simultaneously alternating between the two perspectives, the empowerment model reveals the many contradictory sexual realities women experience. Discourses are begun (not just in academic circles) in which supposedly irrefutable statements about "the" female sexuality or about what women "as women" want or do not want are questioned, and we are continuously forced to take the specific social context of individual sexual scenarios, including their subjective meanings, into account. This, in turn, leads from purely intellectual analysis back to the experiential level and to an honest discussion about what we do and do not want, about the things that bring us joy and pain. Cybersex does not supply an all-purpose recipe for understanding self-determined, gratifying and socially compatible sexualities. It can, however, support empowerment on an intellectual and experiential level through the negotiation of boundaries and the critical exploration of desires.

Negotiating boundaries

The victimization model claims that it is nearly impossible for women on the Net (an anonymous, oversexualized world of men) to protect themselves from unwanted contacts. In contrast, the liberalization model emphasizes that violence on the Net (a social space in which written and verbal discourse among equals occurs) is no longer a problem for women. If one takes the special sociotechnical features of computer-mediated communication into account,

both perspectives prove to be extremes, neither of which consider how and if women establish individual and collective boundaries online. Closer inspection reveals that women most definitely do establish boundaries and that they often experience increased control because of these computer-mediated boundary negotiations. This strengthens their self-confidence and might also encourage self-determined action in sexual (and non-sexual) contexts outside of the Net. The sociotechnical conditions of Net communication make it possible not only to establish individual and collective boundaries and to severely punish threatened or actual infringement of these boundaries, but they also make the negotiations of boundaries salient—an object of public discourse on the Net.

On an individual level, the interpersonal exchange of digital (text) messages relieves the threat of immediate bodily violence and intimidation and offers additional protection and sanctioning possibilities on both a technical and a social level.[88–90] While being hit on and stared at in face-to-face situations can often become a problem, filter and ignore commands, easily available online provide a simple way of no longer acknowledging another person on the Net. The offender is often informed of these actions via technical messages from the system itself ("you are ignored"). By using those Net forums and programs offering these types self-defense and control functions, women can systematically block undesired contact attempts without having to justify or defend their decisions. Even simply ignoring someone without the help of special commands by simply not responding to their messages is made easier on the Net, as the person may continue to send messages but has no chance to force you to actually read them—exercising pressure through bodily advances is not possible. Besides this very effective tactic of simply ignoring someone, it is also easier online than offline to react to boundary infringement in an aggressive or self-assertive manner rather then just merely being terrified or intimidated. Because the exchange remains a written one there is no visual contact to make personal insecurity obvious. On the contrary, a participant can take her time to carefully consider whether she should respond and with just what words or commands

she should respond.[91] The speechlessness that many women experience when they are treated disrespectfully in face-to-face situations is lessened online.

The fact that virtual actions are purely discoursive also provides us with the opportunity to deliberately reshape their course or to re-interpret their meaning in such manner that creativity and the art of wording assist in the production of a reality created by equals:

> Rape is first and foremost an issue of violated consent. When a man in Minnesota types "tears your skirt" or some other intense or graphic obscenity, you can only reasonably feel disgust or offense. Because TinyMUDs are only as real as you want them to be. At any moment you can stop believing in what's happening around you, and it loses its reality. Action on a TinyMUD has to be mutually consented to in order for it to occur. If I type "throws a brick at you!" and you just ignore it, what influence has my brick had on the agreed upon reality? None. If I type "throws a brick at you!" and you type "catches the brick!" you have consented to the existence of the brick, and taken your own action in cooperation with the suggested reality. It is the same with TinySex. If I type "tears off your shirt" and you ignore me, or type "snaps her fingers and the shirt reappears," you have denied the reality I've tried to impose on you. So there can be no rape on a TinyMUD. If someone types "pushes you against the wall" I can respond with "and she transforms into a butterfly and flits away" or I can log out. While the haven produced by cyberspace can't protect you from being emotionally effected by this person, at least it grants you an escape from him—a choice to ignore him, not acknowledge him; an off switch, a quit command; the ability to transform into a butterfly and fly away. [92]

Reshapings in the case of violent virtual actions are not limited to undoing another's action or fleeing from it, they might also consist of massive counterattacks.[93] Consent processes in cybersex are not only about dealing with violence, more often they are about negotiating what vocabulary should be used and how the action should be staged, as well as redirecting actions that seem to be taking a wrong turn. In virtual scenarios the participants type in not only their own behavior, but refer to the actions and reaction of their partners as well. This opens new suggestive possibilities for steering the interaction in a desired direction ("I gently caress and kiss your breasts"—"Getting into it you start to knead and suck my tits harder and harder.") as well as avoiding the undesirable ("Then I take your nipple between my thumb and forefinger and roll back and forth"—"Realizing that I am not responding to your touch you stop and ask for guidance"), thus ensuring mutual consensus.

The fully automatic documentation or the possibility of fully documenting computer-mediated communication helps avoid the problematic distinction between private and public spheres. Boundary infringements which take place in the private sphere outside the Net are hard to reconstruct and prove. On the Net, however, they can easily be reproduced word for word and made public. On a collective level this offers users new methods of protection and possibilities to sanction offenders. Virtual gathering places and environments are, contrary to the popular opinion that anarchy reigns supreme in the Net, much easier to control than social spaces outside of the Net. Interactions between individuals in public virtual locations can be observed by all those present. Bad behavior does not usually escape commentary or punishment (e.g., irony, ridicule, insult, temporary or permanent exclusion from the forum, denial of rights or virtual possessions). In contrast, hardly anyone has a complete overview of all the individual interactions taking place on a street, in a bar or in a disco, making intervention such as immediate temporary or long-term expulsion impossible in most offline scenarios.

> On one social MUD, a male character repeatedly asked all female characters if they would engage in phone sex. Amidst a chorus of complaints, the system's God stepped in and ousted the offending character. It's nice to know that God is alive and well and living in Cyberspace. If only there were some omnipotent presence on the New York City streets to sweep away those offensive street characters who shout endless-loop choruses of "hey baby, baby, give me some of that" to all pass-

ing females, proving that New York City may be dirty but it ain't no MUD.[94]

Of course, the increased possibility to control virtual environments only guarantees freedom from violence to the extent which the controlling powers (e.g., the system administrator) and the regular members of the virtual community commit themselves to an agenda of mutual agreement. The dramatic examples of sexual infringement in the cybersex literature, such as the much quoted MrBungle rape case in the LamdbaMOO MUD, prove that they do just that.[95,96] Shannon McRae (alias "legba"), Net researcher and the primary victim in the MrBungle rape case, has therefore publicly distanced herself from the interpretation that computer networks are particularly hostile environments for women, and instead now stresses that virtual communities establish rules and sanction offenders and the means by which they do so.[97,98]

The fact that the rules for most MUDs and Chats, be they geared toward socializing, flirting or having sex, usually suggest proceeding on the basis of mutual agreement and strongly prohibit harassment proves both that such problems often occur in the Net[99] as well as that they are also recognized and publicly discussed online as such. Occasionally the official rules even mention that another male stepping in to stop a woman's being harassed might be perceived as patronizing:

> If you see a woman being harassed, jumping in to help might or might not be a good idea. While it would seem to be the gentlemanly thing to do, CU is not like Real Life. *Most women on CU have learned to handle themselves quite well; sometimes, for a woman to deal with a harasser herself is an important way for her to establish control.* In other words, your actions may be resented. Or worse yet, you risk turning a harasser who is simply being boorish into one who is verbally abusive. By all means, jump in if a situation is clearly out of hand or if you are asked. [100]

The fact that online harassment is a topic not just in feminist literature and discussions but is also often mentioned in mainstream media has a downside. The danger exists that the "malestream" media will project the ubiquitous problem of boundary infringement too one-sidedly onto "cyberspace," an often seemingly obscure concept as it is. Thus attention is diverted away from the boundary infringement problems confronting women in less controllable, everyday offline contexts and the Net is affirmed as a man's world. The greater opportunity to control computer-mediated communication is, of course, restricted by the power balance in the offline ("real") world in which it takes place. Prostitutes active in the cybersex branch seldom make use of the opportunity to rid themselves of unpleasant clients with the touch of a key if their supervisors are not supportive of their decisions. The ability to document bad behavior on the Net leads to external sanctions only when the offline authorities are adequately conscious of the problem. On the other hand, the computer-mediated power balance also restricts the control possibilities outside the Net. After all, if a woman realizes her partner's willingness or ability to reach a mutual consensus are lacking in the first few erotic/sexual online encounters, it is unlikely that she will seek a face-to-face encounter.

The goal of the empowerment perspective is to carefully consider the possibilities for women to actively negotiate boundaries in sexual and nonsexual interactions. The opportunity for increased control in computer-mediated communication benefits individual women who, given the necessary sociotechnical competencies, can carry out their online activities undisturbed. But it also benefits all women—as men increasingly find that boundaries are set for them which they may not cross and the necessity for fair negotiation of boundaries is repeatedly discussed.

Exploring desires

The increased bodily and social security in computer-mediated communication as well as the fact that the meaning assigned to virtual actions alternates somewhere between reality and imagination (thus, it is primarily our own attitude that determines how seriously we take them) make an active, experimental and even risk-taking approach to sexual encounters and

relationships easier. While the victimization model assumes that these new opportunities for sexual actions are used primarily by boys and men as a means of living out their aggressive/sexist fantasies, the liberalization model emphasizes that women benefit from cybersex in that it provides them an opportunity to override patriarchal norms and live out their sexualities unhindered. Although the empowerment model welcomes women actively analyzing their sexualities, it is critical of the "prosex" attitude displayed by the liberalization model. In the empowerment model the discovery, expression, and realization of personal sexual desires is not reduced to a mere casting off of constricting norms. Instead, it sees this as a construction process that is not only enjoyable and enriching but also contains the potential for causing conflict and insecurity. The purpose of this process, as it is seen by the empowerment model, is for women to design an independent sexuality and lifestyle appropriate to their specific living conditions and preferences. A broad spectrum of variation is to be found between the reproduction of patriarchal concepts of femininity at the one extreme, and the rejection of these norms and assumption of complementary roles on the other. The characteristics and implications of these variations need to be described and evaluated on the basis of practical experience. The participants, those affected and even outsiders should play a part in the evaluation process of different sexual self-presentations, actions, and lifestyles.

The relation of sexuality to love and social attachment is a controversial topic. In an attempt to explain this relation, complementary, gender-specific models are typically constructed according to which men primarily seek sex and women seek love and attachment and are capable of enjoying sex only within the framework of a romantic relationship. According to the victimization model, cybersexual permissiveness harms women, while the liberalization model claims that this same permissiveness is an advantage for women. The empowerment model, however, calls for more careful observation of the internal and external social conditions under which women obtain satisfaction from cybersex or feel used by it. A

12-item questionnaire about cyber affairs (meaning cybersexual contacts outside of an established relationship) has been available on the website of *The Self-Help and Psychology Magazine* since January 1997.[101] The questionnaire has thus far (December 1999) been answered by $n = 2,308$ people (64% women, 36% men). Thirty-six percent (36%) disapproved of cyber affairs. The following quotes are examples of some of their commentaries:

> I feel that more men are into the cybersex thing, woman need the touch of a man and everything loving that one can get form a REAL relationship, I think that cyber is a way for men to sit and jerk off while they are on the computer and it makes me ILL! (Female, October 1997)

> My husband had a cyber affair for weeks before I knew what was going on. It has hurt our relationship a lot. (Female, April 1999).

On the other hand, 64% of the participants had a positive attitude toward cyber affairs. They stated their case as follows:

> I had Cyber sex for the first time and it was quite enjoyable. I will never meet this person and I love my husband so I do not think it is considered infidelity. (Female, March 1999)

> I have had cybersex . . . it is a great feeling and as you say it does enhance my married life . . . but it has led me to meeting the man i was having a cyber affair with and it has led to an affair . . . but it is wonderful and i am not sorry . . . (Female, April 1998)

> I think a lot of men (maybe women) would like to say that cyber sex isn't real. But I have often been left with the same sort of feelings I would get from real physical sex. Sometimes elated, sometimes used. For the past 1 1/2 years I have only been involved with one man online outside of my primary "real" relationship. Because of this computer I have met him in person many many times. Although our relationship remains primarily online, it feels as real to me and sometimes more real than my primary relationship. I also know that He does participate in cybersex with other women. He feels that doing this provides him a quick release and that it is not really sex. Because he has known me actually in person, he consid-

ers cybersex with me real. We have spent a lot of time figuring out this distinction. I feel that in any case cybersex is still sex and is still as real as physical sex. But I also admit that, that is how it is for me. So I avoid cybersex with strangers. Maybe others don't operate under my distinctions. To me, its just that an orgasm with another person has to be sex whether they are in the same room or not. Isn't phone sex sex? (Female, January 1999)

Here we see that women have very different ways of connecting the sexual enjoyment experienced during cybersex (outside of their established relationship) to the monogamy concepts they apply to both their "real" and their cyber relationships.

Just as explosive as the question of personal attachment (or the desire for lack of commitment) is the question of playing up or playing down one's own bodily appearance in cybersex. The liberalization model sees the absence of visual control and the opportunity for random self-description in text-based cybersex as emancipation from patriarchal beauty norms. Thus women with bodily handicaps must no longer suffer any restrictions in their sexuality and attractiveness. In contrast, the victimization model assumes that the male is still holding the mental reins, therefore subjugating the female body to sexual objectification during cybersex. That fact that the question of appearance, usually especially concerned with a woman's figure and breast size, is so widespread in Net forums testifies to this. In fact, it is difficult to phase out references to bodily appearance during cybersex, thus the questions who defines bodily sexiness, how it is defined and how norms are enforced remain virulent in the context of the Net. Does the fact that we can all give ourselves an ideal male or female body for the purpose of text-based cybersex contribute to the strengthening and propagation of these stereotypes? Or do we not actually, in a cybersexual context, demystify those male and female ideals by robbing them of their power to differentiate and discriminate, using them simply as a strategy in our search for sexual enjoyment? Taking into consideration the ubiquitous availability of idealized sexual self-presentations, the deviation from these stereo-

types might be seen as an indicator of authenticity and directness and therefore might be more sexually laden than usual, leading to a new evaluation of individuality.

When, as is often the case in cybersex, realistic self-description leads to an unexpected feeling of completeness and beauty, the over critical perception of one's own body so typical for women can be put into a broader perspective and perhaps even overcome. Marginal flaws are not mentioned, instead the participants take turns concentrating on the erotic potential of one another's bodies. Because women retain more control over how they present their bodies in cybersexual dialogue than in non-medial sex they are able to overcome impeding feelings of insufficiency and shame.

The shame chip made me hesitate to reveal the fantasy scenes that turned me on. This bothered me. One day when I found him [her cyberlover] in the Den of Love [Sex Room on the MUD LambdaMOO]. I poked him and said, *I have an idea.*
Oh? Do tell me :-)
Do you CU-SeeMe?
He didn't have a camera, but he must have heard about CU-SeeMe because his imagination of what we could do with video took off and soon he said, *I'm downloading CU-SeeMe now. I won't be able to get a camera till next week, though. In the meantime I can watch YOU.* The shame monster loomed before me. I felt it and hated it. NO! You are not me, you were forced on me without my consent and I'm going to vanquish you, shame monster. The cyber lover lived in England, and by the time I returned from my office, it would be the middle of the night for him on a workday. But he was so enthralled that he was eager to C-me anyway. I was determined to seize the opportunity to overcome my gender conditioning. I wanted to break the barrier that made me embarrassed of my genitals. What a stupid emotion embarrassment was. After adjusting camera angle and lighting, I put on a wig to keep my face hidden—vanquishing shame didn't mean I was going to open myself up to blackmail or ridicule if the other person wanted to put a nude picture of me on the Web. That night I succeeded in further freeing my sexuality from the shackles of society. I let myself be the sexual being I am and let myself enjoy the plea-

sure my body was capable of without embarrassment or shame. What freedom! What power! I slew a dragon! [102]

The empowerment model encourages examining virtual body presentations during text- and video-based cybersex more closely and then developing positive strategies for conveying sexual desire without compromising one's social standing or bodily integrity. The same procedure applies to sexual practices and roles.

> My digitized body, curled and pale as my fingers fly across the keyboard to connect to FurryMUCK, stretches and glows as the last letter of the password is entered. Oh, but what mood am I in? The list of my characters beside me includes personalities that in many cases in no way resemble my own. There's "*Aileen*," a sharp-tongued, stand-offish young woman with a powerful ego and a denial of her own sexuality. There's "*Tacey*," a forever-16 sexpot, blonde and perky, filled with giggles and high school philosophy. There's "*Tate*," a slender young gay man with soft eyes and a Queen's snappish, flirty disposition. There's "*Kari*," a young woman discovering her submissive side, nude, and wearing wrist cuffs that advertise her exploration. [. . .] Within this cyberspace, men and women can in theory take a part of their sexuality and emphasize it without fear of consequences. [. . .]. I can become this girl Kari, who is slender and young, with golden skin and a winning smile, who wears no clothes, and who sleeps with the stranger who meets her eyes and gruffly orders her to follow him. This drama would never happen in my real life, but in this fiction-world of words I can let my head do it, even my heart, and there's an off-switch by my hand the whole time. [103]

When women (and men) assume multiple roles in cybersex it is especially hard to interpret their behavior as either a confirmation or rejection of traditional gender roles. Far more interesting are the conceptual strategies with which they integrate the feelings of sexual desire associated with each of these individual sexual practices, roles and self-presentations into their self-concept. One must also consider that, besides gender identity, other partial identities (e.g., professional or religious identity)

are also included in this self-concept. The widening of horizons which participants often describe in connection with cybersex can promote the questioning of the identity compulsion behind the rhetoric of fixed "preferences" and "orientations" in the area of sexuality, as well as the questioning of a socially-imposed hierarchy of normal versus abnormal/marginal sexualities. This basic critique of sexual norming as a process of establishing hierarchies should be part of an analysis of the gender hierarchy. A general critique of the hierarchy resulting from an essentialist stipulation of differences is necessary in order be able to include all women in the empowerment process, not just "as women," but as individual representatives of diverse sexually marginalized groups.

Because text-based cybersex requires the written expression of sexual feelings and desires, and thus the adoption of a personal language of sexual desire, it prepares one to speak about sex in an especially precise manner. As cybersex is typically construed of as being something sexual, but not quite the "real thing," thematic thresholds are crossed (e.g., in connection with shame or fear of stigmatization) both in private and public discourse. One of the special features of cybersex research is that sexual interactions about which we generally have little precise information because of privacy norms can be recorded in detail by the participants (or even by outsiders in public cybersex) and cited word for word in academic discourse on the subject—whereby the recording and citing of authentic Net communication is, of course, subject to strict ethical guidelines.[104] The log-file of a cybersexual encounter is the record of a one-time social event, already in the past, and is not equivalent to the experience itself. However, such a documentary approach may inhibit the wide-spread tendency to create myths in the area of sexuality. Reading authentic documentation [105–110] can make us realize how unspectacular, predictable, or even clichéd most sexual interactions are, yet how easily some of their particular gestures touch or arouse us. The provocative nature of the log-files can be combated by questioning their authenticity. This, in turn, raises the even more interesting question of why we think such

an interaction is not authentic, why we think for example that a "real woman" could not have taken part in these interactions and that therefore we guess it was only a fake. The empowerment model does not see cybersex so much as a chance for the realization of a "female sexuality" beyond patriarchal norms, but as a chance for women's manifold cybersexual activities to debunk the myth of one unique "female sexuality" opposing the "male sexuality."[111] We must continually ask ourselves what being a man or being a woman means, what sexuality means. We must also, however, consider what kind of power structures are created when we ascribe meaning to these questions, answer them in specific ways and thus create differentiations that could all too quickly lead to hierarchies.

DISCUSSION

Cybersex (in both the broader and narrower sense of the word) has received much attention from the general public due to its intensive coverage in the mass media. It is being increasingly discussed in professional circles as well. There is not, however, what might be referred to as a homogenous discourse on cybersex. On the contrary, completely different problem levels are being discussed in the, primarily critical, examination of this phenomena. One of the points is that there are supposedly too many sexually related or sexualized offers in the Net, especially commercial (commercialization discourse) or illegal (crime discourse) ones. Often lamented is the danger of sexual material being easily available to children and teenagers on the Net (youth protection discourse). Some fear that an increased use of cybersex will be accompanied by a reduction in real, interpersonal togetherness, which could lead to alienation and isolation of the entire community (sociological discourse) as well as individual psychosocial disorders such as online addiction (clinical psychology discourse). Besides these critical discourses other, affirmative discourses have now been established. Cybersex is also a booming sector in the e-commerce branch (business discourse). So numerous are the offers that consumer tips such as "best of" lists,

cost comparisons, reviews or commentaries are published (user discourse). And finally, the opportunity provided by the Net for informing about sexuality is also taken advantage of (sexual education discourse). All of these many perspective and their values must be taken into account.[112]

Viewing cybersex from a feminist perspective means choosing one discourse, which is linked with the others, for example the crime discourse (women are affected by online crime to a greater extent than men) or the user discourse (women are becoming frequent users of sexually related offers in the Net). A feminist analysis of cybersex should be based on a feminist theory of sexuality as well as empirical findings regarding cybersexual behavior. This is necessary because cybersex is all too often used as a collective term and a standard assessment is applied to it, without it being known how women, men, boys, and girls individually use computer networks or, more importantly, what experiences they have gathered with interpersonal, computer-mediated sexual contacts (cybersex in the narrower sense of the word).

In the current theoretical cybersex discourse, the radical feminist victimization view stands opposed to liberal feminist liberalization view. This polarization can be overcome by means of the integrating empowerment model. It can be proven that the specific sociotechnical features of computer-mediated communication make it easier to avoid boundary infringement, to explore one's own sexual desires and to critically reflect on the experiences associated with them. This increase in personal power of action on the Net should not be attributed to the medium itself, however, but to individual styles of use, which are still embedded in various socioeconomical offline contexts. The empowerment approach invites you to inform yourself about the conditions, characteristics and consequences of women's (and men's) sexually related cyberactivities, and most importantly, to learn from positive experiences.

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