The Porn Drift: Pornography, Technology and Masturbation

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ABSTRACT

The author introduces a concept he calls “the porn drift” and which describes the rift that exists between the experience of sexual intercourse as presented in pornographic moving pictures and that which is acted out in the corporeal world with another human being. He traces the cause for the porn drift to the technologically determined nature of pornography, which prevents it from conveying the most real experience involved in sexual intercourse with another human being: the tactile experience. Touching upon the historical development of pornography, he tries to understand the emergence and prevalence of the so-called “gonzo pornography” on the Internet and sees its existence as the tool for the pornographers to compensate for their genre’s inherent inability to convey the real sexual experience to the consumers. Finally, the author describes what he sees as an emerging new sexual practice that might greatly influence sex life in the new millennium, a practice defined by the merger of advanced information technology, hard-core pornography and masturbation.

Keywords: Gonzo Revolution, Internet, Internet Porn, Media, Pornography, Technology, The Porn Drift

At its core, technoethics is a research area concerned with the dynamic and changing relationship “between technology and living entities” (Luppicini, 2008, p. 14), which means that both technology and biology are central to its concerns (Luppicini, 2010). This makes technoethics an ideal field for dealing with the question of how technology affects the natural instincts of living beings. Among the latter, humans not only interact with technology most frequently and willingly, they are also the inventors and developers of new technologies, a portion of which transform the way they fulfill and understand their instincts. This paper attempts to show one of the ways human sexuality has been changed by the recent rapid expansion of information and communication technology (ICT), especially the Internet. As Hans Jonas (1984) stated at the beginning of his monograph The Imperative of Responsibility, all ethics in the period of human history prior to the era of unprecedented technological development was essentially anthropocentric, based on the interaction between human beings. Thus, before the emergence and spread of various electronic forms mediating human sexuality, the latter was more or less confined to the realms of the instinctive and of direct human contact;¹ in short, to the field of inter-human relations. Interpreting the transformation regarding sexuality in the technological era in terms of Borgmann’s (1984) device paradigm, it would appear that

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technological devices have caused a shift in the focus of sexuality from the end (the corporeal sexual intercourse with a living human being) to the technological means through which said end is mediated as pornographic moving images; again, in Borgmann’s (1984) terms, the technological devices have caused the line between the real and the simulated experience to become blurry.

In Technoethics and the Evolving Knowledge Society, Rocci Luppicini (2010) points out that one of the main missions of technoethics is to “address the human side of technology that lies within ‘individual’ minds and bodies that affect and are affected by technology at a deeply personal level” (p. 48). What needs to be addressed is the “persisting problem within a continually advancing technological society to understand the relationship between technology, consciousness, and society” (Luppicini, 2010, p. 48). As will be seen in this essay, in regard to sexuality, it appears that users of technology are more than prepared to speak out publicly on how ICT has been affecting their personal lives and their interactions with other human beings. The paper only wishes to present their experiences in order to make sense of them, therefore its intent is not to judge or offer concrete solutions. In this sense, it is a study of morals in the primal sense of the word – morals as ethos, as rules of conduct derived from what Nietzsche termed as the “power of custom” (Nietzsche, 1911, p. 15). It is a study of customs as they appear in our era of rapid change, when traditional rules and habits of forefathers have ceased to be the guidelines of ethical behavior, a time when customs are rapidly borne out of, shaped by and die out in synch with the frenzied rhythm of the interaction between human beings and technology.

“Men become like computers, unable to be stimulated by the human beings beside them. /…/ The image of a lonely, isolated man masturbating to his computer is the Willy Loman metaphor of our decade” (Paul, 2004, p. 100). These ominous words from Mark Schwartz, the director of the Masters and Johnson clinic in St. Louis, MO, which appeared in a Time magazine article, were not the first to warn this publication’s readers about the possible consequences of using Internet pornography. Already, in 1995, Time magazine had voiced its anxieties regarding the technological redefinition of sexuality in the new era, recognizing in the emerging Internet porn the imminent danger of the “dissolution and fusing of man into machine, or perhaps, man into ‘network’. It is an understanding of the relationship of body and networked computer as potentially, peculiarly and unwholesomely dissolvent of the subject.” (Patterson, 2004, p. 105). Nearly a decade later, the Internet’s vast informationscape suggests that these fears of individuals preferring masturbatory techno-sex over sexual intercourse with another human being have become a widely discussed topic.

It was the vocal proclamations of those who have openly let the Internet community know that they’re finding the use of Internet pornography more sexually stimulating and satisfying than corporeal sex with human partners that have provided the impulse for this essay. Different explanations and interpretations of this phenomenon have been given, from physiological to psychological to sociological, and this paper is one such attempt at an answer. I’ve considered the claims made by the above-mentioned sciences, and decided to join the debate by offering my own perspective, which led me to the creation of a special terminology that might seem forced or even pretentious, but is necessary for the development and explanation of the concept I wish to present here – that of the porn drift.

Given the Internet’s widespread “troll” culture of false or exaggerated opinions meant to provoke other users, it is a daunting methodological task for a historian to evaluate the trueness of textual sources found on the Internet. Because deciding upon the trueness of a certain document found on the World Wide Web – I’ve mostly used forum discussions – is not just an impossible task (especially for all those texts drifting in the gray area between sincerity and untruthfulness) but an illusory and as such an unnecessary one as well, I’ve decided to rely on the reactions of other users and the prevalence