

Reflections on Digital Information and Communication Technologies, Gender and Sexualities in Asia

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Introduction

This paper will present an overview of issues related to gender and sexualities in an age of digital ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), referred to by the futurologist Alvin Toffler (1980) as the third wave of societal development, following the agricultural and industrial revolutions. The article is divided into three parts. The first offers an explanation of the theoretical framework used in this paper. The second provides a historical review of information media in general, leading to the current digital revolution, and presents some statistics on the reach of digital ICTs in Asia. In the final section, I describe distinctive characteristics of digital ICTs that have implications for the area of sexuality and move on to focus on their space-making functions and interactions, as they relate to gender and sexualities.

Much has been written about the digital revolution but there seem to be different worlds in the academy, each dealing with the topic from particular perspectives. Even within the social sciences, different analytic approaches to the topic prevail, depending on the field: sociology, anthropology, political science, or media studies. Each too has its own jargon, of sampling and bits (and bytes) and packets, of CMC (computer-mediated communication) and SCSSK (sociology of cyber-social-scientific knowledge) (see Hine, 2005, p. 9).

In writing this piece, I had to go through some of the technical material explaining some of the intricacies of digital technology, and then wade through media studies, before coming to the emerging field of virtual ethnographies. To begin the discussion, it is worth revisiting the work of Marshall McLuhan, known for his analysis of mass communications and modernity and also for sharing a view that technologies constitute social relations. McLuhan proposed that “the medium is the message”, meaning that while a technological medium may itself carry no message, its transformation of space and time shapes people’s perceptions of the world and the way they structure their social relations. McLuhan’s examples of the importance of the medium included the differences between watching a movie on television and watching it in a theater, as well the difference between listening to and reading the news. Today, we could reflect on the implications of people requesting particular newspapers, for example the *New York Times*, through email alerts on very specific news articles.

McLuhan’s first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, published in 1951, already alluded to sexuality, with some interesting insights into how his own conservative Catholic background had shaped his views. Analyzing 60 print advertisements, he concluded that the human body had been transformed by these ad campaigns into “a sort of love machine capable merely of specific thrills”, arguing that “this extremely behavioristic view of sex ... [reduced] the sex experience to a problem in mechanics and hygiene” (p. 99). McLuhan’s later work had a more optimistic view of the power of mass communications, with an interest in developing taxonomies of mass media. McLuhan looked into the space- and time-biases of various media, which, he contended, depended on their portability. For example, what he called a light information medium such as paper was important for the administrative functions of bureaucracies, reflecting a bias toward space with its portability, but having the disadvantage of deteriorating rapidly. Time-biased media, on the other hand, were based on more durable media (e.g. text etched in stone) and were more useful for preserving and propagating religious doctrines. McLuhan also developed a taxonomy of “hot” (intense media, like cinema, which tends to create passive consumers) and “cold” (more interactive) media. McLuhan

died in 1980, right at the threshold of the era of personal computers, but he had already taken notice of the emerging electronic media.

While McLuhan has been accused of technological determinism, his work resonates in this era of digital ICTs, particularly in the way these technologies have allowed people to reconfigure not just space and time, but their social relations and personal identities. He is certainly not the only theorist to have underscored the strong role in society of communications technologies. Benedict Anderson's (2006) classic, *Imagined Communities*, describes the seismic societal transformations that print technologies heralded. Specifically, he refers to how the invention of the printing press and the circulation and consumption of printed material facilitated "print capitalism", which meant that more people could have their own copy of the Bible in vernacular languages. This meant that they could reflect on and question Catholic religious leadership and its monopoly of the interpretation of scripture. Anderson also describes how the mass circulation of newspapers in the 19th century collapsed spatial distance, permitting the consolidation of national identities as "imagined communities".

The digital ICTs open a window onto certain dilemmas raised by modernity (and postmodernity) in relation both to structure and agency, technologies and technological media. We are coming to a better appreciation of the work of Anthony Giddens (1986) on modernity and structuration, and Arjun Appadurai (1996) on globalization, global ethnoscapes and global imagination. Finally, given the many powerful metaphors of digital and virtual realities, and our interest in a dialogue on geopolitics, Marc Auge's (1995) work on spaces and places and non-places becomes all the more relevant.

Together then, these various social theorists allow us to navigate the digital sexual landscapes in a way that goes beyond traditional phenomenological studies of texts (which in fact Appadurai is sometimes prone to), with their often disembodied and depoliticized focus on meanings, and beyond

accounts informed by classical political economy, which tend to look at mass media mainly in terms of ideological hegemonies in capitalism, manipulating passive consumers.

A timeline

Kalus Bruhn Jensen proposes a framework for looking at the development of media, referring to them in terms of 'degrees' (2002, pp. 3–4). The framework lends itself well to a historical review. Jensen defines media of the first degree are "... biologically based, socially formed resources that enable humans to articulate an understanding of reality, for a particular purpose, and to engage with others in communications about it". These include verbal language, song, musical expression, dance, drama, painting, and creative arts. Social interaction occurs, but it is limited to small groups or communities.

Media of the second degree are "... technically reproduced or enhanced forms of representation and interaction which support communication across space and time, irrespective of the presence and number of participants and include printed materials, cinema, [and] television". Interaction is limited, with a passive recipient (reading, watching a movie) although the telephone, technically a medium of the second degree, was one important exception. Analogue recording media developed across time to produce high-quality recordings, but this depended on capturing large amounts of 'data' (sound waves, for example), which had the disadvantages of needing large storage media, and erosion with each re-recording. These media did allow some play with reality in the way images and sounds could be edited and retouched.

Media of the third degree include "...digitally processed forms of representation and interaction which reproduce and recombine previous media on a single platform". They are highly interactive and allow much re-representation. Data – text, sounds, colors – are converted into numbers (digits) which can be packed for rapid re-reading (or sampling), reproduction and dissemination.

The digital revolution is usually dated to 1947, when the transistor was developed, paving the way for digital computers. Through the next two decades, many small but important discoveries – integrated circuits, the Intel chip, the mouse, floppy discs, even Spacewars, the first computer game – paved the way for an explosion of digital technologies. In 1969, Arpanet – the predecessor of the Internet – was developed to facilitate communications between computer networks. Microsoft and Apple Computers were formed in the 1970s. In 1979, IBM introduced its first personal computer (PC), and in the 1980s, PCs (IBMs and clones) became commercialized. The 1980s also saw software such as Lotus 1-2-3 and Microsoft Word, as well as other digital technologies, from Swatch watches to the first handheld mobile phone.

The 1990s and the 2010s and beyond have seen continuing explosive expansion of the Internet and the World Wide Web with all its derivatives: blogs and social networking sites. The last decade has also seen the rapid development of greater access to personal computers and laptops, as well as ever more sophisticated mobile phones, digital cameras, video recorders, and MP3 players.

Digital ICTs are still built, and are partly dependent, on older information technologies and media. For example, broadband Internet connections are still largely dependent on fixed telephone lines. However, they have taken radical new forms, allowing an interrogation of the very concepts of “information” and “communication”. The new forms come about as these technologies converge. Cellphones, for example, now have Internet capability and incorporate digital cameras and audio players/recorders, while the Internet allows for the transmission, and reproduction (often illegal) of data captured through these digital technologies. Digital technologies have also allowed more reproduction and distribution of older analogue products, an interesting example of modernity riding on nostalgia as old movies, old songs, and old photographs are restored and re-stored.

The speed with which digital ICTs have penetrated developing countries has taken many by surprise. The International Telecommunications Union’s 2009 yearbook notes that:

In the developing world, mobile phones have revolutionized telecommunication and have reached an estimated average 61 percent penetration rate at the end of 2008 – from close to zero only ten years ago. This is not only faster than any other technology in the past, but the mobile phone is also the single most widespread ICT today. The number of Internet users, on the other hand, has grown at a much slower rate, in particular in the developing world, where at the end of 2007 only 13 out of 100 inhabitants used the Internet. Fixed Internet access in developing countries is still limited, and, where available, often slow and/or expensive. High-speed (broadband) connections are rare and mobile broadband, while increasing steeply in high-income countries, is still insignificant in most developing countries. (International Communication Unit, 2009, p. IV)

Table 1 provides statistics on ICTs from Asia, with the leading developed countries included for purposes of comparison. Asia provides an interesting case for study because quite a few countries have leapfrogged into the digital age – many countries now have more cellphone subscribers than fixed phone lines – with some countries (e.g. South Korea) faring better now than many developed countries in terms of digital ICT coverage and access. The percentages for digital penetration may be small but because Asia's population is so large, these percentages convert into large absolute numbers. China, for example, has an estimated 200 million Internet users, while Vietnam had, as of the end of 2007, 24 million mobile cellular phone subscriptions (International Telecommunications Union, 2009, pp. 5–6, 31).

Table 1: ICT penetration in selected Asian and developed countries, 2008 and 2010

| COUNTRY | Mobile Cell Subscribers (per 100 inhabitants) | | Percentage of households with Internet | |
|-----------------|---|-------|--|------|
| | 2008 | 2010 | 2008 | 2010 |
| Cambodia | 30.7 | 57.7 | 0.2 | 0.4 |
| China | 48.3 | 64.0 | 18.3 | 23.7 |
| Hongkong, China | 167.2 | 190.2 | 70.9 | 75.7 |
| Indonesia | 59.8 | 91.7 | 1.9 | 3.9 |
| Korea (Rep) | 95.5 | 105.4 | 94.3 | 96.8 |
| Japan | 87.2 | 95.4 | 79.8 | 85.4 |
| Lao PDR | 33.6 | 64.6 | 2.1 | 3.4 |
| Malaysia | 100.8 | 121.3 | 21.1 | 25.1 |
| Philippines | 75.5 | 85.7 | 7.2 | 10.1 |
| Singapore | 134.4 | 143.7 | 76.0 | 82.0 |
| Thailand | 90.6 | 100.8 | 8.6 | 11.4 |
| U.S. | 85.7 | 89.9 | 63.6 | 71.6 |
| U.K. | 125.2 | 130.2 | 71.1 | 79.6 |
| Vietnam | 87.1 | 175.3 | 4.9 | 8.1 |

Source: International Telecommunications Union (2011).

Also important is the way the ICT sector itself has become globalized, especially since 2002, from software development to the manufacturing of hardware, all the way up to the operation of call centers, so that the ICT sector is now a vital part of many Asian countries' economies.

Digital ICTs and digital spaces

The revolutionary potential of digital ICTs draws from several distinctive and common attributes.

- First, digital technology has meant greater reproducibility, with large amounts of information packed into smaller and smaller media, without losing fidelity or quality.

- Second, digital technology is marked by its ease for and versatility in sharing and dissemination, including the options of going from one-on-one to many-to-many connectivity, and the many peer-to-peer file-sharing functions.
- Third, digital technology, being easy to reconfigure, recombine and/or re-embed, is highly flexible.
- Fourth, digital technology is relatively accessible. While many of the computers and gadgets are expensive, costs have been dropping quite significantly over the years. In addition, Internet cafes allow even low-income individuals to access the Internet at extremely low costs.
- Fifth, digital technologies allow for autonomy and decentralization with reproduction and distribution, often in the privacy of the home.
- Sixth, digital technologies allow for relative anonymity.
- Note how these attributes allow us to revisit McLuhan's contentions about media shaping society, even while rendering their taxonomies obsolete. Multi-platform, multi-media, these digital ICTs transcend both space and time.

These attributes have allowed digital ICTs to become more than information media. Instead, we speak now of digital ICTs as constantly growing potential spaces, albeit "virtual", "hyper real" or even "non-places", which I have broadly categorized into seven types, and to which we can apply McLuhan's insights into socially constituted and socially constitutive spaces. (I invite others to come up with more metaphors besides the "information superhighway" to describe the digital spaces and places.)

1) Libraries. Sites for information. Given the digital ICTs' characteristics, we speak here of large amounts of information now becoming more accessible either through facilitated searches (search engines) or by simply being accessible through a computer. Digital ICTs have allowed a customization of information, people now choosing what they want. The potentials are tremendous for education, information and advocacy around reproductive and sexual health. This can range from vital biomedical information about contraception and abortion to explanations of homosexuality and other issues around which there is stigmatization or socially-imposed silence.

I use *libraries* here loosely. The idea of private electronic libraries is also important, with its tensions between privacy and disclosure. If in the real world people keep *dirty drawers* of porn and sex toys, folders in computers can be *secret* places for *sexy* materials, materials produced on something as basic as a digital camera embedded in a mobile phone.

2) Recreational sites. The entertainment aspect of digital ICTs cannot be overestimated. Internet cafes cater more to these recreational demands than to educational needs, in activities from downloading MP3 music files to gaming. There has been an explosion in the availability of videos, including previously banned films with sexual themes, escaping censors and becoming readily available at extremely low costs. Appropriately, the regional dialogue is being held in Hanoi, where tiny DVD shops can yield films ranging from those of the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodavar to Japanese hentai (anime pornography) and even an occasional Filipino independent film like *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros), about a transgender child growing up in an urban slum area with a family of cellphone snatchers, while struggling through first love, the neighborhood policeman.

I intentionally chose the term *recreational* to highlight the way these electronic spaces are entertaining as well as re-creational (and re-presentational) in selective ways, a particularly important dimension in considering sexuality. Recreational spaces are most intriguing in the way they let loose the

surreal and the fantastic (as in fantasies), a point to which I will return later when discussing digital spaces as platforms for performance.

3) Socialization. Digital ICTs allow socialization that defies physical borders and, more importantly, that is able to overcome social strictures and inhibitions. At the most basic level, mobile phones, email and, increasingly now, VOIP (voice over Internet protocols) have revolutionized communications and the meaning of “being in touch”. As part of its marketing, Skype flashes on the screen how many other users are online. While I was using Skype on April 8, 2009, the numbers ran from 8 to 15 million.

Other Internet sites further expand the potentials for socialization, explicit about possibilities for partnering, from cruising to non-sexual ‘dating’ (including as a prelude for actual physical dating or eyeballing), to sexual activities (audio or audio-visual). Again, the numbers can be staggering. On March 21, 2009, Planet Romeo, an international gay site, reported the following number of posts:

| Planet Romeo postings, statistics posted March 21, 2009 | |
|---|----------------|
| Europe | 607.936 |
| Asia* | 260.352 |
| North America | 75.537 |
| Africa | 14.259 |
| South America | 12.430 |
| Middle East | 7.193 |
| Australia | 7.174 |
| Central America | 2.566 |
| TOTAL | 987.447 |

* For Asia, the Philippines accounts for 133,545 posts, compared to Vietnam with 760 and Afghanistan with 74.

4) Social networking. The term “social networking” is used to describe sites like Friendster, MySpace, Orkut and Facebook. I use social networking here as distinct from socialization. Social networking has a more deliberate organizing component that goes beyond dyadic social relations. Social networking is particularly important for organizing people around common interests, as well as in the building of identities around gender and sexualities. The number of groups that have sprouted is amazing, including intersex people, transsexuals, and many “sexual minorities” or even “sexual outlaws”.

Social networking sites allow people to acquire hundreds of friends. In relation to gender and sexuality, the social networking sites may be more circumscribed, but are still significant, and some sites that cater to specific sexual minority populations can become highly segmented, allowing subgroups to form around specific interests, from sexual fetishes to pets to religion.

In countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, mobile telephony remains a major channel for social networking. In the Philippines, *clans* that take on the nature of a fraternity/sorority, with up to a hundred members, have been built through random dialing of numbers, and then snowballing through the new contacts. The clan members meet up physically, and allow for new friends beyond the immediate geographical neighborhood.

5) Marketplaces. E-commerce has opened many new possibilities in terms of access to sexual materials, from pornography to sex toys to academic materials to Viagra and Cialis (which seem to form the bulk of spam solicitations). Although access to foreign exchange is still restricted in many countries, E-commerce has developed rapidly and it has become easier now to obtain materials that were once heavily restricted. Digital technology allows potential buyers to overcome many of these restrictions, starting with initial “browsing” or “shopping”. Even in relatively liberal societies that have sex shops, entering the store may be considered embarrassing so online shopping opens new possibilities. E-commerce has also allowed access to lifestyle pharmaceuticals, sex toys, books and

videos.

E-commerce has also expanded the possibilities for sex work, from the more traditional forms with agents or pimps processing bookings, to autonomous sex workers now advertising openly.

6) Platforms for performance. Digital spaces and technologies allow a reconfiguration of the self and of one's private lives, of communities, and of what Appadurai (1996) calls "imagined selves, imagined worlds" (p. 3). Socialization and networking in digital spaces hinges now, not on *presentation* but on re-presentation and performance. Suddenly, for example, every other gay Filipino male presents himself as 'bisexual,' 'discreet' and 'masculine' because these are perceived to be desirable traits among men who have sex with men.

There are other implications for gender and sexuality that may not be as apparent but are important as well, especially as we look at lived sexual lives, from the little lies around one's physical location (a theme that has made it into Thai and Filipino rap songs, of the feckless husband lying to the wife on a cellphone) to the reinvention of self on MySpace.

Performance allows other digital spaces to be constantly recolonized and reculturalized, allowing an explosion of digital fantasies, from strippers on one's desktop to webcam-facilitated cybersex. In the Philippines, there have been at least two instances where police raided Internet cybersex shops, with transvestites presenting themselves as female-bodied women to entertain heterosexual Korean clients.

7) Political arenas. To a large extent, all the previous 'spaces' that I discussed have characteristics of social arenas. Digital spaces are forums for expression, and for contestations of those views. Blogs and chat rooms, even in sites for dating and cybersex, are also active with chatters, discussing everything from sexual fetishes to national politics. Sites can be subversive, allowing prohibited images, and ideas to be reproduced and disseminated.

I will return to the discussion of politics and political arenas, but want to emphasize here that the taxonomy I present is in a sense artificial because digital spaces are often contemporaneous hybrid or 'mestizo' spaces (Auge & Jacobs, 1999), used at once for recreation, political expression, and socialization.

It is also important to remember that digital spaces, for all their hyper real attributes, are still linked to the physical world. In fact, the power of digital spaces lies not just in simulation of the physical, but in attempting interfaces. This has been particularly important in the area of cybersex, with attempts to conflate the virtual and the real with gadgets and devices like the cyberdildo (a USB interface dildo, used while watching porn).

The politics of digital spaces

Christine Hine (2000) suggests three possible ways of looking at the Internet, which could well apply to an examination of the actors and stakeholders in digital ICTs. First, we could look at these technologies as a logical upshot of modern society preoccupied with rationality and control. Toffler's description of a third wave for humanity does in fact recognize how, in industrial society, information needs to grow for the military and corporations along with the need to organize and access this information more efficiently. Some questions do revolve around political economy. Who controls information and information flows, and for what purposes? Certainly, digital spaces often end up maintaining if not amplifying the status quo, reinforcing essentialized, medicalized, and commodified sexualities and further privileging men in terms of access to these spaces.

Other sexual ideologies are reproduced through the gendered spaces of digital ICTs. For example, the re-presentations of self on Internet sites may conform to perceived norms and explicit rejections of certain physical types such as, among gay men, *uglies*, *fems*, and *fatties*. Often, too, the rejection

of physical types carries elements of class discrimination. “No *fems*”, for example, is actually a rejection of lower-class transgender people.

A second view Hine proposes is that of digital ICTs as “embodiments of a postmodern mode of (dis) organization, with fragmentation of science, religion, culture, society, self”. This “postmodern” view could look at the digital frontiers as areas of refuge and growth for diverse ideas and identities, as spaces that do not define some as sexual minorities or sexual outlaws. Conservatives, regarding such possibilities as modernity leading to moral decay, respond with moral panic, embodied in stricter rules and laws. Finally, and this view overlaps with the second, digital ICTs could be looked at as “agents of radical changes in social organization” (p. 2). Information and information flow are important, as are spaces for talking, and talking back.

How might we go about studying the politics of digital spaces? Drawing on Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar (1997), Hine (2000, p. 6) de-emphasizes attributes of technologies as shaping or determining forces and suggests instead that we look at the Internet both as a cultural artifact (i.e. a product of culture) and as a space where culture is being formed and reformed. She also emphasizes the need to examine the social processes involved in the digital ICTs ranging from the design of their technologies to Internet’s architecture and to actual utilization.

Some of the methods for looking into these digital spaces come from traditional media and communications research. There is content analysis, looking at representations in the texts and images of the digital jungle. There can be discourse analysis, looking at who is saying what, and to whom, although the digital ways of expression may be very different. Links on a website, for example, speak of who someone, or an organization, might be, and its interests. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has a website with links to conservative causes, for example, a piece that talks about homosexuality being caused by a “weak or absentee father and

dominant or overindulgent mother”.⁶⁷

There are also “big picture” analyses. State, supra-State and non-state actors recognize the power of the digital ICTs and their spaces. Classical political economy focuses on the hegemonies, with concerns over the reproduction of First World colonialism through digital spaces, as well as the political economies of media control through the big five: Time Warner, Disney, NewsCorp, Viacom and Bertelsmann (Bagdikian, 2004).

Digital ICTs have also sparked conservative reactions as well as social and moral panics. These institutional responses are important to document. For example, as early as 2001 the Catholic Church in the Philippines produced its own Internet filtering mechanism with prepaid Internet cards. Entry into an X-rated site brought up a warning message and a block. The business, however, went into bankruptcy the following year.

Even earlier, in 1997, China’s State Council passed a Computer Information Network and Internet Security, Protection, and Management Regulation, with Section 5 providing for very specific prohibitions: “No unit or individual may use the Internet to create, replicate, retrieve, or transmit the following kinds of information”. Included were such prohibitions as “inciting to overthrow the government or the socialist system” as well as ‘promoting feudal superstitions, sexually suggestive material, gambling, violence, murder”.

Moral panics have taken numerous forms. In the United States, public attention in recent years has focused on *sexting*, where young people send photographs of themselves to friends through mobile phones (Gibbs, 2009). An even more controversial development was the case of a 14-year-old

67 <http://cbcplforlife.com/?p=8372>, Accessed February 1, 2013.

American girl charged in March 2009 with distributing pornographic materials. The materials were photographs of herself naked, which she posted on her Internet site. The debates here resurrect many old issues around civil liberties and the very definitions of obscenity and pornography. The following passage from a National Research Council study (conducted by a Committee to Study Tools and Strategies for Protecting Kids from Pornography and Their Applicability to Other Inappropriate Internet Content) reflects old debates on what constitutes obscenity:

Extreme sexually explicit imagery to create sexual desire on the one hand, and responsible information on sexual health on the other, are arguably unrelated and, many would contend, easily distinguished. But much content is not so easily categorized. While some extreme sexually explicit material meets legal tests for obscenity (and therefore does not enjoy First Amendment protection), less extreme material may not – and material described in the previous paragraph, lingerie advertisements, and models in swimsuits generally do enjoy First Amendment protection, at least for adults and often for children [Section 7.3]. In short, sexually oriented content that falls outside the realm of extreme sexually explicit imagery is likely to be the source of greatest contention, and there are arguments about whether such content would be subject to regulatory efforts aimed at reducing the exposure of minors to material that is or may be sexual in nature [Section 7.3]. (Thornburgh & Lin, 2002, p. 5)

Some of the moral panic draws from old social phobias, as in the Religious Right's tirades against homosexuality and homosexuals, while other dimensions respond directly to digital representations, as with recent fears over *sexting*. But the e digital chattering often also reflects the intersecting effects of class, race, ethnicity and gender. One example is an extended discussion that began with the murder of a young man in California, which brought out tensions around masculinities, Asian-ness and race.⁶⁸

68 <http://www.topix.com/forum/oakland/TKV3FNPVDE17S05JB>.

Many governments, as well as non-State actors such as religious bodies, face dilemmas, wanting to tap into digital ICTs, their potentials, their symbol value as markers of modernization and progress, but they also fear their destabilizing potential. We thus have the paradox of a country like China, where the government is actually wiring households for high-speed Internet access, and yet needs to bring in “information purifiers” to filter the Internet.

Future spaces and places

While it is important to look at the social dynamics surrounding moral panics, it is equally important to consider how Internet users themselves develop their own “street-smart” cybersex networks, including degrees of self-regulation for safer networking. This means going to the level of individuals and small groups, to explore how Internet cruisers see themselves and their risks. As one contribution to the anthology *Sex-word Memoirs on Love and Heartbreak* summarized so well: “If I get Chlamydia, blame MySpace” (Slocum, 2009).

For all the fears of an Internet-induced STD epidemic, we might lose sight of how the Internet could in fact create, in some instances, “virtual virtue and sex discarnate” (Levinson, 1999, p. 57), of how “virtual” sex allows a safe (and relatively chaste?) distancing of bodies. This puts McLuhan on his head, the master of modern mass communications actually fretting at one time about “discarnate man . . . relieved of all commitments to law and morals”. Almost tongue-in-cheek it seems, Levinson talks about the relative chastity: “. . . as long as online angels take care not to jeopardize their status by falling offline, or coming to Earth to confirm or extend their relationship in the real, palpable world” (p. 60).

Virtual ethnographies need not be elaborate exercises in discourse analysis. Even casual surfing of the Internet will show how digital or electronic spaces reinforce older concepts of gendered spaces,

for example, 'female' sites devoted mainly to housekeeping and 'male' sites to cars and gadgets. De Certeau (1984) reminds us that "spaces are a frequented place," where there is an "intersection of moving bodies". Ultimately, it is important to look at how virtual spaces 'converse' with embodied places. There is in fact a whole field of cyberdildonics attempting to link the virtual and the physical to enhance sexual experiences, for example, dildos hooked up to the computer through the USB port so it can be remotely operated while watching porn.

The interfaces between the virtual and the "real" spaces are strongest for socialization. Some electronic chatting eventually leads to "eyeball" encounters, for actual physical interaction. Its links to sex tourism have been described in the Philippines, where a Filipino may have contacted potential sex partners in Thailand long before an actual visit (Dalisay, Tan & Ting, 2007). It is important as well to look at the physical "bricks-and-mortar" structures that have grown around virtual worlds, such as Internet cafes, which have become so important in developing countries. Internet cafe clients tend to be young males who use the spaces for gaming and socializing. In a way then, the Internet and Internet cafes become sites for male socialization and the reproduction of male ideologies, while excluding females (simply because more of the clients are males). One could look too into the gendered breakdowns in the ownership of personal and laptop computers and mobile phones.

Finally, some very real physical establishments are involved in the production and distribution of sexuality-related digital products. The networks for DVDs, with their many sexually explicit titles, need to be analyzed: who determines which titles and genres are to be produced and how are these consumed? I am also fascinated with the places where these DVDs are sold: in Manila, it is in Quiapo, in a predominantly Muslim district, in the shadow of a mosque and a Catholic basilica.

The growing interest in social justice and sexuality (Correa, Petchesky & Parker, 2008) means that we must deal as well with the continuing digital divide, not just among but also within countries. The ITU report (2009: 18) highlights two important features that affect ICT use: an ICT price basket, and

something as basic as literacy. Without basic literacy, even the cheapest ICT would be useless. And in countries with fairly high literacy, as in China and the Philippines, even relatively low ICT cost may limit access to the internet. One could argue about the impact of this digital divide. On one hand, it could mean depriving people of alternatives in relation to gender and sexualities. On the other hand, it could also mean people not becoming trapped by the increasingly globalized essentializing of sex and sexuality.

One should revisit, too, many of the assumptions about communications and information that are too quickly transferred into digital ICTs, for example, the assumption that the Internet amplifies the exploitation of mail order brides. Constable (2003) provides an interesting challenge to this, showing agency and negotiations in the Internet correspondence between potential brides and grooms. We are challenged to explore and to map the digital world, yet one is reminded of Jean Baudrillard's comment (1995) that "the territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it" (p. 1). Even as we map the digital, the territory changes, morphs, mutates.

To give one concrete example, we might want to look quickly at how digital ICTs affect Filipino overseas workers, some 9 million of whom are spread throughout the world. What do the digital ICTs mean for them? Is "being in touch", including cybersex, sufficient to keep them faithful to spouses or partners left back home? What new tensions emerge with the use of digital technologies? For example, there has been some discussion of cybersex being sinful. An article on cybersex appearing in *PC Magazine* in 2001 made reference to the Catholic view: "To remove all murkiness, the church ruled recently that carnal e-mail and illicit online relationships are sins. Virtual reality can be just as much a vice as a reality made up of facts and actions" said Reverend Antino Sciortino, editor of *Famiglia Cristiana* magazine (Behr, 2001).

Sonia Correa, Rosalind Petchesky and Richard Parker (2008) refer to the brave new world of sex in late modern capitalism, marked especially by an "explosion of intimate possibilities" (p. 20). Many

more exciting developments are likely in the future in this multi-terrain, multivocal age of digitalized bodies, senses, fantasies and desires, wired and lived.

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