

**INTRODUCTION**

# Queer on Line

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The year 2004 was something of a milestone for the internet. October 2004 marked ten years since Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the web, founded the World Wide Web Consortium. It was fifteen years since Berners-Lee proposed the hypertext system that became the web. It was forty years since Paul Baran laid out the idea of packet-switching networks, thereby laying the foundation for internet infrastructure. How much has the internet changed since then? Enormously, and in particular between 1994 and 2004.

Research on the social consequences of the internet has also changed a great deal. The last ten years or so have produced a veritable flood of research on internet social aspects. Before the mid-1990s, when considerable research focused on the effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC), it was common to find studies of its impact on productivity in the workplace but uncommon to find much—with some notable exceptions, such as the work of Ron Rice (Rice 1984; Williams, Rice, & Rogers 1988)—about social support. Now there are reports and studies of on-line communities, interest groups, mailing lists, chat rooms, web sites, social networks, and numerous other on-line social phenomena. There are internet research institutes at a few universities and a full-blown Internet Studies Ph.D. program at Curtin University in Australia.

Despite increasing scholarly output across numerous disciplines that takes aim at internet consequences and influences, precious little scholarship has anything

to do with sex, sexuality, and sexual identities on line. While working on the *Virtual Culture* anthology (Jones 1997), I could find only one person studying queers on line, David Shaw, who was then a doctoral student at the University of Colorado. David began his fine essay with a quote from Roland Barthes, and then wrote,

If, as Barthes illustrates, love is most readily understood in the physical absence of the lover, then perhaps the best way to understand communication lies in the uncharted territories of cyberspace where men sit alone at their keyboards producing and inscribing themselves within interactive texts of homosexual desire and need. (Shaw 1997, 133)

David interviewed a dozen or so gay men who used an internet chat room. So, yes, there are queers in cyberspace. Scholars know that. But beyond knowing that, we know little else. In fact, we cannot even be certain that they “sit alone at their keyboards.” We do know that teenagers, in particular, use the internet for health information, especially related to sex education and sexual health. In a 2001 report (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis 2001), the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 40 percent of teenage girls and 26 percent of teenage boys who use the internet look for health information. As one girl, age fifteen, noted in a focus group for that study, “Health and body issues is the topic that sticks out in my mind when it comes to sensitive subjects that can be researched on line.” Or, as another girl said, “It’s less weird and cheaper than going to a doctor to ask.”

Part of the reason so little empirical evidence exists about queers on line may be the difficulty of studying matters of sex and sexuality on the internet. Quite often, when someone learns that I work with the Pew Internet and American Life Project, the first question asked is what we have learned about on-line porn. Sex and porn are almost unavoidable on line, and the public wants to know how prevalent it really is and what to do about it. In truth, in our research, we have learned just about nothing about porn on line. Our primary research method is the telephone survey. Random digit dialing around the country and asking interviewees about their use of internet for porn is not likely to yield many useful or trustworthy results. Even asking questions about sexuality would cause many, if not most, of our respondents to hang up on us.

Trying to use the internet for such research would be even more difficult. First, there would be the spam filters that would no doubt block e-mail messages we would send to invite participants, unless we cleverly disguised words like *sex* to a degree that we could never be sure whether the questions asked what we would like to know. But the more important problem with using the internet for the research would be the difficulty of overcoming respondents’ fears. Given numerous news stories about on-line sexual predators caught in law enforcement stings, would anyone trust us? And should we trust those who would trust us? (And would we get in trouble ourselves?)

Of course, researchers have managed to study other harmful, dangerous, or illicit behaviors, such as drug use, often with good results. Why should the internet be more difficult? In part, the problem springs from the never-ending alarms that technology companies sound and the media report, making the internet out to be untrustworthy. Were the public to heed all the dire warnings about the internet, ranging across what it could do to our computers, to our credit ratings, to our bank accounts, and even to ourselves, we would have quit using the internet by now, if we had the temerity to begin using it in the first place. But that is not the prime source of the difficulty, because, after all, most users seem to trust others on line—to a point. The primary reason is that gaining trust on line is difficult beyond the initial, basic level first established. An internet user is a curious and contradictory mix of low alert and high suspicion, willing to part with all sorts of personal information but dubious about the identity of most other users on line.

David Phillips's essay offers insight into trust and identity. His ideas can help teach more about what it means to be queer on line, not only in the sense of the visual and textual representation of queer identity, but also in relation to the traces that on-line activities create and leave. I am convinced of the need to think further about the connections he draws between performance and context, because, at least at present, I would argue that the internet is largely about performance and context. If one were to replace the word *identity* with the word *performance* in the numerous theoretical interventions into on-line life, the result would leave agency foregrounded in ways that, thus far, internet studies have overlooked.

What is urgent, however, is that the ideas Phillips sets forth be put into practice in scholarship. The next iteration of Internet Protocol, IPv6, is to include unique identifiers in every device and every message, in every packet, transmitted and received. Router-level control of internet connections promises more forceful and stringent limits on access to the internet. In short, internet infrastructure is changing. The implications for surveillance are staggering, of course, but more so are the implications for performance and context and for scholarship.

The internet is still in flux, in many ways, and its history is unwritten. Gay and lesbian communities (and individuals within those) played key roles in the development of elements of CMC that users today take for granted. Little historical work about the internet has been undertaken, and now is the time to begin interviewing, while many of those involved in its initial development are still alive and willing to discuss, recollect, and reminisce. It is important to approach internet history from a critical standpoint. Like the hypertext links that provide the base for the web, the multiple histories of the internet are not linear but connect and reconnect in interesting ways within and outside the on-line realm. Rather than lumping together the groups on the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (Well), to cite an easy example, one could tease out the histories of individual groups and note the connections between

them. That might reveal something about the multiple dimensions of group and self-identity and about the roles the gay and lesbian communities played in relation to and within other communities in the early days of the internet.

The connections between on-line identity and life off line are where one must go, I believe, to understand to the consequences of the internet for social interaction. Han Lee's chapter pp. 243–260, does just that, integrating race and ethnicity into an understanding of queer identity on line. Lee notes that queer communities “played a vital role in the early transformation of internet technology into sociable media” (see Chapter 12, pp. 243–260) and provides a sterling example of how to interrogate identity—queer, on line, and racial—to provide a valuable understanding of the seemingly contradictory fluidity and fixity of identity and social relations.

Perhaps at no time in one's life is identity more fluid than during youth (particularly adolescence), and yet it is also a time when one may feel trapped, that one's identity is forever fixed and unchanging. One of the most important factors in adolescent development must be the media, at least when it comes to matters of identity, for, through the media, young persons learn about and discover the plethora of identities in the world. For most youths in the West today, the concept of the media is impossible to imagine without the internet, and it is just as hard for them to imagine a world without the internet. The pervasive invisibility of homosexuality, about which Larry Gross writes, is now bisected by a visibility in media and cultural products, as he notes, complicated by the availability of ready communication with and among homosexual members of across cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities.

But I suspect that, as Gross writes, “most young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths still find themselves isolated and vulnerable,” (see Chapter 13, pp. 261–278) no matter how much the internet can give them a space to be themselves, because to do so truly would be to integrate their identity into everyday life and not sequester it for use only during on-line communication, to trade in effect a figurative closet for a virtual one. The virtuality that makes the internet a playground for role games, gender bending, and other types of experimentation also hints at the fluidity of identity off line and likely makes it difficult for the young to understand that identity can be integrated. No matter how provocative and downright fun it may be to consider virtual disembodiment, cyborg theory, or William Gibson's ideas about cyberspace, humans do not so easily disassemble into bodies and projections, experiences and expressions, or words and bodies.

That caveat does not rule out positive outcomes. Gross notes a sense of community belonging and social support, as well as the creation of a community safe enough that many youths feel comfortable coming “out on line before doing so in so-called real life.” But it is also clear from Gross's essay that internet use does not ameliorate everything. And so I return to David Shaw's poignant image of the physically absent lover, in “the uncharted territories of cyberspace,” sitting alone at the keyboard

“producing and inscribing” the self “within interactive texts of homosexual desire and need” (Shaw 1997, 145).

What transpires on line researchers can observe and may try to understand, but what occurs at the keyboard we still do not know, and we know next to nothing about the connections between what occurs on line and what occurs in other aspects of life. As a result, we know a little about queers on line, and we know even less about what it means to be queer on line. But as the essays in this section show, perhaps now we have begun to learn.

## REFERENCES

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