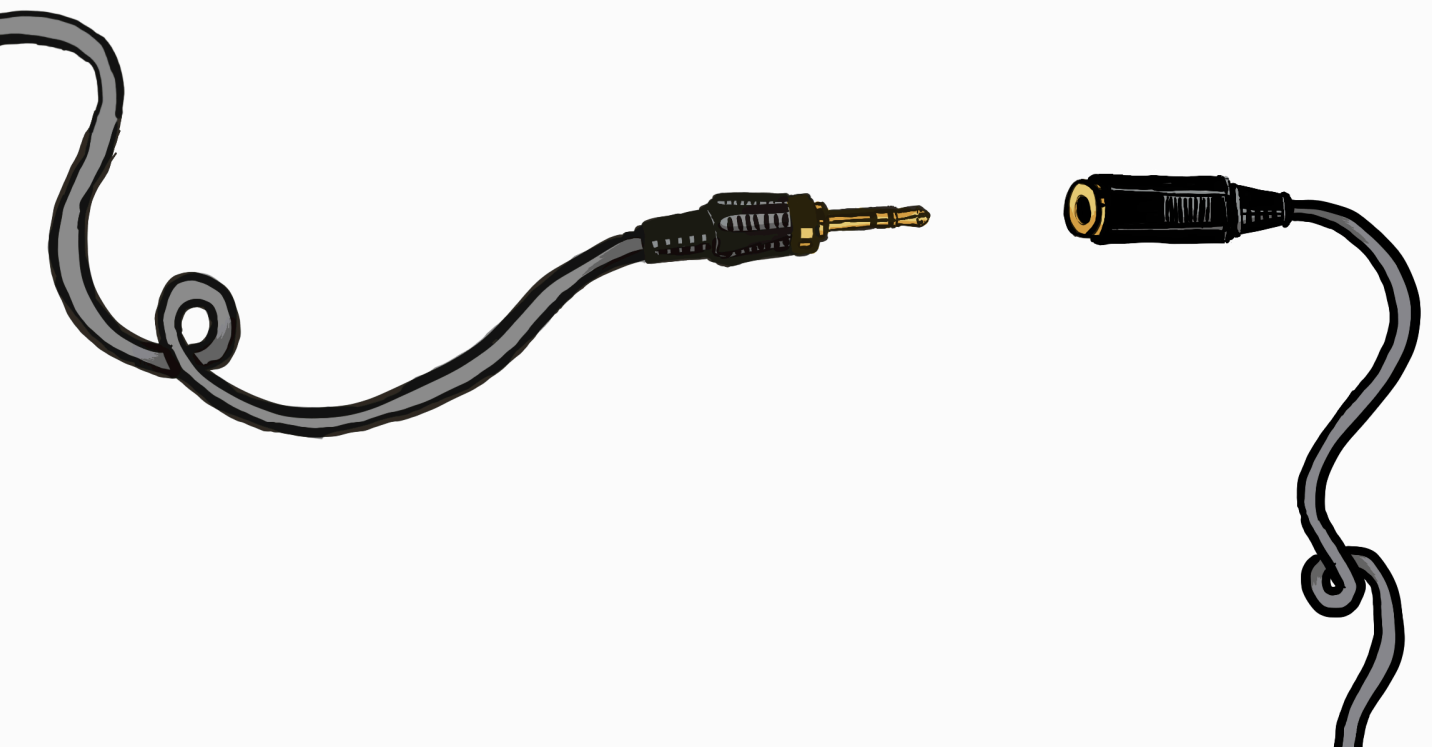
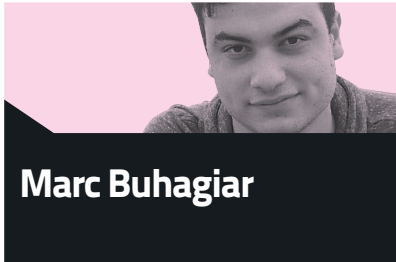


CYBERSEXUALITY

Changing the Nature of Sex through Technology

Relationships have changed hand in hand with society. More couples are living far apart from each other. **MARC BUHAGIAR** speaks to **MARY ANN BORG CUNEN** to explore how technology can lend a hand. Illustrations by **SONYA HALLETT**





Marc Buhagiar

Push a button to receive instant gratification,' said the technobot. Picture a world that goes beyond the conventional form of sexual intercourse. In this world natural sexual intercourse will pale in comparison to a newer form of technological sex. It is not hard to imagine companies pushing for these 'improvements' to make a profit through new technologies. The porn industry is a well known example where technology and sexuality have merged to bump up income.

Other industries have also benefited from this merge, as sex toy manufacturers have established their own market. Recently, Durex has started testing a new product called the Durex 'Fundawear'. It has been advertised as 'The Future of Foreplay'. The underwear has inbuilt sensors allowing users (the couple), to 'touch over the internet' using an iPhone app which controls sensor vibration. Their markets are couples in long distance relationships. They must use a video call over the Internet to see their partner's pleasurable reaction.

In this way, the sexual act is artificialised. Sex is mediated through a screen where all the senses except the sense of sight are lost.

According to Mary Ann Borg Cunen, a University of Malta academic and counselling psychologist specialising in

sexuality and couples therapy, certain senses are fundamental towards the sexual act. For example, the sense of smell is very important in selecting a long-term partner for procreation of healthy offspring.

The sense of touch is also crucial to the sexual act, and technology, according to Borg Cunen, can only partly compensate for this. Some technology is even breaking through this barrier. Teledildonics, sex toys that use a computer to transfer the sense of touch achieving climax, can help couples

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separated by long distances keep the intimacy alive even when proximity is impossible. However, they have alternative uses. Such technology could be used as an extension of pornography to give a more realistic, reciprocated 'feel'. This technology could provide sexual gratification when none is available in the real world. It could even be used to

'cheat' on your partner to the relationship's detriment.

Technology can never fully simulate physical contact. It can only attempt to keep the couple interested in each other sexually while in a long distance relationship. Borg Cunen identifies a form of idealisation that develops at the start of a relationship. This diminishes over time and contact to mature into love shared by the couple. Borg Cunen argues, 'in a long distance relationship this genuine love based on true knowledge cannot fully take place. We can 'be' only the person who we think the other will like'. With long distance relationships there is a constant need to always be your partner's ideal mate and vice versa. This means that the couple will always be sexually interested in one another and they can easily gain sexual release because the relationship is built on ideals.

Sexual technology is trying to satisfy sexual appetite while withholding intimacy. Borg Cunen claims that people appear fearful of intimacy. 'We seem to be seeking sexual pleasure devoid of commitment and devoid of a relationship which you have to work at. In relationships you have to relate to the other person. This can also be seen in the trend of "hooking up" with strangers in clubs and bars whom you hardly (if at all) know.' There is a beneficial flipside to sexual technology. It promises sexu-





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al release without the risks accompanying sexual intercourse. With sexual intercourse, sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancy are ugly spectres looming over the act. They are only dampened by contraception — though always needed. Sexual technology can give a sexual outlet without risking any grave repercussions.

Another issue behind sexual technology is that it needs a computer that can anonymise the user. This guise of privacy and anonymity contributes to the temptation to use it. Men are the typical avid consumers of such products sating their desire for multiple sexual partners. This desire could even be driving the production of sexual technologies, suggested Borg Cunen.

So how do companies sell sex? According to Borg Cunen, ‘Sex has always sold. And people can always be persuaded that their “neighbour” is having better sex. By promising better, more exciting sex we are awakening the innate envy that exists in each one of us, and manipulating it!’ Companies

release products they swear will spice up your love life by improving it and making it more exciting. Regular intercourse seems rather boring when you can develop it further with sex toys and costumes, hence injecting some fantasy.

The Internet has changed how many partners a person can have. There are infinite possibilities to choose from thanks to online dating sites and communities but repercussions exist. With this dating pool full of possibilities, the current partner may always seem inferior to an idealised digital image.

The Internet has made it easier to buy sex toys. People can be ashamed to buy the latest sex gadget and a computers’ sense of anonymity can provide a great opportunity. The Internet has blown open the doors for sexual experimentation that can help maintain the sexual interest of countless couples — a double-edged sword. ●

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