

The unconscious allure of internet sex¹

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When I started thinking about coming to talk about people in difficulty with internet pornography in Australia, my first thought was, 'Fantastic. The other side of the world. I don't need to be concerned about confidentiality. I can give some uncensored case illustrations. The gloves are off!' Forty eight hours later, I realised that talking about my patients in Australia is no different from talking about them in London, because wherever we are, what we are talking about is the most deeply personal aspect of a person's being, their sexuality. And while there is less risk here that anyone might recognise a patient I describe, actually the subject of sexuality and sexual fantasy is still an area which one has to approach with respect and discretion.

But I think this first thought that I had is symptomatic of the fact that internet pornography is fundamentally about voyeurism and exhibitionism – an excited looking and showing. It is often about substituting an excited looking and showing for all the complexities of a more profound human engagement. And that dynamic can pervade talking about, thinking about, and writing about this subject matter. It is terribly tempting to offer shocking statistics, graphic case material, or even, as I've experienced at some conferences, graphic images. And then the audience have the discomfort of being made voyeur.

Another quality of this thought that I had is that it is manic – in the psychoanalytic sense, though hopefully not meeting psychiatric criteria for mania. It's as though there are no constraints, the usual rules don't apply – omnipotence, denial of my own vulnerability and that of my patients, and indifference to the welfare of the other dominate. And this again is a feature of the internet – It allows activities that would have been unimaginable 25 years ago, access to staggering amounts of information with mind-boggling speed, horrendous attacks on others via trolling – all these things that are associated with a sense of excitement and power, and dissociation from dependency, vulnerability, concern, and limitations.

And lastly, how odd that I thought this phrase 'The gloves are off'. Consciously what I had in mind was those white cotton gloves that historians wear when handling fragile and ancient documents. But this is an expression from the boxing ring, and captures something much more aggressive in this thought that I could go public on the details of my patient's sexual lives.

So these three qualities of my over-excited thought – exhibitionism, manic defences and barely concealed aggression – are also compelling qualities of much internet sex. These are themes I'll return to. And I will try to address this subject of internet pornography in an unexcited way and to provide you with a case illustration without breaching the privacy of my patients.

I've had a special interest in this area since 2003 when I started at the Portman Clinic in London. The Portman Clinic is a small clinic offering psychoanalytic psychotherapy to people with problems of

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violence, criminality and compulsive sexual behaviours. Our patients are voluntary patients, seen as outpatients, with just over half receiving group psychotherapy, and the remainder, mostly once weekly individual psychotherapy. Referred patients are almost 90% male so they resemble a forensic population rather than a general mental health population. The problems we treat are very longstanding problems, and if treatment is concluded prematurely there may be a risk of harm to the individual themselves or to others. Consequently it is not unusual for us to see people for 5, 8 or occasionally 10 or more years.

In 2003 when I started working at the Portman Clinic compulsive use of internet pornography was a new problem because the internet was a relatively new phenomenon, but it was obvious that internet pornography was going to be of increasing concern. It is now the most common reason why patients are referred to the Clinic. My perspective on this subject matter is therefore a psychoanalytic one, founded in in-depth clinical work with a relatively small number of patients but sometimes over many years. However I will try to make connections with available research in the field because I think, if our psychoanalytic theories are to have validity, they must have something useful to say about what we observe in society as well as what we see and experience in the consulting room.

Coming at this from a clinical perspective, I am inevitably more aware of the negative impacts of internet sex than the positives. But what proportion of people are using internet sex and what proportion are in difficulty with it? These are very common behaviours².

Existing studies suggest that 3-6 % of all internet users are addicted to the internet; roughly 1% of all internet users addicted to internet sex; 4% of young adult internet users looking at pornography for more than 10 hours per week³: the percentages are small, but the potential numbers are huge. These prevalence rates are comparable with those for common mental health disorders such as depression, phobias and OCD.⁴ For the small minority of people who get into a cycle of compulsive use, this can be a desperate symptom, with sometimes devastating consequences.

There are different ways of defining problematic usage. Subjective distress is the criterion we tend to rely on clinically. One person may be concerned when they are looking at pornography for a few hours per week, while another seeks help when they are up all night on the computer and failing to meet other obligations⁵. Amount of time spent online is not irrelevant however. In the US, Cooper et

² A survey of young heterosexual Danish adults found that 67% of men and 18% of women used pornography at least once a week (Hald, 2006). A 2008 study of American college students found that 93% of men and 62% of women had watched internet pornography before 18 years of age (Sabina, Wolak and Finkelhor, 2008).

³ An early survey of internet users (Greenfield, 1999) concluded that 6% were internet addicted, and of these, 20% were sexually addicted, suggesting that a little over 1% of internet users may develop an addiction to online sexual activity. In 2011 I collaborated with the BBC on a survey of over 1,000 18-24 year olds for a programme they were doing; we found that 4% reported using online pornography for more than 10 hours per week, and these people who we defined as 'heavy users' were much more concerned about their behaviour than so called 'light' users accessing pornography for less than 1 hour per week (Wood, 2013). More recently, a survey of 2,500 German leisure time internet users found that 3.7% of regular internet users, which they calculate to be 2.1% of the German population, met criteria for internet addiction (Muller et al, 2014). Of the addicted individuals 32% were using online pornography compared with 12% of the regular users; the addicted individuals were also more likely to be using the internet for gambling and gaming.

⁴ Depression 2.6%, Phobias 2.6%, OCD 1.3%, (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2009)

⁵ A survey from Poland of people referring themselves for help with internet sex addiction found that self-referral did not correlate directly with amount of time spent online, but with experience of negative symptoms

al (2000) found that people using internet sex for more than 11 hours per week reported more adverse consequences in terms of the impact on their relationships and wellbeing, so in some research studies 11 or more hours online per week is used as the cut-off between problematic and so-called 'recreational' usage. A third way of defining problematic usage is in terms of the nature of the images – whether they are extreme or particularly violent, and whether the images viewed are deemed illegal within a particular jurisdiction. I will ask new patients whether they are concerned about the amount of time they spend looking at pornography, or the type of material they are looking at. Usually the answer is 'both'.

So how do we know about **what** people are doing online? The main focus of academic research has been on people offending online, viewing or posting illegal images. With respect to general usage, Ogas and Gaddam (2012) have written a fascinating book called 'A billion wicked thoughts'. Using data from meta-search engines such as Dogpile, they collected about 400 million different internet searches from July 2009 to July 2010. About 55 million searches (roughly 13%) were for erotic content, representing searches by approximately 2 million people. This is the internet age and internet research: numbers are vast, the scale is huge⁶. They also used data from a data set released in 2006 by AOL of the search histories of 657,000 people over a three-month period in 2006. The release of this data enabled Ogas and Gaddam to see which search terms occurred together, so they could see whether ambiguous search terms implied sexual searches by seeing what they often occurred with. So 'college cheerleaders' occurred so frequently with things like 'naked cheerleaders' and 'free cheerleader porn', that 'college cheerleaders' was deemed to be indicative of a sexual search. This technique enabled them to categorise people's searches.

We know that however extreme or idiosyncratic someone's sexual interest, they will find some realisation of that online, what Ogas and Gaddam refer to as Internet Rule #34: if you can imagine it, there will be internet pornography of it. The internet allows people with very idiosyncratic sexual interests to find whatever it is they are looking for. We also know, from clinical experience, that there are some people who are hooked on novelty – who seem excited by anything they haven't seen before. But what Ogas and Gaddam found, from analysing the AOL search histories, was that 56% of those searching for pornography used search terms in just one category during this time. The average number of categories was less than two (see *The Economist*, 26.9.15). Ogas and Gaddam found that just 20 different interests accounted for 80% of all searches. Their analysis suggests that the vast majority of people are relatively consistent in what they look for, and there is convergence across the population in people's sexual interests.

Ogas and Gaddam are looking at the big picture. They have big data, and their interpretation is essentially sociobiological. Their view is that 'Visual cues trigger desire in men' (p.46). The five most popular websites amongst men are all adult video sites. Adult sites targeting men often focus on body parts. They argue that many male sexual obsessions appear to form after only a single exposure, and almost all life-long sexual interests originate in adolescence. And their argument is that mostly what is sought, are those characteristics that are evidence of fertility in women – youthful and/or maternal, oestrogen-charged bodies.

associated with pornography use such as preoccupation, negative affect, relationship problems, and a feeling of losing control over sexual behaviour (Gola et al, 2016).

⁶ Two thirds of the searches they examined were from the US, with others from Canada, India, Nigeria and the UK – none from Australia.

They report that women, in contrast, are focused on emotional and psychological cues, leading to an interest in erotic stories rather than imagery. Of the top five websites visited by women, four are story sites or adult story sites, and only the fifth is an adult video site. In Ogas and Gaddam's view women attend not just to a man's appearance, but also his social status, personality, commitment, his attitude to children, the authenticity of his emotions – and so on – in effect, markers of whether he will be, not just a good biological mate, but whether he will be a supportive partner over years of child-rearing.

They argue that male homosexual pornography resembles male heterosexual pornography in that what is sought are body parts – genitalia, but also chests, butts – but it is men that are depicted and not women.

Interestingly Ogas and Gaddam argue that those women whose pattern of pornography use resembles that of men, consisting of an interest in images and bodies, tend to be self-identified bisexual women.

Ogas and Gaddam's findings are interesting at a population level, and Freud would be the first to recognise the human as a biological being. The gender differences they describe do fit with my clinical experience, though Alessandra Lemma's work suggests that there may be a cohort effect, and younger women, as in the case she describes, may be increasingly using internet pornography to focus on visual imagery. To date, the women we have seen at the Portman Clinic are much more likely to be using the internet to try and forge sexual relationships with others, often in a way that may be reckless or self-destructive. We also see women using avatars to explore issues of identity and sexual identity. These gender differences in the use of pornography are fascinating and require explanation, and sociobiology may have something to say about it. But as soon as we look at the idiosyncratic preferences of the individual, which is what we are concerned with psychoanalytically, one needs to look the issue of **meaning**, and the function this behaviour serves within the dynamic unconscious.

The conscious allure of internet sex may be self-evident: sex equals pleasure, and the internet provides easy and relatively anonymous access to unrivalled quantities of sexual stimuli – what Cooper (1997) called the 'triple A engine' of internet pornography – access, affordability and anonymity. What it offers to the **unconscious** is more subtle, but perhaps even more compelling. I describe some key issues highlighted by a psychoanalytic approach, before returning to some thoughts about the specific images which people seek out.

The psychic functions which pornography seem to have include [clinical material redacted to protect confidentiality] :

1) Avoidance of the perils of intimacy

One of the psychoanalytic concepts which is central to our work at the Portman Clinic is the notion of the core complex, proposed by Mervyn Glasser in 1979. Glasser was a former director of the Portman Clinic, and his ghost lives on in the culture. In Glasser's view the core complex is a universal dilemma, founded in early infantile experience. It describes the longing for blissful fusion with another – the wish to merge with another and lose oneself in an in-love state of union. But to merge with another threatens loss of self and potential annihilation, and evokes aggression to the other

who might take us over in this way, but who is the very object of desire. There are different solutions to this – one solution is narcissistic withdrawal, where we give up on trying to engage with the other and retreat to a state of isolation but feel depressed and lonely. Glasser proposes that the solution found by people who go on to develop perversions is that they stay engaged with the other, but treat them sadistically, where the sadism is a vehicle for the expression of the aggression stirred up by the desirable object – so the object is not destroyed by the aggression, but is treated cruelly and made to suffer.

The core complex is a kind of claustro-agoraphobic dilemma: to be close threatens claustrophobia, but to be alone threatens unbearable loneliness. Looking, admiring, being turned on by appearances may be an inevitable part of sex. But in this situation, an excited looking substitutes for all the challenges of being with an other in an emotional and a bodily way.

Coen (1981) describes five functions of masturbation in men. Although the paper was written in 1981 and predates the internet and internet pornography, I think the functions described in his paper are all evident in work with internet pornography patients and are a reminder that the sex act in internet sex usually consists of masturbation. The first function of masturbation that Coen describes concerns *'[providing] the illusory presence of another person which extends to identification with the comforting mother to restore the symbiotic duality'*. We can think that it was not just an adult woman partner that 'Michael' was summoning up in his imagination, but at some level, a symbiotic relationship with a comforting mother in whom he could immerse himself, but safely, without the threat of engulfment.

2) Electronic transitional object or fetish

The use of screens could be thought of as a kind of electronic transitional object, conjuring a sense of the presence of another, and of himself in relation to another in fantasy. The screens allow the creation of an area of illusion, as Winnicott (1953) describes, in the intermediate area between subjective reality and external reality. In infancy, the fantasy created by the infant is accepted as a piece of external reality – this thumb is the breast, or this teddy bear is both me and mother, both comforter and comforted. The creation of this area of illusion is a necessary step in coming to terms with external reality.

Greenacre (1970) suggests Winnicott's notion of the transitional object applies in the context of good enough mothering. However, in the context of a chronically disturbed relationship to the mother, the child may have a disturbed sense of his or her own body and the relation to the other, and there may be premature eroticisation. As early as the end of the first year or beginning of the second year of life, autoerotic activities developing in the context of severe deprivation, combined with the anger generated in frustrating or depriving conditions, means that the transitional object may acquire the characteristics of an infantile fetish, or pave the way for the later development of a fetish. This is more the quality that we see with compulsive use of internet sex, when sexually exciting images on a screen do not just conjure up a sense of the benign comforting relationship to the other (or the mother), but are infused with the aggression and auto-erotic excitement that signal frustration and a retreat from relatedness. For some people, use of on-screen pornography is not a transitional step in coming to terms with the reality of the separateness of the other as Winnicott describes, but becomes much more like the compulsive retreat to a fetish that Greenacre describes.

Hanna Segal's distinction between symbols and symbolic equations is also very useful in understanding the sterile, repetitious behaviour that can occur with people with sexual compulsions. In her view, in the depressive position, there is differentiation from the object and an awareness of loss – a symbol is then used to recreate the experience of the original object **in its absence**. In contrast, in the very earliest use of symbols in the paranoid schizoid position, self and other are not fully differentiated. At this level of functioning, early symbols '*are not felt to by the ego to be substitutes or symbols [for the object] but to be the object itself*' (1957 / 1988 p. 164). So in the depressive position the thumb that is sucked substitutes for the absent breast. In the paranoid schizoid position, it is felt to be the breast itself. In her view it is this 'symbolic equation' of the symbol and the thing itself which underpins the concrete thinking in psychosis.

In many compulsive sexual behaviours it is as though some image, some experience is sought with an absolute desperation, as though this will finally be 'the object itself' as Segal. There is a kind of concreteness to the desperation. The search for some exact experience, though not frankly psychotic, does not recognise loss, disappointment and separation. Yet it is doomed to failure, because the person looks at these women and knows that they are not the idealised mother, their bodies are not real, and their sexual responses are enacted. They are being paid to do a job. Part of the work of therapy is to mourn the original losses, to know what he yearns for and missed out on, to know that he can't ever find the perfectly luxurious mothering that he can blissfully lose himself in - and so to become dis-illusioned. Functioning at this more depressive position level, there is the possibility of enjoying a temporary retreat into fantasy, maybe the conscious use of sex or pornography – knowing it is a symbol of all that was wished for and desired in infancy, but it will never be the thing itself.

I'm not suggesting that the behaviour, per se, is pathological – but the illusory search for a perfectly comforting and exciting other / mother can give this behaviour a kind of compulsion and desperation which keeps the person locked in an addictive cycle, and which can cause great shame and distress.

3) Creation of a potent masculine self

Coen (1981) describes how masturbation contributes to the differentiation of the self from the maternal introject by '*hypercathecting the self-representation as phallic and masculine [enabling] illusory recovery of the paternal phallus*'. In some ways it is not surprising that masturbation can become so compulsive if it can both conjure a sense of an other, while countering fears of a disabling fusion with the maternal object, as the erect penis allows the confirmation of potent masculine vitality.

4) Avoidance of internally-generated sexual fantasy

Seemingly paradoxically, pornography can be used to **block** internally generated sexual fantasies. If the person is terrified of discovering his own sexual desires and wishes, it can ease anxiety to simply react to an external stimulus.

5) The enactment of entitlement, grievance and revenge against a depriving object

Pornography can be used when the person feels he deserves a treat – all of us with minor addictions probably know this dynamic: the cigarette, the drink, the caffeine which is the reward for some effort that we resent. Coupled with the sense of deserving a treat, are underlying feelings of grievance and entitlement – ‘I’m deprived, too much has been asked of me, I’m not properly appreciate or rewarded – I’m entitled to have this...whatever’. Behind the treat are feelings about deprivation. But this is a treat that can leave the person disgusted, because others are exploited in the production of the images. The rage about the deprivation is not really masked by sexual excitement, it is actually enacted: people are exploited and mistreated. And so unconsciously the individual gets his revenge against the depriving maternal object – but he also suffers guilt, because he can see what he has done. The ‘treat’ leaves him ‘disgusted’. How depressing to be confronted with this self when you thought you were escaping into a world of sexual pleasure.

6) Defiance of a persecutory superego

A further way in which pornography may be used is in defiance of a very persecutory superego. Use of pornography then becomes an act of defiance against a persecuting internal voice.

7) Denial of painful intrapsychic reality

In Coen’s account, this is number 3 in his list of the functions of masturbation:

The illusory actualization of fantasies during masturbation. Alteration of consciousness aids partial denial of painful intrapsychic reality and the substitution for it of the positive world of illusion (Coen, 1981)

Discussion

This work is typical of my experience with people caught up in compulsive use of internet pornography. I hope I have conveyed that it is so far from being exciting and titillating; it is more about bearing the loneliness of the human psyche, and about facing the perils of intimacy with another. Paradoxically it can be about the **avoidance** of an internally generated sexual life, one that makes us aware of our bodies, our instinctual urges, and our conflicting feelings towards the objects of our desire. It is like an excess of sexual excitement used to treat an absence of sexual desire, or an excess of sexual excitement used to mask highly conflicted sexual desire, or an excess of sexual excitement used to mask the terror of becoming emotionally and physically close to another.

With many internet patients, far from sexualising the transference, there is a sense that they are terrified of bringing together sexual and dependent feelings, and one or other or both have to be kept out of the consulting room at all costs.

The sexual fantasy as dream

Returning to the issue of the specific content that an individual searches for, these were the top 7 search categories in Ogas and Gaddam’s (2012) analysis:

% of all sexual searches	Ranking	Category
13.5	1	Youth

4.7	2	Gay
4.3	3	MILFs ('mothers I like to f***')
4.0	4	Breasts
3.4	5	Cheating wives
2.8	6	Vaginas
2.4	7	Penises

Their explanation, once again, is sociobiological – youth equals fertility and availability for procreation. 'Mothers' are also seen as fertile, with the added appeal that older women are apparently seen as more active and sexually aggressive. But we could equally look at this list and see in it a psychoanalytic model of sexuality: the continuity between childhood and adult sexuality ('youth'), constitutional bisexuality ('gay'), the Oedipal mother ('MILFs' and cheating wives). The sociobiological perspective is tested when we look at some of the strange and idiosyncratic things that turn people on that appear to have very little to do with fertility, procreation and child rearing. When it comes to the understanding of the sexuality of the individual, this does not seem possible without also taking into account all those fundamentally **human** attributes: meaning, history, primitive anxieties, defences - the dynamic unconscious.

Psychoanalytically, how do we think about what it is that people are searching for? The sexual image or scenario which is sought out online may be seen as the external realisation of the conscious sexual fantasy⁷. Laufer (1976) describes how, at the core of the individual's sexual orientation and 'final sexual organization' is the 'central masturbation fantasy', 'the fantasy whose content contains the various regressive satisfactions and the main sexual identification' (p.300). The sexual scenario which is imagined encapsulates a representation of who the person feels him or herself to be as a sexual being, and the enactment of some highly charged object relationship. It may be gratifying, or frustrating, caring or cruel – but for the individual, it is what excites him or her.

Working psychoanalytically we know that, while people's searches may fall into fairly broad categories – cheerleaders or cheating wives, for example – for the individual the sexual scenario that they search for is highly scripted and it is the detail of the sexual script that is highly significant. Patients I have worked with have very specific ideas about not just who is doing what to whom in the sexual scenario or the roles that people are playing, but the appearance, maybe the racial characteristics, the expression on the faces of the protagonists. Each facet of this sexual script will have meaning within the individual's history and psyche.

The conscious sexual fantasy can be thought of as akin to a dream or a symptom. As Freud (1900) described in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the manifest content of the dream, the dream as told, represents a distillation of the disturbing unconscious processes which seek expression, disguised through displacement and condensation. In just the same way, we can see that, underpinning the conscious sexual fantasy, there are unconscious elements including highly charged representations of relationships – those pertinent to sexual fantasy often concern the experience of intimacy – which may be of blissful fusion, or intrusion, abuse, humiliation or annihilation. There will be memory residues of both exciting and disturbing experiences of childhood, such as experiences of sexual

⁷ The conscious sexual fantasy may be defined as a daydream with erotic content which leads to or enhances sexual arousal.

discovery as well as sexual trauma. And there will be primitive anxieties, wishes and phantasies of sexuality, intimacy and destructiveness. In just the same way that condensation and displacement operate in the formation of dreams, we see the displacement of feelings associated with one figure that may be too dangerous to allow into consciousness, onto another - so what we infer may have been an unconscious sexual curiosity about the mother becomes a preoccupation with the anonymous 'MILF' or the surgically enhanced porn actor. And one figure, on exploration in therapy, is often revealed to represent a number of unconscious themes, through the process of condensation.

Sexual fantasies bear a striking resemblance to dreams in their structure. In both the mind generates a scenario which is highly scripted – there seem to be few random elements. On examination each feature of this scenario seems to be loaded with meaning.

Freud famously described dreams as 'the royal road to the unconscious'. I would suggest that sexual fantasy is the dual carriageway to the unconscious. Because of its stability, in a way it is **more** revealing than the object relationships mobilised in a dream on a particular day. The object relationships depicted in the central masturbation fantasy convey some enduring configuration of the internal world. But normally in psychoanalytic work we are used to the central masturbation fantasy being so private, so deeply personal, that it might years before a patient talked about it in therapy. Working at the Portman Clinic it is not that unusual for patients to talk about their central sexual fantasy in a first assessment session – and this might reflect a degree of exhibitionism – but where the person's online behaviour is a central concern, what they are looking at becomes relevant very quickly.

The impact of the technology

So what difference does make when pornography is accessed through a laptop or tablet, rather than through printed materials? First, there is the possibility of finding an exact match in the external world, for whatever idiosyncratic sexual fantasy the person seeks expression of. Whereas prior to the internet, external reality would never have quite offered an exact realisation of internal fantasy, the vast array of material on the internet means that people will, sooner or later, find whatever it is that fits with their conscious or unconscious sexual script. All of this heightens arousal and satisfaction, but it also fuels omnipotence and manic defences; you can have whatever you want, you don't have to suffer disappointment, you don't have to suffer the painful realisation that reality never quite matches our dreams. Neuropsychological research is starting to suggest that pornography which provides a match to people's sexual preferences will trigger activity in the ventral striatum, associated with reward anticipation and craving (Brand et al, 2016) – the authors conclude that internet pornography may then become particularly compelling for individuals whose preferences are unlikely to be met in external reality.

Second, as Alessandra Lemma has described, there is the immediacy. Waiting and delay are bypassed, and pornography and sexual excitement can serve as an immediate treatment for any intolerable thought or feeling. A critical persecutory thought enters the mind and before even experiencing and knowing about the humiliation, shame and defiance this evokes, there is the thought, 'I'm going to do it', and off he goes to masturbate.

Thirdly there is the by-passing of self-consciousness and shame about sexual fantasies and desires – or temporary by-passing, as these feelings often return amplified after the sexual excitement has subsided. But in the days of top shelf magazines people would presumably have been highly constrained from making purchases by self-consciousness. Now the internet confers what one patient described to me as an ‘invisibility cloak’ as described in the *Harry Potter* stories, a piece of magic that creates the illusion that one can entirely disappear from view – not just from the view of the newsagent, but from scrutiny by a critical superego.

The electronic device functions as a transitional object, which can conjure, on a whim, the illusion of the existence of an other, but not an other whose reality has to be accommodated, an other whose existence, shape, size, age, behaviour is totally under the individual’s control. The device itself can be held, clutched, taken to bed. The internal world prevails, but we are allowed the illusion that this is external reality. For many people this is an exciting experience of omnipotence. There are others for whom this creates a near-psychotic experience.

The internet is like a screen which seduces with the promise that the individual can project into or onto it whatever he or she wishes. At times, it is like the black mirror that Alessandra describes, reflecting back the implicit hostility which may exist alongside frustrated longing.

The internet can also be experienced more like a stage, in which the individual can watch, or even participate in the enactment of his internal dramas. Alessandra has previously described the internet as being like a consulting room, a consulting room in which the person is invited to explore unconscious fantasy. This has been captured by the phrase, ‘The internet lifts the lid on the id!’ But it is a consulting room without an analyst or therapist – there is no-one to help the individual to metabolise what has been unleashed. The invitation is seductive – the reality is often profoundly disturbing. How do you get the lid back on the id?

Returning to Glasser’s (1979) core complex, the internet is like an idealised object that you can climb into, merge with, lose yourself in, that can apparently bear the enactment of hostile sadistic impulses as well as sexuality, and that appears to by-pass self-consciousness and shame about such impulses. What people are discovering is that the internet is not as passive and tolerant as was imagined – actually, the mirror reflects, the drama turns nasty – as one patient said to me, he felt there was a monstrous creature in a cage, and through his activities on the internet, he thought he was rattling its cage, but the creature turned round and bit him.

I do not have a negative view of the internet – indeed, I think it is amazing – nor of pornography per se. People will always be interested in sex. I think the internet speaks to the sexually curious Oedipal child in the adult, who wants to push open the door of the parental bedroom and see what is going on. Neither do I think that controls that restrict the availability or access to sexual materials online are either realistic or desirable. But I think we need much more public awareness of the way in which the technology does not just passively reflect human interests, but interacts with the human psyche, not just at a conscious but at an unconscious level, to shape and magnify those interests. Online sex promises so much to the unconscious mind. It is compelling, it is alluring – but for vulnerable individuals, the consequences of immersion in internet sex can be profoundly disturbing.

What should we be doing? I’m no expert on the technology and maybe others have ideas about what can be done at that level. But at a societal level we need public information, and education

starting at primary school age, when we know that children are already being exposed to pornography. They need to know that this is not representative of most sexual relationships, that there is so much more to adulthood and adult relationships than just sex, and porn models' bodies are often extreme, and surgically enhanced. Young people need to know that commercially produced pornography is not a documentary - it's the action movie version of sex. You should not believe everything you see.

It would be great to have empirical research which established a sound scientific basis for the types of people who are more vulnerable to suffering adverse consequences from using internet pornography, so that there is public knowledge, as with respect to alcohol, that some people are particularly vulnerable to this stimulus and need to approach it with caution. My message to teenagers would be the same as that with drink and drugs: these things are there, you will be curious and you will want to try them. But put off trying them as long as you can because they almost certainly have more impact on the developing brain than on the mature brain.

In the UK, some research gets funded within the criminal justice system on the use of illegal images, but problematic use of legal images is still beneath the radar. Maybe there is something specifically about sex and pornography that philanthropic organisations who fund research do not want to be associated with⁸.

In our psychoanalytic work sexuality has returned to centre stage in the consulting room for many patients after decades of being eclipsed in our professional world by concerns about early experience. But we see the havoc that immersion with internet sex can play not just with a person's sexuality and relationships, but with their unconscious mind. It is becoming apparent that exposure to disturbing sexual materials can map onto disturbed early experience, acting as a catalyst to existing vulnerabilities.

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⁸. A neuroscientist at UCLA apparently reports that programme officers at America's National Institutes of Health advise applicants to avoid using the word 'sexual' in funding requests, even when the topic is sexual functioning (The Economist, 26.9.15).

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