

Erwin J. Haeberle

## The Future of Sex Research?

The fast growing world-wide popularity of MOOCs shows us that a new epoch has dawned for academic teaching and learning. It is high time for us sexologists to prove our worth under these new conditions. However, since the original idea of a unified approach to sex research as conceived by Bloch, Hirschfeld and Kinsey has largely been lost, it has now become much more difficult to find financial support or even public attention for it. Current sex research no longer follows a “grand design”, but is practically reduced to special studies in the natural sciences, conducted at traditional universities. Such studies look at problems in the biology of evolution, in physiology, endocrinology, neurology, and genetics. The findings are not yet definite, remain disputed among the respective specialists, and, so far, have not produced a new view of human sexuality. This may very well change sooner or later, as many of us hope. In addition, there is a flow of historical and psychological studies in “gender” and “homosexuality”. Occasionally, there are also very enlightening sociological studies which deepen our understanding without revolutionizing it.

Unfortunately, even the undisputed factual knowledge about sex is still largely unknown to the general public, especially in countries outside the US and Europe. At the same time, our mass media have become “sexualized” to an extent that was unimaginable in my youth. Prime-time television dramas contain scenes of „straight“ and „gay“ copulations, the most popular newspaper prints photos of nude women formerly restricted to “men’s magazines”, bestselling books describe sadomasochistic fantasies, telephone books advertise brothels, printed and electronic media contain personal ads for casual sex contacts, advice columns discuss the most intimate sexual details, large public posters recommend the use of condoms etc. etc. In addition, everyone of any age now has practically unlimited free online access to all forms of pornography. (Only the viewing and possession of „child pornography“ remains prohibited.) Is this progress? No matter: All of it is dominated by commercial considerations. „Sex sells“ is the merciless motto, which taints all efforts to educate the world about human sexuality. Thus, even the most “progressive” message finds itself firmly embedded in its medium’s larger context of “making money”. Indeed, upon a closer look, the profit motive seems to be the driving force behind much of our present “sexual liberation”. Both good and bad go hand in hand, and one is therefore tempted to speak of a “dialectic of sexual enlightenment”.

But let us first emphasize the positive: The increasing commercialization of sex is, at the same time, an important factor in its liberalization. As more and more women and men can openly declare their sexual interests, they can also be targeted as “legitimate” customers. The profit motive is therefore also a driving force for sexual tolerance. This increased tolerance has, in the meantime, contributed to a more relaxed public attitude toward nonconformity and has thus made life easier for many sexual minorities. And “normal”

citizens have also benefitted: Unmarried couples and their children are finding social acceptance, teenagers are silently permitted to have active sex lives, if a couple is childless because of the male partner's infertility, it can turn to artificial insemination by an anonymous donor etc. etc. Even same-sex marriages or registered partnerships have found surprisingly little lasting resistance. In short: Many formerly condemned - and therefore hidden - variations in human sexual behavior are no longer secret and are being accepted as socially harmless. However, this commendable acceptance now has an ugly companion - surveillance. An ever increasing, surveillance of all internet traffic helps businesses to discover more potential customers and thus to increase their profits. In this sense, we are now living in an increasingly "open society".

### Very public sexual health education in Germany 2016



The very large posters were produced by the Federal Center for Health Education (*Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung, Bzga*). These and similar posters were placed at bus and streetcar stops as part of a campaign for the prevention of AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections.

*Above:* A man discovers his gonorrhea, while his shocked female partner is looking on. The larger text reads: "When it burns in the crotch", the smaller print: "Off to the doctor".

*Below:* A male couple having sex. The text says in larger print: "Amazingly simple", in smaller print: "Use condoms".

<http://www.bzga.de/home/>

How far this openness will eventually go, is anyone's guess. There is no doubt, however, that the already almost ubiquitous „ads“ will become even more frequent, insistent and bothersome. At the same time, the surveillance of ever more people could help the advertisers understand how varied human sexual behavior is (and always has been), and how little of it is really harmful to society. This could create additional business opportunities and thus lead to a further increase in tolerance.

However, the outcome could also be very different: The new electronic media - and with them their commercial masters – are steadily gaining access to more and more aspects of our personal lives, and this, in the end, could have some very unwelcome consequences. Just by seeking information in the internet for shopping or travel or by participating in social networks we and countless others voluntarily provide uncontrolled private companies with a constantly growing collection of our personal data. These companies, on their part, sell all of these collections, representing millions of individuals, as “big data” to interested parties. After all, their commercial value is obvious: Accumulated over a longer period of time, they produce an ever more complete picture of our financial status, our life styles, preferences, and antipathies (“likes” and “dislikes”). Most internet users do not realize (or do not care) that, as they become active online, their individual characteristics are being recorded by some unseen collector – addresses, birth dates, levels of education, job history, marital status, number and ages of their children, preferred clothing, literary and musical tastes, shopping habits, circles of friends, travels by automobile, bus, train, and airplane, preferred vacation spots, leisure activities, hobbies etc. etc. Indeed, very often people also unknowingly reveal their health data to this hidden collector - doctor's and pharmacy visits, types of medication, hospital stays, eating habits, regular, occasional, or lacking physical exercise, in some cases even blood pressure, pulse rate and much more. Over time, all of these bits of information are being recorded, added up and used to establish an ever more refined and complete profile of each user's personality, and that, by now, includes all of us. We ourselves do not get paid for our input, but we are, in fact, creating our own virtual “doubles” who are constantly busy making money for other people. Indeed, without realizing it, we are turning ourselves into merchandise.

At the same time, our Western societies are fast approaching the age of total surveillance. Its present far-reaching, but not yet total extent is often experienced as annoying, but still tolerable, because, so far, it serves only commercial, seemingly harmless ends. We become aware of it mostly through “personalized” advertising without thinking much about how the advertisers found out what we might be inclined to buy. And we do not yet resent it too much that unknown others are reaping enormous profits with our personal data. The fact is, however, that, with every passing day, this constant data collection is making the collectors richer and more powerful, and that means that they are becoming harder to control.

<http://www.alternet.org/labor/you-wont-believe-surveillance-capabilities-future-employee-id-badges>

Sooner or later, this worrisome development will raise very serious questions about its economic and political implications. These questions are unavoidable, even disregarding the surveillance by secret agencies and criminal hackers. However, I cannot discuss this fundamentally important, very complex question here. Instead, I restrict myself to the limited subject of my own field: What does all of this mean for the present and future sex research?

First of all, we should remember not only the advantages, but also the dangers of privately funded research. It is only natural and entirely legitimate that large pharmaceutical companies should try to use neurological and hormonal research for their own business purposes, even when it is first conducted by others. (Here, the development of the contraceptive pill is a „classic“ model.) It is also a fact that private companies have made important contributions to the healing of diseases and to the preservation of human and animal health. However, the matter becomes dubious, when supposedly non-commercial universities are forced to acquire outside financial support and thus become dependent on private, profit-oriented donors while, at the same time, reducing or abandoning research projects of their own. It becomes even more dubious when, for example, outside financial interests bolster the questionable trend toward a „medicalization of sexual problems“ by creating products for alleged sexual dysfunctions. When such products are then promoted with million-dollar campaigns, sexologists will find it difficult to find a hearing for their critical scientific arguments. Anyway, it is obvious that an overriding profit motive is bound to distort any research. It is likely to overemphasize partial findings and to suppress “inconvenient” doubts. This will prevent a thorough understanding of the phenomena under investigation. In the end, only “suitable” results will determine the discussion and the general state of knowledge.

Even more problematic is the future of research into human sexual behavior where we can expect an ever dwindling influence of qualified sexologists. It is, of course, unavoidable that our sexual interests become subject to market analyses: Social networks and various „*dating sites*“ offer the first clues to the data collectors, and these clues are gradually amended by our other personal data. Without going into much detail, let me simply cite the relatively harmless example of an American online „porn“ provider: In 2013, this company analyzed the masturbation habits of its US customers according to their geographic location, favorite themes, and viewing time per session (average: 10 minutes). The results were presented in the form of graphic charts and were both surprising and instructive. When the film „*Fifty Shades of Grey*“ was widely discussed, the same company released new and very detailed charts showing the suddenly increased demand for various sadomasochistic practices.

These charts can also serve as early examples of something we might call “automated sex research”: A company owning our personal data may simply leave it to its computers to

generate all sorts of findings about our most intimate fantasies and activities, and illustrate them with colorful curves, columns, and pie charts. This kind of instant, “push-button research” may, in the future, offer nearly endless possibilities. It will be able to cover all sorts of groups and subgroups in whole continents or even in the entire world. After all, the amount of intimate personal data available to commercial companies is steadily growing. The consumption of online pornography alone has been shown to be quite extensive and can be assumed to spread to ever more countries. The smart phone seems to be a major factor in this development.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10720160490884082?journalCode=usac20>

57. Happy Place: „*Pornhub released data...*“

Plus: „*50 Shades of Pornhub*“

Plus: The Guardian, 20. Juli 2015: [Infidelity site Ashley Madison hacked as attackers demand total shutdown](#) and <http://www.tripwire.com/state-of-security/security-data-protection/cyber-security/the-ashley-madison-hack-a-timeline/>

Plus: *Pornhub 2015 Stats* <http://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/sex/news/a41086/pornhub-2015-stats/>

And here is another problem: In 2015, internet hackers succeeded in penetrating an online service for extramarital affairs and stealing the personal data of 37 million users (names, passwords, addresses, credit card and phone numbers). They then actually made many of the data public, which lead to resignations, divorces, and suicides of customers. This incidence had many interesting ramifications too complex to be discussed here. In any case, it shows very clearly that even very intimate details can be traced back to individual users.

Examples like these give us some hints as to what may become possible in the future. It is even conceivable that marvelous, unprecedented perspectives could open up for serious sex researchers. Still, the question remains: Will they be allowed to conduct the research? Unfortunately, the answer is uncertain, because the exclusive owners of the new sexual data have no motive to share them with anyone. They have total control over what can be done with them by whom and under what conditions. Why should they let others profit from their most precious, income-producing possessions? Or, to put it another way: Considering this new, extreme imbalance of power in this field, how can science still play a corrective role? Will scientists still find the strength - and the financial resources - to form a counterweight to the interests of big business? Will future sex research ever amount to more than market research? Will the data owners eventually become immune to any form of criticism and control? Will their power be used to establish an all-penetrating, profit-oriented dictatorship? And will this lead to the “ultimate sexual oppression”? Will George Orwell be proven right after all? Will “Big Brother” and his “Big Data” end up confirming that in the internet “*Freedom is Slavery*”?

