Most popular, scholarly and legal attempts to understand the Internet as a public medium have focused on user agency and thus produced two seemingly antithetical sets of narratives. Conceptions of the Internet as the great equalizer, which erases physical differences and allows ones’ words (or credit card numbers) to resonate around the world, seem in stark contrast with notions of the Internet as ideal Panopticon, pornographic badlands, or as accelerating the digital divide. *Sexuality in the Age of Fiber Optics* seeks to change the terms of the Internet debate by challenging the assumption that the Internet’s “democratic” potential correlates with individual empowerment. Rather, this book contends that the key to understanding the Internet’s potential as a democratic medium, and its difference from other mass medium, lies in the way it exposes “users” to others—the most banal and atypical example of which being voluntary information exchange. Further, it argues that the exposure endemic to people’s increasing (in)voluntary exercise of what Walter Benjamin called “their legitimate claim to be reproduced” is experienced as and through sexuality. Thus this book brings together “cultural” criticism of digital media interfaces, with an analysis of the Internet’s infrastructure in order to highlight the ways in which technology and ideology together create “new media.”

From “cyberporn” legislation that seeks to regulate the WWW to webcam operators who immerse themselves in visibility, from cyberpunk dreams of “jacking-in” to Internet Protocol, this book examines the ways in which the increasing intrusion of “publicity” into everyday life is negotiated through sexuality. Analyzing various crises that sexuality in the age of fiber optics has provoked, this book argues that the privatization and globalization of telecommunications networks have transformed the efficacy of and relationship between disciplinary and regulatory power. For instance, through a reading of the current Internet infrastructure, it shows that visibility no longer ensures “good” behavior. Both Santa Claus and the Panopticon are dead, since the power to look has been privatized and democratized, and since users cannot be adequately isolated. Or, to be more precise, one performs for Santa Claus and the central tower in ways that belie the disciplinary power of these figures. Thus, this book, rather than revealing how the electronic communications conform to or epitomize older theoretical concepts (such as the Panopticon, the bourgeois public sphere, post-structuralist notions of subjectivity and performativity, sexuality as the will to know), attempts to think theory after fiber optic networks. Through fiber optic networks—through light coursing through glass tubes—it engages the rich philosophical tradition of light as a figure for knowledge, clarification, surveillance and discipline, in order to argue that the Internet literalizes, and thus explodes, Enlightenment.
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Introduction: Sexuality/Enlightenment
This extended introduction positions this study within theoretical examinations of sexuality (Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgewick), historical investigations of Enlightenment (Robert Darnton, Jeremy Bentham) and philosophical analyses of media (Walter Benjamin, Thomas Keenan). It argues that the age of fiber optics erodes the distance between self and other, spectator and spectator, public and private—erosions that are experienced as and through sexuality.

Chapter One: Screening Pornography
Analyzing print media’s representation of the cyberporn scare and the U.S. Federal and Supreme Court decisions on the Communications Decency Act, this chapter contends that the 1996 de-regulation of the telecommunications industry led to cyberporn’s emergence as a public threat. This surfacing of “cyberporn” facilitated two things: the acceptance of the Internet as a marketplace of ideas in which “bad” contact stemmed from content rather than context/structure; the commercialization of the Internet. Point out that electronic contact cannot be divided into “safe” and “dangerous” modes since the risk of exposure underlies all electronic exchanges, this chapter argues that the Internet’s democratic potential lies in the way it enables encounters between self and other.

Chapter Two: Scenes of Empowerment: Virtual Diversity and Digital Divides
Through an analysis of television commercials by MCI and Cisco Systems, and United Nations and Cheskin Research documents on the digital divide, this chapter argues that a logic of “passing” lies at the heart of current conflations of racial and technological empowerment. The Internet, rather than enabling anonymity, allows users to “pass” as the fictional whole and complete subject of the bourgeois public sphere. It concludes by analyzing work by the digital collective Mongrel in order to call into question the effectiveness and desirability of this form of passing.

Interlude: Cyberspace
This interlude addresses the question: Why cyberspace? Through a reading of the domain name structure, Nobert Wiener’s Cybernetics and John Perry Barlow’s Wired articles, it contends that the “cyberspace” constructs the Internet as a navigatable frontier.

Chapter Three: Orienting Orientalism, or how to map cyberspace
This chapter argues that American and Japanese cyberpunk make electronic spaces comprehensible and pleasurable through the orientalizing—the exoticizing and eroticizing—of others and other spaces. Through a reading of William Gibson’s Neuromancer and Mamoru Oshii’s Ghost in the Shell, it contends that the disembodied “user” construct relies on another disembodiment, namely the reduction of the other to data. This chapter does not simply dismiss cyberspace and electronic communications as inherently Oriental, but rather investigates the ways in which narratives of and on cyberspace seek to manage and engage interactivity. It ends with a reading of Octavia Butler’s Children of My Mind in order to expose the ways in which mind-to-mind communications can trouble, rather than secure, the border between self and other.
Chapter Four: Stroking Keys, or Look Who’s Lurking Now
This chapter attempts to understand the most popular yet under-theorized “user” position—that of “lurking.” Through an analysis of MUD-based cybersex and webcams, this chapter explores how these new technologies of sex both disrupt and re-inforce the logic of voyeurism that structures much non-realtime electronic interchanges, such as “surfing” the web. It contends that cybersex—like S/M—disengages knowledge of the self from “productive” sexuality, but only by shattering the self and dispensing its shards in a system that is entirely findable and visible.

Coda: Privacy
This coda makes explicit one of the grounding assumptions of this study, namely that the transformation brought about by the age of fiber optics is best understood as the encroachment of publicity, rather than as a withering away of privacy. Examining Echelon, it argues that the current conflation of privacy with secrecy leads to paranoid fantasies that grant information a stability that obfuscates its essential ephemerality. (I call this the logic of “memorializing memory.”)