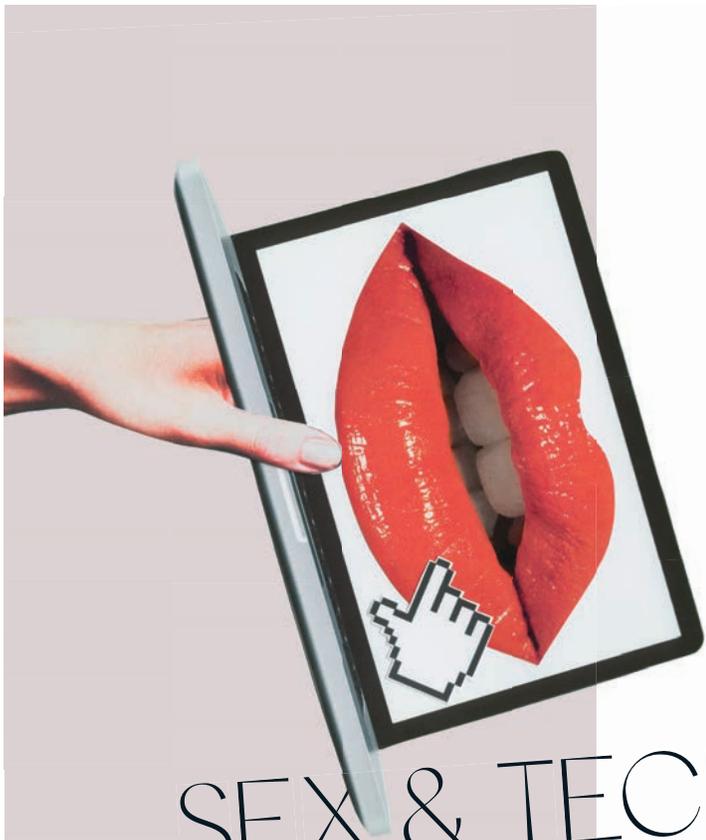


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SEX & TECH: TOMORROW IS NOW

Surprising, cybersensual and more pleasurable than you could imagine – the second sexual revolution is coming. And, this time, it's driven by women, says *Stephanie Theobald*

It's 7am and your alarm wakes you up on another rainy morning. Only the year is now 2020, so this wake-up call is pretty exciting. Think of your body being gently teased into life by a sex toy that looks like a mini octopus. Or your duvet getting frisky, vibrating feathery waves all over your body until you can't help but turn to the person lying next to you who, as luck would have it, has three penises.

This female erotic future might seem far-fetched, but it is not so far away, according to Britain's sex-robot expert (yes, it is a job) and computer scientist Dr Kate Devlin. 'I'm so bored with robots that look like female sex dolls,' says the senior lecturer in computing at Goldsmiths, University of London. 'I don't want a robot that looks human. Why not make one with three penises, 20 arms, and tentacles for hands?'

This kind of imaginative sexual speculation is classic 'second sexual revolution' talk. This is a phrase I kept hearing as I drove across the US researching the female orgasm for my book, *Sex Drive*. I learned that the much-trumpeted 'sexual revolution' of the Sixties and Seventies was tailored to men. It sounded progressive on paper: the contraceptive pill was invented, miniskirts and gay liberation arrived, John and Yoko had their 1969 bed-in, and endless surveys showed that premarital sex was on the rise. And yet nobody was asking what kind of orgasms women were having. Or, indeed, whether they were having them at all.

That's all changing. We don't just have women demanding an overthrow of the 'made by men, for men' sex-robot market. On a worldwide level, women are demanding an end to the shame, ignorance and deafening silence around real female sexuality. Consider the thousands of women wearing 'pussy hats' at the Women's Marches, or New York artist Sophia Wallace, whose multimedia project, *100 Natural Laws of Cliteracy*, promotes discussion around the primary female sexual organ, the clitoris. Which, by the way, has about 8,000 nerve endings, compared to 4,000 in a penis* – that makes the vulva the Lamborghini to the bicycle of the male genitalia.

Consider, too, last year's launch of OMGYes, a website where women both explain and visually show how they have orgasms. Incredibly, this is the first time any large-scale research has been done about the specific techniques women use to climax – the infamous sex researchers Kinsey, Masters and Johnson never thought to go there. Emma Watson is a fan, announcing in an interview with Gloria Steinem, 'I wish [the website] had been around longer!'

In San Francisco, I asked OMGYes co-founder Rob Perkins if he was really good at having sex with women now. He smiled, and admitted: 'What women want varies way more than anyone had thought! It's all about getting feedback, starting gently and having a dialogue.' (I love the fact that one of the OMGYes co-founders is a straight man – the other is a lesbian, Lydia Daniller – because we're going to need some enlightened sex-rev bros on board for the exploratory new era we're entering.)

It's also about not worrying if you're appearing sexy enough for your partner, either. Krystyna Hutchinson, co-presenter of the hit podcast *Guys We F****d*, is seeing that message trickle down.

In the three years that she and Corinne Fisher have been presenting their lively show, which they say has 310k downloads per episode, women have 'changed enormously', she says. 'Women are constantly writing to us, or coming up to tell us that they're finally comfortable with asking for what they want in bed.' The duo

have just written a book, *F*cked: Being Sexually Explorative and Self-Confident in a World That's Screwed*. The book is needed, the authors assert, because the second sexual revolution isn't quite here yet. 'We're just as clueless as the women who were sexual in the Seventies,' says Fisher. 'But now we're more comfortable being vocal about how completely clueless we are.'

While some might see the massive success of Pornhub (10 years old this year, and 75 million daily visitors) as a good thing for female pleasure expression, a growing wave of female porn barons disagree. 'People should be more critical about their porn,' says Erika Lust, who makes independent female-friendly porn. We're talking in her sunny office in Barcelona; she moved to the city from Sweden as a student, and decided to stay. It's refreshing that we don't even need to broach the 'Is porn degrading for women?' chestnut that was doing the rounds in the Eighties. It's a contentious issue, but I'm interested in a world where women are allowed to express their erotic imaginations as far as they want to. Just as men have been able to do for decades.

Lust says that porn should be the equivalent of Fairtrade chocolate. 'We need to ask, who is behind these sites?' says Lust. 'Who are the women? What are their stories? Who is earning the money? I don't go to these sites because I don't feel secure there.' Luckily, porn is now starting to have a craft beer-style niche. ▷

*health.com, October 2015. **pornhub.com, January 2017

'A new world of indie adult cinema is growing,' Lust explains. 'Women like me want to watch people connect over sex. Not just be physical robots.' She says her projects are all crowdfunded, so members (60:40 male to female ratio) get to see what they want. The entrepreneur also runs a programme training female directors, and her favourite current director crush is *Transparent* creator Jill Soloway. 'I'm obsessed with the show *I Love Dick*. I love how Soloway lets women be sexual without slutifying them!'

Lust's films embrace a diversity in terms of gender, sexuality, race and body type. And if you think that sounds 'modern', you can't have met Stephanie Alys, whose company MysteryVibe makes a tech-smart bendy dildo called the Crescendo. She doesn't talk about women and men – she says 'people with vulvas' and 'people with penises' to encompass those who are not biological females or males. 'As society opens up to a more gender-fluid space, you have to be inclusive and diverse,' explains Alys. 'It's about pleasure, and pleasure is not gendered.'

Alys is also the co-founder of London's sisterhood sex mafia, the self-named Sex Tech Collective. The \$30bn (£24.1bn) sex-toy market has been dubbed 'sex tech' since so many of the toys now work through computers and smart phones*. Members include Dr Devlin, Kate Moyle, the founder of Pillow app ('deeper connection for busy couples'), and Wan Tseng, the founder of Wisp ('sensual jewellery'). They're a bunch of highly entrepreneurial women who socialise and help each other out on marketing ideas in open forums – while many things are par for the course on social media, sex is generally banned, even if it is the kind of sex that brings wellness and healing to women across the world.

The counterpart of this group in New York is Women of Sex Tech, led by Polly Rodriguez, who is the CEO of Unbound Box, a sex-toy company (an online shop for 'rebellious' women) that sends subscribers products every quarter. Think Birchbox, but with BDSM. Rodriguez believes that the new-era vibrators will help 'demystify the female orgasm for women who might have difficulty reaching climax'.

And yet the author of one of this year's best sex books suggests that the orgasm is so amazing it can never be demystified. Annie Sprinkle's *The Explorer's Guide to Planet Orgasm* goes beyond sex robots. Readers are addressed as 'Orgasmonauts' because, when you get really good at orgasms, Sprinkle explains, they can take you 'to a state of altered consciousness'.

There is a lot for women to look forward to in the world of future sex. The octopus body teaser does actually exist – named the Love Pad, it was the winner of the Sex Tech Hackathon, which Dr Devlin organised last Christmas at Goldsmiths. A follow-up event this year on 25 and 26 November will be even bigger. She admits that most sex robots are currently little more than 'mechanised sex dolls because of the difficulty replicating human movement'. And with a smartphone and a piece of hardware, there are now sex-tech inventions that can pleasure your lover from across the ocean: 'It's great for our heavy travel schedules and fragmented relationships,' she says.

Sex toys will become more desirable, she predicts, as women increasingly enter the sex-tech field. (Last year's Hackathon

was roughly a 50:50 male to female ratio.) And yet technology will only be a small component of the second sexual revolution. In *Buzz*, her new book on the history of sex toys, Hallie Lieberman warns: 'Sex tech can be part of a healthy sex life, but all sexual interactions shouldn't be mediated through technology.'

This is a good point, because once we've learned to be amazing Orgasmonauts, we might find that the concept of the relationship has changed radically. Most of us have heard of 'polyamory', basically an open relationship with rules. But at this summer's Queer Spirit Festival in Wiltshire, there was a fascinating workshop called 'Loving Many' by self-described 'pleasure activist' Calu Lema. She talked about the concept of 'relationship anarchy' where there is no sentimental hierarchy with any of your many lovers. If someone can come up with an app that tells you how to get rid of jealousy, this sounds great.

The future's going to be a blast. The day will begin with an orgasm, not caffeine, and women will say the word 'orgasm' like they now say 'yoga'. We will also talk about our 'vulva' as opposed to our 'vagina', which is only part of our powerful genitalia. Sex will be better for men and women (although the definition of those words will have broadened), because smart men will have learned that sex is more fulfilling if you understand what your lover really likes. Some may be in two minds about the octopus tentacles, but all the women I spoke to agree that swinging-from-the-chandeliers-style sex will soon be replaced by the much more honest goal of good old-fashioned pleasure.

Find 'Sex Drive' by Stephanie Theobald at unbound.com/books/sex-drive

'The day will begin with an orgasm, not coffee, and women will say the word "orgasm" like they now say "yoga"'

