# SEX EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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# Introduction: Sex Education in the Digital Era

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**Abstract** Young people all over the world are keen to learn about sex and relationships but are not finding the information they seek in their immediate environment. The internet provides them with a welcome alternative. In response to the rapid increased connectivity of young people, international organisations that work on comprehensive sex education for young people have moved online. While there are new opportunities to reach young people in these digital spaces, sex educators also encounter restrictions. They face the immense power of new supranational commercial digital gatekeepers such as Facebook and Google and must respond to digitally mediated sexual and gender-based violence. This article introduces a special issue of the *IDS Bulletin* on experiences with internet-based sex education in 14 countries. The authors explore how familiar forms of exclusion and inequality, as well as empathy and solidarity, manifest themselves in these new digital spaces in highly diverse national settings.

**Keywords:** Sex education, sexual health, ICT, digital, internet, pornography, youth, gender.

## Sex education: who has it?

It is an understatement to say that exploring sex and sexual relationships is an important part of adolescence: for many young people, it is the most important part. Besides its central role in adolescent emotional development, sex education is also a crucial public health issue. Among other things, good sex education improves maternal and child mortality by helping to prevent unwanted, early and risky pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases. Yet in many parts of the world, unmarried teenagers are excluded from receiving information and sexual health services because, according to unrealistic and conservative religious and sociocultural norms, they are not supposed to be sexually active.

In many countries, traditional cultural forms of organised sex education have disappeared or become commercialised. If information about sex is available, it comes too late or in inaccessible formats. Too often,

modern sex education focuses exclusively on warnings about risks. It rarely offers any practical suggestions on what young people really want to know: how to give and receive pleasure, and how to engage in sexual relationships in ways that make them happy. In many parts of the world, even providing scholars with information on sex is seen to encourage immoral sexual behaviour.

In this context, the internet and digital technology provide welcome, portable and readily available alternatives for seeking 'personalised' responses to questions about sex and relationships. For many young people all over the world – including in villages in Bangladesh, Ethiopia or Uganda – pornography is the primary source of information about sex. Attempts to restrict access to porn seem futile when more than 52 per cent of the world population and 41 per cent of those in low-income countries have access to the internet (ITU 2016).

In the last decade, in an attempt to offer more responsible information on sex over the internet, digital sex education initiatives have been launched all over the world. Such initiatives often gather millions of users and hits. Compared to traditional, interpersonal offline sex education, these numbers are impressive, and they have changed the field of sex education. Yet very little is known about the effectiveness of online sex education, or about how digital technologies affect young people's access to wanted or unwanted information. The internet provides not only freedom but also new forms of gender-based violence such as 'revenge porn' that sex educators have to face. Much of the research on sexuality in the digital era is moralistic and slanted. For practitioners and academics working on sexual and reproductive health, youth and digital development issues, learning more about sex education in the digital era is a major challenge.

**Exploring global digital sex education and porn to meet global goals**
There has never been a collection of scholarly work on this topic for a mixed audience of researchers, policymakers and practitioners. This is remarkable given the size of the populations affected and the money and political attention allocated to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Unless policymakers, researchers and practitioners deal with the contested issues of young people's sexuality and sex education, globally-agreed goals such as a reduction of maternal mortality and teen pregnancy will not be reached.

This *IDS Bulletin* is a collaboration between Love Matters, an international organisation dedicated to online sex education for youth, and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). In this issue we discuss experiences with digital sex education in Argentina, Ghana, Kenya, India, Nigeria, Tanzania, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia, China, Egypt and Mexico. The range of settings is diverse, as are the issues confronted. Yet the common themes encountered across these varied settings are often as striking as the differences.

Linda Waldman and Isabelle Amazon-Brown (this *IDS Bulletin*) explore how sex education for adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa is enabled by them having access to mobile phones. Examining the history of online health information platforms, they conclude that in contrast to formal, traditional sources of sex education, the internet offers many advantages, including portability, anonymity, informality, personalised responses, and the ability to interact with peers who are not local and not part of face-to-face networks. However, online sex education has not yet achieved an improvement in actual sexual and reproductive health status, due to weak or non-existent integration of online information with on-the-ground services. Online education programmes must comply with national legislation, which often restricts the provision of services to young people, who can thus not act upon the information they receive about these services.

**Sex, the state and social media**
Most sex education is provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – often in partnership with commercial partners such as mobile phone companies. An exception is Argentina where the state is involved in a successful digital sex education website. Natalia Herbst (this *IDS Bulletin*) describes how state-led sex education is part of its broader strategy to improve access to education on sex and reproductive rights. But the state's ability to influence the religious and sociocultural sexual beliefs held by parents is limited. And the Argentinean case highlights the power of the new supranational commercial digital gatekeepers such as Facebook and Google. Even the state cannot circumvent the restrictions and censorship imposed by these commercial social media companies. Censorship on nudity on Facebook does restrict public health efforts. A campaign for breast examination, for example, had to use photos of a man with large breasts, since images of women's breasts are censored on Facebook. Another concern is the lack of accountability in the digital space: anonymous users often feel free to engage in sexually aggressive or abusive communication. Gender inequality, social exclusion, and the possibility of harassment exist in the digital environment just as they do in the offline one.

For this reason, digital sex educators must pay attention to gender and power dynamics when establishing online spaces. Safety is a prerequisite for information exchange and open dialogue on sexuality. Maaike van Heijningen and Lindsay van Clief's case study in this *IDS Bulletin* on enabling safety in an online sex education space in Kenya shows that online spaces can appear safe enough to share very personal experiences, but in reality they remain highly risky. Interactivity and the ability to provide peer-to-peer information make social media a valuable tool for sex education. But real-world gender inequalities manifest themselves, for example in sexual harassment and bullying, also in the online world. Hence, such spaces must be carefully managed. Creating a safe space requires guidance by trained and supervised moderators who can create a community atmosphere that enables friendships to grow, and who establish some form of digital accountability for users.

Service providers have a duty care to participants but for them to create worthwhile spaces they also need to think about and resource robust discussion spaces. The findings also suggest that users must remain free to create anonymous online personas in order to protect themselves.

**Examining pornography**

Research on the effects of pornography in developed countries is still rare, but the available studies have found that pornography is ubiquitous and can create unrealistic ideas about sex. Kristen Cheney, Annah Kamusiime and Anteneh Mekonnen Yimer (this *IDS Bulletin*) decided to explore porn consumption among youth in Uganda and Ethiopia, after observing that in both countries greater access to information and communications technology (ICT) had resulted not just in greater consumption of Western-produced pornography, but in more production of home-grown pornography. Their research suggests that this growth was not entirely voluntary: girls expressed discomfort at being asked to record themselves in sexual situations, and often felt under social pressure to consent. Some reported that boys sometimes film sex without their partners' consent. However, both boys and girls said they consume pornography to get ideas for new sexual styles and positions, to explore and release sexual feelings, and to bond with peers by talking about the porn they have seen. Most young people believed that pornography was realistic. As a result, girls complained that pornography and sexually explicit messages (SEM) created difficult sexual expectations, such as female ejaculations and extended labia. Although boys might be more active in seeking SEM and porn, girls are also aware of it, especially through mobile phones, as well as internet cafes, video shops and video halls.

Anne Philpott, Arushi Singh and Jennie Gamlin (this *IDS Bulletin*) argue that sex educators have so far been reluctant to respond to pornography and SEM. Research has been largely biased towards the negative aspects of porn. They propose a more realistic approach, blurring the boundaries of public health and sex education by making porn that both includes safer sex and challenges the restrictive, violent, racist and sexist scripts currently portrayed. There are initiatives to produce more inclusive and realistic porn, including efforts by feminist porn directors and other innovative examples. Rather than seeking (futilely) to ban porn, public health should focus on reforming it, aiming to show wider ranges of sexual identity and types of relationships. Sex education professionals need to engage and educate to ensure that viewing porn can help promote safe sex choices, and consent, as well as pleasure.

**How do young people find online sex education?**

Catherine Müller, Pauline Oosterhoff and Michelle Chakkalackal (this *IDS Bulletin*) examine this landscape further by exploring digital pathways into sex education. We know that online sex education platforms reach millions of young people in countries where they cannot access trustworthy information. But we do not know how young people reach these sites. How does censorship of porn or 'obscene'

images by invisible sentinel guards such as Facebook and Google restrict access to these sites? Knowing more about different user pathways into sex education sites would help to understand what the effective entry points for sex education are.

Using data from Love Matters, Müller *et al*. conclude that it is extremely difficult to know how young people reach sex education sites and whether or not porn can be an entry point. Invisible gatekeepers in online spaces specifically restrict access to information about porn, sex education and pleasure (Anderson *et al*. 2016). For example, social media networks such as Facebook and Google may impose strict rules, such as banning nudity, while implementing such rules unpredictably; and sites may be blocked or posts deleted for unclear reasons. Access to data on the online search behaviour of users of social media is restricted due to ethical and security concerns. Online sex educators thus find it hard to gather the information they need in order to design outreach strategies to provide target groups with realistic, healthy and supportive sex education environments. More collaboration with online gatekeepers would be helpful. Furthermore, sex educators need to understand the importance of creating online content in local languages, and making it accessible and youth-friendly.

One of the key lessons from all of these contributions is the urgency of developing digital literacy skills for academics and practitioners. Young people need help in learning to critically examine the sexual messages they are getting in their digital environments. This is true both of the pornography they view, and of the riskier, more participatory digital sexual activities they engage in, such as SEM. They also need access to new types of digital sex education environments that are realistic, emotionally attuned, non-judgemental and open to the messages they themselves create. Sex educators cannot help build such environments until they understand how they work.

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