

# coyle.html

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Volume 18, Number 1

The CPSR Newsletter ( [../index.html](http://www.cpsr.org/..../index.html) )

Winter 2000

## Forbidden Technology

by Karen Coyle  
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A review of: *The Technology of Orgasm* (  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0801859417/computerprofessi>  
 ): "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satisfaction. By Rachel  
 P. Maines. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

We live in a world that is the culmination of centuries of technological progress. Right? Not quite. In fact, what we see around us is a selection of possible technologies minus the many that failed, were lost, or were forbidden. There are some technologies that were just a bad idea to begin with, while others have their day until they are surpassed. But some technologies, by their nature, fly right in the face of the notion that technology is socially neutral and succeeds entirely on its merits; and one of these is the technology of the female orgasm.

Author Rachel Maines was doing research on needle arts of the 19th century when she inadvertently stumbled across a glaring example of the social manipulation of the progress of technology, and an even more astonishing example of the oppression of women's sexuality. In the women's magazines toward the end of the century she came across advertisements for vibrators. The ads carefully made no allusion to sex or orgasms but their promises were couched in terms so sensual that the author concluded that the technology of female orgasm was widely known and practiced in the late 1800's. As she followed her curiosity about this phenomenon she discovered that early in the 20th century all mention of vibrators disappeared from the press. This led her on an historical inquiry that stretched back into ancient times.

The pathology known as "hysteria" was named over two thousand years ago as a condition that affected women and had something to do with the willful difficulties of the uterus. Already in the times of Galen, a doctor who lived around the time of Jesus, medical experts recommended a "massage" of the genital area of women suffering from this malady, which relieved the symptoms and restored the women to health. It was commonly known from that time forward that hysteria was related to female sexual satisfaction although different societies responded to this problem in quite varying ways.

The 19th century saw a great rise in the disease to the point of it being a near epidemic, at least among middle- and upper-class women. This was undoubtedly related to the heavily repressed sexuality of the era as well as to what Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English describe as the masculinization of industrial society (*For Her Own Good* (  
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0385126514/computerprofessi>  
 ): *150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women*. Anchor Books, 1978). In a world in which a reasonably wealthy woman's role is purely sexual and where sexuality is solely the realm of men, the greatest taboo was the idea that traditional coitus might not in and of itself satisfy the demands of women's sexual needs. Although many doctors of the time observed that over half of their female patients were not satisfied by their marital duties, they also were able, with a straight face, to declare this majority "abnormal" and in need of medical treatment.

As in ancient times, treatment for hysteria consisted generally of manual manipulation of the womb area to provoke a "hysterical crisis" in which

### What's inside...

- [Introduction: Gender in the Internet Age \( \[../index.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../index.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../index.html)
- [Gender Differences in CMC: Findings and Implications \( \[../herring.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../herring.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../herring.html)
- [Paradigms and Perversions: A Women's Place in Cyberspace \( \[../eubanks.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../eubanks.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../eubanks.html)
- [Gender Issues in Online Communities \( \[../king.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../king.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../king.html)
- [Strangers In the "Myst" of Video Gaming: Ethics and Representation \( \[../buchanan.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../buchanan.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../buchanan.html)
- [Gender and Computer Ethics in the Internet Age \( \[../adam.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../adam.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../adam.html)
- Forbidden Technology
- [Where Have Women Gone and Will They Be Returning \( \[../davies-camp.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../davies-camp.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../davies-camp.html)
- [The Digital Life Style for Women \( \[../spender.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../spender.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../spender.html)
- [Wit Helps Women in Computer Science Combat Ignorance \( \[../spertus.html\]\(http://www.cpsr.org/..../spertus.html\) \)](http://www.cpsr.org/..../spertus.html)
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the woman convulsed and moaned and was relieved of her tension to the point of even being somnolent. In this way, women's sexual needs were deemed to be an illness and without ever using the word "orgasm" doctors of the time made a fine living with women patients who returned frequently for treatments.

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These treatments were so common and were consuming so much of the time of doctors that this actually led to the invention and perfection of the vibrator. The first vibrators were huge, expensive machines sold only to doctor's offices (and came with names like "The Chattanooga"). With this modern technology the time to treat a hysterical patient dropped from one hour to ten minutes, allowing the doctor to see many more patients in the same time. Needless to say, the medical establishment was quite enthusiastic.

As the end of the century neared and more and more homes were connected to electricity, the technology of orgasm came into the home in the form of small, inexpensive vibrators. For the first time this technology was in the hands of the women themselves, but all mention of these machines carefully avoided mention of sex or orgasm. Instead advertisements gave glowing reports of rosy cheeks and youthful energy.

Something, however, happened between the beginning of the 20th century and the 1920's, because suddenly the vibrator disappears as a product; the ads are gone from women's magazines and the manufacture of the products themselves seems to drop off. One possible reason, reports Maines, is that some early pornographic films from the 1920's show the vibrator as a sexual tool. This connection of the vibrator with sexuality made it impossible for women of the time to continue the charade that they were "just relieving tension," and the vibrator disappeared from the home.

The vibrator as sexual technology returned in the 1970's during the era of sexual liberation. In 1976, sexual therapist Joanie Blank opened the first store dedicated to vending vibrators in a women-centered, sex-positive environment, and which she called "Good Vibrations."

The vibrator is only one example of a hidden technology. Autumn Stanley, in her book *Mothers and Daughters of Invention* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0813521971/computerprofessi>): *Notes for a Revised History of Technology* (Rutgers University Press, 1993) presents a detailed history of technologies invented and developed by women from the first agricultural improvements to a great variety of solutions relating to menstruation, childbirth and fertility. At the same time in the late 19th century that some women were suffering from hysterical crisis, others (and undoubtedly some of the same) were filling pavilions at industrial fairs with women's inventions. Few of these women or their inventions are ever included in a history of technology.

The technologies that surround us today are only a selection from a wider range of possibilities and it should be clear that it is not technology that forms our world but it is our world that accepts and promotes the technologies which support the values that society's present values.

For a greater connection with our fore-mothers and their technology, visit the Online Vibrator Museum sponsored by Good Vibrations at <http://www.goodvibes.com> (<http://www.goodvibes.com/>).

● [ [top \( ../coyle.html#top \)](#) ]

[Newsletter Index \( ../././././index.html \)](#)