Phone and Computer Sex. Phone sex is masturbation while communicating by telephone with another person. It is an emerging pastime and industry, with franchises and telephone equipment designed for it. An offshoot of the pornographic industry, phone sex has built on its legal base and network and shows signs of attracting a significant fraction of its revenues. A number of small, non-profit clubs facilitate obscene phone calls among their members.

History. Dirty talk over the telephone is nearly as old as dial telephones, on which no one could eavesdrop, and has precedent in obscene letters exchanged by lovers. Also helpful was the telephone industry’s early stand in favor of confidentiality of communications, which soon became law. As a commercial phenomenon, though, its origin is in the 1970’s with recorded tapes of dirty talk sold by Old Reliable (*pornography) and a number of smaller publishers. Beginning in the early 80’s advertisements appeared in sex publications for phone sex services, in which for a fee of $10 to $40, usually paid via credit card, a phone prostitute creates fantasies or discusses any topic that will produce orgasm in the customer.

“976” phone services were introduced in the mid-1980’s; the number refers to a telephone company prefix. They provided recorded messages of short duration for a fee of $2 or less, billed through the telephone company. An important legal ruling stated that providers of sexual messages should have equal access to this facility, and the primary use of the “976” capacity was for masturbatory sexual messages, gay and straight. The unrestricted availability of these recorded messages to minors led to such a parental outcry, that they were effectively ended by the late 1980’s. They were also a problem for businesses, which were faced with charges for surreptitious calls by employees. So many calls were made from Mexico to 976 numbers that international access was discontinued at the request of the Mexican telephone company.

Various adaptations of this highly profitable service were tried: the use of access codes furnished upon validation of age; changes in telephone company prefixes and equipment so that parents could remove access to such services from their phones; a requirement of payment by credit card, which few minors could do. The adaptation which seemed to meet with the most immediate success was the abandonment of recorded messages altogether and simply connecting callers to each other, in pairs or groups, or providing contact advertisements via phone. Thus the service provider could disclaim responsibility for, and indeed remain ignorant of, the message content.

Computer Sex. An offshoot of phone sex is computer sex or compu-
sex, in which the connection is made by modem, parties being linked over telephone lines with a host computer. This began with mainframe-based services such as CompuServe and American PeopleLink, which have been friendly to their numerous gay customers. Computer sex then spread to smaller, exclusively gay services operated by individuals; while they started as hobbies, several have outgrown that status. Providers of computer communication services encourage callers, in private messages or when connected in private with one or more other callers, to be as explicit as they wish; part of the appeal is that one can converse anonymously using a pseudonym or “handle.” They also provide contact advertisements and gay news and commercial advertisements. Mainframe-based services offer popular “party line” type discussions; services usually have a gay conversation line, accounting for a third to a half of the party line conversations, and on which a very cruisy atmosphere sometimes develops. Computer communications are quickly being given the same legal rights to privacy as telephone messages. In France, since the national telephone system distributed simple computer terminals to all customers, sexual message services, called messageries roses, have been very successful; indeed, the sexual message services have ensured the success of home computer terminals in France, just as X-rated videos assured the success of the video tape recorder in the United States.

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1 Documentation - Atlantic monthly article; see FRANCE.NOT Also see Advocate No. 504 8/2/88 p. 30.

2 This was said in article on Minitel in New York Times, 11/8 first business page.