

# Barbara Kay: Bring on the sex robots and make our world a better place

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In this picture taken on April 21, 2017, 62-year-old Senji Nakajima (L) picnics with his silicone sex doll Saori under cherry blossoms in Yamanashi prefecture. AFP PHOTO

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At Toronto's Idea City last month, [where I spoke](#), no fewer than four presenters addressed the fast-approaching era when beef will be replaced by plant-based proteins. At a breakout session, prototypical "hamburgers" were served. They looked like hamburgers and (slathered with condiments) sort of tasted like hamburgers. But true carnivores will still prefer the Whopper.

Are "hamburgers" the food equivalent of sex bots? Food and sex, humankind's strongest appetites, share common social terrain. Once basic security and comfort needs are met, food and sex become our most intense preoccupations. Both confer great pleasure, with deprivation high anxiety, and also, circumstantially, significant shame. In addition, both subjects arouse strong public judgmentalism.

Blow-up sex dolls used to be triggers for hilarity. Understandably, since a painted, woman-shaped balloon is so inhuman it is intrinsically funny. But a sophisticated bot that looks, feels, moves and (powered by speech recognition programs) talks like a real person, and which can even be created in a custom-desired image, is nothing to laugh at. That's a frequently-imagined film fantasy come to life, or, rather, "life."

It's happening for real. Doll brothels are already operating in South Korea, Japan and Spain, and the first robotic oral sex coffee shop opened last year in London, according to [a report](#) from the Foundation for Responsible Robotics (which sounds like something out of an Iron Man film).

To my surprise, I'm feeling totally non-judgmental about the phenomenon. I say "surprise," because I am pretty judgmental about other sex-bottish stuff like sperm donorship, which sadly eliminates actual fathers from children's lives, and yet arouses no indignation in the general public. But in the case of controversial sex bots, which seem to me a victimless fetish, I find myself remarkably unoffended, even somewhat boosterish at their potential for alleviating human distress.

In Utopia, everyone will be vegan and prefer chastity to all but emotionally-engaged sex. For now, realism must accommodate our carnivorous and carnal weaknesses. As with all weakness of the flesh, harm reduction is the best we can do. Even if a more conservative approach to sex were to reclaim our culture's high ground, there would still be many people who don't have much, or even any, opportunity to achieve the sex-love nexus on a regular basis. Some of them are committed loners; some socially inept; some disabled or disfigured; some denied sex at home, but principled enough to forego adultery. Sex bots would be a blessing to them, and in the process would cut into the sex trade, which is harm reduction, no?

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According to the report, the four current manufacturers of advanced sex bots predict they will be used for sex therapy and as companions for the elderly, or as replicas for long-distance partners, facilitating virtual sex across the miles (your new word for the day: "teledildonics").

And what about prisoners (not mentioned in the report)? I have never understood why inmates ineligible for conjugal visits are denied opportunities for sex. It seems to me imprisonment for a crime is punishment enough. Access to sex bots could help to radically diminish much of the aggression in prison life, including the [scandalously high rate of prison rapes](#). More harm reduction.

The report cautions that dependence on sex bots can be socially isolating. "It's very sad because it's going to be a one-way relationship," said FRR co-founder, Prof. Neil Sharkey. True, but social isolation for some demographics is a constant in human life, one way or another. Video games are socially isolating. Teleworking is socially isolating. Netflix is socially isolating. Go back in time, and lack of telephones in rural life was socially isolating.

Less easily dismissible is the dark side, the thorny questions of rough sex and child sex dolls. The FRR report cites a robot called Roxxy Gold, made by TrueCompanion, which can be programmed to "Frigid Farah," to simulate reluctance and encourage users to apply force. Do bots have consent rights? I say no; they're things. But others argue such simulation is encouragement to real-life rape. One often hears the same for porn, but evidence-based consensus amongst researchers [remains elusive](#).

More disturbing to many observers, Japanese sex doll manufacturer Trottla has been selling underage schoolgirl dolls globally for a decade, created by self-confessed pedophile Shin Takagi, who claims the dolls prevent him from harming children. “We should accept that there is no way to change someone’s fetishes,” Takagi told *The Atlantic* in 2016. “I am helping people express their desires, legally and ethically.” He isn’t wrong about pedophilic desire.

In 2013, one of Takagi’s dolls was seized at a Canadian airport and its owner charged with possessing child pornography; the case remains unresolved. Personally, I think Takagi’s dolls fall into the harm reduction category. You may well disagree. Thorny questions, as I noted.

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