**The Pre-History of Print and Online Dating, c. 1690-1990**

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It is often argued that the rise of online dating reflects the increasing dominance of economic liberalism in western societies. This is said to extend even into the personal sphere where modern courtship is epitomised by the dating website which turns its customers into self-marketing managers of their own emotional capital. In that sense online dating is seen to represent a particular social constituency – the urban, late-marrying type, perhaps a member of the new white-collar “precariat” working in professional employment on short-term contracts, settling down much later, and as a result on the dating market for a correspondingly longer period.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of that argument, changing patterns of courtship (and the rise of print and later digital media to arrange it) do reflect changes in the organisation of marriage, employment and the relationship of self and society. Although a successful market of this kind requires a free press and thriving print culture, in historical terms advertising for love has become popular in conjunction with three things: first, a mostly urban population of insecure workers seeking to break away from established courtship patterns; secondly, the idea of marriage as a contract freely entered into by contracting parties, and thirdly, some kind of announced “crisis” in marriage or romantic intimacy. The latter is normally discovered by more conservative voices, is often part of an attack on the contractual idea, and tends to see “modern marriage” (or partnership) as an unromantic and mercenary transaction.

Arranging courtship or marriage via a third party is not especially modern. Many peasant or pre-industrial societies outside Western Europe practiced systems of arranged marriage – either via parents and close kin, or through the offices of a professional matchmaker and still do. In societies where production is based on the home, arranged or brokered marriages result from the importance of the marital couple as an economic unit, and their significance to local economic relations involving wider kin groups. The intervention of parents and community in the process of courtship reflected the effort to ensure that property would be transferred legitimately and that the new household would be able to make an effective and sustainable contribution to the economic life of the community. In the past historians have argued that the decay of this communal model and its replacement by one in which courtship was almost wholly determined by the wishes of the parties concerned reflected the emergence of free labour and capitalism. While the former model is characterised by the intervention of parents, kin and community, the latter is said to have been marked by the rise of romantic love, the personal choice of partners free from parental interference, and the establishment of a separate marital household. This transition, from the “arranged” system that belonged more to what is known as the “stem family” defined by broad kinship among a wide group of relatives, to one in which romantic love and free choice of partners is allowed has been seen as a significant moment of transition in Western history. Most famously, Lawrence Stone argued that the emphasis on the self and its wants over and above the needs of kinship, alliance, or economy, beginning in the late sixteenth century, highlighted the gradual rise of affective individualism, the decay of communality, and hence the coming of modernity. Critics of Stone were quick to point out that even in late-medieval texts, especially legal codes, individual choice and romantic love could be found as an element of marriage among all classes, and hence had to predate Stone’s chronology. Jack Goody and Alan Macfarlane see this individualistic model not as the creation of modernity, but of late-medieval Europe going back as far as the late thirteenth century. For them, the fact that canon law in medieval Europe defined marriage as an agreement of mutual consent between the parties concerned meant that the narrow conjugal family based on the couple, in which romantic love and not material interest is the prime motivation, was the norm in Western European history. [[1]](#footnote-1)

In that sense, Stone’s critics have discounted any evidence of intermediaries, arrangements and closely-calculated marriage settlements that might reflect communal interest in or control over the conjugal couple as the exception rather than the rule. However, more recent work on northern Europe has pointed out that freedoms asserted (or legally codified) and freedoms practised are two different things and that in reality, most couples even in the West European marriage system had to deal with parental and community pressures. Actual courtship was a much more complex affair than the desiccated calculations of rationally-choosing subjects. Moreover, community interest was often at stake, and intermediaries were employed, even if their roles were not formalised or professional. As Diana O’Hara has pointed out, sixteenth-century Britain was not unfamiliar with brokers, “utterers,” “medlers” and “matrimonial bawds” who intervened in the process of courtship, not to mention the many aristocrats anxious over the destination of their estates. For instance, in 1664 it was said of the Duchess of Newcastle that “women do fee her to get them husbands, and men to get them rich wives, so as she is become the huckster, or broker of males and females…indeed she is a matrimonial bawd.”[[2]](#footnote-2) That the influence of these third parties on the marriage bargain was more or less informal did not make it less important.

In northern Europe at least, the older model of communally-organised marriage gradually gave way from the late sixteenth century onwards. In these areas couples were expected to establish a separate household and so in order to marry they required access to property or an artisanal trade that would support them. However, by 1600 or so it was increasingly difficult to ensure that new couples could support themselves in this way, and a new category of “masterless men” or wage-earners began to emerge. John Gillis calculates that by 1600 around one third of the population no longer had access to land or trades, and that as a result they became increasingly detached from traditional customs and institutions and more willing to indulge in “private spousals.”[[3]](#footnote-3) By the early eighteenth century, Gillis calculates, perhaps one-third of marriages were outside the purview of communal custom. This process went hand in hand with the rise of Puritanism, which tended to narrow the courtship process to one that focussed primarily on the family and not the wider community. Two marriage practices reflected these changes: first, the custom of marriage by licence, in which the couple could (if they could afford it) pay the local bishop to marry them without publishing the banns and therefore attracting the interest of parents and others; and secondly, clandestine marriages conducted in mostly urban locales known as “liberties” in which ecclesiastical authority did not apply.

This is the historical background against which we should see the rise of advertising for husbands and wives. Although the involvement of third parties in courtship did not necessarily mean that families or communities were not involved in the process, in general, we might take the development of advertising to reflect the rise of “private spousals” free from familial or community pressure. Advertising of this kind emerged in the 1680s or 1690s, about forty years after the appearance of the first newspapers. Most of these early newspapers contained small announcements about events, crimes or incidents. One of the first references to matrimonial advertising was from the British weekly The Athenian Mercury, which in 1692 responded to a series of questions about marriage and love with a comment on the practice.[[4]](#footnote-4) By the mid-eighteenth century advertising for husbands, wives, and other less conventional arrangements had a secure foothold in British print culture.

Until the early twentieth century, the matrimonial advertisement dominated the market. Stating an intent to marry was seen to provide at least some guarantee of respectability. However, other less conventional arrangements were also common in the 18th century, for instance, the gentleman who in 1768 expressed a desire to meet a “young lady dressed in a black nightgown, with a letter in her hand” whom he had followed about the City the previous Friday. Others seemed to be advertising openly for mistresses, such as the “Gentleman of independent fortune, in possession, and very considerable expectations” who in 1770 announced an intention to make a tour through France and Italy. He thought it would be “a particular happiness could he meet with an agreeable young lady, whose education and sentiments would engage his esteem and affections, to accompany him on his travels.” Other men advertised for single women to board with them possibly as a way of making an informal marriage. Financial arrangements very much like prostitution were sometimes offered by women advertisers. One 1769 ad, to “any real *gentleman*, from a *lady* of character,” promised that in exchange for £100, a man could have “an advantage, which cannot be named in a public newspaper.” Another who was “at present so critically circumstanced as to want the immediate friendship and assistance of a gentleman of honour and benevolence,” offered in return to “render essential services.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

While individual advertisements began to be common in a wide variety of different papers, organised matrimonial agencies were also a feature of eighteenth century society. One such agency, which presented itself as the solution to the difficulties of modern marriage, was the Imprejudicate Nuptial Society, or the Grand Matrimonial Intercourse Institution, probably established in the mid-century. This organisation, run by a clergyman from an address in the City of London, presented itself as a philanthropic society which would enable more people to marry, thereby saving British morals and preventing the increase of “vagabond children.” The Rev. Watson, the proprietor, proposed to recruit clergymen in every town who would give sermons on the benefits of marriage, thereby collecting money which would be placed in a communal fund for those who could not afford marriage expenses. There would also be list of subscribers, divided into three classes according to income and property, the estimation of which was at the heart of the enterprise. Advertisers with the agency, such as the “Gentleman, 40 yrs of age…a little corpulent, rather of a dark complexion, wears his own hair,” were compelled to be honest about their status. He estimated his wealth at £200 per annum, with £750 in the public funds, and “a small Estate in Surry.” This method of proceeding, Rev Watson proclaimed, avoided “the common way” which was for men to fall in love, “and then disgracefully retreat, if there is not money enough.” In his scheme, as in most other matrimonial ads of this period, “the circumstances are first known, and nothing to prevent sincere love afterwards.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Allegations of fraud, which were to dog the matrimonial business for the rest of its days, quickly followed the rise of formal marriage brokers. In the early 1770s, a Mr R was supposed to have made a huge fortune in London by acting as an agent for young, rich women looking to marry. Every spring, he would place a series of ads in the press, offering to arrange marriages for ladies with fortunes of £30,000. These wealthy women would be installed at his house, while he again advertised for potential suitors, who, it was said, paid him as much as £500 for the privilege of paying court to his clients. He was then supposed to have “touched several five hundreds without the candidates for matrimony being successful,” and kept everybody dangling on a string while he pocketed the proceeds.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, rumours like this did not dent the popularity of the medium, and by 1777, a young lady could aver that “the mode of advertising is become too general.” However, she herself was not deterred from seeking “a man of fashion, honour, and sentiment, blended with good nature, and a noble spirit, such a one she would chuse for her guardian and protector.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

The feeling expressed by one advertiser in 1749 that “the mode of advertising… may be looked upon with disdain and contempt by some,” was not mitigated by its association with some unsavoury episodes.[[9]](#footnote-9) Suspicions about the type of man who might advertise were compounded by one of the most famous crimes in British history, the murder of Maria Marten by her sweetheart William Corder at the infamous Red Barn in the village of Polstead in Suffolk in 1827. Part of the sensation that surrounded the trial of Corder in 1828 was the revelation that he had been a regular user of matrimonial columns. In that sense, the case offers a rare glimpse into the style of advertising in this period. In the winter of 1827, fleeing his crime which was still undetected, Corder moved to a tavern in the City of London, from where he took out ads in the *Morning Herald* and *Sunday Times*. His announcement, headed “MATRIMONY,” described him as a “A Private Gentleman, aged 25, entirely independent,” seeking “any female of respectability, who would study for domestic comfort,” and who was willing “to confide her future happiness in one every way qualified to render the marriage state desirable.” He was, the ad said, a “sociable, tender, kind, and sympathising companion,” and instructed correspondents to write to Mr Foster’s stationer’s shop in the City, from where he would collect the letters. More than fifty replies came in from women mostly in their late teens and early twenties, and still more women came to Foster’s shop – later luridly described in the press as a “*Love Depot*” – to inquire after the advertiser’s character. The means of getting to know advertisers like Corder varied widely. Some respondents offered to pair him with their sisters, others did not want to meet him but preferred to get to know him first by an extended correspondence, and some wanted to arrange an interview at their homes. One reply instructed Corder to take a walk on the south side of Northampton Square in the City of London, between the hours of 12 and 1 on the following Monday, and to carry a white pocket-handkerchief. “I shall be there and may perhaps have an interview with you,” the writer promised.

Corder eventually made the acquaintance of one Mary Moore and, with his past still completely unknown, offered the promise of marriage. Ms Moore’s mother was set against such a proceeding, mainly because the anonymity of the ad did not allow them to know or investigate Corder’s family connections. Her brother was also suspicious of this man who had appeared apparently from nowhere, and angrily denounced the whole business. However, as Miss Moore pointed out to him, the matrimonial ad was for financially independent individuals like herself who did not have to put up with the interference of their families. Most of Corder’s respondents were the same – they were young women who were distanced from parental interference, either through the death of parents or relatives, or through their own financial independence. Miss Moore, who had inherited some of her father’s wealth, was one of many such women. She told her brother “that she was fully satisfied in her own mind,” about Corder’s connections, “and urged that as she was her own mistress, she should use her own discretion, and in defiance of anything her brother might urge to the contrary, she should marry him on the morrow.”[[10]](#footnote-10) She carried out her threat, and she and Corder moved to Ealing in West London to open a girls’ boarding school, living in what appeared to be marital bliss right up the moment when her husband was arrested in the spring of 1828 for the murder of Maria Marten.

Most observers agreed that Corder’s career after the murder showed him to be the exact epitome of a “cool, calculating, deliberate villain.” One of the key lessons of the tale, played out in the countless shows, songs and plays which followed the trial and played continuously throughout the following century, was never to trust a man who advertised for a wife. Mainly, though, it was suggested that the case should act as a warning against the kind of independence shown by Mary Moore.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Cases like these may have put off respectable middle class readers and helped to confine the appeal of matrimonial advertisements to the working class. When a new craze for it reappeared in the new penny press of London in the 1860s, in titles like the London Journal, Family Herald or the Halfpenny Paper, it was certainly felt by most editors that the practice belonged almost wholly to the less educated working classes. However, although it was regarded as far from respectable, by 1900 the matrimonial press in Britain at least had developed into a particular form of journalism. This was in marked contrast to the European continent, where most mainstream newspapers like the *Frankfurter Zeitung* included extensive sections of matrimonial advertising as a means of financing their news coverage.[[12]](#footnote-12) In Britain, respectable papers like the *Times* or *Morning Chronicle* refused to carry matrimonial ads, thereby encouraging the development of a specialist press devoted solely to publishing them.

As a consequence of this ban a specialised matrimonial press began to flourish in late-nineteenth century Britain. The British Library lists twenty-two matrimonial papers established between 1870 and 1914, while several other titles also contained matrimonial columns around this time. Most of the dedicated matrimonial press was allied to a related agency where advertisers could obtain the personal services of a matrimonial agent.[[13]](#footnote-13) Of these titles some were more long-lived than others. Among them were the *Matrimonial News and Special Advertiser* which claimed to date from 1848 (though wound up in 1895), the *Internationale Matrimonial Gazette* of Sheffield, which in various guises ran from 1909 to 1944, and the most venerable of the British papers, the *Matrimonial Post and Fashionable Marriage Advertiser*, published in Bristol, which claimed lineage from 1860 and was run by the same man – R. Charlesworth – between 1894 and 1948. Some other titles appear to have lasted only a few months. Most of the papers were based in London, though several existed in provincial cities. The larger papers carried between 200 and 600 ads, though several of these would have been reinsertions over several issues. In addition to this dedicated press, there were many others, ranging from W. T. Stead’s high class matrimonial monthly the *Round About* (1898-1903), to the comic paper *Ally Sloper’s Half Holiday*, or the fiction series *My Pocket Novels* (1900-1934) that carried matrimonial ads or operated agencies by post at various times in the same period.

These papers appealed to, and were mainly used, by two main social groups: white collar workers such as clerks, and the upper working class – tradesmen and domestic servants. Advertising rates were generally kept low – in the 1890s matrimonial papers cost around 3d, while advertising costs were around 1 shilling for between 20 and 50 words, depending on the paper. Personal interviews with the editor/agent cost around 5 shillings. Further costs could be incurred on marriage. In 1893, for instance, one advertiser was asked for £10 up front and then two and a half per cent of any marriage settlement.[[14]](#footnote-14)

These practices were revealed by the trial of the Skates brothers, proprietors of the World’s Great Marriage Association (and the Matrimonial Herald) in 1895. The case resulted from the fact that in order to keep unsuccessful (and unappealing) male suitors on their books they had sent out form letters to a few advertisers from ladies that did not exist. The agency profited mainly from its personal services, for instance, charging some clients between £2 and £17 for such assistance in the marriage market, including personal interviews, advice and introductions. The trial also revealed the social constituency of matrimonial papers and agencies at this time. Its male clients were mainly shopkeepers and skilled workers, such as tobacconists, tailors, hairdressers, decorators, printers and other “well to do artisans,” while its female ones were mostly domestic servants and some widows with capital.[[15]](#footnote-15)

It was widely held at the time that the matrimonial press provided a useful service to the generally impoverished white collar worker, who, uncertain of his income and status, could find respectability helpfully quantified by the requirement of most papers for the advertiser to state his or her income. Matrimonial ads were also seen as a response to the “surplus woman” problem that emerged from a gender imbalance in Britain’s population from the 1860s onwards. Another factor that assisted the rise of the matrimonial press was the increasingly popular idea of marriage as a type of negotiable contract. This view had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in Britain as part of the attempt to reform the laws governing divorce and married women’s right to property. By the end of the century marriage-as-contract had a number of powerful feminist advocates including the writers Mona Caird and Cicely Hamilton, the latter the author of the 1909 protest against Marriage as a Trade. The contractual idea appealed to feminists as it seemed to allow women to circumvent the suffocating restrictions of class, custom and family that dictated who and how a woman should marry. It also appeared to undermine the idea of patriarchal authority within marriage by suggesting that both parties met on the basis of equality. These ideas were accompanied by a widespread feeling that modern love had degenerated into a merely pragmatic and often monetary relation.

Caird had become famous in 1888 when an article by her in the London *Daily Telegraph* entitled “Is Marriage a Failure?” caused a national sensation. In the years following, Caird promoted the idea that marriage should evolve from primitive practices towards contractual agreement. She argued that science, and especially Charles Darwin, had shown that marriage had begun in savage practices like wife-capture, and the problem was that it continued in much the same coercive form. To break away from the “barbaric” elements of marital coercion, men and women should, Caird argued, “*form their own contract*, and not be forced to accept one whose terms they have had no voice in deciding.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The problem then was how to invent a place where such contractual ideas could be put into practice. For an answer many progressive thinkers turned to the matrimonial advertisement and agency. Advocates of eugenically-influenced “rational reproduction” adopted it as a way round the “dsygenic” courtship practices associated with the rituals of respectability that prevented healthy men and women marrying across class boundaries, while others, such as the pioneering editor W. T. Stead established their own version of a social network. Stead’s idea, which ran from 1898 to 1903, was called the Round-About, and was modelled on a matrimonial agency but with the important difference that clients did not have to state a “matrimonial intention,” and could therefore interact without the anxiety thereby imposed. Men and women would see their ads in the Round-About newspaper, and then write to each other via a central office of the “Controller” where profiles of themselves were also kept. If the profile took your fancy, a correspondence would follow and if so inclined, marriage might result. This, Stead argued, was a key solution to the problem of modern urban alienation that especially afflicted the young white collar or professional worker living in what he called “the City of Dreadful Solitude.” Others also took up the matrimonial bureau as a philanthropic idea and rational solution to modern problems, including the founder of the Salvation Army, William Booth. He envisaged a “colony scheme” – a gigantic programme for exporting Britain’s urban poor to Canada and Australia, part of which would be a matrimonial agency ensuring that healthy marriages were made.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Even though all these efforts gained national attention, they were never as commercially successful as the established matrimonial industry. However, in 1913 a new form of advertising appeared on the British scene in the literary periodical *T. P.’s Weekly*, named after its founder the Irish politician Thomas Power O’Connor. In its “Friends in Council” column, *T. P.’s Weekly* allowed advertisers to solve the problem of modern solitude by searching for friends and “companions,” without stating any matrimonial intent. The respectability of the column was – at first at least – protected by the fact that all those seeking such friends had to provide two letters of reference, one of which had to be provided by a clergyman. Similarly, suggestive self-descriptions such as “unconventional” or “bohemian” were banned. By 1915 Friends in Council had processed over 8,000 ads at a rate of five to six hundred a week and had started a national trend.

The origins of lonely hearts ads, as opposed to matrimonial ones, can be found here, and also in the craze for advertising that sprung up during World War One to cater for servicemen. From the outbreak of the war in 1914 it became something of a national duty to write to those serving in the armed forces and several newspapers in Britain opened schemes that organised the sending of parcels and care packages to the various theatres of the war. In France this sort of correspondence was officially sponsored, and French women could become “*marraines de guerre*” (godmothers of war) in order to exchange letters with *filleuls* (adopted sons) in need of epistolary companionship. In Britain, this form of letter-writing operated in a less formal sense through the columns of papers like *T. P.’s Weekly* and other periodicals where “lonely soldiers” and their admirers of both sexes could advertise for pen-pals or other types of companionship. The volume of this correspondence could be readily estimated from the complaints made by the British Army’s postal service about its size and potential for disrupting military logistics. In February 1915 it was pointed out that one ad, which ran for a few issues of the *Daily Chronicle*, and had been placed by a driver in the artillery, had generated three sacks of mail, one containing 3,000 letters, plus 98 parcels.[[18]](#footnote-18) The lonely soldier craze reached a peak in the summer of 1916 when the newspaper *Pearson’s Weekly* ran a competition for servicemen, the prize for which was a chance to woo the soldiers’ pin-up and theatre star Phyllis Monkman. By that time though, the authorities had lost their patience and after a while they forced the paper to abandon the scheme.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The success of the lonely soldier movement encouraged others to enter the wartime market, not least the *Link*, the first periodical in Britain wholly devoted to the publication of “companionship” ads. The *Link* (which was originally given the more enticing name *Cupid’s Messenger*) was founded in 1915 by the career journalist and comic novelist Alfred Barrett (a former editor of the *Family Circle* and *Woman’s World*), and its masthead firmly stated that it was a “Great Social Medium – Not Matrimonial.” The *Link* cost 8d, though advertising was only 1d per word, and it sold around 5-6,000 per issue. However, along with the contemporaneous lonely soldier movement and the other papers such as the racy bachelor periodical *London Life*, which were also opening their own “friendship” columns, the *Link* seemed to represent to many commentators the leading edge of modernity, bad and good. Before long, the *Link’s* announced non-matrimonial intent, not to mention its clientele of “sporty” and “unconventional” female advertisers, began to attract the attention of moral campaigners and the police, who tended to view it as morally dangerous, if not a medium for open prostitution. Stories of girls disappearing into white slavery through its columns began to circulate in the more sensational newspapers, and the police began to take a keener interest. Although they discovered very little evidence of prostitution by women, the authorities did uncover a series of ads that appeared to be arranging contacts between gay men, and which were therefore more obviously illegal. In their ads, these men commonly cited a canon of homosexual heroes, from Hercules and Iolaus to Walt Whitman and Oscar Wilde, declared themselves “theatrical,” “musical,” and “sincere,” before announcing a willingness to meet a potential friend or chum, “own sex.” In 1921, a police investigation of these ads, and a discovery of a cache of intimate letters between two men who had met through the *Link*, landed the paper, its proprietor Alfred Barrett, and three advertisers in court. They were all charged with procuring and inciting “acts of gross indecency” and all sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour.

That episode put an end to the wartime craze for companions and friends, and seemed to confirm once again the low reputation of such enterprises. However, the matrimonial industry, which had generally held itself aloof from the fashion for companionship, continued unperturbed through the interwar period, though it was still associated with an unfashionable lower-middle and working class clientele. The *Link* case contributed to an atmosphere of distrust that prevented any more “lonely hearts” or companionship ads appearing in the legitimate matrimonial press. Other papers that had followed the *Link* and *T. P.’s Weekly* into the trend dropped their columns after the trial. After 1921 the requirement to state a matrimonial intent was restored to its dominance and it was not really until the 1960s that the dubious status of the lonely hearts ad ended. Correspondence clubs such as the longest-lasting one, the Universal (established in 1916 and still in existence in the 1940s) continued to exist, and others grew up at the end of World War Two to cater for a newly-perceived epidemic of solitude and a short-lived post-war boom in divorce (that peaked in 1948 and soon fell away to almost nothing in the 1950s). However, these “friendship” organisations, such as the Victory Correspondence Club or the Two-Ways Correspondence Club, remained on a small scale and most were run by an odd collection of ex-military men from their homes in provincial towns and seaside resorts.[[20]](#footnote-20) Marriage bureaux also enjoyed a new vogue in this climate, some of which began to use psychological and psychoanalytical profiles in order to match people.[[21]](#footnote-21) Responding to the apparent crisis in marriage that seemed to overcome British society in the 1940s, some observers even argued that such organisations should be a state-sponsored element of the new welfare state which grew up under the post-war Labour government.

Even in the 1960s, when the matrimonial industry had produced new “scientific” offshoots such as Dateline, founded in 1966 to match partners using computer analysis, the authorities still suspected the intentions of many advertisers and editors. This became obvious as part of the backlash against the counterculture at the end of the 1960s when the police repeatedly attempted to prosecute the hippy paper *International Times* (more often known as *IT*) for “corrupting public morals,” one of the crimes supposedly perpetrated by the *Link* in 1921. This charge was a sort of legal catch-all usually directed against the organisation of prostitution through advertising or publicity of various kinds – it had also been used in 1960 against a list of call-girl contacts known as the *Ladies’ Directory*. *IT* got into trouble for the same reason as the *Link*: publishing gay contact ads. Even though homosexuality between men was decriminalised in Britain in 1967 (as long as it remained in private and only two people over 21 were present), the police decided in 1969 that *IT* should be prosecuted and a long-drawn-out series of trials and appeals began that lasted until the paper was finally convicted in 1972. The whole process was part of a pattern of prosecutions against countercultural magazines for obscenity – the most famous being the case against Oz magazine in 1971, which resulted in long prison terms (overturned on appeal) for its editors.

The *IT* trial ended up making the efforts of the police look rather ridiculous however. Their attempts to clamp down on ads that sought to facilitate a wholly legal activity (gay men over 21 meeting each other) along with the lengthy process of appeal, ensured that the case (with many others like it) was widely ridiculed.[[22]](#footnote-22) The revelations that followed a few years later of extensive police corruption in London’s Obscene Publications Squad, the branch that masterminded the whole operation, further dented the credibility of such efforts. Moreover, the small ad (in its various forms) was a key technology of the counterculture, which had popularised its use in freesheets and magazines as a method of organising political and cultural groups. Its widespread use in these forms, as well as to facilitate straight lonely hearts and the contacts of gay men, made it unlikely that any further attacks on the latter would be successful. This was especially true since following the emergence of gay liberation at the end of the 1960s, there was an explosion of gay magazines like Jeffrey (est. 1972) that made extensive use of “Photo Pen Pals,” and “Jeffrey’s Beautiful Butch Little Ads.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Once these forms of contact had been pioneered, and their legality tested by the gay press and the counterculture, it was far safer in the 1970s for anyone to advertise in any way they wanted, for partners, group sex, or even for old-fashioned relationships.

Advertising for love has made halting progress towards respectability in the previous three centuries. Its rise in the 18th century reflected the long gradual breakdown of early-modern courtship rituals and marital practices, and it has subsequently appealed to (among others) people experiencing the “dreadful solitude” of the modern city, those contesting traditional heterosexuality and its rituals, and those at the edges of conventional morality like gay people and the counterculture. For much of its history, advertising for love was usually done in the context of a marital intention, and most advertising was contained in papers strictly devoted to finding husbands and wives. The clientele of these papers, which mainly came from the lower-middle or upper working class, tended to ensure that matrimonial advertising remained on the other side of respectability. It was only in the early 20th century, with the dislocations of war, that a new style of “companionship” emerged, one that has since come to dominate digital technologies.

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Newspapers and Periodicals

Jeffrey

Pearson’s Weekly (London)

The Times (London)

Sun (London)

Sunday Pictorial (London)

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6. Pamphlet of The Imprejudicate Nuptial Society, undated, in Anon., Matrimonial Advertisements, Private Collection, BL. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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11. Curtis, An Authentic and Faithful History, 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On the German press see Karl-Christian Fuhrer, ‘Contradicting Nazi Propaganda: Classified Advertisements as Documents of Jewish Life in Nazi Germany, 1933-1938’, Media History 18, 1 (February 2012): 65-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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14. See ‘Matrimonial Adlets’, The Sun, 31 July 1893, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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