You are the you-seeming you

The awkward origins of online dating

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This is the third in a three-part series on modern dating. Here's part one and part two.

I'm actually worried that when I say stuff like "defeated attitude" and "Coupling Industrial Complex" that I'm coming across as some reactionary, anti-app Luddite.

That I don't understand the benefits of using these apps and how absolutely wonderful they can be for the lonely and lonely-hearted.

Because, even though criticizing dating apps is kind of a necessary component of this argument, that rhetorical vector can easily slip into a kind of knee-jerk, down-with-tech attitude that ends up obviating an individual human's personal choice and agency.

Surely there are couples who met on-app and are, at this very moment, reading this next to their S.O. in bed, shaking their head with this very concern.

So yes, I knowwww dating apps aren't some kind of, like, evil Sexual Skynet.

And so yes, we should go ahead and acknowledge that there are at *least* two seemingly useful and delightful things about dating apps

Firstly, they quite obviously do a lot of our people finding for us

Your average Joe or Jill or Jool Wanna Date does a lot of daily zigging and zagging around town, from home to work to post-work events, etc., all the time fretting about opportunity costs, about whether and how they're going to meet someone if they're always to'ing and fro'ing.

But Tinder, Bumble et. al. provide the illusion that no matter where Joe or Jill or Jool personally are, potential partners are always "there" too — which, if we're still enamored with the comparison to bicycles, is less like riding around town to meet people and more like having everyone else ride around town to meet you.

This is, quite literally, a self-centered thing to do.

But it's nigh-invaluable to Joe or Jill or Jool W. Date, who lead busy, frantically successful lives — mostly because they're using other non-dating apps which demand they do ever-more X in ever-less Y, like email, texts, instant messaging, etc etc.

And the good news is they can trust that other people are swiping at the center of their own dating universes, too: on the bus, in line for coffee, waiting for the elevator. Swiping to fill unused, unoptimized moments. Fifty million available-to-copulate and/or ready-to-fall-in-love Americans. This is not to even mention how *good* it feels when you match with someone attractive, even if we tend to forget that all of us are likely swiping in all manner of un-put-togetherness. Not looking like that well-tanned beach photo, probably instead picking our nose.

That very fact is related to the second seemingly delightful thing:

These apps are an absolute godsend for any human who enjoys the benefits of curating an image of their best self.

We take this ability for granted now. It's tap-tap-taparoo easy to prepare an always-on, watchable self. You choose your profile pics (maybe the one with the baby lion, maybe the one jumping on a beach) and thumb-type your bio (drinks emoji, sunrise emoji), and if you're uncertain how to be your best and most attractive watchable self, there are entire .coms and YouTube playlists devoted to the tactics of appearance: Four pics minimum. No group shots. The optimum angle of a selfie is a ⅔ turn towards the left cheek. Let them see your eyes.

But I want to be absolutely clear here: these avatars weren't always a thing. And this is important to the argument.

In hindsight, one of the really neat-o things about Match's 1990s dating profiles was that they provided that almost-unheard-of ability to curate how we appeared to other people—i.e., the kind of ability that previously had been available only to the especially talented (actors, magicians, con artists) or to the especially rich (Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII comes to mind). Having a profile meant you needed, for the first time ever, to construct a brief, you-seeming, mini-auto-biography that included all the necessary basics (age, sex, location, etc.) plus get-to-know-you peccadilloes and topical summaries, e.g., favorite band, last book you read, why you like Cape Cod in the spring but Nantucket in the summer, etc.

It's important to note: This was not a thing people just *knew how to do*!

In the Go-Go Compuserve '90s, the incentives and venues for writing about one's self in public were precisely bupkis.

No Facebook.

No Instagram.

No Twitter or LinkedIn or even, like, Spotify or whatever — all those accounts that, today, serve as the curatorial substrate of our dating app profiles. Instead, to express yourself, there were only screen names and handles for AOL Messenger, or Yahoo Messenger, or your local BBS. Just those tiny pinpricks of you-light in the velvet sackcloth of the internet.

Americans above thirty may remember this historical fact, but I suspect we don't often appreciate, in the years since, how *good* we've become at expressing ourselves online — and how natural it feels.

Nor do we often consider the secondary and tertiary effects of this ability. That is: how we organize much of our day-to-day around the needs of our platforms. I know I'm not the only one who, upon hearing a good one-liner, says to their friend, "You should tweet that."

In fact, I suspect most of us consider our social profiles to be the teleological ends to our writing and image generation. Facebook and Instagram alone seems to be the *reason* we take photos.

There are no more Kodak moments; instead, who hasn't said or heard recently, "That'll make a good profile pic"?

This is just to say that, in the '90s, on Match.com, our profiles were essentially book reports on ourselves. And creating that profile meant accepting a whole host of awkward and Faustian T's & C's, *many of which we abide by today even though we've forgotten*, starting with, bullet point one, your profile was always there! All the time! Forever!

As long as you paid your Jackson + five per mensem to Match.com LLC, you owned a persistent, you-seeming, side-of-the-bus advertisement for yourself, which meant, bullet point two, that advertisement became a Realtor® (of sorts) for the real-life, flesh-and-nose-picking you who, btw, bullet point three, wasn't actually there most of the time, paying attention behind the desktop computer crammed on the side table in the den. If memory serves, I think maybe people checked these things once per day max, probably with a glass of Merlot during *Dawson's Creek*.

Since users were rarely online that meant, in turn, that the primary activity on dating sites was leaving messages and, since you really only had one shot at grabbing someone's attention, you tried to cram a whole lot of natural-seeming, in the real-world 3D behaviors into a 2D, unnatural-seeming, too-small text box ("lol!") and wait for a reply.

That felt strange because a) nobody was accustomed to writing online; and b) you can't, in a virtual space, recreate non-virtual behaviors, i.e., typical human feeling, vulnerability, empathy, etc.; since c) those typical human feelings, vulnerabilities, empathies, etc. involve a whole meta-language of hand flappings and cheek-twitching tics, e.g., trying to hide that you're picking your nose, which you would do if you were *actually sharing the same physical space and time*.

In the time of Match.com, the physical world was still your primary I/O interface. Now? Your phone.

That's really the nut of it, right there. We forget that a lot of what it means to be human is to share a sense of place and time, to share right here and right now with another person. Continuing the bicycle analogy: To be riding around town, together.

That's really my simple thesis: we've forgotten what it means to share ourselves in the same space, together. We are all pedaling furiously, furiously, where?

So what?

A valid response to all the above could simply be, "Hey, suck it the fuck up."

After all, we've never had such a wide variety of cereal aisle-like choices for dating partners.

You want to sleep with tattooed OneTaste devotees?

Yoga-practicing power suit VPs?

Muslim snowboarders?

Jersey-born mortgage brokers?

I mean seriously. You think it was this easy to get laid by such a kaleidoscopically varied group of partners pre-Gary Kremens? Rolling on the floor laughing out loud.

And besides: perhaps our difficulties have always been thus. Women and men have always chafed in the marketplace of courting. Ms. Bennet, Mr. Darcy, etc.

But and here's the thing: the challenges of dating *haven't* always been thus.

There's an argument to be made here that the social consequences of online dating are the result of the entirely new scale the very technology introduces. By scale I mean the sheer number of people who use Tinder, Bumble, etc.

The 40% of eligible Americans.

The hungry of heart and horny who, on average, swipe on hundreds or thousands of people per week.

It's not hysterical to suggest that how they perceive themselves online, and the incredible speed at which they encounter other users online, changes how they perceive other actual homo sapiens in a fundamental way.

I'm concerned that this not sound hand-wavy and fearmonger-ish, so it's worth acknowledging the typical rebuttal to this argument continues with something like "it's not the technology, it's what you do with it." IOW, good people will be good people, jerk people will be jerk people, live and let date.

But this hopeful perspective ignores that the social change in our associations has nothing to do with the intent of the user and *everything to do with the scale of the technology and how it works*. It does not matter how you, personally, act or have acted on dating apps. It matters how all of us *makes large, helicopterish encompassing motion with his hands* act or have acted on dating apps in aggregate.

I mean, for example, our exhibit A, the bicycle.

The bicycle (an object) was only intended to provide a leisure activity, and individual consumers accepted it as such. But the bicycle (a technology) created aggregated interest in paved roads. People didn't know they wanted paved roads until they had a tool that would benefit from paved roads. The bicycle also led to the motorcycle and to the automobile. The motorcycle and the automobile led to the interstate highway system. American travel is organized around the wheel. That happened accidentally. Because somebody invented a bike.

Or consider trains.

Trains didn't change the development of cities across America thanks to the varied intentions of the coal miners, homesteaders, and forty-niners who rode the rails, *but thanks to the railway itself.* There were always coal miners and homesteaders and men and women carrying bindle sticks searching for gold; the train just made it happen more quickly and in different places, and then changed how we thought about accomplishing those things.

Or radio.

Radio didn't create American mass culture thanks to the varied intentions of the radio station owners, but thanks to the harnessing of Hertzian waves themselves. Radio remade America in its image by moving information further and more quickly, and changing how we received that information in the first place.

I can keep going here.

Same with Facebook.

Facebook didn't change the way we associate thanks to our individual intentions — posting innocuous baby pictures or sharing the most dastardly of fake news — but thanks to how Facebook, itself, works.

Dating apps? They ain't different.

To put it another way, and famously: the medium is the message. The medium is the dating app. The message is that people treat people like they're disposable.

Does this make sense?

By shifting everybody into an approximation of the same space, dating profiles shifted those same everybodies into different times. I know you're aware of this already, on some level. I'm just reminding you. And I know you're probably saying *yes, but it's different now, there are dating apps that are real-time* — except they're not, not *really*, it's just that modern apps create a better illusion of same timeness and same placeness.

We're accustomed to thinking of the internet as a continuous state of connectedness, but the truth is that few of us are sharing the same "now." Programs that track "concurrent users" and "load" and "daily active users" track now. But we, individual, lonely-hearted humans, we experience the internet in discrete batches. While you're reading about me, I'm messaging you, and vice versa. And even if you reply near-instantaneously, *you're not here with me*. Literally everything is ships in the night.

This is why, for example, things like Facebook and iMessage and Slack have those indicators that several people are typing. Those indicators keep you in the sense of "now." They make you think "now" is still happening. But consider texting with someone who doesn't write as quickly. Or slacking a co-worker who is slow to respond. Do you get angry? Annoyed? Bored? Could it be because those people exist in a different temporality? That they are a phase shift away from your perception of time? That they are, in the sense of shared time at least, less human?

Online we are always present, but everybody else exists in the just-passed or just-about. The artistry of our technology lies in trying to make you forget that fact. And that is the deeply weirdest thing:

On dating apps, on the internet, many of us are so blinded by what we, ourselves, are constantly doing that we forget other people are having equally rich but separately paced lives.

If you're not careful, if you don't make a conscious, brow-sweatingly hard effort to remember this fact, the internet generally — and dating apps, specifically — can become more or less like T.S. Eliot's opinion of the television: A thing that lets millions of people listen to the same joke at the same time.

And yet, as he said, remain lonesome.

This series of articles about the origins and psychology of online dating was commissioned by a client as part of our strategy work. If you're interested in learning more or commissioning your own research, give us a shout.

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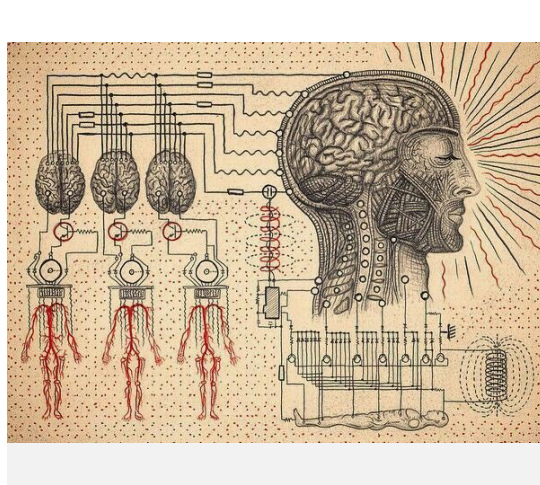

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