

You Are the You-Seeming You

The awkward origins of online dating — how dating apps changed how we perceive ourselves and others, and why the medium is the message.

Dating apps provide the illusion that no matter where you personally are, potential partners are always 'there' too. Fifty million available-to-copulate and/or ready-to-fall-in-love Americans. These apps are also an absolute godsend for any human who enjoys the benefits of curating an image of their best self.

These Avatars Weren't Always a Thing

One of the 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 — the kind of ability that previously had been available only to the especially talented (actors, magicians, con artists) or to the especially rich. Having a profile meant you needed to construct a brief, you-seeming, mini-auto-biography.

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. We've become very good at expressing ourselves online — and we don't often appreciate how natural it now feels.

The Medium Is the Message

The social consequences of online dating are the result of the entirely new scale the technology introduces. The 40% of eligible Americans. The hungry of heart and horny who, on average, swipe on hundreds or thousands of people per week. 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.

By shifting everybody into an approximation of the same space, dating profiles shifted those same everybody into different times. 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.' Online we are always present, but everybody else exists in the just-passed or just-about.