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**Sociology of the Internet**

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**Online search for Offline Partners**  
**Matching platforms as tools of empowerment**  
**and retraditionalization**

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*Zuerich, June 2007*

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**Citation:**

**Geser Hans:** Online Search for Offline Partners. Matching platforms as tools of empowerment and retraditionalization.,In: Prof. Hans Geser: Online Publications. Zuerich, June 2007.  
[http://geser.net/intcom/t\\_hgeser19.pdf](http://geser.net/intcom/t_hgeser19.pdf)

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## 1. Introduction

Since their inception, computer-supported communication media have been extensively used for searching mates - for frivolous sexual one-night stands as well as for serious life partnerships and marriage. An early prototype was the French *Minitel* which has opened up free opportunities for initiating informal contacts already in 1988. Since then, the WWW has been the breeding ground for an immense manifold of platforms with the explicit purpose of partner matching - not to speak about the multitude of chat rooms and virtual communities that are functioning implicitly as contact facilitators. Since the appearance of Match.com in 1996, a rise of potent commercial actors can be observed - but in symbiosis with semi- or non-commercial platforms mainly dedicated to local markets or specialized (e. g. gay or ethnic-religious) users.

As partner matching belongs to the short list of services for which many Web Users are consistently disposed to pay at least moderate fees, it provided the basis for a rather stable industry that was not much affected by the "dotcom" crises of 1999/2000. In the United States, it has produced revenues of about \$ 470 Mio in 2004, compared with only 40 Mio in 2001 (Madden & Lenhart 2005). In the German speaking regions, there have been about 2700 dating sites with a sale volume of about 55 to 75 Mio Euro in 2006. On American markets, signs of stagnation or even shrinkage can be observed since 2005. According to the "weAttract" whitepaper<sup>1</sup>, the causes are manifold: a declining "appeal of newness", market saturation, a loss of public trust (as Match.com has been accused of faking profiles) and a tendency toward niche platforms serving the needs of rather narrow segments of users.

A cross-national study conducted by Nielsen/Netratings has shown that within the month of July 2005, 20% of all German Internet Users (6.7 Mio) have visited at least one online dating site, while in France, the share was 18.7% (3.4 Mio), and in UK 12.4% (3.2 Mio). Many of them (in Germany more than 50%) are looking out for a serious, stable relationship, and most are ready to pay at least a few Euros for a monthly fee (Nielsen/Netrating 2005). Such figures illustrate the very broad acceptance of these new channels in the population: in sharp contrast to the rather marginal relevance of conventional newspaper advertisements or the elitist orientation of many traditional marriage broking institutions.

In a representative survey conducted by Innofact AG in Düsseldorf (2003), it has been found that 66 percent of the population think that Internet channels provide "good chances" to find an adequate partner. In a subsequent questioning (in December 2003), 12% percent of 1000 informants indicated that they have found their present partner on the Net.<sup>2</sup> Such results suggest that partner matching sites may be somewhat more popular and successful in Europe than in the United States, where - according to a survey of PEW & American Life Projects - only 37 of all partner seekers turn to the Internet, out of which only 43 realize at least one Rendezvous and only 17% a longer-term love relationship (Madden & Lenhart 2005). As a consequence, only about three percent of all marriages result from online acquaintances (Maden & Lenhart 2005) - not to compare with the 38% who have met in school or at the workplace, and the 34% who have initiated contact in circles of kin and friends.

Nevertheless, large population segments in western countries evidently possess the amount of generalized interpersonal trust that is a prerequisite for contacting - and even rendezvousing - any kind of foreigners on whom they don't have any secure information. Empirical studies show however that such trust (in the sincerity and harmlessness of most unknown strangers) is more prevalent in higher than in lower strata - so that dating sites are mostly populated with rather urban and educated users who tend to confirm mutually their positive antecedent expectations. Several empirical studies have demonstrated that at least 20-40% of all users include incorrect information in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://weattract.com/images/weAttract\\_whitepaper.pdf](http://weattract.com/images/weAttract_whitepaper.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> In a similar TNS Emnid survey of Febr. 2003, it was found that this percentage (related to the Internet using population) was about 8%.

their self profiles, but that most faking is related to objective personality characteristics (like age, body weight etc.) which can later easily and quickly be falsified "at first sight" (Knox, Daniels, Sturdivant & Zusman 2001; Brym & Lenton 2001; Nielsen Netratings 2005).

In the majority of cases, the usage of partner matching platforms seems to result in more positive than negative experiences, (Madden & Lenhart 2005), so that initial scepticism is evaporating and inexperienced colleagues and friends are encouraged to follow the same paths (Brym & Lenton 2001). Thus the spectacular increase of users seems to be caused more by such horizontal mouth-to-mouth recommendations than by organized top down propaganda campaigns of the respective firms.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The growing demand for artificial partner-seeking procedures in contemporary societies

Unlike most other areas of human activity, partner seeking has not been the object of much functional differentiation in contemporary societies. Most individuals still find their spouses "accidentally" in school, on work, in leisure groups or within voluntary associations, while procedures and institutions explicitly dedicated to partner matching have a rather marginal place. In fact, relying on advertisements, joining a "Lonely Hearts Club" or using the services of partner broking institutes are often still seen as embarrassing measures indicating that somebody is not attractive (or skilled) enough for successful casual encounters. Unquestionably, school and workplace have increased in importance because education has expanded and because gender composition in most work contexts (even the military) has become more equilibrated within the last 40 years.

For various reasons, however, these conventional breeding grounds for partnerships are less and less adequate to meet the changing demands.

*First* of all, the average age when people marry has increased, so that much spouse searching is taking place when formal education has ended. Particularly, the dominant effects of schools on age-homogenous marriages have diminished. *Secondly*, prohibitive rules against "sexual harassment" and sexual relationships among employees (or between teachers and students) have been enacted in most organizations: making the initiation of contacts more difficult and risky. And *thirdly*, the rising rates of conjugal separations and divorces leads to an increasing pool of "secondary singles" of advanced age who don't go to school and rarely participate in leisure pastimes (parties, disco, group vacationing etc.) where younger people find so ample opportunities to meet (see Brym & Lenton 2001). Many of these are additionally constrained by highly structured life circumstances (e. g. by rising kids as single parents) that reduce their freedom of moving and enlarging their social field, and most of them may have become more conscientious, demanding and selective than in more easygoing younger years.

*"Increased pressure from work makes it more difficult to find the time to engage in conventional dating methods, such as meeting eligible partners in athletic clubs and bars. People are looking for more efficient ways of meeting." (Brym & Lenton 2001).*

As a consequence, there is a rising need for new ways to initiate interpersonal contacts: ways that are easily accessible, efficient and highly compatible with any life conditions and situational constraints. Conventional strategies of "random searching" are seen as inefficient because it cannot

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<sup>3</sup> As an implication, we may expect that interest in online matching can rise rapidly within densely interrelated populations, while they may stagnate among collectivities of rather isolated individuals. This may explain why membership bases of many platforms rare often rather homogenous in terms of social background: e. g. in the Swiss case of "Partnerwinner.ch" where most users are Swiss citizens (not immigrants) residing in the Zurich agglomeration.

be known whether any envisaged partner is objective "available" and subjectively motivated for a new serious bond. Therefore, a rich culture of "single dinners", "single wine tastings" or "single cruises" has developed for aggregating people who can at least start the interaction on the pre-mise that they are "in principle" adequately disposed. (However, the dire consequence is that overt rejections cannot be attributed to objective unavailability, so that they have to be interpreted as an expression of subjective indifference or dislike).

Online Dating is a most efficient method for two major reasons: because contacts can be initiated or responded at any time and from any place where an Internetted computer is available (without participation at social events), and because it provides large pools of alternative partners, so that a multitude of precise selection criteria can be implemented. This explains why such platforms tend to be used by very heterogeneous populations, and why so many users (according to Hitsch about 75%) are looking for serious long-term partners, not just for accidental dates (Hitsch 2005).

### **3. Effortless accessibility and high compatibility with other activities and roles**

Conventional partner-seeking procedures often imply considerable costs in terms of time, money and personal efforts, because it is necessary to make preparations (e. g. in terms of neat clothing, hairdressing, deodorant spraying etc.), to appear on prescheduled time at specific (often consumption-intensive) locations, and to engage in courting procedures that demand various tactical activities (e. g. extended attentive conversation).

Such dating rituals have several grave implications. *First of all*, there is a strong trend toward exclusive relationships, because being involved in several affairs means to become overwhelmed by problems of time and mobility management in order to compatibilize them (while keeping them also neatly apart). *Secondly*, obstacles can be so insurmountable that no meetings are realized even when all other conditions are favorable: e. g. in cases of bodily disablements or remote living in the countryside. And *thirdly*, changing partners is difficult and time consuming, so that even dissatisfied couples may continue their relationship just because they don't grant each other enough freedom for looking out for alternatives, or because they are afraid of longer periods of loneliness after separation.<sup>4</sup>

Online platforms reduce or even eliminate such costs by offering cheap or even free communication channels that don't imply personal efforts - except authoring mail texts (which can be sent in identical form to unlimited numbers of recipients). Email addresses tend to be readily exchanged even among partners who don't know anything about each other, and who have a minimum of personal trust to each other, because receiving an unwelcome Email is a very nonintrusive event, as it can be simply deleted and ignored. Providing the telephone number is more risky, because highly intrusive phone calls (even late in the evening or on Sunday mornings) may occur. And communicating the residential address is most risky because it cannot be excluded that an unwelcome "stalker" suddenly knocks at the door.

In a general way, Internetted computers provide everybody anytime anywhere with wide opportunities for anonymous social activities: options that may have been only available in big city settings at earlier times. In particular, no visible activities revealing my intentions (like buying flowers, booking restaurant tables etc.) have to be accomplished. Instead, very inexpressive behavior (like typing words into a PC) is sufficient: elementary actions compatible with almost any other role activities and the simultaneous presence of any other people (e. g. at the workplace or in an Internet café). Consequently, the initiation of new contacts is extremely facilitated. Why not send out dozens

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<sup>4</sup> In a functionalist perspective, it could be hypothesized that the reluctance of society to develop specialized arrangements and institutions for partner seeking (mentioned above) is caused by societal needs to keep existing relationships intact - what is most likely when no structured exit procedures are available.

of invitations to anybody fulfilling the exclusion criteria applied in the search mask - even to individuals who are very unlikely to send a response? Why not let the statistical "theorem of big numbers" work in order to find The One Prince Charming among hundreds or thousands of ugly frogs? In fact, traffic on many partner platforms is heavily loaded with unsuccessful initiations. In the Canadian study conducted by Brym and Lenton, for example, it was found that 78% of all mails were unilateral messages that have not resulted in any reciprocation (Brym & Lenton 2001). Thus, it is an important function of Emails to create masses of tentative networks of extremely peripheral "weak ties" that can be discontinued anytime without consequences. As investments and risks are so low, even individuals with rather low motivation and low trust in the new technology may readily try out these new channels as long as no fundamentalist ideological resistances prevent participation.

Online dating vividly illustrates one of the most significant sociological impacts of the computer: its capacity to increase the compatibility between different individual activities and roles. *First*, sitting before the computer means that many different online contacts can be cultivated at the same time or within very short spans of time, because role-switching is so easy. This increases the chances to gather rather imitate information about many different candidates - so that decisive choices can be better based on rational cognitive grounds. *Secondly*, this same impact is manifested in the easiness with which computer based searching activities are compatible with strict privacy protection because it allows psychological closeness without intrusions into highly personalized environments, as every participant remains unobserved and uncontrollable in his own physical setting (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 102). Incoming electronic messages are also much less intrusive than phone calls, because they can be strictly reserved to free times: e. g. when nobody else is at home or watching. Given that online interactions are compatible with an undisturbed continuance of most offline role engagements and activities, they can be integrated into every life schedule and be flexibly adapted to changing times and locations.

This compatibility is especially consequential for people who live together in the same household (e. g. married couples).<sup>5</sup>

The whole range of phenomena known from Real Sex tends to be mirrored in the virtual world: almost all offline activities and sensations are paralleled with a virtual counterpart:

*"Thus, people speak of cybermates or even online husbands or online wives. People have even got cybermarried and vowed to be faithful to each other. Some women have claimed that they do not want to engage in cybersex with the first person who asks them since they want to save their virtual virginity for the right man. Similarly some of them say they do not want a one night cyberstand."* (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 5-6).

Thus, the whole traditional norm structure regulating real life sexuality tends to be reproduced in a semi-ironic manner, and there may even soon emerge a code of civil law referring to cybermarriages and cyberdivorces. *Cybersex* in particular can be highly competitive to the "real thing", because it is more easily accessible and more compatible with modern standards of individual autonomy - particularly in an environment where primary flirting behavior is increasingly inhibited by fears of "sexual harassment" and highly moralistic conceptions of "sexist behaviour".

Under Real Life conditions, sexual activities are always ambiguous because on the one hand, they are *altruistic* by aiming to express love and provide bliss and satisfaction to the partner, while on the other hand, they are *egoistic* because their aim is to provide lust and satisfaction for oneself. Very often, the incongruence between these two goals becomes quite manifest when a non-satisfied

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<sup>5</sup> The threatening implications of online flirting is highlighted by a survey where the majority of respondents considered it acceptable when their partner visited a pornographic adult site, but as unacceptable that he or she engaged in any kind of Cybersex. (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 4). Evidently, it is the interactive nature of the latter that makes it a virtualized parallel to the "real thing": evoking rather similar emotions despite the spatial distance and complete lack of direct sensory contacts between the partners.

partner turns to masturbation, or when an orgasm is faked in order to pretend that both aims have been reached at the same moment.

In cybersexual relations, these two components are more dissociated from the beginning, because both partners remain enclosed in their own physical environments where they produce their own private satisfactions. As they cannot watch each other, they are less hindered in concentrating on their own sexual needs while keeping a thin line of contact woven exclusively by spoken or written words. Cybersex is partner sex which is most compatible with masturbation (Ben-Ze'ev 2004:51). In such virtual relations, the partners are mainly objects of mutual imagination, not active subjects that affect each other by their manipulations. Thus, highly intimate sex is easily realized among partners who know each other barely and who have not built up any level of mutual trust.

#### 4. Ready exit options

In comparison to phone calls or face-to-face encounters, mailed letters, SMS, Email and other written media are better suited to communicate the abrupt end of interpersonal relationships, because the sender doesn't face the visible spontaneous reactions of the recipient - reactions that may be feared so much that sincere openness is discouraged. In cases of pure online relationships, such terminating notices are less painful, also because investments have usually not been considerable and chances of finding alternative partners are rather high (Merkle & Richardson, 2000).

Under conventional low-tech conditions, the high psychological costs of rejections have the consequence that contacts with low chances of reciprocation are often not initiated at all. Thus, very attractive young women often receive astonishingly few advances because most males think that they have no chances because so many other, more attractive males are competing.

*“For example, a man with a low attractiveness rating may not approach a highly attractive woman if the chance of forming a match with her is low, such that the expected utility from a match is lower than the cost of writing an e-mail or the disutility from a possible rejection. In that case, his choice of a less attractive woman does not reveal his true preference ordering. However, we find evidence that the site users are more likely to approach a more attractive mate than a less attractive mate, regardless of their own attractiveness rating. (Hitsch et. al. 2005).*

Online dating is likely to reduce biases that result from such tactical considerations, so that there is a higher correlation between the intensity of the desire to get into contact and the likelihood that the contact is factually initiated.

Even negative and discrediting information may be more readily disclosed because the involved risk (that the relationship will be discontinued) can be tolerated. And even minor disturbances, mishaps and disappointments may cause separation - so that relationships are less likely to "mature" by living through (and finally solving) difficult phases of conflicts and misfortunes.

Given the ubiquitous possibilities to take distance or withdraw, it is evident that online interaction typically takes place in an environment of much reduced feedback density: so that there are very low needs for regulating behaviour by means of social norms and social control. Evidently, our norms of politeness have been developed for regulating the interactions between people meeting each other face-to-face. As Norbert Elias has demonstrated in his habilitation work (*“Die höfische Gesellschaft”*), the French court in Versailles under the late Bourbon kings was a particularly fertile breeding ground for norms of courtesy because thousands of nobles lived with each other in the same palaces, densely packed without exit options in very limited building space. Under these conditions, high self-discipline had to be imposed on all participants in order to avoid constant collision, conflicts and irritations (Elias 1983).

One of the major consequences of online communication is that they contribute to a general demise of such cultural achievements, because apart from an elementary netiquette which regulates written exchanges, no behavioural norms of mutual politeness have to be followed by people not meeting each other in space. For instance, there is no need for participants to dress neatly before sitting before the computer, to abstain from smoking and drinking in the "presence" of logged-in partners, to shorten verbal contributions so that other get chance to make themselves heard, or to conceal open dissent for avoiding risky direct confrontations. There is also much less need for "flattery"

*"since people are less vulnerable and there are fewer practical benefits to gain by flattering the other person." (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 75).*

This lowered relevance of politeness has several implications. First of all, the participant can directly engage in talks about their "real issues", because no time for preliminary small talk and "grooming talk" has to be consumed. Secondly, the usual hypocrisies going along with politeness are reduced, so that a higher level of sincerity may be usually maintained (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 29)

While online interactions are immune against many disturbances arising from "inappropriate behaviour", they are all the more pervasively threatened by discontinuation, because evasion is so easy and can be enacted suddenly, without prior announcements and intermediary stages of taking distance:

*"In offline relationships, people typically do not suddenly disappear from each other's view. They gradually leave the room, they often say good-bye, and they usually return. In offline relationships, discontinuity - such as sudden disappearance or sudden return - requires an explanation. Sudden disappearance in cyberspace is easy - it merely requires not pressing a certain Button; hence, it is common and needs no explanation." (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 46).*

In fact, terminations are often highly unexpected because partners have no knowledge about each other's situational offline settings (where any kind of interruptive developments and events may anytime occur).

## 5. The larger pool of alternatives

When asked about the most evident advantage of online dating, many respondents indicate the opportunity to get acquainted to people who they would have no chance to meet in Real Life (Brym & Lenton 2001). Even when there is little trust in online selection procedures, it is acknowledged that the pool of available alternatives is significantly expanded. Of course, this widening is particularly relevant for rather isolated people. This may explain the finding that this aspect was given more importance by inhabitants of small towns and villages than by big city dwellers (Brym & Lenton 2001). Given the statistical "law of big numbers", even individuals with highly deviant characteristics or life conditions can realistically expect to find a fitting partner - so that such traits may be more openly communicated than in local settings where much pressure is felt to conform to "ordinary standards" (Paap & Raybeck 2005).

Selection procedures vary on a continuum between two ideal type poles that can be characterized as follows

1) *Institutional selection („push model“ according to Burrell et. al. 2004).*

Partner choice is conceptualized as a process that can (or should) be guided completely by objective scientific procedures: by experts who certified tests and matching procedures that have proven to be reliable and successful. Platforms like eHarmony.com, Tickle.com or Parship.de generate revenues from rather high membership fees paid by individuals with high trust in graphological analyses and differential psychological personality tests. As a consequence, they are ready to accept the recommended candidates as potential matches even when test procedures and their outcomes are not openly communicated.

2) *Individual selection („pull model“ according to Burrell et. al. 2004)*

Partner choice is seen as a process that is completely self-guided by the respective individuals who rely on their intuitive and empathic capacities as well as their sound rational judgments without needing any external (professional and institutional) help (e. g. Match.com, Yahoo!Personals, etc.). Similar to the participation in self-help groups, this method is certainly cheap and is compatible with radical scepticism against all kind of psycho tests and other "scientific" procedures, but it implies that users have enough time and motivation to do the whole selective work themselves - and are bold enough to make self-responsible decisions. Such self-imposed selection processes tend to stimulate self-reflection and raise the consciousness about personal goals and preferences. To use the platform is already revealing evidence that "I'm looking out for a partner", the way I define my personal profile implies strategic choices about my "impression management", and to fill out the search mask means to reflect about my demands and expectations: the aspects where I am flexible and adaptive and the dimensions where I cling stubbornly to specific standards. Thus, *"we are more able to become aware of our unique personal characteristics"* (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 63).

As in many other spheres of modern life, such forced choices among many alternatives have many socio-psychological repercussions:

- 1) It is costly to collect all the necessary information and to create orders of ranking.
- 2) Regardless of which selection is made, ambivalences are persisting because the non-selected "near-choices" do not lose their attraction.
- 3) In the case of failure, I have to attribute total responsibility to myself, because no exogenous circumstances (blunt "fate") and no dominating third individuals (like parents imposing marriage partners) can be made accountable.
- 4) There may be increased social pressures on singles to find a suitable partner. To remain single will be interpreted as an indicator of autism or other psychological dysfunctions when so many potential partners are available, and to engage in a misalliance may no longer attributed to "bad luck", but to "bad personal judgment".

Experimental studies in social psychology have shown that individuals are more ready to make a choice and to be satisfied with their choice when relatively few alternatives (e. g. of fruit marmalades in a supermarket) are available (Iyenga and Lepper 2000). Obviously, less mental effort is involved in overviewing and ranking the options, and it is more likely that one of the options stands out as "clearly the best".

By comparing pull and push platforms, it can be asked who is preferring more self-guided or more authoritative selection procedures under what personal and situational conditions, and which of the procedures is more likely to lead to satisfactory results. We may find that a high belief in psychological test procedures as well as a busy "workaholic" lifestyle may cause people to turn to push platforms where they have just to wait for well-founded proposals, while individuals with high self-confidence and extended time resources may be more ready to engage in self-guided activities of searching and decision.

The following discussion will be focused on *pull platforms* exclusively because we think that the Internet is contributing to a strong shift toward such decentralized, deprofessionalized structures. The extensive usage of such platforms may well reflect a more generalized societal tendency toward self-guided problem solving, as it is also evident in the spectacular rise of "self-help" groups as a substitute for professional therapy and rehabilitation (Riessman & Gartner 1984). The causes underlying this trend may also be similar: a declining trust in the scientific validity of standardized diagnostic and therapeutic procedures, a stronger emphasis on emotionality and other nonmeasurable components, and an appalling diversification of individualities, problem types and situational conditions that precludes the application of any routinized procedures.



## 6. The standardization of exclusion criteria

In Real Life, the range of potentially attractive interaction partners is heavily filtered by sensory perceptions: e. g. by taking distance from people who look unattractive or behave in a strange fashion. As such "gating mechanisms" (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 37) are not available with online partners, the pool of potential partners is likely to remain large. Therefore, there is more need for any other information to reduce complexity: e. g. information about life situations and biography, age, ethnic background, location of residence, family constellation etc. Thus, selection procedures are necessarily more governed by criteria of social status as well as by situational characteristics that are rather unrelated to bodily traits.

In Real Life, accidental meetings and spontaneous sensory impressions have the effect that even the hardest *ex ante* criteria of mate selection are sometimes overruled. As a consequence, all sorts of "falsely positive" matchings ("misalliances") are emerging as we all know them from dramas and novels: relationships that are in sharp contrast to the homogamous norms of the partners and their families, and that may effectively subvert highly valued segregations based on class, caste, ethnicity or religion.

Under online conditions, these latter criteria are likely to assume higher dominance, because such aleatoric events based on accidental spatial proximity cannot take place. In addition, online partner selection calls for applying harsh filtering procedures in order to reduce the pool of prospective mates to a number compatible with the limited cognitive and behavioral capacities of average individual users. In any case, this implies that potent standardized exclusion criteria have to be applied. While eliminating blunt misalliances, they tend to produce masses of "falsely negative" results: unwarranted exclusions of potentially optimal partners that will never be detected because no subsequent contact and information gathering is ever taking place. Whoever sets the upper age limit to 35 or the lower body size to 165 cm will forgo any chances to meet somewhat older or slightly smaller candidates - regardless of how attractive they would appear in all other valuable respects.

*"In online dating, users typically search and sort by relatively superficial characteristics, precluding interaction with anyone who does not meet the criteria the searcher specifies. Browsing a large catalogue requires exclusion of entire categories, snap judgments, and quick dismissal of the vast majority of the items." (Fiore 2004).*

A major function of this screening process is to create a positive predisposition for subsequent interaction: after careful selection (according to procedures in which they deeply believe), both partners will be ready to make relatively large investments and to explore thoroughly the possibility for a deeper relationship. As I am convinced that my partner conforms to all my major preferences, I think that chances of success are rather high, and as I know that my partner shares my conviction, I'm even more convinced that he or she will be ready to become equally committed. Thus, processes of "self-fulfilling prophecy" may easily start because the partners will take care to engage in highly responsive and open communication.

Evidently, this increased weight of objectified selection criteria meets the preferences of rather traditional users who search for a partner who conforms neatly to clearly definable characteristics of family breeding, ethnicity, religion, profession or wealth.

*"In some ways, online dating is better-suited to brokering arranged marriages than love marriages. The characteristics used to pair people for an arranged marriage — e.g., family background, caste, socioeconomic status — are much easier to represent in a database and search than vaguely defined qualities like "chemistry," which people often cite as a major factor in love relationships." (Fiore 2004).*

Thus, even tiny and geographically dispersed minorities may be enabled to remain endogamous under conditions of modern urban life, instead of mixing with the surrounding population. This trend

could potentially weaken the well-known regularity that the rate of exogamy of minorities correlates negatively with the size of local population (Lieberman & Waters 1988; Wong 1989; Kalmijn 1993). For instance, it is well known that the Internet is used by caste-conscious Hindu Indians for implementing strict rules of homogamy under conditions of high global dispersion and migration, because global search increases the chance to find exactly conforming partners (Priyanka 2004). In Western countries, online platforms also seem to reinforce homogamic patterns - but more so in the realm of individual character and biographic traits than on the level of social membership:

*„An analysis of dyadic interactions of approximately 65,000 heterosexual users of an online dating system in the U.S. showed that users of the system sought people like them much more often than chance would predict, just as in the offline world. The users' preferences were most strongly same seeking for attributes related to the life course, like marital history and whether one wants children, but they also demonstrated significant homophily in self-reported physical build, physical attractiveness, and smoking habits.” (Fiore & Donath 2005).*

On the other hand, however, the same platform can as well support heterogamy: e. g. by freeing people from the factual homogamies enforced by work places and schools.

As the search procedures enable users to implement their subjective values, norms and role expectations in a direct, uncompromising fashion, it can be hypothesized that factual search activities truly mirror such individual divergences (e. g. related to culture, age or gender). So far, particularly gender-related differences have been clearly assessed in several empirical studies. Thus, it has been found that more contact initiations start from males than from females (in the comprehensive study of Fiore & Donath: 73%), while females feel more frequently free to give no response (Brym & Lenton 2001; Fiore 2004: 41f.). Consequently, the quotient between sent out and received messages is likely to exceed 1.0 in the case of males, and stay below 1.0 among female users (Brym & Lenton 2001).

*„Women are browsed more often, and receive more first contact e-mails and e-mails containing a phone number or e-mail address than men. Hence, a first contact is more likely to be initiated by a man. While men receive an average of 2.6 first contact e-mails, women receive 12.6 e-mails. 54.5% of all men in the sample did not receive a first contact e-mail at all, whereas only 19.9% of all women were not approached by e-mail.” (Hitsch et. al. 2005).*

Similarly, women are found to be more consistent in selecting males according to objective status criteria (like education, income or ethnic background), while males remain more open towards non-status related characteristics like personal attractiveness (Hitsch et. al. 2005). While higher education and professional prestige makes males more attractive, such characteristics have little (or even a slightly negative) impact on female users:

*„Online success also varies across different occupational groups. Holding everything else constant, the biggest improvement in outcomes is observed for men in legal professions (77% outcome premium), followed by the military (49%), fire fighters (45%), and health related professions (42%). Manufacturing jobs, on the other hand, are associated with an about 10% penalty. The occupation of women, on the other hand, has little influence on their outcomes; in fact, most professions are associated with a slightly lower number of first contacts relative to students.” Hitsch et.al. 2005).*

For several reasons, studying the exclusion behaviour of online users seems a fruitful research endeavour. In a microsociological perspective, such studies provide detailed insight into the subjective values, norms and role preferences of various individuals; and from a macrosociological point of view, they may allow conclusions about how the Internet is changing the reproductive mixing or separation of different population segments, social classes and ethnic-religious groups.

## 7. An additional historical stage in the ongoing „subjectification“ of partner selection

As a well-known correlate of industrialization and modernization, the grip of families and ethnic collectivities on mating has diminished, so that most individuals are empowered to make self-determined selections in accordance with their own life plans and subjective preferences.

Paradoxically, however, a high level of *de facto* endogamy is still practiced without such collective social controls, because most bondings occur within neighbourhoods, friendship circles, schools, work environments, voluntary associations or other social environments characterized by a rather homogeneous social composition (Wirth 2000). Institutions of formal education have particularly contributed to increased homogamy by raising the chances that matings take place among individuals of exactly the same age, social background, intellectual interests or perspectives of professional career (Hirsch et. al. 2005). Several empirical studies have shown that homogamic patterns become more pronounced with increasing length of formal schooling (Blossfeld et. al. 1998; Bernardi 2003).

“Search frictions” of this kind contribute to a higher factual level of endogamy than would be expected on the basis of individual preferences or social norms.

*„Traditionally, people find their marriage partners in the social and geographic environment they live in, such as the school, college, or church they attend, at work, through friends or relatives, or in public places such as bars. Most people are therefore more frequently exposed to potential partners who are more similar to them in terms of their education, income, faith, or ethnicity than a randomly drawn partner from the general U.S. population. Therefore, the empirically observed correlations in marriages along certain attributes, such as income and education, may be purely due to the social institutions that bring partners together and only partially due to the preferences men and women have over their mates. (Hirsch et. al. 2005).*

Thus, intra-elite homogamy can survive the erosion of family control structures when upper classes send their offspring to the same high-standing universities, and intra-ethnic homogamy can be high even within atomized collectivities when they live in ethnically homogenous neighbourhoods that provide enough meeting opportunities for their teens and twens (Muttarak 2004). As a general rule, “marriage markets” seem to have a hard time to keep pace with the internationalization and globalization of so many other markets. They tend to remain segmented into many smaller local markets, because the “law of distance interaction” (Mayhew & Levinger 1976) inhibits the formation of transspatial bonds.

Seen under this perspective, the Internet may have the potential to free humans from the grip of these pseudo-ascriptive forces: enabling them to make *de facto* use of freedoms they have acquired *de jure* already a long time ago.

Similar to other online activities, computer supported mate selections occur in private settings that are fundamentally protected from group conformity pressures and other forms of social controls. As a consequence, they can be shaped predominantly or even exclusively by subjective motivations, moods, interests, values and goals.

*„Compared to traditional marriage markets, online dating is characterized by only small search frictions, and the resulting matches are therefore largely driven by preferences and the equilibrium mechanism that brings partners together.“ (Hitsch et. al. 2005).*

As a consequence, work places, schools, family gatherings and any other conventional interaction settings may be less needed as breeding grounds for matings, so that they lose some of their stabilizing influence on the production and reproduction of social structures.

On the other hand, traditional structures may also be *reinforced* because they can be preserved even under conditions of inhibited interaction - as long as the individual members still identify with the respective common values and norms. For instance, immigrants may well instrumentalize the Internet for keeping higher distance toward the indigenous population, because it offers them better

opportunities to remain embedded within their domestic settings and social networks and to find even spouses within their country of origin. Similarly, they may be less resistant to live dispersed instead of aggregating in homogeneous collectivities (e. g. urban ghettos), because they can more easily associate regardless of their geographical location,

Looking at the reigning theories of partner selection, this all implies that the Internet diminishes the reach of "*supply theories*" which stress the determinative power of objective status characteristics and social memberships (in families, schools, associations, corporations etc.) and the impact of spatial locations (e. g. Fischer 1977; Maroden 1990; Kalmjin & Flap 2001). On the other hand, it increases the relevance of "*demand theories*" which start from the premise that partner selections mirror subjective individual preferences: from internalized norms and values to fully rational economic calculations (e. g. Buss & Barnes 1986; South 1991; Becker 1974).

Seen from a methodological (research) perspective, this implies that the Internet opens up new opportunities to assess psychological factors of partner selection because they translate themselves without distortions into factual overt behaviour. Similarly, the Web offers an excellent testing ground for economic market models of partner selection, because in comparison to offline conditions, it is (somewhat) more realistic to assume that the actors acquire "perfect information" and are factually capable to set their preferences into practice (Fiore & Donath 2004).

As mentioned above, focusing on subjective (instead of structural) determinants does not mean to lose sociological factors out of sight, because among these individual attitudes, we do not find only personal idiosyncrasies or egocentric utility calculations, but also highly collectivized values and norms that have been internalized in preceding processes of socialization. However, it becomes more decisive whether and to what extent collective values are anchored in such intrapersonal dispositions. For instance, the Internet may well amplify the differences between *highly cohesive and conforming minorities* who use the Net uniformly to increase rates of *homogamy*, and more *individualized collectivities* where the same digital technologies boost *heterogamic* associations.

Similarly, partner selection may become heavily shaped by reigning fads and fashions: e. g. by the widespread current tendency to keep distance from smokers or by "Zeitgeist" preferences for partners from Thailand or other exotic countries (Model & Fisher 2002).

On the most general level, it might be expected that online procedures result in a higher rate of partnerships which are consistent with individual expectations and preferences - so that it becomes more consequential what "ideal partner" models are instilled and subjectively maintained.

## 8. The absence of structuring by "situative frames"

Conventional offline dating usually takes place within an exogenously given environment: *a structuring "situated frame"* which restrains and specifies the interactive and communicative options of the participants in manifold ways (Fiore 2004).

Three levels "structuring" may be analytically distinguished.

*First*, there is always a *limited "action space"* circumscribed in terms of available time, physical space, material resources or restraining social conditions. For instance, I may be in a hurry to introduce myself to my attractive seat neighbour before the short-range flight has come to an end; and my intimate advances to a work team member have to wait for the rare moment when all unwelcome third bystanders are temporarily out of sight.

*Secondly*, the common environmental setting constitutes a *shared stage and scenery* which define a specific set of appropriate normative expectations, social roles and styles of behaviour which may be mutually consensual to a large extent. Thus, lingering in a Disco Club or staying "in vacation on Ibiza" are conditions that facilitate or even demand a relatively open attitude toward casual sexual encounters, and a Saturday night dating may follow a neat script of precisely predictable stages: from

common cinema attendance to a shared dinner, fond post-midnight cuddlings on dark sideways and even much more intrusive subsequent intimacies within the private home.

And *third*, situational structuring means that my behaviour toward the partner in focus will be shaped by the *presence of bystanders* - especially in cases where such observers are people with whom I have also a social relationship, or persons who know individuals with whom I am acquainted - so that they may well report to them anything they have seen.

Most offline activities involve the risk of being visible to unwelcome third persons: particularly in smaller communities or neighbourhoods where it is regularly noticed (and discussed) when I'm dating a new partner or when an unfamiliar new car is parked overnight in front of my apartment.

*"In the offline world, we meet friends and lovers in the context of existing social structures. The grocery store, the bar, church, or the neighbourhood are common venues for meeting people. More abstractly, one's social network serves as the backdrop for introductions to friends of friends. Interactions which emerge from these contexts remain socially situated or embedded within them, such that the involved people are accountable not just to each other but to the wider circle of friends and acquaintances. The sanctions for misbehaviour therefore extend beyond the immediate dyad. In terms of dating, this provides incentive for individuals to treat their dating partners well; additionally, it offers some assurance that others are unlikely to behave badly." (Fiore 2004)*

Online dating takes place without such a common situational frame, so that no efforts are necessary for carving out a part of it for intimate bilateral interaction. Neither is there a need for hurrying because the addressee is leaving soon, nor do I have to wait for undisturbed moments when unwelcome bystanders are gone. The downside is that no overarching scenery is available that structures mutual expectations even before any verbal communication sets in.

As a consequence, a broader range of alternative communicative options is available at each single moment, so that more insecurity about the current situation and the next moves is maintained.

*"Without a social context in which interactions might be embedded, users can misbehave with fewer consequences than in an offline dating milieu; word of their misbehaviour will likely never reach their offline friends, and the unfortunate dating partner can be wiped from the email record and blocked from future communication with a few clicks." (Fiore 2004: 25)*

Like browsing through a mail order catalogue, surfing on dating platforms is a home-based activity mainly shaped by factors associated with my present psychological states on the one hand and my current proximate environment on the other: how would the focused candidate fit into my apartment, and how would he or she harmonize with my friends who come to dinner every Friday night?

How calculating and trivial such considerations are in contrast to my enthusiastic casual beach love that survives only a few weeks of holiday adventure - or to my party flirts based on momentaneous leisure moods and high levels of ethanol. Of course, such home-based contacting can be particularly empowering under conditions where discretion is of utmost importance: e. g. in the case of young women in traditional Islamic societies who are strictly forbidden to interact with males in public, or in the case of "deviant" homosexual leanings where a "coming out" would have discrediting implications.

## 9. From multilateral to "poly-bilateral" interactions

Similar to the telephone, dating platforms are mechanisms for distilling out bilateral relationships from larger social networks, and for establishing new "bridges" between two networks that have hitherto been separated. While this may facilitate the initiation of contact and the development of the first phases of the relationship, more efforts than normal may be needed later when every

partner has to introduce and assimilate his or her new acquaintance to his existing network of kin and friends.

The trend toward individualized social worlds is much supported by the capacity of PC users to engage in multiple conversations with different partners simultaneously or to switch between different partners within no time: partners who are segregated from each other and may have no knowledge that they are contacted by the same initiator. Thus, we expect that computer interaction leads to a "thinning out" of social networks: each individual interacts with a set of partners who don't know about each other, and each interactive relationship is completely separated from all others. Certainly, such poly-bilateral relationships facilitate self-disclosure because whenever I open myself up to partner A, I have not to care that this same information will also be transmitted to partners B, C and D. On the other hand, they may remain perpetually unstable insofar as I can give them up easily without hurting anybody else beside my partner (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 157).

In conventional offline society, there is a dearth of interaction partners to whom we can be very open because we are sufficiently sure that they are not acquainted with any of our other acquaintances. In fact, such people can often only be found among professional elites: among priests who take confidential confessions, or psychotherapists who guarantee absolute confidentiality in exchange for considerable fees. On the Internet, I can easily find responsive partners who are not acquainted with any other individuals I personally know, so that they combine the anonymity of a psychotherapist with the free availability and sympathetic stance of a "real friend". Such partners are particularly valuable in cases when disclosures imply information that would be highly stigmatizing within the dense social circles in the Real World: for instance: the "coming out" of being homosexual, epileptic, HIV-positive or a criminal just released from prison.

Another implication of poly-bilateralism is that interaction with A is the only way of getting information about A, because no third informants are available (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 38). This also means that my partner has complete control over the way he or she is self-presenting to myself, and full certainty about the kind of knowledge I possess about him or her. Of course, this is also a reason why false pretensions can be successfully maintained: insofar as no others are available for making corrections.

Finally, poly-bilateralism may cause conventional norms about the "exclusiveness" of love relationships to be relaxed. When I live in densely knit social networks, I have to define my love to a specific partner as strictly exclusive because whenever I would dissipate my feeling to a second, the two are likely to get informed and develop jealousy. Under online conditions, I can easily declare equal love to several partners without having to fear such reactions (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 184f.). On the other hand, generalized mutual mistrust is easily nourished when the partners assume that each of them maintains more than one affair simultaneously (without telling). As my partner lives a life about which I cannot get any information, a particular amount of interpersonal trust is needed for being convinced that he or she is not behaving in such unacceptable ways.

To sum up: online interactions tend to be highly segregative because people engage in a strictly bilateral dialogues with singular others, while neglecting wider multilateral participation in larger collectivities. This trend has given rise to the hypothesis that the social world of modern individuals no longer consists of "communities" (in the sense of tightly-knit groups sharing common beliefs and traditions), but just of "networks" of bilateral relationships: highly decentralized entities where each individual occupies his or her own center (Wellman & Gulia 1995).

Therefore, we could hypothesize that larger face-to-face gatherings (like parties, weddings etc) become increasingly important as a compensating mechanism for such segregations: by allowing individuals to embed themselves into larger collectivities of people who are "just there", even if only few of them are verbally contacted.

## 10. Symmetrical patterns of communicational exchange

Offline relationships are often characterized by a high asymmetry between the partners. Especially in sexual encounters, one person may take the lead, while the other plays a rather passive role. Similar disequilibria may be produced at any Rendezvous where one of the participants dominates the conversation by words and gestures, or in many joint activities (like going to the cinema or on a vacation trip), where one of the partners takes the decisions and imposes his own preferences on the other .

Online interactions tend to be more symmetrical, because both partners have exactly the same tools at hand, and because fruitful interaction is completely based on mutual communicative exchanges. In Cybersex relations, for instance, both partners have to be equally active in giving feedback to each other: the sexual experience is always something jointly produced. (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 132). Similarly, all other online communications have to be based on common interests, because otherwise, one of the partners may discontinue the conversation: with the effect that the interaction process breaks down. Text-based online exchanges imply a particular symmetry which refers to the intellectual and verbal capacities of both participants: therefore privileging people with higher levels of literacy and formal education.

Thus, we may speculate that online interactions

- may be most preferred in cultures or social strata where gender roles are highly symmetrical;
- may function as a breeding ground (or socialization context) for more equilibrated gender relations.

On the other hand, the Internet may cause a neglect and unlearning of other activities which have traditionally been aimed at emphasizing the asymmetry between the genders. For instance, women may be less eager to impress males by means of clothing, hairdressing, perfumes and cosmetic manipulations, because all these signals cannot be transmitted (at least in predominantly textual exchanges). Also on more substantive levels, online platforms seem to catalyze rather "modern" conceptions of gender roles and partner relationships that are based on equality and cooperation. In comparison with newspaper ads, males are less disposed to stress their professional and financial achievements, and women hesitate to emphasize their physical charms (Arvidsson 2005). Instead, both genders observe the new norm to present themselves as dynamic, expansive personalities who display a manifold of interests and activities and who have still a high potential for future development regardless of their current age.

As a consequence, the envisaged partnership is conceived as an opportunity for enriching common life experience: a shared adventure full of new activities and developmental perspectives.

*"Rather, the dominating element of the vast majority of the profiles I surveyed was what I would call an 'experiential ethic' of self-discovery, an orientation towards touching, revealing or sharing one's true self through open-hearted and intimate communication with others, or through an active or experientially rich life conduct.<sup>1</sup> Most users would stress how they already lead an experientially rich existence with a rich social life 'I love, travelling, working out, reading books, spending time with family and friends' (WF, 31), 'I love seeking experiences through food, travel, conversation' (WF, 31), and how they possess the qualities to further enrich their lives through contacts and new experiences: how they are 'easy going', 'intelligent', confident' and 'have a passion for life'". (Arvidsson 2005).*

## 11. The discursive (instead of intuitive) process of mutual disclosure

When meeting face-to-face, human beings inevitably initiate an extremely complex process of mutual perceptions and communications that is only partially controllable and comprises a constant broad stream of visual and acoustic (and potentially also tactile and olfactory) cues. On the one hand, I see the rather invariant features of "personal appearance" that are themselves a complex mix of nonmanipulable biological factors (e. g. body size, gender and age) and intentional manipulations (e. g. hairdressing, clothing and jewellery). On the other hand, I'm confronted with a permanent flow of

variable behaviour ranging from unconscious and uncontrollable gestures to intentional verbal utterances (which themselves possess various unintentional characteristics on a paralinguistic level; Geser 1990).

As a consequence, the actors have no chance to analyze all the signals in a sequential and systematic order, and to use conscious rational procedures of selection and integration. Instead, interpersonal perception is characterized by intuitive "Gestalt images" in which all the incoming information is already synthesized to a coherent whole before any conscious reflection has set in. As Georg Simmel has vividly described, such synthetic interpersonal images are so diffuse that cognitive elements and affective components (e. g. spontaneous feelings of sympathy and antipathy) are inseparably mixed in ways not amenable to explicit verbal expression.

*"In irgendeinem, freilich sehr schwankenden Maße wissen wir mit dem ersten Blick auf jemanden, mit wem wir zu tun haben. (Es ist) erstaunlich, wie viel wir von einem Menschen bei dem ersten Blick auf ihn wissen. Nichts mit Begriffen Ausdrückbares, in einzelne Beschaffenheiten Zerlegbares; wir können vielleicht durchaus nicht sagen, ob er uns klug oder dumm, gutmütig oder böseartig, temperamentvoll oder schläfrig vorkommt. Was aber jener erste Anblick seiner uns vermittelt, ist in solches Begriffliches und Ausdrückbares gar nicht aufzulösen und auszumünzen- obgleich es immer die Tonart aller späteren Erkenntnisse seiner bleibt, sondern es ist das unmittelbare Ergreifen seiner Individualität, wie seine Erscheinung, zuhöchst sein Gesicht es unserm Blick verrät, wofür es prinzipiell belanglos ist, dass auch hierbei genug Irrtümer und Korrigierbarkeiten vorkommen."* (Simmel 1908: 485).

While the famous "love at first sight" may be experienced as something rare and outstanding, it represents only a special case of a highly normalized everyday procedure (which may give rise to many more "antipathies at first sight" that cause a sudden end (or inhibit the initiation) of any further interaction).

All technical media of communication not only reduce bandwidth, but filter out whole categories of signals, especially where encoding and decoding takes place spontaneously or even unconsciously (and therefore beyond the sender's and the recipient's control). Especially text-based communication is intrinsically poor, because all the concomitant cues associated with facial expression, bodily gestures, touch and vocal intonation are lacking: signals that surpass written verbal utterances in spontaneity, speed as well as in the subtle nuances characteristic of genuinely "analogue" communications (Wilden 1972; Kiesler et. al. 1984; Sproull & Kiesler 1986).

*"Because text-based media provide only a limited communicative modality, it is possible to control what one conveys in such media more fully than in face-to-face interaction. In the language of Goffman (1959), users can tailor their self-presentation so completely that they accidentally 'give off' nothing, communicating only what they intend to 'give'. This level of control allows users to construct and maintain one or more personae easily and convincingly."* (Fiore 2004: 18).

Nevertheless, online texts also tend to go along with implicit supplementary signals that may not be noticed or intended by the sender. e. g. when the delay or shortness of answering message reveals lack of involvement, or when incorrect spelling demasks deficits of formal education.

*"The kinds of words chosen, the speed of the response, the length and frequency of messages are all cues to your partner's perception of the type and quality of the relationship. Thus, a fast response indicates great interest, whereas a slow response suggests lack of enthusiasm."* (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 31).

When partners expect that messages are interpreted in such subtle ways, they will feel new pressures for self-discipline: e. g. by sending a quick and elaborated response in order to avoid the (metacommunicative) interpretation that they "don't care". As extensive socio-psychological research has shown, human individuals have a tendency to make highly generalized judgments on the basis of scarce information, particularly in the realm of interpersonal perceptions and



evaluations. For instance, attractive physical appearance is taken as an indicator of genetic fitness, higher intelligence or superior moral qualities (Etcoff 1999).

A major problem of online interaction is that when physical appearance cannot be assessed, this generalizing "halo effect" is also not available, so that alternative bases for generalization have to be sought. Thus, there is a tendency to use any disclosures made in online exchanges as an anchor for a "personality halo": by assuming that one specific characteristic is correlated with other traits that are not yet known (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 161). In particular, writing skills may be taken as a valid proxy for personal intelligence, charm and creativeness and as a signal for more generalized social and communicative skills. For instance, highly salient features like mistakes in orthography and grammar may become straightforward indicators of deficient individual schooling (or even intelligence), and be used as potent screening criteria on the competitive partner matching markets (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 166).

The absence of facial expressions and gestures is particularly consequential when emotional states (instead of objectified information) have to be transmitted. Thus, empirical studies show that in comparison with face-to-face communicators, online partners are less able to communicate feelings of sympathy and to recognize the amount of sympathy they evoke in their partner.

*"Within the online dyads, partners' liking was not reciprocated, nor were partners able to judge how much each liked the other, although face-to-face partners did both. ....It does seem that liking is not transmitted in computer-mediated communication as easily as it is face-to-face. This makes sense, because liking is often indicated by facial expressions, physical closeness or touching, and body language (and dislike can be signalled by the opposite cues), which are not communicated online." (Shaw 2004).*

The multi-level exchanges in face-to-face encounters allow the expression of highly complex and ambiguous emotional conditions. For instance, harsh verbal criticism may be counteracted by eye contacts or corporal gestures that express generalized sympathy or love, or praising words may be relativized by gazes that express reluctance or scepticism.

Under online conditions, it is more likely that only one of these strands is dominating, because the lower communication bandwidth makes it difficult to express both at the same time. Thus, it is more likely that either absolutely positive or totally negative emotions, judgments and evaluations are transmitted: and they can more easily skip from one extreme to the other (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 32). "Flamings" are logical outcomes of such simplifications: they occur when attention is momentarily focused exclusively on negative thoughts, memories and emotions (Suler 2003).

Face-to-face interactions tend to give rise to "diffuse" relationships where many different activities, topics of conversation and aspects of personality are involved. This is caused by the extremely broad bandwidth of face-to-face communication where apart from verbal expressions, a large variety of nonverbal cues (visual and acoustic) are transmitted and comprehensive emotional reactions to the other's personality (involving generalized "sympathy" or antipathy") are likely to be generated. When emotions are intense, this diffuseness is giving rise to exclusivity: in the sense that one can only be in love with a single person at the same time. By comparison, online relationships tend to be more specialized, because they have to be based on a much thinner stream of mutual cognitions. While emotions can also run high, they are not likely to make relationships exclusive, because they are directed only to specific activities and personality characteristics and usually fulfil only a narrow range of psychological needs (Ben Zee's 2004: 64/65).

To the degree that individuals become socialized into online interaction, they may lose the experience of such complex ambiguous emotions: by adopting instead more simplified, shallow, non-ambiguous interpretations of human relationships that have no place for such ambivalences. Evidently, individuals often prefer leaner communication channels because they want to transmit a rather simplified image of themselves, or to keep a social relationship on a highly unambiguous level (of either unconditional love or hate; Ben Ze'ev 2004: 33).

However, all this doesn't necessarily imply that online interactions are felt to be less personal and less satisfying (Tidwell & Walther 2002). According to the "Social Information Processing theory" (SIP), a considerable level of familiarity is rapidly realized under face to face conditions, but it may

often stagnate or even diminish in later phases. Under online conditions, familiarity grows slower but can easily reach very high levels when enough time is available (Walther & Parks 2002).

As the partner is not physically here, I feel less inhibited to shape my verbal communications by my own inner thoughts: as I do it in completely private documents never communicated to anybody else:

*"Writing to a stranger is in a sense similar to writing in a diary. In both cases, you can freely express your thoughts and such self-disclosure does not make you vulnerable." (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 35).*

The new thing is that such intimate self-reflections can now become the subject of interpersonal interactions - diminishing my loneliness because I can see others reacting to my innermost thoughts. Thus, becoming acquainted to an online partner is a time consuming process with many stages of ever more intimate personal disclosure - a process which provides also ample opportunities for reflection as well as for consulting third partners before taking any far-reaching decisions.

*"For example, when we so desire, we can either slow down or increase their pace. If someone surprises you - say, by expressing her love to you - you have some time to consider your response." (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 3).*

Anonymity in Cyberspace can be compared with wearing a mask that conceals everything, but which can be lifted gradually by disclosing one personality characteristic after another (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 36). As a consequence, we may expect that people behave in a more bold fashion: e. g. by expressing love confessions or even marriage proposals with less hesitance than in face-to-face encounters. Even shy people may take bold steps of this sort because they have not to fear that receivers feel overwhelmed and are reacting in a too irrational spontaneous fashion. Instead, they have time to absorb the message and to reflect about their responses.

Under conventional conditions, interpersonal cognitions usually start with sensory perceptions of bodily characteristics, clothing, gestures and oral language, in order to proceed afterwards toward less visible characteristics associated with the personality and biography of the partner and his or her current life conditions. When communicating online, a reverse learning process sets in where such invisible characteristics are transmitted first, while bodily perceptions are delayed to the first Rendezvous (which usually only takes place when antecedent stages have been successful). Consequently, participants have much leeway to structure the disclosure process strategically from the beginning, because initial phases are not determined by their physical outward appearance and other emissions over which they have little or no control (Merkle & Richardson 2000).

Cyberspace creates a *Platonic platform for the interaction of "pure minds" untainted by the imperfections biological bodies and the harsh restrictions of physical time and space*. Instead of "face-to-face", interaction occurs "brain-to-brain", and interaction partners are "soulmates" in a more perfect sense that has ever been possible before (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 28: 72).

As an older study by Gergen has shown, people are more prone for personal disclosures when they meet in a dark room where they cannot see each other, and as a result of disclosure, they express more mutual liking after the experiment (Gergen et. al. 1973). Such experiments illustrate that the absence of visual cues causes communication to shift to the verbal level. Under offline conditions, interaction may well drag on without (much) talking, as long as the partners are together at the same location, or moving in the same train or car. By contrast, the mere absence of body-related perceptions under online conditions makes the disclosure process completely dependent on ongoing verbalizations. Text messages have to be continuously exchanged in order to keep it going, because it is not picked up by gestures or gazes in intermittent periods of silence.

*"In offline affairs, two partners can have sex or go to a restaurant without talking too much to each other. In online affairs, every activity consists essentially of verbal communication.*

*(This) forces the participants to enlarge or deepen the scope of mutual interest" (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 8).*

Nostalgic observers even hail the comeback of traditional "courting rituals" that have been almost vanished in the recent decades of informalization:

*„In many ways, online dating is how courtship used to be, before the advent of the singles bar. There was plenty of conversation but no touching. With the computer serving as a chaperone guaranteeing that no one gets too close, tastes are compared as are family backgrounds, hopes and dreams. Online dating also puts a premium on verbal fluency, another forgotten romantic skill. Potential suitors used to compete to shower their potential companions with flowery metaphors and witty images; online suitors are also obliged to charm their potential companions in the same way with. Therefore, the technology that goes into developing an online dating service may have a positive impact on the social skills of its patrons by putting an emphasis on the art of conversation.“ (Burrell et. al., 2004).*

While extensive self-disclosure is of course often a *consequence* of an intensive intimate relationship, several studies have shown that it can also be *causal* for its further development, because self-disclosing partners tend to see each other as trusting, friendly and warm (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 42). Thus, the mere obligation to verbalize may be sufficient to trigger rapid flows of rather intimate information, so that high levels of familiarity are usually achieved before the first physical encounter (Bargh et. al. 2002; Tidwell and Walther 2002; Joinson, 2001), As constant active communication is necessary in order to maintain the relationship, partners can have the positive experience of a *continuous active courtship* not diminished by passive periods of "just being together" as they are typical in real life. This implies that when two partners interact on offline and online levels, face-to-face encounters may have paradoxically the function of interrupting talk, of relaxing from periods of permanent verbal interchange that are highly demanding and tiring because they necessitate a constantly high level of mental concentration, self-discipline and self-reflection: a timeout from stressing online talks by just sitting or laying beside each other, exchanging hugs, gazes and gestures, enjoying together a film, an exhibition or just the bright sun on the beach.

Similar to mailed letters, online messages have the power to evoke intensive emotions based on scant mutual information, because they leave so much room for imagination. (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 8). The room for imagination is much larger than in the case of phone talks which are nearer to face-to-face encounters because "*whispers, sighs, moans groans and other sexually arousing sounds*" are transmitted (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 9). This empowering of imagination implies a tendency to idealize the partner, constructing him perfectly in accordance with subjective preferences, without any "disturbing" empirical factors.

*"Just as in personal phantasy, you don't have to worry about mechanics - your legs stretch as wide open as you wish, there are no unseemly smells or tastes or textures, and you partner looks precisely as you want him or her to look." (a Cyber-sex practicing woman cited by Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 19).*

Interestingly, a similar facilitation of romantic relationship was occurring with the telegraph:

*"... at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several articles and even a book were published on electronic romance, bearing titles such as 'Romances via the telegraph, "Making love by Telegraph', "Wired love" and "the dangers of wired love" (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 9).*

We could speculate that extensive engagement in online activities may generate highly problematic "socialization effects" that spill over into Real Life. Thus, people may also look in the offline world for the Perfect Partner and for highly intensive experience of love, so that they become less prone to make any compromises with empirical reality (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 21). As unconditional romantics, they may rather prefer to remain lonely than to engage with sub-optimal offline partners.

## 12. Dispersed interaction flows and reduced normative commitments

When people meet face to face, they usually engage in highly committing interactions, particularly when the meeting is not accidental but has been deliberately planned.

The partners have to make themselves free from other obligations, have to keep accurately the scheduled time, may need to travel at the place of appointment and may feel pressured to fill a limited stretch of time with intensive talk covering different topics or problems. Even at casual meetings, there is a norm of politeness that demands not to be too short, but to engage in some - maybe "ritualistic" - conversation. Especially when meetings are rare and short, the partners have to maintain a high arousal state in order to be hear everything the other is saying and to tell the other everything intended. This highly socializing nature of physical gatherings is enhanced by the fact that all participants temporarily share a common environment which can function as an integrative factor. Thus most (successful) socialization and education takes place within families or school classes where predictable convergent learning occurs as a result of a highly committing togetherness and common environmental factors.

Online communications are very different, because they are much less dependent on such limitations of space and time. Therefore, communication can be dissipated to a multitude of small sketchy transmissions dispersed over many hours, night and day.

*"In ... (offline) relationships, you cannot meet a person for thirty seconds, say that you love her, and then go about your business. In online communication, sending twenty messages is common and not intrusive since people are sending and receiving these messages at their own convenience. There is no need to coordinate schedules and venues." (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 48).*

This implies that interpersonal communication can be better synchronized with current moods, thoughts and emotions, and that every single message can be sent out or replied with a rather low level of self-discipline or self-reflection, because inadequacies can be swiftly corrected in subsequent calls or mails. There is much less pressure to focus full attention on the contacted partner, so that many other activities and contacts can be cultivated within the same periods of time. Of course, such continuous interaction flows can be highly dysfunctional in cases of ongoing conflicts, because controversial communication can drag on continuously instead of being focused on specific meeting times where there is a high pressure to come to a solution (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 48).

On a more general level, we may say that the offline world is primarily a source of stability and reliability: because events and developments are constrained by the inertia of physical and biological factors, while the online world is primarily a source of changing transitory activities and experiences, because no such anchoring in physical substrates exists.

*"Cyberspace is more unstable, dynamic and transitory than our actual environment is. Thus we would expect that transitory emotions are more dominant in cyberspace while more enduring affective attitudes are more rare. If in offline relationships we often look for changes in order to make our life more exciting, in cyberspace we look for stability in order to facilitate calmer and more enduring online relationships." (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 59).*

Thus, pure online relationships are often shaped directly by rather rapid emotional changes creating insecurity and stress. People who want stabilization will be eager to anchor their relationship in Real Life interaction. (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 63/64).

This complementarity is also mirrored in the rather *different weight given to normative vs. cognitive orientations*.

Under *offline conditions*, interactions usually imply considerable personal investments in terms of time, money, preparation activities, travel costs, self-disciplined behaviour etc. All these resources are invested in the "relationship": a bonding which is a complex product of past mutual interactions

and which determine interactive behaviour in the future. In other words: interactions among offline partners are usually heavily constrained by such past investments that have given rise to the structure of the present relationship: e. g. in terms of consolidated roles, cooperation patterns and normative expectations. As a consequence, normative expectations are likely to become very strong, because when participants have invested a lot in their mutual bond, they take care to stick to it even under conditions of temporal strain. Whenever a partner is dissatisfied, he/she is more likely to turn to the "voice" option, not to the "exit" option: by expressing his/her frustration and expectation that the partner will correct his misdemeanour, apologize for his wrongdoings, and finally acknowledge the common norms essential for preserving the relationship in the future.

Under *online conditions*, less investment has usually to be made in order to engage in relevant interactions. Apart from the low costs of searching, it is extremely easy to get into contact anytime at any location, and even highly emotional cybersexual contacts can be realized without first building up any "serious" relations (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 49). Such interactions then are "free-floating" in the sense that they are not embedded in structured roles and expectations: so that they are easily influenced by any momentaneous moods and situational factors.

Gay males may be most disposed to engage in such contacts because they have ever been prone to form sexual relations under conditions of minimal investments (e. g. in darkrooms). For most others, it may be a new experience to cultivate deeply affecting interactions outside enduring and reliable interpersonal bonds - or rather: a rare experience that has hitherto been restricted to special "adventurous" time-outs like vacations in exotic countries.

Cyberspace trivializes such "adventurous escapades" by making them accessible to anybody at any time and almost any location. As a consequence, online dating can become a destabilizing factor even in stable long-term marriages, because even rather unsocializing, introverted partners can easily engage in "dangerous liaisons" without leaving home (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 50).

When exposed to such conditions, I have evidently

- 1) less *means* to enforce normative expectations, because my partner may just evade my contact, and even if he doesn't online messages are less efficient than face-to-face talks to make impression and bring about change.
- 2) less *reasons* to enforce such norms, because whenever my partner misbehaves, I have good chances to find other, even more suitable partners rather quickly, as the Net gives me so many alternatives at hand.

Thus, I'm more likely to retain a *cognitive attitude*: seeking eagerly to assess whether my present partner has the preferred characteristics and behaves adequately, but remaining quite ready to turn to the exit option whenever I'm sufficiently disappointed.

### **13. On the semi-playfulness and "latent irony" of online interactions**

Brenda Danet (2001) lists many characteristics Cyberspace has in common with conventional plays and games: participation is free, outcomes are insecure; activities are governed by special rules differing from those in the Real World, and the emphasis is on "make-believe": on pretending fictitious identities only displayed within the neatly circumscribed digital sphere. In addition, there is an emphasis on spontaneity and fun: so that even highly absorbing activities are carried out voluntarily without pay because Cyberspace is seen as a sphere of intrinsic motivation (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 83).

As Erving Goffman describes in his famous essay, taking role distance is a means to cope with situations and activities with which individuals don't want to be identified personally (Goffman 1972). For instance, an adult who participates a few minutes in a boy basket ball match signals clearly that this is not his "real" identity, but just a temporary role outside the set of central roles that are defining his status as a grown up man. The better he is able to signal that his behaviour is "just play", the more he feels free to behave in even very childish fashions without having to fear that others

think he is mentally disturbed. Therefore, all societies have some arrangements where individuals are allowed to leave their core identity behind and to engage temporarily in "mock identities" completely dissociated from this central core.

As John Suler (2003) has noticed, a major reason why online interaction often goes along with unusual deviant behaviour (like "flamings") and spectacular personal disclosures is the fact that it is seen as "just a play". However, this is a radical notion that is usually not explicitly upheld unequivocally because it would destroy the very basis of relationships. For instance, when two partners swear "eternal love" on the Internet, they have of course to pretend that this is full truth. However, as soon as one of them shows signs of evasion, the other may also quickly end the virtual affair by giving notice that "*after all, it has just been a play*". In other words, we have situations of ambiguous role distance that can be interpreted as "semi-plays". Such relationships can have long phases of "apparent sincerity" when they cannot be distinguished from "genuine" Real Life relationships because both partners are successful in making each others believe (and believe themselves) that they are engaged in a "real affair". However, there are also situations of crisis when the play character of the whole relationship becomes manifest: when it is suddenly seen that the partners are readily disposed to break up because they have made only minimal psychological investments. In addition, break-ups are much facilitated because the relationship has always remained a segregated bilateral thing, so that it has not become rooted in wider social circles (e. g. among family, kin and friends).

We could then say that many (certainly not all) online relationships are tainted by a "latent irony". While the partners are careful to keep up a mood of sincerity vis-à-vis each other as well as vis-à-vis themselves, they always leave an easy exit option open in the background: because "*after all, it has just been a play*". While this *ultima ratio* is latent, it is nevertheless shaping the relationship in powerful ways: particularly in facilitating all kind of unusual behaviour and disclosures that are quite inhibited in Real Life.

## 14. Conclusive Remarks

There are sound reasons to assume that the new Internet platforms will revolutionize partner matching on a wide scale, because they open up much larger pool of alternatives, lower the costs associated with searching and allow the implementation of more complex and more rational search procedures.

Thus, they are likely to extend principles of technical rationality to one of those few spheres of human activity where - particularly in the most advanced societies - highly archaic low tech practices based on uncontrollable emotions and fortuitous accidents have been the normative rule. The still reigning romantic model of unpredictable passionate love is certainly very much restricted to face-to-face conditions. In its ideal form, two individuals "fall in love" at first mutual sight, without knowing anything substantively about each other. "Falling in love" is conceived as an uncontrollable event that occurs without any rational reasons: just as a synthetic psychological reaction caused by sensory perceptions: by the bodily appearance of a person, her/his facial expressions and gazes, her way of speaking and gesturing etc etc. Romantic love exists when such deep, uncontrollable emotional reactions are not only tolerated, by emphatically approved, and when these emotions are leading to subsequent actions with the most far-reaching consequences: sexual intercourse, pregnancy, engagement, marriage (and divorce).

As we know, this posttraditional model of irrational love is most prevalent in middle strata of modern societies, where material security is based on occupation rather than marriage, and where the influence of family and kin is rather weak. To the degree that it is normative, people are strongly discouraged to use systematic rational search strategies for finding their optimal partner: instead,

they are expected to wait for the happiest of all accidents to happen - without purposeful interventions.

Online dating deviates from this model in two ways.

*First of all*, it violates the rule of "passive waiting" because people engage in purposeful search behaviour: signalling to the other that they are in search of a partner and using rational procedures for optimizing their chances (and minimizing searching effort and time). *Secondly*, online dating means that partners do not expose themselves to the chances and risks of "falling in love at first sight", because mutual sight takes place not at the beginning, but (maybe) in later phases of interaction. Instead, the first phases are dedicated to the exchange of information about each other: so that the decision to continue or end the contact is always based on cognitive (rather than emotional) grounds. In a way, this is a regression in pre-romantic times where the partners (and even more their families) were eager to collect information first before engaging in extensive primary interactions, because "arranged marriages" were the rule (Ben Ze'ev 2004: 167ff.).

However, the effortless accessibility of many potential partners may be a two-edged sword, because it may also cause many existing relationships to be broken up, especially those that have hitherto continued just because partners lacked time, energy and opportunities to "look around". The richer the pool of alternatives, the more potent procedures of complexity reduction are necessary for sizing down the number of options to the unchangeable minimum: *one*. This potent selectivity is achieved by coupling a rather standardized *exclusion* procedure to a subsequent (much more individualized) process of *inclusion*.

The *exclusion processes* aim at *eliminating all candidates that are ineligible* because they don't fulfil specific predefined conditions. In general, such procedures are largely based on supra-individual criteria: psychological diagnostic test procedures on the one hand and stereotypical search mask features like age, race, occupation or ethnic background on the other. Their problem is that they may produce "false-negative cases" that may never be detected because exclusion means that no potentially falsifying information will ever be collected.

In the subsequent *inclusion process*, the goal is to identify the *one optimal partner* within the narrowed pool of "serious options". Evidently, this process is structured by rather idiosyncratic personality traits like humour, wittiness or taste preferences and guided by highly subjective reflections and emotions (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 43/44). Symmetrically, it can result in "false positive" selections (e. g. marriage swindlers) that may be discovered only after considerable material and psychological investments have been made. While people often lie about objective factors in order to avoid exclusion in the first place, they cannot control the disclosure of their constitutive personality characteristics forever, because deceptions are inevitably revealed in the later course of communication.

Given that both of these processes have to be made more powerful and efficient when the pool of options expands, it can be deduced that online dating leads simultaneously to a higher weight of standardized and collectivized selection criteria on the one hand and to a rising need for highly individualized judgments on the other. Collectivized as well as individualized values and preferences both gain importance at the cost of all those irrational and hazardous factors reigning partner selection at workplaces, schools or any other physical locations.

While promoting the long-term historical trends toward individualism and subjectivism in potent new ways, digital partner matching platforms at same time "retraditionalize" mating behaviour by giving again more weight to courting rituals (mainly based on textual exchanges) and to objective status criteria as they have dominated in preindustrial societies.

In fact, the increase in individual autonomy does not at all mean that collective factors of mate selection diminish in importance. To the contrary: searchers have *better tools* to implement such criteria (by manipulating search masks), and they have *more need* to do so because potent exclusion criteria are necessary to reduce the number of so many potential partners. However, such collective factors make themselves felt now exclusively through individuals who have internalized them sufficiently to act them out voluntarily - not by normative group pressures and social controls.

Given their extensive usage by very broad social strata, it is evident that dating platforms have to be seen as Janus-faced entities. On the one hand, they have an impact of innumerable individuals by empowering them to select partners in self-guided rational ways, and on the other hand, they may influence meso- and macrosociological structures by affecting patterns of homogamy and heterogamy, marriage rates or even fertility patterns within various segments of the population. If online-generated relationships are conforming better to collective cultural norms as well as subjective individual preferences - doesn't this imply that they are more satisfying and survivable than all the accidental bondings generated offline? The small body of empirical evidence on this point tends to support this rather bold suggestion. By comparing 800 "match-com" couples with a control group of the same size (in Jan 2004), Baker has found that online couples needed less time to marry and were more inclined to describe their marriage as "happy" and "harmonic" and to look sanguinely into the future (Baker 2004; see also Dietz-Uhler & Bishop-Clark 2001). After ten or more years of large scale online dating, the time will soon be ripe for retrospective studies assessing their encompassing impact on social networks, family structures and society as a whole.



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