



Love at First Byte: Internet Dating in Canada

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THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOCIETY

It is not often that one gets to witness the birth of a new society. Yet the birth of a new society is exactly what is happening on the Internet today.

The society is growing quickly. Numbering 40 million people in 1996, it reached 375 million in 2000. It is conservatively projected to grow to more than 700 million by 2005. In 2005, only China and India will be bigger than the society of the Internet.

But is it really a society? A society is a large, enduring network of social interaction that survives by accomplishing five main tasks: (1) preserving order, (2) producing and distributing goods and services, (3) teaching new members, (4) providing its members with a sense of purpose, and (5) replacing old members (Aberle et al., 1950). Bearing this definition in mind, does the Internet form a society? We believe it does.

Internet society accomplishes many of the same tasks as other societies. For example, although control of members is much less centralized and extensive than in other societies, Internet society has established governing structures, such as those that regulate conventions in

the use of HTML code, the allocation of domain names, and user behaviour on specific sites. Similarly, although e-commerce is still only a fraction of economic activity in the world of bricks and mortar, it is growing much more quickly than the economy as a whole. Meanwhile, distance education is becoming increasingly popular (some universities already offer entire degrees online) and the Internet has become an important agent of informal socialization. Thus, the first three tasks of an enduring society — preserving order, producing and distributing goods and services, and teaching new members — are all performed by Internet society.

So is society's fourth task: providing members with a sense of purpose. More precisely, Internet society provides its members with *many* senses of purpose by enabling social interaction in a wide variety of contexts. Today, Internet users interact socially by exchanging text, images, and sound via e-mail, Internet phone, video conferencing, computer-assisted work groups, mailing lists, and chat groups. Some forms of computer-assisted interaction operate in delayed time. "A" sends a message to "B." "B" receives the message when he or she logs on, responding when convenient. Other forms of computer-assisted

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interaction operate in real time; people communicate by means of “instant messaging.”

The proliferation of computer-assisted communication in delayed and real time has resulted in the creation of “virtual communities.” Virtual communities are associations of people, scattered across the country or the planet, who communicate via computer and modem about subjects of common interest. Membership in virtual communities is fluid but the communities endure. They are self-governing bodies with their own rules and norms of “netiquette” (McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith, 1995; Sudweeks, McLaughlin, and Rafaeli, 1999). Members of virtual communities form social relationships. They exchange confidences, give advice, share resources, get emotionally involved, and talk sex. Although their true identities are usually concealed, they sometimes decide to meet and interact in real life. In the 1980s, most observers believed that social interaction by means of computer would be restricted to the exchange of information (for a review and critique of this literature, see Wellman et al., 1996). It turns out these observers were wrong. Internet society can provide its members with a sense of purpose, giving them new freedom to shape their selves as they choose (Turkle, 2001).

THE RISE OF ONLINE DATING

The fifth task of any enduring society involves replacing old members. That is, people ensure the survival of their society by dating, courting, forming long-term offline relationships, and reproducing. With respect to this task, too, Internet society is now beginning to measure up to other societies. Online dating is a growth industry, and cases of online relationships resulting in long-term relationships are increasingly common.

The first online dating services started up around 1996. Wherever the Internet extends, people now use these services. For example, China’s Xinhua News Agency ran a story a few years ago about two handicapped people, one in

China and the other in California, who met thanks to an online dating service and eventually married (“Internet Dating...,” 2000). By the middle of 2000, the seven largest online dating sites on the Internet boasted over 12 million registered members and many more “guests” or “visitors.” Of these seven large sites, four were based in the United States. The UK, Israel, and Canada hosted the other three large sites. The Canadian site, Webpersonals, and its associated Womanline.com and Manline.com sites, had more than one million members, about a quarter of them Canadian residents. Advertising revenues aside, membership subscriptions generate up to CAD \$450 000 per month per million registered members. *Business Start-Ups* magazine ranked online dating as one of the top five business ideas of 2000 and beyond (“Market Overview,” 2000; “MediaMetrix’s...,” 2000; “DatingClub.com...,” 2000; Rogers, 2000; “uDate.com...,” 2000).

How does an online dating site work? Typically, any Internet user may browse the ads free of charge. However, to place an ad and interact with others, one must pay to become a site member. Some sites charge a monthly fee while others operate on a fee-per-use basis. Ads include text and an optional photograph and sound recording of the member. Members may correspond by e-mail or instant messaging.

Members create a public identity — a name by which others may identify them and a user profile by which others may determine their level of interest in specific individuals. The user profile usually includes such information as the member’s sex, age, locale, marital status, type of relationship preferred (e.g., romantic involvement, marriage, casual sex, online sex), sexual preferences, and so forth. The online dating service also categorizes this information and allows members to search for other members with specific characteristics. For example, one may search for heterosexual single Christian men between the ages of 35 and 44 living within a 50 km radius of one’s home and wanting a romantic involvement. Some smaller sites are devoted

exclusively to Christians, Blacks, Jews, gay men, and so forth (Briscoe, 2000; Crary, 2000).

Four main social forces appear to be driving the rapid growth of online dating:

- *A growing proportion of the population is composed of singles.* Statistics Canada divides the Canadian population into four categories by marital status: married (including common-law unions), single, widowed, and divorced. Of these four categories, “married” has been growing slowest and “divorced” has been growing fastest for decades. Between 1995 and 1999, the number of married Canadians grew by 3.3 percent. The number of single, widowed, and divorced Canadians grew by 4.4 percent. With more single, widowed, and divorced people in the population, the dating and marriage markets have grown apace (Statistics Canada, 2000a).
- *Career and time pressures are increasing.* In the 1970s, many observers predicted the advent of a “leisure society” by the end of the twentieth century. In reality, many people are working longer hours (Schor, 1992). Among the world’s rich countries, Canada ranks in the middle in terms of hours worked per week and near the bottom in terms of paid vacation days (“Mild Labor...,” 1999). According to a 1998 Statistics Canada survey of more than 11 000 Canadians over the age of 14, a third of Canadians identify themselves as “workaholics” and more than half worry they do not have enough time to spend with their family and friends. Nearly a fifth of Canadians reported “severe time stress” in 1998, up significantly since 1992 (Statistics Canada, 1999). 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. Online dating has emerged as a credible alternative.
- *Single people are more mobile.* According to the 1996 census, more than a fifth of Canadians were not living in the same census subdivision

as five years earlier. Nearly 7 percent said they had moved from another province or another country (Statistics Canada, 2000b). These numbers reflect the fact that single people, who compose nearly 80 percent of online daters, form an increasingly flexible work force, more willing to uproot and relocate in response to job market demands than in the past. (Dual careers may make it more difficult to relocate so it is questionable whether married people are more mobile.) Moreover, a growing number of jobs require frequent travel. As a result of increasing geographical mobility, single Canadians are finding it more difficult to meet other people for dating and sustained intimate relationships. Online dating is increasingly seen as a possible solution to this problem.

- *Workplace romance is on the decline.* Due to growing sensitivity about sexual harassment in the workplace, it is more difficult to initiate workplace romances. Increasingly, people understand that sexual or romantic overtures may be interpreted as sexual harassment and result in disciplinary action or suspension. This encourages the search for alternative milieux in which to meet people for sexual and romantic involvements. Again, online dating benefits (Luck and Milich, 2000).

In short, while demand for dates is on the increase, social circumstances often make it difficult for people to find good dating partners. Thus, a 1999 Toronto Sun/COMPAS poll found that fully 52 percent of Toronto’s singles were not dating, while 75 percent said they are finding it difficult or very difficult to find a good dating partner (Mandel, 1999).

A SOCIAL PROFILE OF ONLINE DATERS

To find out more about online daters in Canada, we conducted two surveys late in 2000. First, between 7 and 29 November 2000 we organized a telephone survey of 1200 randomly selected

Canadians living outside the northern territories (400 in Quebec and 800 in the rest of the country). Second, we organized an online survey at the Web site of Webpersonals, Canada's largest Internet dating service, between 30 November and 5 December 2000. Members and visitors to the Webpersonals sites were presented with a pop-up window when they logged on. It asked if they were willing to participate in the survey and informed them the survey was restricted to Canadian residents. Our questionnaire was completed by 6581 people. From respondents who completed the questionnaire, we selected 185 men and 105 women who said online dating is "a great way to meet people" and said they were willing to be interviewed in depth by telephone. Eleven individuals were subsequently selected at random from this group of 290. They participated in 20-minute taped interviews from which we quote below.

The two surveys show that online daters differ in significant ways from the general Canadian population and from Canadian Internet users who do not use online dating services. People who use the Internet at least once a month comprise about 40 percent of the Canadian population. However, Internet users are younger, better educated, more likely to be employed in the paid labour force, and more likely to earn higher incomes than Canadians in general. Using the online survey, it is also possible to compare online daters with Internet users who are not online daters. This comparison shows that the two groups are similar in some respects but different in others. Online daters are more likely to be male, single, divorced, employed, and urban. They are also more likely to enjoy higher incomes.

One of the enduring myths about avid computer users is that they are social isolates in the real world, locked in their basements alone for hours on end, windows tightly sealed and shuttered. Similarly, online daters are sometimes characterized as "losers" or "lonely hearts," people who are unable to form normal social ties and enjoy normal social interaction. In this view, they pursue online dating out of desperation.

There may have been some truth to these observations when online dating was in its infancy (Klement, 1997). However, our online dating survey found little evidence to support these generalizations. It turns out that, as of the end of 2000, Canadian online daters are sociable and self-confident. Offline, they tend to be joiners of organizations. They often visit family members. They frequently engage in social and leisure activities with others. These findings are consistent with the results of other recent Canadian research on avid computer users. It turns out that the myth of the socially isolated computer enthusiast is just that — a myth (Hampton and Wellman, 1999, 2000; Wellman and Hampton, 1999).

About 30 percent of Canadians claim to belong to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. Membership is concentrated among people 35 years of age and older, and especially among people 55 years of age and older. Only about 15 percent of Canadians under the age of 35 say they attend church, etc., weekly (Bibby, 2001: 128, 132). Set beside these figures, it is surprising that almost 24 percent of online daters say they belong to churches, etc. That is because more than half of online daters are under the age of 35, compared to just 29 percent of the adult population. It seems that online daters are more likely to belong to churches, etc., than non-online daters of the same age.

Additional evidence of sociability comes from a question on club membership. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were "a member of any clubs, such as a bridge club or athletic club, within the past year." Fully 41 percent of respondents said they belonged to such clubs. Of those who said they belonged to such clubs, 61 percent said they belonged to more than one. In striking contrast, a recent Statistics Canada study shows that only 18 percent of Canadians aged 15 and over belonged to one or more "sports and recreation organizations" (Hall et al., 1998: 43).

When respondents were asked how often they visit family or distant relatives in a typical month, only 18 percent replied that they do not visit them even once. This cannot be considered

a high figure in a society with high geographical mobility. In Canada today, people often live a considerable distance from family members and cannot visit regularly. More than 82 percent of online daters visit family or relatives at least once a month and 39 percent visit them weekly or more often.

Finally, respondents were asked how often they go out with one or more people for social or leisure activities in a typical month. Only 4 percent said they typically do not go out with others at all. Roughly speaking, a quarter of respondents go out with others 0 to 2 times per month, a quarter go out 3 to 4 times a month, a quarter go out 5 to 8 times a month, and a quarter go out 9 or more times a month. So, on average, online daters go out for social and leisure activities with others a lot. Some 53 percent typically go out with others for social or leisure activities more than once a week.

It is interesting to compare these results with comparable data from the telephone survey. About 86 percent of respondents in the telephone survey said they have never read personal or dating ads on the Web or “checked out” an online dating site. These people are much more likely than online daters to belong to a religious organization (40 percent vs. 24 percent) and visit their families and relatives one or more times per week (60 percent vs. 39 percent). However, Internet users who have never read personal or dating ads on the Web or checked out an online dating site are somewhat *less* likely than online daters to belong to a club (37 percent vs. 42 percent). They are also somewhat less likely to go out once a week or more for social or leisure activities (68 percent vs. 65 percent). Thus, online daters are less sociable in terms of religious and family activities but more sociable in terms of friendship and intimate activities.

Sociable people tend to be self-confident. It should therefore come as no surprise that online daters are, in general, a very self-confident group. Specifically, 70 percent of respondents said they would feel comfortable making a speech in public. Of these, 45 percent said they would feel very comfortable. Only 30 percent of

respondents said they would feel uncomfortable making a speech in public. Of these, 36 percent said they would feel very uncomfortable.

Respondents were also asked about how others see them: “In terms of your personality, how do you think that people who know you well would rank your self-confidence, say, on a scale from 0 to 6, where 0 is not self-confident and 6 is very self-confident?” Only 5 percent of respondents answered in the “not self-confident” range (0–2). Another 10 percent gave a neutral response (3). Fully 86 percent of respondents answered in the “self-confident” range (4–6).

In terms of self-confidence, Internet users who have not read personal or dating ads on the Web and have not checked out an online dating site are slightly more self-confident than online daters. Seventy-five percent of Internet users who have not read personal or dating ads on the Web or checked out an online dating site said they would feel comfortable making a speech in public and 89 percent said that others regard them as self-confident.

In sum, the picture that emerges from these data goes a long way toward dispelling the myth of the online dater as a social isolate lacking social skills. On the whole, online daters are joiners. They often socialize with family and friends. They see themselves as self-confident. And they believe others see them that way. Although Internet users who have not read personal or dating ads on the Web or checked out an online dating site differ from online daters in some ways, the two groups differ little in terms of overall sociability and self-confidence.

THE PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE DATING

People use online dating for a variety of reasons. Allowing multiple responses, the online daters we sampled often use online dating services to meet someone (78 percent), find someone for a long-term relationship (58 percent), find sexual partners (43 percent), out of curiosity or fun with no intention of making face-to-face contact

(41 percent), for casual online chatting and flirting (36 percent), and to find a possible marriage partner (31 percent).

More than a million Canadians over the age of 17 had at least visited an online dating site by 2003. (21.9 million Canadians over the age of 17 times 39.1 percent of Internet users times 13 percent of respondents in the telephone survey who said they had at least visited an online dating site equals 1.1 million people.) What do these people see as the main advantages and disadvantages of online dating? Respondents were asked to evaluate nine possible advantages of online dating on a scale from 0 to 6. We calculated the percentage of respondents who gave each item a score between 4 and 6. For online daters, and allowing multiple responses, the three main advantages of online dating are as follows:

- It creates the opportunity to meet people one would otherwise never meet (89 percent of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6).
- It offers privacy and confidentiality (75 percent of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6).
- It's a lot more convenient than other ways of trying to meet people (74 percent of respondents gave this item a score of 4 to 6).

We conducted 11 in-depth telephone interviews of online survey respondents. When asked, "What prompted you to use online dating?" they virtually unanimously stressed its convenience and the way it allows users to be selective. Typically, one woman in her 20s from Montreal said: "I feel that online I can find someone more compatible because I'm very much into the computer field and if someone has an ad up on the Internet that means that he knows how to use a computer ... [Also] you can get to know the person first [before dating] and sometimes see a picture, which helps." In the words of a Toronto man, also in his 20s: "You see right away if you have some compatibility. It's not like a random chance where you walk into a bar. You know

right away if they're a smoker or a non-smoker, you know if they participate in some of the same activities you participate in. Some of them have photos. You can see if there's a physical attraction. Quite a long list! You can assess the person more easily." Or as a woman in her 30s from Calgary put it: "You don't have to have these lengthy, drawn-out conversations at a bar with one person. Via the Internet you can start up five or six or seven different conversations with people and kind of weed them out."

Respondents were also presented with a list of five possible disadvantages of online dating. The two biggest disadvantages:

- People online might not tell you the truth about themselves. Eighty-two percent of online daters found this a big disadvantage. Women were significantly more likely than men to find this a big disadvantage. There were no other noteworthy differences between subgroups.
- The people you meet online might be hiding something. Seventy-two percent of online daters found this a big disadvantage. Again, women were significantly more likely than men to find this a big disadvantage and there were no other noteworthy differences between subgroups.

The 11 people interviewed in depth agreed unanimously that the number one disadvantage of online dating is that some people misrepresent themselves. As one respondent put it when asked about the disadvantages of online dating: "I can't really think of any [disadvantages] other than a few people will, shall I say, exaggerate the truth."

CONTACT, MEETING, AND MISREPRESENTATION

Some people read online personal ads merely for fun, out of curiosity, or to engage in erotic verbal fantasies with no intention of meeting their correspondents. Over a third of our online survey

respondents said “chatting and flirting” are important reasons why they use online dating services.

Chatters and flirts aside, other people actually meet one or more correspondents face-to-face. Let us now see how often people establish contact with others through online dating services and how often they meet face-to-face. We then discuss misrepresentation in online contacts.

CONTACT

Respondents in the online survey were asked how many people they had contacted by e-mail or other means as a result of an online personal ad or dating service. They were also asked how many people had contacted them. Nearly a quarter of respondents never initiated a contact. Over a third initiated one to five contacts. Nearly a fifth initiated six to ten contacts and just over a fifth initiated more than ten contacts. Women were more likely than men to be contacted by others. Thus, nearly 16 percent of men but only about 12 percent of women had never been contacted. At the other extreme, 3 percent of men but nearly 12 percent of women had been contacted more than 50 times.

MEETING

We asked respondents how many people they had asked to meet in person as a result of online dating and how many people had asked to meet them. About a quarter of respondents said they requested no meetings with others and about half said they requested meetings with one to five other people. The remainder said they requested meetings with more than five other people. The figures are much the same for meetings requested by others. In both cases, the median number of requested meetings is two. About 2 percent more men than women asked to meet others and 8 percent more women than men were asked to meet by others.

How many people actually meet face-to-face as a result of using online dating services? A third

of respondents reported no face-to-face meetings as a result of online dating. Nearly half reported one to five face-to-face meetings and nearly a fifth reported more than five face-to-face meetings. The median number of face-to-face meetings is two. Men reported fewer than 2 percent more face-to-face meetings than women.

About two-thirds of online daters exchanged pictures and 86 percent talked on the phone before agreeing to go out on a date. Some 55 percent of respondents spoke on the phone three or more times before first getting together with someone they met online. Only 2 percent of respondents met face-to-face the same day they established contact. About a third met within a week and a quarter within two weeks of first contact, the remaining 40 percent taking more than two weeks to meet. This suggests that most respondents approach online dating cautiously, taking the time to collect information and grow comfortable before going out on a first date. On the other hand, a minority is quick — in our judgment, too quick — to date.

MISREPRESENTATION

People do not always give accurate information when they place personal ads online. Some people misrepresent themselves to stimulate interest. In the online survey, people who had placed personal ads were asked if they had ever given inaccurate information about their appearance, job, education, income, age, marital status, interests and hobbies, and whether they have children. Multiple responses were allowed. Over a quarter of respondents said they had misrepresented themselves. This is a somewhat smaller percentage than we expected to find. We were also somewhat surprised not to discover big differences between men and women in their propensity to misrepresent themselves. The only sex difference worth mentioning is that slightly more men than women (11 percent vs. 8 percent) misrepresented their marital status. Age is the number one issue people misrepresent.

Fourteen per cent of respondents said they had misrepresented their age. Tied for the number two spot as topics of misrepresentation are marital status and appearance (10 percent each).

SOME CONSEQUENCES OF ONLINE DATING

We asked respondents about the kinds of relationships they formed with people they met online. Multiple responses were allowed.

Of those who met other online daters face-to-face, 63 percent had sex with at least one person they met online. Having sex with a person first encountered online is somewhat more likely for men than women (66 percent vs. 58 percent) and for Canadians living in the East than those living in the West. Thus, 69 percent of Atlantic Canadians, 67 percent of (mainly Anglophone) Quebecers, 65 percent of Ontarians, but only 60 percent of respondents from the Prairies and British Columbia say they have had sex with someone they met online. A higher proportion of gay men (79 percent) than heterosexuals (62 percent) and lesbians (61 percent) said they had sex with people they meet online. As far as age is concerned, it is people in their 40s who are most likely to have sex with someone they met online (67 percent) and people under the age of 25 who are least likely to do so (58 percent).

Sex aside, 60 percent of those who met other online daters face-to-face formed at least one long-term friendship. Thirty-seven percent met at least one person they regarded as a “partner.” Three percent met someone they eventually married. The probability of marrying someone whom one first encounters online falls with age. The people most likely to marry a person first encountered online are in their 20s. The people least likely to do so are more than 39 years old. The probability of marrying an online date is not associated with one’s income or education. However, the people most likely to marry someone they met online tend to live in small

towns near major cities or in the suburbs of major cities. Such people compose 25 percent of all online daters but 56 percent of online daters who married someone they met through an online dating service.

What pre-dating practices are associated with the establishment of long-term relationships among online daters? We asked respondents: “How many, if any, of the people that you have met as a result of online dating have become a long-term friend, a partner, or a spouse?” Our data show that people who form long-term relationships are more likely to take a long time to get to know other people online. They are also more likely to engage in a protracted exchange of information and emotion before the first date. Specifically, people who find long-term friends, partners, and spouses online are more likely than others to send photos to people they eventually date, see photos of those people, talk to them on the phone ten or more times, and wait more than a month before first meeting them. It may be that daters looking for long-term relationships are generally more selective than daters looking for casual relationships. It may also be that people who spend more time getting to know others before meeting them face-to-face inadvertently increase the chance of finding a good match and therefore forming a long-term relationship. In either case, the duration and intensity of pre-dating “courtships” is likely to be greater for people who eventually form long-term relationships.

Despite the apparently high “success rate” of online daters, 42 percent of people who went out on a date with someone they met online reported at least one bad experience on a date. For 38 percent of people who went out on a date, the bad experience merely involved “disappointment” at least once. Another 33 percent simply “felt uncomfortable” at least once. More seriously, 10 percent said they felt “frightened” at least once, and 26 percent said they were “pestered” at least once after a date. (Multiple responses were allowed.)

It is important to note that the 10 percent of daters who said they were frightened at least once on a date were not frightened enough to change their positive opinion about online dating in general. There was no difference in attitude toward online dating between people who were frightened and those who were never frightened. The same finding — no difference in attitude toward online dating — held for the 26 percent of daters who reported being pestered at least once after a date. It also held for men and women considered separately. We conclude that, in the great majority of cases, the more serious negative experiences reported by our respondents were not all that serious.

They were almost certainly less common than the kinds of negative experiences people have during conventional dates. For example, one nationwide survey of dating in Canadian universities found that, in the year preceding the survey, more than half the men and women who dated were insulted or sworn at by a date and more than half experienced a date throwing, smashing, or kicking something. Nearly 12 percent of men and 20 percent of women were pushed, grabbed or shoved by a date in the year preceding the survey (DeKeseredy and Schwartz, 1998: 60). Seen in this context, it is quite possible that online dating is safer than conventional dating. That was certainly the strong consensus of the 11 online daters we interviewed in depth. “It just seems safer doing it this way.... Online dating gives you more control,” said one woman in her 40s from northern Ontario. When asked whether she would recommend online dating to others, a woman in her 30s from Calgary replied: “Oh, definitely, yes. Because it’s safe.... It’s risk free. You can get to know somebody anonymously before you meet them.” These responses must be taken with a grain of salt because the 11 individuals interviewed in depth were selected on the grounds they thought Internet dating is “a great way to meet people.” Still, if seen in the context of other data presented above, it seems reasonable

to conclude that Internet dating is rarely the risky activity sometimes portrayed by the mass media.

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