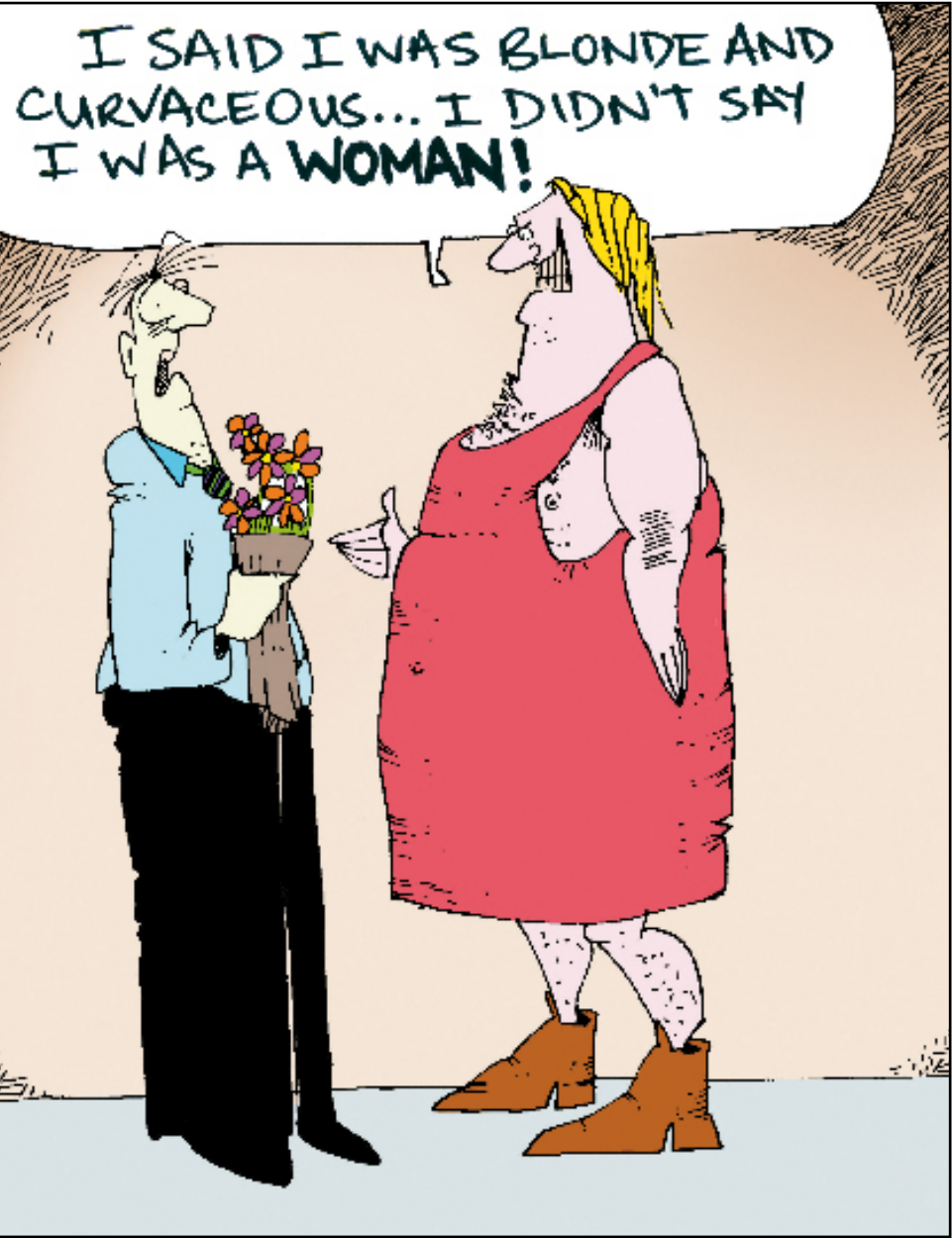


Love virtually

Does online romance mean rewriting the rituals and etiquette of finding a partner? It all comes down to trust.

story Véronique Morin



IS DATING DYING out in our wired-up modern world? Is online romance replacing traditional ways of meeting people? If so, does it change us; the way we feel, the way we love? “It has a liberating influence because it multiplies our choices,” says Derrick de Kerckhove, director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology (and, incidentally, a professor of the language of love) at the University of Toronto, Canada.

There is no question that the Internet makes it easier than ever to date. You can do it whenever you want, wherever you want. You can hit on someone in Sydney while taking tea in Toronto. There is no need to leave the house, no crowded bars, no expensive drinks to buy, no noisy and rowdy people — and you can do it from the comfort of your own home.

Liberating, perhaps, but if you are serious about relationships you may have to navigate your way through a labyrinth of deceit and misrepresentation before you find ‘the one’. If you find the right person, that is.

The big problem with online dating? Lies, lies, lies! We’ve all heard horror stories of sexual predators and extortionists lurking on the Web, so it’s no surprise that concerns over honesty and security are universal fears when it comes to online romance.

According to the widest independent survey on the topic, recently carried out by the Pew Research Centre in Washington, 66 per cent of Internet users believe that online dating is dangerous because personal information is posted on the Web, and 57 per cent think people lie about their marital status online. Another study by Jeff Hancock, professor of communications at Cornell University in New York, found that men were most likely to lie about their height, and women about their weight. So although online dating is becoming more common, people are certainly cautious.

So cautious, in fact, that fewer people than you might think meet their match online: about the same proportion as those who find their soul mate at a religious service. “In our study, we found that relatively few couples started their relationships online,” says Mary Madden of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a non-profit research centre studying the effects of the Internet on U.S. society.

“Those who started their relationship over the Internet make up only three per cent of the population — roughly the same as the portion who say they met at church,” says Madden.

According to Madden, most people who are currently in serious long-term relationships or

marriage either met through family and friends or in a work or school setting. “Because that group of partners who met online is so small and this was the first time we examined online dating, we don’t yet have a sense of how successful or unsuccessful these relationships are relative to those who met offline.”

Very few independent studies exist, and so far none examine the success rate for those who meet people online. “I would love to get my hands on these data,” says Andrew Fiore of the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley, “but they don’t exist.”

A recent study by Veronica Scott, Karen Mottarella and Maria Lavooy at the University of Central Florida, Orlando revealed, however, that people who find online dating more stimulating than face-to-face rendezvous have problems dealing with ‘real-life’ experiences.

Most scientific research related to online dating is designed to improve the experience rather than to measure ‘a trend’. According to Fiore (whose fellowship is paid by Microsoft)

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his research is aimed at making online relationships more ‘successful’.

“There is a major problem of perception,” he explains. That is, when people meet face to face, they see something different to what they thought they saw online, and chances are that the photo they saw showed a younger and slimmer he or she. So when they meet in person, the difference between what they had envisioned and reality might be a big turn-off.

Lying is one thing, but people who date online also miss out on the sensory cues we normally rely on when choosing a partner. “The subtlety of the human body is certainly not yet anywhere close to being reproduced even in visual terms,” explains de Kerckhove. The eye is capable of infinitely more nuance than anything that can be reproduced on a screen. “So none of the senses are actually helped or enhanced by technology.”

To enrich the experience of online dating, scientists are developing gadgets that recreate our sensory perceptions virtually. For instance, cybersex belts and goggles designed to make the wearer ‘feel what they see’ are in development.

Are we on the verge of being robotised this way? No more than by looking at pornography, suggests de Kerckhove. “The translation of the senses itself is reducing the experience to what the machine is capable of reproducing. Looking at porn focusses on your visual sense, but leaves out all the others. Any time we specialise one of the senses we reduce that experience to the function of the specialisation.”

Deceit, distortion, reduction of sensory experience — it seems that there are still major drawbacks to conducting interpersonal relationships online. Despite this, a large number of people are willing to try it out; roughly 10 per cent of Americans have, according to the Pew Research Centre. “It is a significant phenomenon,” says Nosh Contractor, director of the Science of Networks in Communities (SONIC) research group at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

“Before the Internet, there were very few explicit forums for people to build romantic relationships,” he says. “Of course, bars and

social gatherings have been fertile grounds [for meeting] potential lovers, but romance was not the obvious purpose.” And given the power of the written word online, where physicality becomes less important, Contractor is hopeful that logic might triumph over passion when it comes to finding a mate.

With multimillion-dollar businesses backing the industry, online dating is here for the long haul. And according to de Kerckhove, it might have the positive effect of re-emphasising the importance of trust in society. There will certainly be casualties, he admits, but it will allow us to evolve strategies to overcome negative experiences online.

“Trust is becoming one of the most important features that you can have in a network environment because you depend so much on the reliability of the relationship ... whether it is in business or in love.”

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