



LOVE ONLINE

Emotions on the Internet

AARON BEN-ZE'EV

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Love Online

“Computers have changed not just the way we work but the way we love. Falling in and out of love, flirting, cheating, even having sex online have all become part of the modern way of living and loving. Yet we know very little about these new types of relationship. How is an online affair where the two people involved may never see or meet each other different from an affair in the real world? Is online sex still cheating on your partner? Why do people tell complete strangers their most intimate secrets? What are the rules of engagement? Will online affairs change the monogamous nature of romantic relationships?” These are just some of the questions Professor Aaron Ben-Ze’ev, distinguished writer and academic, addresses in the first full-length study of love online. Accessible, shocking, entertaining, enlightening, this book will change the way you look at cyberspace and love for ever.

AARON BEN-ZE’EV is Rector of the University of Haifa, Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Emotions at the University of Haifa. He has published extensively on emotion, most recently *The Subtlety of Emotions* (2000).



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To Ruth, my real love

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Preface

Paradise is exactly like where you are right now . . . only much, much better.

Laurie Anderson

Nowadays, one of the most exciting social, as well as romantic, sites to visit is cyberspace. At any moment, millions of people across the globe are surfing that space, socializing with each other or having romantic affairs. Their number is growing by the minute. What is the lure of the Net? Why do people feel compelled to leave the comfortable surroundings of their actual world and immerse themselves in this seductive space? Why are emotions so intense in this seemingly imaginary world? Are we witnessing the emergence of new types of emotions and romantic relationships? What is the future of romantic relationships and prevailing bonds such as marriage?

In this book two topics are analyzed: cyberspace and emotions. Whereas emotions have been at the center of our everyday life throughout the development of human beings, cyberspace has been accorded such a central role only in recent years. Many thinkers have contributed to various debates about emotions, but the more systematic study of emotions has only recently become the focus of substantial academic investigations. Cyberspace is itself a relatively recent phenomenon and the academic community has just begun to collect and publish data and to formulate theories about it.

In my book, *The Subtlety of Emotions*, I presented a comprehensive framework for understanding emotions in our everyday life. The present book seeks to apply this framework to the rapidly growing instances of online relationships. It focuses upon a few central emotions that occur in cyberspace, and in particular romantic love and sexual desire. I examine the nature of these emotions in cyberspace and compare them to their counterparts in offline circumstances. There is no doubt that intense, real

emotions are present in online affairs – otherwise, such affairs would not be so popular. However, the reasons for the generation of such emotions are not readily apparent.

The Internet has a profound impact upon the extent and nature of romantic and sexual relationships. Describing this impact may be helpful in coping with the online romantic and sexual revolution and in predicting the future development of these relationships.

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1 *The seductive space*

The most exciting attractions are between two opposites that never meet.

Andy Warhol

The appearance of computer-mediated communication has introduced a new type of discourse and consequently a new type of personal relationship has developed. There are various kinds of computer-mediated relationships that differ in some significant aspects: one-to-one or group communication formats, interrelating with real people or fantasy personas, interrelating with anonymous or identified people, and communicating in synchronous or asynchronous formats. Such types of communication can be text-based, voice-based, video-based, or a combination of any of these. My main concern is with those types of communication that facilitate romantic relationships. Foremost among such types are email, which is asynchronous text-based communication that can be one-to-one or one-to-many, and chat or instant messaging that allows for synchronous text-based communication, either one-to-one or many-to-many. These types of communication take place between real people who, while not completely anonymous, may have not fully disclosed their identity: in most cases, you cannot see or hear the other person.

The interactive revolution in imagination

We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of creating the perfect love.

Tom Robbins

Cyberspace is a psychological and social domain. It is not tangible and some of its dimensions, such as distance, and location, are not measured by physical parameters, but by psychological content. This

often imaginary reality is not limited to the private domain of a specific person; rather, it is shared by many people. Such a novel psychological reality is supported by sophisticated technology, but it is not defined by this technology; it is defined by the various psychological interactions occurring in it.¹

Cyberspace is virtual in the sense that imagination is intrinsic to that space. In many online relationships, you can imagine your cybermate in whatever way you wish to and you can describe yourself as you want to be seen. When people are asked why they engaged in sexual relationships online, the most common reason given is that they have specific fantasies and desires that are not being fulfilled in their offline relationships.² However, in another important sense cyberspace is not virtual: online relationships are conducted between actual, flesh-and-blood people. Although this relationship involves many imaginative aspects, the relationship itself is not imaginary. Cyberspace is a part of reality; it is, therefore, incorrect to regard it as the direct opposite of real space. Cyberspace is part of real space, and online relationships are real relationships. The term “actual” may be slightly more accurate than “real” in denoting the opposite of “virtual” – although it raises certain difficulties, too. Another term that I will use often to denote the opposite of “online” is “offline.”

People typically consider the virtual, or imaginative, nature of cyberspace to be its unique characteristic. Although cyberspace involves imaginary characters and events of a kind and magnitude not seen before, less developed virtual realities have always been integral parts of human life. All forms of art, including cave drawings made by our Stone Age ancestors, involve some kind of virtual reality. In this sense, cyberspace does not offer a totally new dimension to human life. What is new about cyberspace is its interactive nature and this interactivity has made it a psychological reality as well as a social reality. It is a space where real people have actual interactions with other real people, while being able to shape, or even create, their own and other people’s personalities. The move from passive imaginary reality to the interactive virtual reality of cyberspace is much more radical than the move from photographs to movies.

Most other types of virtual realities are essentially one-dimensional: the person may passively receive the informational content from outside (as in art), or create it by herself (as in imagination), but there is no actual interaction among the participants – the interaction is purely imaginary.

Communicating through writing letters or speaking on the phone involve actual interaction, but none of these involve a comprehensive virtual environment – the participants in such communication are typically fully immersed in their own ordinary, non-imaginary environment. Cyberspace provides a whole virtual environment in which such actions take

place. The closest imaginary reality to the virtual one associated with cyberspace is that elicited by phone sex. Actual interaction is also part of phone sex, but the imaginary environment is limited to a certain sexual activity only. Hence, its impact is limited as well.

Interactivity is a crucial element in the psychological reality of cyberspace. The greater and the more profound the interaction is, the greater degree of psychological reality we attach to it. Thus, psychological reality is perceived to be greater if what we send and what we receive consist not merely of words that we type, but also of voices, pictures, and body movements. The outputs we send are of greater psychological reality for us the more their execution seems natural to us; for example, the less effort we need to control them. The psychological reality of the inputs we receive is determined by features such as the speed and frequency of the responses that express the sender's psychological attitude toward us. An immediate response is psychologically more exciting, just as live broadcasting is more exciting. Similarly, instant messaging is psychologically more real than corresponding by email. The more similar the inputs and outputs are to offline interaction, the more real they are typically perceived to be.³

The greater interactivity of cyberspace implies that we have greater control over our personal relationships. For example, when we so desire, we can either slow them down or increase their pace. If someone surprises you – say, by expressing her love for you – you have time to consider your response. You do not have to rely merely on your spontaneous responses. In this sense, it is easier to cope with online relationships. The sense of greater control is often central to enjoyable experiences.⁴

Cyberspace is similar to fictional space in the sense that in both cases the flight into virtual reality is not so much a denial of reality as a form of exploring and playing with it. One crucial difference between the two is the interactive nature of cyberspace. In cyberspace, people do not merely read or watch a romantic affair undertaken by others, but in a sense they are actually participating in it. As one woman says: "It's almost as though you were reading erotica, except you are also writing the erotic story, and you don't know what's going to happen next."⁵ Karl Marx once said that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please."⁶ In cyberspace, they can finally make it exactly as they please.

In cyberspace, we are more actively involved than we are when we read novels, but, in addition, online communication touches upon more personal and specific aspects than does reading novels. As one woman writes: "I love reading about sexual things. When I know that the writer is thinking of me specifically, it is completely, absolutely thrilling. And when I find someone who enjoys the same level of explicitness I do and has similar writing skills, it's particularly alluring."⁷ Since the personal aspect is of special

importance in stimulating intense emotions, cyberlove and cybersex are typically more exciting than reading novels or watching television.

When reading fiction or watching a movie we enter the imaginary world even if we remain aware of its imaginary nature. We suspend disbelief and though, on one level, we accept the fictional reality of the characters, on another we recognize that the situation is make-believe. In cyberspace this recognition is often absent.

The imaginary journey into the fictional reality of novels or movies is not usually condemned unless it is perceived to have a negative influence on our everyday life. The moment that such negative impact is present, as in the case of violent movies, the effect of the imaginary reality is condemned. The interactive nature of cyberspace makes it more susceptible to moral criticism, as its practical impact is greater. As one man argues: "Cybersex is closer to having a hooker than plain pornography because there is a real and active person involved on the other end. People are touching each others' minds in a mutual and cooperative way that silent fantasy does not permit."⁸ Indeed, in a survey of Internet users, 75% stated that they would find it acceptable for their significant other to visit an adult site, whereas 77% said that it would not be acceptable for their significant other to participate in an adult one-on-one online video conversation with a member of the opposite sex whom they do not know.⁹ Due to the interactive nature of cyberspace, virtual activities on the Net are accorded moral significance.

Cyberlove and cybersex

Online sex is a wonderful invention. Now, if only everyone could type faster.

Unknown¹⁰

The interactive element in cyberlove and cybersex has made these options very attractive. The nature of cyberlove and cybersex will be explored throughout the book. In this section, I characterize some of their salient features.

Cyberlove is a romantic relationship consisting mainly of computer-mediated communication. Despite the fact that the partner is physically remote and is to a certain extent anonymous, in one important aspect this relationship is similar to an offline romantic relationship – the emotion of love is experienced as fully and as intensely as in an offline relationship.

In a broad sense, cybersex refers to all types of sexually related activities offered in cyberspace. In this sense, the viewing of sexually explicit materials on the Internet is also a type of cybersex. Since this book is concerned with personal relationships, I am less interested in this type of cybersex and will use the term in the narrower sense, referring to a social interaction between at least two people who are exchanging real-time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused. People send provocative and erotic messages to each other, with the purpose of bringing each other to orgasm as they masturbate together in real time. These messages are typically sent via a private communication, such as an email or instant message, but can also be part of a public chat room – in which case, they could be considered as public sexual activity. The messages may be of various types – video, audio, and text-based; here I mainly refer to text-based cybersex. In cybersex (or in slang, “cybering”), people describe body characteristics to one another, verbalize sexual actions and reactions, and make believe that the virtual happenings are real. Cybersex requires the articulation of sexual desire to an extent that would be most unusual in face-to-face encounters. In cyberspace, that which often remains unspoken must be put into words.¹¹

When people are involved in cybersex, they cannot actually kiss each other, but nevertheless the kiss they may send is emotionally vivid and its emotional impact is often similar to that of an actual kiss. Our active role in cyberspace makes this environment more exciting and seductive than that of daydreams, erotic novels, or X-rated movies; hence the temptation to engage in sexual activities is greater. A married man whose wife of fourteen years is having cybersex, reports: “I offered a compromise and suggested that she read adult stories or look at pictures instead of a one-to-one chat. She refused. I even suggested that while she’s cybering, she types, I do the things the other person describes, but she flatly refused and told me that it was a personal chat and is nothing to do with me.”¹² The personal interaction, rather than the mere aspect of imagination, is what excites his wife. Since the line separating passive observation from full interaction has already been crossed in cybersex, it becomes easier to blur the line separating imagination from reality.

Participants in cyberlove take the reality of cyberspace seriously. Thus, people speak of their cybermates or even their online husbands or online wives. People have even got cybermarried and vowed to remain faithful to each other. One woman wrote that what attracted her to respond to the first message sent by her online lover, with whom she is now deeply in love, is that he asked her to cyberdance with him.¹³ 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 say that they do not want to have a one-night cyberstand, but rather wish to have a more extended and meaningful online sexual affair. A man who often participates in cybersex writes:

I love to cyber; I think it's great. The only thing is I can't cyber with someone I have never talked to before. Someone sent me a message and went right into cybering without asking my name or if I even wanted to. I know it's probably silly since the person you cyber with is a stranger, but I would just like to have a regular conversation first. I guess some reality does play a part here, because I would not have sex (in real life) with someone whose name I didn't even know.¹⁴

People complain that they now have the added pressure of faking cyberorgasms too. In one survey, 36% of Net surfers who had engaged in cybersex said they had reached orgasm; 25% said they had faked it; and the rest neither reached orgasm nor faked it. (The percentage of people faking orgasms in offline circumstances seems to be somewhat greater: in one survey, 56% of women and 23% of men claimed to have faked an orgasm.)¹⁵ One married woman described her online sexual partner: he was **"self-centered on his part and not very exciting and I found myself faking an orgasm over the computer and thought I had totally lost my mind."**¹⁶ The illusory nature of cyberspace does not diminish the need to resort to the same illusory methods used in offline circumstances.

The presence of interactive characteristics in the imaginary realm of online relationship is a tremendous revolution in personal relationships, as it enables people to reap most of the benefits associated with offline relationships without investing significant resources.

The interactive revolution in online romantic and sexual relationships has promoted both greater social interaction and more solitary activities. In comparison with standard fantasies, online relationships involve more social activities with other people. However, in comparison with offline relationships, many romantic activities are performed while someone is all alone sitting in front of a computer. Take, for example, cybersex. Compared with offline masturbation, cybersex (like phone sex) is a much more social interaction, as it is done while communicating with another person. While in offline masturbation, orgasm comes courtesy of the person's own hands and mind, in cybersex, orgasm also comes courtesy of another person's mind. Cybersex narrows the gap between masturbation and offline sex, as it involves the active contribution of another person. However, compared with offline sexual relationships, cybersex is less social and it can in fact reduce the need for actual social interactions.

Letter, telegraph, and telephone

Pardon me, but I am writing a phone book – can I have your number?

Unknown

Online romantic relationships are not the only kind of romantic relationships that use communication to overcome spatial limitations. Other examples include relationships that are based purely on conventional letters, telegraph, or phone conversations.¹⁷

Falling in love through letter writing is not a new phenomenon: it has been going on for hundreds of years. It has been particularly prevalent during prolonged periods of war when men were far away from home and the only way to communicate with them was through letters. Writing love letters is also common in peacetime when the two lovers are in different places. Online relationships are based upon an improved version of an old-fashioned way of communicating: writing. In the new version, the time gap between writing, sending, receiving, and reading has been made almost instantaneous – the sender can receive a reply while still in the state of emotions in which she sent the original message. This difference, which may appear merely technical, is of great emotional significance, as emotions are brief and involve the urge to act immediately. In this sense, instant messaging is better than email. A man comparing the two methods remarks: “I think I prefer the IM’s. I have had cybersex once or twice, and it’s nice to have that instant feedback from the woman (God, I hope they’re women) that you’re with.”¹⁸

Writing romantic letters to a person you hardly know and online romantic communication have certain aspects in common: for example, the scanty amount of information the partners have about each other at the beginning of the relationship, the significant role of imagination, the reliance on writing skills and verbal communication, the spatial separation, discontinuity of communication, and marginal physical investment. In both types of relationships, people fall in love with individuals who are almost strangers to them and about whom they know only what they glean from the written word. The information we rely on when we write letters is often greater than that available through online communication. When we write a letter, we usually know the real name and address of the recipient. If the letter is being written under special circumstances, such as during a period of war, we may be able to detect further details – that the person is a soldier, his rank, his probable age, and a rough idea of his present situation. Some information can also be gathered about the

sender from the type of paper she writes on, her handwriting, and her name.¹⁹

Even this amount of information may be absent in online relationships: we have neither the real address nor the real name of our online friend, and there are usually no special circumstances that can provide further information. Of course, the name our partner chooses to use or the type of chat room we are in can provide some clues, but these are typically insufficient and unreliable. Thus, if the name of the chat room is "Married & Flirting," you can assume that most participants are married people who would like to have an affair, but even this meager information may be unreliable. It should be noted, however, that most sites now offer online profiles from which you can gather a reasonable amount of identifying and personal information about someone; sometimes even photos are included.

The presence of partial information, and hence the need to fill the informational gap, explains the significant role of imagination both in letter writing and in online communication. When someone is not physically present, imagination takes on some of the functions typically fulfilled by vision but people have to be careful about their underlying assumptions.

Letter writing and online communication are based on writing skills and verbal communication and not on external appearance. 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. The emphasis on verbal communication forces the participants to enlarge or deepen the scope of their mutual interest. Extended communication between two partners cannot be limited to sexual messages; other aspects must be explored as well.

The great temporal gap between one letter and another does not suit the impetuous nature of romantic affairs. A snail-mail affair is also less immediate in the sense that you cannot just speak your mind; you need to find an envelope, a stamp, and a postbox before (slow) communication can take place. Other features distinguishing online communication from conventional letters are related, for example, to convenience, ability to copy the message and send it to other people, a possible use of multimedia, and a convenient manner in which incoming and outgoing messages can be stored.

Telegraphic communication between private wireless operators who made Morse contact with other operators is similar in many respects to cyber communication. Both cases involve online exchanges between people who do not meet face-to-face. In both types of communication,

speed and writing style are more important than external appearance. One significant difference between the two types is that, whereas access to cyberspace is open to almost anyone, telegraphic communication was limited to a closed, exclusive community of telegraph operators. Another difference concerns the lack of privacy in telegraphic communication, as opposed to the anonymity typical of cyberspace communication.

Despite the apparently impersonal nature of telegraphic communication, it generated profound and intimate romances; some of these came to an abrupt halt when the two parties met for the first time. Accordingly, at the end of the nineteenth century, several articles and even a book were published on telegraphic romances, bearing titles such as “Romances via the telegraph,” “Making love by telegraph,” “Wired love,” and “The dangers of wired love.”

The powerful romantic impact of the written communication that is typical of cyberspace is clearly expressed in telegraphic communication as well. Thus, an article discussing a love relationship by telegraph describes a man who was involved in “a red hot row” with a young female operator. After some time, he started to feel in love with the woman, realizing that “nothing short of an angel could work that wire.” After meeting face-to-face, they married and remained happily married for a long time.²⁰

Limited access, limited vocabulary, the expense involved, and lack of anonymity are among the main reasons for the limited impact of the telegraph upon romantic affairs. In this sense, the introduction of the telephone has been much more significant.

Interpersonal relationships conducted exclusively via phone conversations have some features in common with online relationships. Telephone conversations often involve sincere self-disclosure, as do online relationships. Like cybersex, phone sex involves no fear of unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. In both types of sexual activity, external appearance is not significant.

Phone communication, however, is closer to face-to-face communication than online communication is. Phone sex does not involve typing but engages with the other person’s real voice, whispers, sighs, moans, groans, and other sexually arousing sounds; it involves the immediacy of face-to-face interaction.²¹ Phone conversations involve a lesser degree of anonymity – typically, your gender and approximate age are detectable – and hence imagination has a lesser role in such communication. Phone communication is also more expensive than online communication and this may influence the length and thus the content of the conversation.

Another important issue in this regard is that of continuity. The ability to call the other partner whenever one wants to may prevent the

participants from disconnecting themselves from this relationship if they want to end the affair. Unlike online communication, in which you choose when and how to respond without immediate time or psychological pressures, phone communication is more intrusive and insistent. The telephone forces you to respond at a time and in a manner that may be inconvenient for you: it induces a sense of obligation and urgency that is hard to ignore. Moreover, since most telephones do not have off switches, this further enhances the sense of urgency in replying to the phone's ring. This sense is even more pronounced in the case of the telegraph.²²

It is easier to avoid or defer responding to unpleasant questions in email communication than in phone conversations. An obsessive romantic partner can intrude upon our everyday routine much more by phone than by online communication. Merely pressing a button cannot end intimate phone relationships. If you do not pick up the phone and merely respond to messages on an answer machine, communication by phone may be less intrusive, but then it loses some of its advantages, such as immediacy. Today, with the extensive use of mobile phones, there are even fewer opportunities to escape incoming calls. However, mobile phones do have off switches that enable you to mark the boundary of your private zone and so can be less intrusive.

In many chat rooms and instant messaging communication, there are buddy lists that enable people to know when you are online. This increases the continuity aspect that is more problematic in email relationships. Even when taking into account this feature, phone communication is still more intrusive and less anonymous than online communication. The latter provides, therefore, a greater degree of safety. Hence, it is more likely that a woman will give a strange man her email address, rather than her phone number. A man who presents himself as an expert in these matters argues: "I've found that getting an email address is not only easier, but it gets more positive responses later on. And I've found that emails are answered FAR more often than voicemail messages."²³ Indeed, giving someone your email, then your phone number, and finally your address, represents increasing levels of trust in the other person and your commitment to the relationship.²⁴

The greater similarity of phone conversations to face-to-face communication increases the reality of such conversations. This is nicely expressed in the following description by a 26-year-old woman who has engaged in both cybersex and phone sex:

I met lots of men, and eventually I had cybersex with many of them. This did not seem promiscuous to me. I would never have sex with so many men in real life. After three months of this, I met

someone online who really intrigued me. We started having phone sex, and for me this seemed very real because I could hear his voice. Now, if I had phone sex as often as I had cybersex, I think I would feel promiscuous because phone sex seems more real.²⁵

In a similar vein, people testify that it was easier for them to say “I love you” in online communication than on the phone – even when the phone conversation took place after this statement was communicated online. It is still harder to utter these words in a face-to-face meeting. The same goes for flattery (and criticism), which is easiest to express in cyberspace and hardest in face-to-face encounters. In all these cases, the less real nature of online communication reduces the pain of a hostile response.

Another reason why some people prefer phone sex over cybersex is that it can provide “hands free” stimulation – it does not have to be done while the person is typing with one hand. A married woman, who had little sexual contact with her husband, said she had tried computer sex but found it **“too difficult to be into it when typing . . . phone sex is better, you don’t have to use both hands to talk with.”**²⁶ (You can even turn the loudspeaker on, so that you have both hands free.) For some people, it is really difficult to get turned on while typing; for others, communicating by typing about mutual sexual activities is very stimulating. People get quite proficient at typing with one hand and masturbating with the other. Moreover, when they reach an orgasm, they often just bash their hands randomly on the keyboard, which does not take a great deal of precision.²⁷ If, in the good old days, an ideal desired person was tall and beautiful, in cybersex the ideal is a smart person who can type fast with one hand. The mechanics of cybersex are not entirely clear to everyone. Thus, one person writes: **“I don’t get it. If you’re trying to masturbate, how do you keep up with yourself and the key board? Anyway, boys and girls, at least give them credit for being coordinated; I could never do it.”**²⁸ It should be noted, however, that most cybersex does not involve one-handed typing; it involves people typing, and reaching orgasm sequentially – in such cases, fast two-hands typing will suffice as well.

The form of one’s response – for example, its length and speed – is left more to the discretion of the respondent in online communication than in letters or phone communication. In this sense, too, online communication has some advantages over relationships conducted by letters and telephone. Thus, instant messages can be very short – even one word and often one sentence – whereas such a short message is rare, and thus considered rude, in the other types of communication. In email communication, such extremely short messages are also considered rude. Online communication offers the immediacy of the telephone, but, as in letters,

it is up to the respondent to choose when to respond – the response does not have to be spontaneous if one does not so wish; this may reduce the stress on the participants.

A face-to-face relationship is the most profound type of relationship we experience. In evaluating other types of relationships, we should consider their affinity to this relationship. If it is too close to a face-to-face relationship it may keep most of the advantages of the latter, while failing to avoid its disadvantages. When the similarity is more superficial, the ability to retain the advantages of a face-to-face relationship is considerably reduced.

Relating by merely writing letters or phone conversations cannot present a real alternative to conventional offline relationships. Accordingly, these means typically supplement such relationships – when those are not feasible or desirable – but do not replace them. Online relationships do not merely supplement offline relationships, when those are not feasible or desirable, but in some circumstances can present a real alternative to them. In this sense, an online relationship, rather than one conducted via telephone conversations, is “the next best thing to being there.” Sometimes an online experience is even better than being there. Thus, a 57-year-old married woman, who frequently has cybersex, comments about her offline (“real”) sex: **“When I have the real thing, I am thinking of my (online) experiences.”**²⁹ Indeed, many people testify that their virtual cybersex is much more active and intense than their actual offline sex.

Computer usage is often compared with that of television, but the similarities are superficial. Indeed, both media entail a visual screen and sound, but whereas television is essentially passive – viewers watch what is offered to them – computer communication is interactive, presenting an exchange of information and a range of social relationships.³⁰ Although nowadays there are attempts to make television more interactive, this aspect is insignificant in television when compared to interaction on the Internet. The interactive nature is an essential reason why the Internet, rather than television, has gained tremendous momentum as a primary communication medium.

The impact of television on our social life is mainly negative: watching television has reduced social participation as it keeps people at home; the introduction of the telephone, on the other hand, has enhanced social participation. The major reason proposed for the decline in social participation as the result of the introduction of television is time displacement, that is, the time people spend watching television is time in which they are not actively socially engaged. Excessive watching of television, which keeps people at home and leads to reduced physical activity

along with reduced social activity, results in diminished physical health and psychological well-being.³¹

Using the Internet also involves physical inactivity and limited face-to-face social interaction, but, like the telephone, it involves social interaction; active interpersonal communication is the dominant way in which the Internet is used at home: much of the time spent online involves social activity as people correspond with other people. In this sense, the social and psychological impact of the Internet is more like that of the telephone than that of television.³² A social disadvantage of the Internet in comparison with television is that the former is less likely to be used as a group activity, while several people often watch television together. When people watch television, it can easily be relegated from the foreground of attention into background noise, thereby allowing social interaction to continue; when people surf the Internet, however, it is less possible and hence unusual to treat it as a background to social interaction. In comparison to watching television, time spent online involves more social contacts with friends and colleagues, but less social interaction with close family members, such as children. Overall, Internet users spend more time in conversations and sleep less than do television watchers.³³

There are conflicting findings concerning the social value of the Internet. Some indicate that the Internet facilitates shallow and aggressive behavior as well as loneliness, depression, and lower social support and self-esteem. In contrast, other findings indicate the profound nature of online relating as well as a decrease in loneliness and depression and an increase in social support and self-esteem.³⁴

These contradictory findings reflect the complex nature of the Internet and the difficulty in defining a typical Internet user. Thus, there may be general and individual differences in social value when reference is made to cyberlove, sex sites, or online support groups – such as groups for specific chronic illnesses, for weight loss, or for bereavement. The Internet suits most types of personalities, even though it is differently associated with each type. Despite the various prognoses, it may turn out to be the case that people with more extensive offline social contacts will use the new medium more frequently than shy people who have fewer contacts; however, the latter are more likely to achieve more intimate relationships.³⁵

The Internet can have a particularly harmful impact in the case of heavy users who often behave in a compulsive manner that makes it difficult to sustain personal or social relationships. However, in cases of more moderate use, the social value of the Internet is evident. Indeed, recent studies indicate the social value of the Internet, while suggesting

that its use is most socially beneficial when online interaction supplements, rather than replaces, offline interaction. There is evidence that online social contact supplements the frequency of face-to-face and telephone contact.³⁶ Online communication can be characterized as a social activity performed alone. This seeming contradiction aptly sums up the unique nature of online communication: communication is a social activity, but online communication is conducted through the privacy of one's computer.

Mobile texting

When a Roman was returning from a trip, he used to send someone ahead to let his wife know, so as not to surprise her in the act.

Michel de Montaigne

Modern technology continues to improve the methods available for distant relationships. One such recent technological innovation is Short Message Service (SMS), which is a kind of mobile texting. Other types of mobile texting are those made available by Palm Pilots or even mobile computers; here I focus upon mobile phones, which are the most typical and prevalent kind of mobile texting. SMS allows text messages to be sent to and received by mobile telephones. The text can comprise words or numbers or an alphanumeric combination. Mobile texting is essentially similar to paging, but SMS messages do not require the mobile phone to be active and within range, as they are held for a number of days until the phone is active and within range. The SMS is a storing and forwarding service; short messages are not sent directly from sender to recipient, but via an SMS center. The SMS also offers confirmation of message delivery: senders can receive a return message back notifying them whether the short message has been delivered or not. Short messages can also be sent and received simultaneously in voice mode. Furthermore, users of SMS rarely, if ever, get a busy or engaged signal.³⁷

The kind of information and style of communication typical of mobile texting is somewhat similar to that of phone conversations. The means of communication in both cases is a phone and the communication is basically in the form of live conversation. The written form of mobile texting requires shorter sentences than those usually employed in phone conversations. Accordingly, a whole new alphabet has emerged because SMS messages took too much time to enter and appeared quite abrupt, as people attempted to say as much as possible with as few keystrokes

as possible. Abbreviations such as “C U L8er” for “See you later,” which started in online communication, have become more popular and even fashionable in mobile texting. Consider the following message: “AAR8, my Ps wr :-)- they sd ICBW, & tht they wr ha-p 4 the pc&qt . . . IDTS!! I wntd 2 go hm ASAP, 2C my M8s again.” The message actually says: “At any rate, my parents were happy. They said that it could be worse, and that they were happy with the peace and quiet. I don’t think so! I wanted to go home as soon as possible, to see my friends again.” Children’s frequent use of SMS shorthand as their first choice of written communication may impede their educational progress in spelling and grammar.

Mobile texting continues the text-based revolution of computer-mediated communication, but uses mobile phones instead of personal computers. In both cases, we are reading a text rather than talking. As compared to mobile texting, online messages are longer, more detailed and profound, and less similar to continuous conversations. In this sense, online communication is closer than mobile texting to letter writing; mobile texting seems to be closer to face-to-face conversations. In comparison to online communication, mobile texting is more continuous, available, immediate, and spontaneous. Like online communication, mobile texting is not intrusive, but it is less anonymous and less detached.

Mobile texting is quite common among teenagers who consider it a more convenient, direct, and private mode of connection. They see email as mostly useful for interactions with adults, whereas mobile texting is a more casual connection, useful for a brief chat or gossip. Mobile texting with its character limit for a text message is seen as a plus because short abrupt messages are perfectly acceptable. Mobile texting is also discreet as messages can be sent and replied to silently, and can therefore be used in public places or late at night in bed. It thus allows them to communicate without the surveillance of parents.³⁸

When using mobile texting, people are “always on” – they are always available to their friends or partners. Mobile texting extends the time and location in which people carry out tasks or recreational activities. Thus, it enables them to interact with friends while moving or while on a train or in a crowd. The constant interaction increases participants’ sense of belonging to a social group and makes them feel that others are thinking about them. This is one aspect of the social value of mobile texting. On the other hand, valuable social boundaries are blurred when one is always on call. One significant boundary that may collapse as a result is the line between our private and public lives. The privacy of home is no longer protected from the invasion of work obligations, colleagues, friends, or lovers. In a private situation, the intrusion of those from our public life

can disturb or unsettle our social or private life, as the sudden “presence” of an outsider may switch our attention from close relationships to distant ones.³⁹

Mobile texting is also most useful for communicating matters that one has not the courage to do by talking. Thus, it is easier to express interest in a potential romantic partner via mobile texting as this is a more neutral medium and one thus avoids the possibility of face-to-face rejection. Sending a bland message, such as “That was a nice party,” can test the other’s attitude – the other can ignore the initiative and hence signal disinterest, or respond and thereby express interest.⁴⁰ Online communication is similar in this regard, but, since mobile texting is closer to everyday conversations, the latter is a more neutral vehicle.

Mobile texting is a very useful and convenient means for flirting, as it suits the superficiality and brevity that characterizes flirting. It also has practical uses that regular online communication lacks. Thus, “interpersonal awareness devices” have been evolving recently. Such devices send a text description of potential romantic matches who are nearby at that moment. The just-in-this-time, just-in-this-place matchmaking service illustrates the greater integration of mobile texting into ordinary everyday life than of online communication. This makes mobile texting more susceptible to actual hazards. In a sense, the mobile telephone is evolving into a kind of remote control for people’s lives; those controlling the remote control can easily harm us.⁴¹

Mobile texting provides the modern and light version of written flirtatious communication. Indeed, a sizeable proportion of SMS users choose SMS for asking someone out on a date.⁴² It is highly likely that in the future the use of mobile texting and online communication for romantic purposes will be significantly greater.

The egalitarian space

A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.

Gloria Steinem

The interactive nature of cyberspace has a profound impact upon its social structure. The ability to shape your virtual society eradicates many social constraints, particularly status differences. One does not have to be the product of many years of evolution, personal development, and luck in order to share the advantages enjoyed by handsome and rich people. In the virtual reality of cyberspace, these advantages are open to everyone.

Cyberspace is indeed an egalitarian medium – theoretically, everyone can have access and everyone is treated equally regardless of personal characteristics such as external appearance, gender, color, religion, race, age, disability, social status, and income level. People are connecting on the basis of what they have to say, and what is on their mind. While income level, education, and place of abode can clearly limit the access of everyone to the Internet, decreases in costs of computers and advancements in the developing world's education and infrastructure are projected to make the Internet increasingly more accessible to many more people. The digital divide is indeed shrinking.⁴³ There are, however, other characteristics, such as creativity, intellect, interests, wit, a sense of humor, and the ability to respond quickly in a witty manner, that give an edge to those who possess such skills, and this makes the Internet less egalitarian. As a married man who has a cybersex relationship notes: **"I'm a good writer and a fast typist so my partners seem to enjoy themselves."**⁴⁴

The egalitarian nature of cyberspace is also expressed in the fact that the demographic characteristics of cyberspace users increasingly resemble those of the general population. This is particularly striking concerning gender differences. In one comprehensive study conducted in the USA in 1994, only 5% of those in cyberspace were women; in 1998, nearly 39% were women, and now women outnumber men online.⁴⁵ Physical gender differences are less significant online as people can choose to present themselves as a member of the opposite sex. Consider the following statement:

I've been playing in Lesbian chat rooms for almost 5 months now. I present myself as a 30-something lesbian single mom. I have pictures of a very attractive young woman that I am willing to share. The only problem is they are not me. I'm a middle aged, married male and this has been one of the most powerful experiences of my life. The Internet is a real gender blender.⁴⁶

In cyberspace, gender differences are limited to the mental realm where boundaries are much more flexible.

Age differences are also less important in cyberspace. As one woman wrote about her online lover: **"He was a few years older than me, but I figured age didn't matter if we have a good chat."**⁴⁷ Indeed, people of all ages interact with each other, and this can have negative as well as positive consequences. There is particular concern over the ease with which pedophiles can take advantage of this and lure children into online sexual activities and then into face-to-face activities.

Another important egalitarian aspect of the Net is that specific sectors of society such as those who are physically disadvantaged, sick, older,