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ARTICLE

'Quality singles': internet dating and the work of fantasy

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Abstract

This article builds on a case study of the worldwide online dating site Match.com to develop a theoretical understanding of the place of communication and affect in the information economy. Drawing on theoretical debates, secondary sources, a qualitative survey of dating profiles and an analysis of the features and affordances of the Match.com site, the article argues that internet dating seeks to guide the technologically enhanced communicative and affective capacities of internet users to work in ways so that this produces economically valuable content. This is primarily achieved through branding, which as a technique of governance that seeks to work 'from below' and 'empower' users to deploy their freedom in certain particular, pre-programmed ways. The argument is that online dating provides a good illustration of how the information economy actively subsumes communicative action as a form of immaterial labour.

Key words

computer-mediated communication • dating • immaterial labour • information economy • love • online relationships

The internet dating sector has grown enormously in recent years. It encompasses a range of mainstream sites, such as Match.com (www.match.com), Kiss.com (www.udate.com/?alt=2&czoneR=7935),

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Matchmaker (www.matchmaker.com) and Yahoo's Club Connect (http://uk.personals.yahoo.com); more niche-oriented operations such as Eharmony (www.eharmony.com; devoted to upscale singles), Fitnessdate (www.fitnessdate.com), Jdate (www.jdate.com) for Jewish singles, and the downright esoteric such as Spanking.com (www.spanking.com), gathering some 40,000 participants who rejoice in mutual buttock-slapping or fantasies thereof. In addition, there are a plethora of geographically specific sites, such as Eurosingles (www.EuroSingles.com) or the Danish Dating.dk (www.dating.dk). Many of the larger operations show very solid economics. Lavalife (www.lavalife.com), a Canadian site, claimed a total client base of 2 million in 2001, adding on 7000 new customers per day. Together they produced a revenue of US$100 million. Match.com, the largest operation, claimed 9 million registered members worldwide (7 million in the US) and some 700,000 paying subscribers. In 2001 Ticketmaster (the company that owns Match.com) reported that the site generated US$16.5 million in earnings before interests, taxes, depreciation and amortization on a revenue of US$49.2 million. In 2002 it was estimated that 15 million US residents used the internet to find a partner. The figure was expected to rise to 24 million by 2007 (Graham, 2003). According to Fiore and Donath (2004: 1) this measure has been surpassed already. They estimate that in August 2003, personals websites drew 40 million unique visitors, 'half the number of single adults in the US'. All in all, industry analysts claim the dating market is worth close to US$1 billion (Olijnyk, 2002).

This article will use a case study of the major international dating site, Match.com, as an example around which to construct the beginning of a theoretical understanding of what here is termed 'fantasy work' and its place within informational capitalism more generally. It is suggested that such 'fantasy work' – the work of imagining situations, people and relations – is activated to an unprecedented extent in the online economy. Moreover, this kind of work is becoming critical not only to the realization of value (where Marx placed it), but also to the production of value (see Miranda, 1998). The imagination is empowered, but it is also put to work as an important source of profits.

Internet dating provides an important example of this mechanism at work. In internet dating, our common ability to construct mutual symbolic meanings, shared experiences and affective bonds is put to work to generate a kind of content that can be commercialized successfully. This affective productivity itself has been greatly empowered by new information and communication technologies (ICTs). Thus internet dating shows how an emerging productive power, a media-enhanced capacity to imagine and relate, which is itself a consequence of the particular sociological and technological features of the information society, can be subsumed under capital as a source of surplus value. The way that this is accomplished is

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through branding. As argued in my recent book (Arvidsson, 2006), branding is a managerial technique particular to the information economy (see Lury, 2004). Brand management seeks to control and program a diffuse production process that proceeds through extended circuits of mediatized communication. Brand management is about moving the (more or less) spontaneous activities of an autonomous productive subject (such as the multitude of networked agents engaged in romantic communication on the internet) onto plateaus that are 'desirable and preferable' (Terranova, 2004: 122). In this way, branding can be understood as a response to a problematic that is typical to the information economy; the production of value can be conceived no longer as uniquely (or even primarily) centred around material production or the time-space of the factory (Lash, 2002). Rather, 'the direct exploitation of labour is becoming less important as a source of profit and the private exploitation of social knowledge is becoming more important' (Morris-Suzuki, 1997: 64l; see Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2004; Lazzarato, 1997). The capitalist production process tends to coincide with the reproduction of life itself (Negri, 1995).

COMMODIFICATION OF THE COMMON

Viewed in this way, internet dating is but one aspect of a more general trend to commodify our ability to construct a common social world through communicative interaction, putting it to work in generating economically valuable outcomes (Arendt, 1958; Habermas 1984, 1987; Hardt and Negri, 2004). Indeed, one can argue that such a movement towards the commodification of the common constitutes an emerging paradigm of valorization in e-commerce (as well as in other vanguard sectors such as software development, biotechnology, brand management and design). The first strategy that guided the commercialization of the internet in the mid-1990s built mainly on a vision of that medium as a new channel for the provision of content. The key to making money online was to capture consumers, or 'eyeballs', to whom one could subsequently broadcast ready-made products through new channels. This was the economic rationale behind the merger of large media companies with large content libraries such as TimeWarner, with internet portals such as America Online (AOL). Even though this strategy allowed for a certain amount of 'interactivity' (as to the choice of feature and time of viewing), basically it replicated an older broadcasting logic in which content was understood to be produced by professionals and then broadcast to a consumer public (Schiller, 1999). But the success of AOL in accumulating a critical mass of 'eyeballs' had been built already on different relations between 'producers' and 'consumers'. To a large extent, AOL's success derived from the unpaid efforts of tens of thousands of volunteers who administered online communities, actively contributed to discussion groups and built and

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maintained websites. It is estimated that in 1996, 'at the peak of the volunteer movement, over 30.000 community leaders were helping AOL to generate at least $7 million a month' (Terranova, 2004: 92; see Margonelli, 1999). Thus the success of AOL had built on the ability to put the communicative production of users to work. A similar strategy stands behind recent success stories such as eBay, where users themselves construct the community that serves to guarantee the reliability of the auction site and underpins its brand equity. It is at work in interactive games (or Massive Multiplayer Online RolePlaying Games; MMORPGs) such as Sony's *Everquest*, Microsoft *Asheron's Call*, or *America's Army* (which is not an MMPORG, strictly speaking), the highly successful interactive online shooting game launched by the US military for recruitment purposes. In the case of these games, users collaborate to construct the virtual world that becomes the property of the site owners who, in turn, make money by selling access (Nuttall, 2003; Terdiman, 2004). Stretching the definition a bit, we can argue that a similar principle stands behind more recent forms of media voyeurism, such as webcams or reality television, where viewers interact and engage in a 'work of watching' that effectively extends the production of valuable content to include the social and communicative processes of the lifeworld (Andrejevic, 2003).

This strategy actively utilizes the interactive bias of the medium. It builds on putting to work, stimulating or empowering the human ability to create a common through investments of affect (Jarrett, 2003; Negri, 1999). To quote one Merrill Lynch consultant: 'to say that the internet is about information is the same as saying that cooking is about oven temperature – right, but wrong. The real creator of value is relationships' (Schrage, 1997). This relational capacity is made to evolve in such a way that it creates an enclosable area for which one can charge access fees (as in the case of MMORPGs), or is made to sustain a distinct brand identity (as in the case of eBay).

IMMATERIAL LABOUR

The commodification of affect is nothing new in itself. Karl Marx recognized the potential value of the production of common meanings and aesthetic experiences through the labour of singers, schoolmasters and poets. But he considered these activities so marginal in relation to capitalist production overall that it was not worth wasting much intellectual energy on them. Until recently most economists – whether Marxist or not – have shared this view of immaterial production as economically insignificant. We can date the rediscovery of immaterial labour to the 1970s, when feminist economists began to argue for the productivity of housework and the (mostly female) production of affect and care in general. This accelerated in the 1980s, as the developing service economy was the subject of a host of

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studies of service professionals, such as airline stewardesses (Hochschild, 1983) and retail personnel (du Gay, 1996). Recently, the focus on immaterial labour has come to invest the new culture industries (Power and Scott, 2004), 'creative industries' (Florida, 2002; McRobbie, 1999) or the contemporary 'symbol analytical' workforce as such (see Reich, 1991). An important part of the productivity of such knowledge-intensive professional workers is understood to rest with their capacity to work with sociality and communication to produce the kinds of social circumstances (project teams) and shared meaning complexes (corporate culture) that allow a flexible adaptation of the production process to the rapidly shifting demands of a volatile market environment (Gorz, 2003; Maravelias, 2003; Negri, 1989; Virno, 2004). There is also a growing body of literature that stresses the connection between the mediatization of the work process and the necessity of, and capacity for, such immaterial, affective work (Zuboff, 1988; see Kakihara and Sørensen, 2002; Mowshowitz, 2002). This points to the possibility of a more general connection between the mediatizaton of the social and the productivity of affect.

Arguably, Marx is not the right thinker to start with in establishing that connection. A better point of departure is Gabriel Tarde. This long marginalized (but recently rediscovered) sociologist pointed to the direct economic relevance of public communication. In his *Psychologie économique* (Tarde, 1902) he argued that, at least for luxury goods, the value of a commodity was determined partially by the public production of standards of 'truth, beauty and utility' that could serve as a measure, because such goods did not have a place within traditional standards of value. Thus the cognitive and affective productivity of the public should be understood as an integral element to a society-wide, extended production process by which the values of such goods were established (Lazzarato, 1997). Tarde's argument was that the public could serve as such a productive subject because it was not directly tied into the fixed codes of traditional social circles. Rather, the public mobilized individuals across geographical and cultural boundaries in a sort of transversal networking of minds – similar to the ways in which contemporary theorists, such as Castells (1996) have thought about the internet. This autonomy of the public allowed it to produce ideas that could not emerge elsewhere. In short, the productivity of the public rested on its particular ability to fantasize or construct virtual alternatives to the actual (Shields, 2003; Terranova, 2004).

Indeed, such a relation between the mediatization of public communication and the enhanced powers of fantasy has stood at the core of the critical reception of new media technologies for a long time. An enhanced capacity for fantasy has been perceived as the flipside of the new capacity for rational argument that commonly has been attributed to the emergence of the modern public (see Habermas, 1989). One of the central

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preoccupations of early social theorists was that the new mass media would create excessive powers of imagination. People would imagine situations that they simply could not realize, or situations where realization would severely disrupt the established order of things. Gustave LeBon (1991[1896]), Schipio Sighele (1901) and Ortega y Gasset's (1932) preoccupations with the disruptive effects of the mass mind are examples of the second attitude (as are instances of press censorship and the 18th-century suppression of coffee houses). Emile Durkheim's (1966[1897]) concept of 'anomie' is an example of the first attitude. He argued that the greatly enhanced powers of the imagination that characterize modernity risk propelling the individual's plans and prospects beyond what is realistically possible or socially permissible. Durkheim argued that divorced men risk becoming anomic because, beyond the limits of marriage, they are now free to imagine a sexual life too fantastic to be realized.[1] It is telling that Durkheim chooses love and sex (or to use a common term, 'the erotic') as an example of the anomic dangers of the modern, mediatized intellect. As Lynn Hunt (1993), among others, has argued, the mediatization of erotic fantasy from the early publications of libertine thinkers such as the Marquis de Sade onwards has been a powerful and potentially destabilizing force of the imagination. Sade's imaginations of fantastic erotic relations were deeply intertwined with fantasies of a different social and moral order. When censorship of erotic publications began in the mid-1800s, mass literacy, cheaper printing technologies and, significantly, photography had empowered a mass capacity to fantasize about sex and, by implication, about a new standard for sexual difference (O'Toole, 1998). Female erotic fantasies have been feared to have equally disruptive results. In fascist Italy, the new erotic demeanour of young urban girls, who modelled their behaviour on Hollywood films and romantic stories in new, American-style women's magazines, was perceived to have dangerous consequences for established gender roles as well as for female fertility (Arvidsson, 2003; de Grazia, 1992; Horn, 1996). In India in the 1950s, newspapers and cinema were mayor driving forces behind the emergence of non-traditional attitudes to love and marriage (Gist, 1953). In the 1950s, the sociologists Francesco Alberoni and Guido Baglioni (1965) argued that the new 'urban culture' spread by television had made girls in southern Italy refuse to marry peasant men. This, they claimed, was a major driving factor behind migration. In short, historically the erotic has proved to be an important example of how the media can enhance the capacity to imagine social relations, and how this enhanced capacity can subsequently have real, transformative effects.

Indeed, it is telling that according to Thomas Laqueur's (2003) history of masturbation, the real dangers of the 'solitary vice' were not so much physical as they were social. He shows how Enlightenment thinkers from Voltaire and Rousseau to Kant worried about masturbation primarily because it risked deviating psychic energy away from the moral project of

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the social towards the individualistic pursuit of fantasy. 'Autoerotic sexuality was at odds with social and moral life as it ought to be lived', it risked making the subject 'hopelessly enslaved to himself' (Laqueur, 2003: 42). This perspective on masturbation as an asocial or even anti-social danger prevailed until the 1970s, when masturbation began to be taken up by the feminist movement. The right to control one's own fantasy became something for and with which to fight. The possibility to imagine alternative forms of sexual relations became a political tool. In the 1990s, masturbation became an important business. Through the diffusion of the internet, masturbatory fantasies could be shared, collectively produced and augmented by a booming internet porn industry, ultimately feeding into an equally successful industry for the manufacture of various props and tools. In true Tardian fashion, the explosion of internet 'smut' served to make companies such as Doc Johnson, the largest sex toy manufacturer in the USA, go from a turnover of US$8 million in 1990 to US$45 million in 2000, or Beate Ushe, their German equivalent, to increase sales by 50 percent between 1999 and 2000 (Laqueur, 2003; not to speak of the turnover of the actual porn business itself, see Cronin and Davenport, 2001; Lane, 2000). It is telling that as the internet realizes the hidden potential of masturbatory economy, fantasies become interactive. True, a lot of online 'smut' sites are about the simple provision of content. But it seems that the way to attract and retain customers in this highly competitive environment is by means of some interactive service, be it a discussion group, interactive striptease or biographical information on models that makes possible identification and an intimacy that extends beyond the strictly carnal. This is particularly evident in new forms of 'amateur' pornography, where users are invited to follow the models around as they 'masturbate *and* water the plants *and* walk the dog *and* take college classes', thus approximating a form of consumption that builds on 'the abolition of the spectacular in favour of other models of relationality' (Patterson, 2004: 112, 119; see McNair, 1996). This interactivity has been pushed further by the emergence of weblogging ('blogging'). At present there are blogs for most erotic specialities which combine posts, fiction and other forms of 'user-produced' content with links to commercial and non-commercial content sites. Some commercial ventures, such as Nerve.com, have realized the potential in this enhanced interactivity constituting itself as a platform that links different users and their different activities (blogging, dating, producing fiction, posting photos) into a community which is not only highly educated but also actively involved in their topics of interest ('all things smart, sexy and culturally important and entertaining'; see www.nerve.com/about/advertising). Advertisers are invited to weave their messages into the environment of the site, to place their products as part of the context within which communication unfolds.

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Sites such as Nerve.com are an excellent example of the tendency to put to work the capacity for interactive fantasizing that computer- mediated communication (CMC) promotes (Parks and Floyd, 1996; Turkle, 1996). The problem from a managerial point of view is to give this fantastic productivity direction and embodiment. Nerve.com has solved this problem by providing a distinct environment that pre-structures and guides interactivity towards particular arenas, which provides it with a distinct brand space on which to evolve. So has Match.com.

'QUALITY SINGLES'

In its passage from marginality through politicization to business, dating has a history which in many ways parallels that of erotic fantasy. The practice emerges from relatively marginal origins in the 1880s, when newspaper advertisements were used as a tool for finding partners among migrants and displaced sections of the population. Personals had a submerged existence until the 1970s, when the medium resurfaced as part of the sexual revolution (Cockburn, 1988; Steinfirst and Morgan, 1989) Fanzines and small media of various kinds helped people of a particular sexual orientation, such as gay people or 'swingers', to find suitable partners. Looking for a partner catering to one's particular interest also became one of the main driving forces of the 'pioneering' development of the internet in the early 1990s, at least from the launch of the 'alt.' domain in 1988 (and Mintel Rouge in France). With the wider diffusion of the internet in the second half of the 1990s, dating became distanced from the sexually explicit, and as more mainstream venues such as Match.com (launched in 1996) opened up, acceptance spread and the dating sector boomed.

Dating sites are places where the powers of fantasy are stimulated. After registering and logging on to Match.com (or any other major site) there is a wealth of profiles to browse through, theoretically millions on the larger sites, hundreds of thousands on the lesser ones, although often search engines will give you no more than 300 to 500 to look at in one session. (A search on match.com generates a maximum of 500 profiles.) All present themselves as potential partners to romance, friendship or erotic adventure. Most have photos, usually faces (this is strongly recommended by the Match.com guidelines), but sometimes full body shots. On the more 'cerebral' sites, people sometimes portray themselves in special positions or offer a view of body parts central to the particular proclivity to which the site caters. On Match.com, typically the extra photos portray the user as engaged in some activity, whether it be a social function (smiling in an evening dress with a glass in hand) or in the outdoors, walking on a beach, waterskiing, windsurfing, etc. (the significance of this will be explored further later).

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All the profiles have information on height, hair colour, body type and a wealth of similar topics, as well as on lifestyle issues: work, religion, leisure preferences, values and aspirations. One can linger at a particular profile, read little essays or diaries, and sometimes discover additional photos or even video clips. Text and images are deployed to support an ongoing imagination of the profiled other. Like the Oracle at Delphi, dating profiles neither hide nor reveal: they give signs. The cues supplied are inconclusive and fantasy is activated to fill in the blanks; one clicks ahead and new questions are asked. Even if site managers encourage you to 'think of your profile as your online identity, introducing you to other members . . . as a quick sketch of who you are, your lifestyle, and what counts most in a relationship', the effect is primarily that of leaving blanks that stimulate curiosity and fantasy (see www.match.com/help/faq.asp). The different search engines that most sites offer also contribute to this end: one can look for people in one's geographical location for particular sexual or romantic preferences, or for keywords in essays or self-descriptions. In this way one can add on scenarios such as meeting, doing particular things together or sharing particular interests to one's fantasy in progress. Most dating sites also supply some kind of automatic matching service. Match.com's 'Venus' automatically chooses and alerts you to profiles that are compatible with your own. With Venus, new matches arrive three times a week or daily. There is always new material for fantasy available.[2] The actual registration process also stimulates investment in fantasy and creativity. After answering a number of fairly straightforward questions on age, occupation, body type, 'background/values' (including ethnicity), users are invited to respond to more esoteric queries, such as: 'When are you happiest?', 'What have you done that makes you proud?', 'If you could choose a superpower, what would that be?', 'How does your [ideal] match spend his/her weekends?' Users are invited to imagine their ideal match: 'What kind of hair do you want to run your fingers through?' and choose a scenario for an 'ideal date'. These imaginations are used subsequently as input by the search engine and affect the selection of 'matches'. Finally, users are invited to 'describe yourself and who you would want to date' in a short, 2000 character essay. This is recognized as 'the hard part' and the site supplies a lot of advice and guidelines for the insecure user.

The next step is to share your imagination with others through communication. Here too, there are many options. One can start with sending a 'wink', a non-committal message with no content that signals one's potential interest in a profile. The point here is that whoever is 'winked' at gets new material for fantasy by exploring who 'winked' them. The communication can go on to richer media formats such as messages or emails. Most sites offer the possibility to 'keep it on the level of fantasy' through anonymous emailing services and, in the case of Match.com,

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anonymous voicemail and telephone calls (this gives the opportunity to 'hear how his voice sounds' and thus imagine 'him' in more detail, before deciding whether one wants to meet or not) (Hecht, 2003). Indeed, the advice encourages people to feel free to explore each other in depth, to 'wait until it's time', until you 'feel confident' with sharing personal information or contact information. Such recommendations certainly work towards creating the 'safe environment' that most dating sites cite as their particular advantage (although statistics suggest that users generally perceive online dating environments to be 'safer' than traditional mating venues anyway; Berin and Dolinsky, 2001; Brym and Lenton, 2001). But it also serves to navigate what Fiore and Donath (2004) identify as the two conflicting goals of dating site designers: to create matches and retain traffic. Match.com attempts to solve this by encouraging prolonged anonymous (and hence on-site) communication. Indeed, *Cosmopolitan* magazine's guide to internet dating cites Match.com's spokesperson Trish McDermott, whose advice is that 'if he wants to set up a date after one exchange of emails, or mentions sex, cut him loose' (cited in Goins, 2002: 1). McDermott implies that security is a factor behind this advice: if a man mentions sex or wants to see you at once, he is certainly a weirdo. But she also hints that such 'hurried' behaviour is improper in itself, it goes against the emphasis on in-depth self-discovery and thus disqualifies the man as a 'Quality Single' (which is what the site sells). Refusing to engage in long processes of communicative fantasizing also goes against the brand identity and the very purpose of the site.

Match.com does have a strong and coherent format. Browsing through the site one is struck by the apparent similarity of profiles.[3] There appears to be a fairly generally accepted normative model for self-presentation on the site. Interestingly, this model differs substantially from what has been observed in earlier studies of mainstream, offline dating media (Jagger, 1998, 2001). It is true that sometimes, men tend to stress their financial standing or market value, presenting themselves as 'single, sane, solvent' (WM, 30), but this is neither a very frequent nor a particularly dominant trait. Similarly, some women stress their physical appearance or sexual readiness, presenting themselves as a 'fun-loving up for it all sex-kitten' (WF, 19), but again, this is rare.[4] Nor are the lifestyle traits that Jagger (2001) sees emerging at the expense of more traditional gender roles particularly prominent. Rather, the dominant element of the vast majority of the profiles surveyed here was what one 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.[5] Most users would stress how they already lead an experientially rich existence with a rich social life:

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> 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)

In particular, they stress how they possess the qualities to enrich their lives further through contact and new experiences; how they are 'easy going', 'intelligent', confident' and 'have a passion for life'. Users would then seek partners with whom to share a life conceived as an ongoing quest for enriching experiences. They would seek

> someone who loves to enjoy life and lives to enjoy love. Someone incredibly down-to-earth with whom one can dare to be oneself. Someone who I can pretend to be an adult with and yet still be silly and childlike with, someone to laugh at and above all laugh with. (BF, 24)
>
> I need someone who can keep up with me and my hectic life, adding something to my existence in a positive way. (AF, 20)

Of course, this could be a matter of class habitus. Perhaps such quests for self-expansion through continuous experiences make up the ideal of the particular class of 'culturally mobile', urban, college-educated symbol workers that make up the main target for Match.com (as for dating sites in general, see later; see Emmison, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). Presumably these people have been taught to valorize 'social competence' and affective productivity in their professional activity. But at least the men tend to signal a slight tension between the experiential ethic that prevails as the norm on the site and their own 'true selves'. It is not that they do not embrace it – and some men do this well – but many signal a certain difficulty or awkwardness, as if they regret their inability to be more imaginative:

> Favourite hot spots: Boring, I know but I love the Canaries, its always hot! (WM, 24)

while clearly, a better answer would be:

> Mountains, rivers, ski slopes, beaches (without sunbathing tourists). Somewhere where you can't see the impact of man. (WM, 35)

Alternatively, they signal their own desires to retreat humbly and underline their acceptance of anything.

The difficulties that many men seem to have suggests that they feel a certain pressure to adapt their self-presentation to the expectations of the environment (and Match.com is very much a female space – most of its content providers are women who write from a female perspective). Indeed, quite a number of men signal overwhelming difficulties in constructing a profile:

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> Havnt [sic] a clue what to put here. Christ, where to begin? (WM, 27)
>
> I don't feel comfortable having to describe myself, but I understand it has to be done, so here we go. (LM, 31)

It seems that many male users feel that there is a distinct brand identity for them, centred on a problematic emphasis on the self and its experiences and complexities, that they have to wrestle with when making their self-presentations on the site.

Celia Lury (2004) argues that a brand is to be understood as a 'platform for action' – brands should be seen as diffuse programming devices that enter social life and pre-structure or anticipate possible actions or experiences of actions. In this way, brand management demonstrates close similarities with other 'post-disciplinary' or 'advanced liberal' (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999) forms of power. It is a matter of working from below by constructing an environment in which certain expectations are inscribed. Brands are not primarily authoritarian or normative but empowering. They govern subjects by enabling their actions to evolve in particular directions; they do not say 'You must!' but 'You may!' (Barry, 2001; Zizek, 1999). A dating site is a perfect branding tool in this sense, because it supplies a totally artificial environment where the very preconditions for action can be programmed in detail. Match.com has made good use of this branding logic, creating an environment where the very problematic of loneliness and finding love is already framed within a highly particular discourse that posits particular conceptions of selfhood and love. Communication and interaction on Match.com evolves on the basis of the assumption that true love is contingent on a true and authentic experience of selfhood, on revealing the inner self and its true desires. The first and most obvious way in which this is achieved is through the positioning of the Match.com brand. Match.com has a series of linkages and co-branding efforts. Many of these, such as partnerships with Yahoo, MSN, AOL, Compuserve and Netscape where Match.com offers its search engine and database in exchange for exposure, serve primarily to enlarge the customer base. Other linkages are directed more explicitly at creating a brand identity. This is particularly true in the case of 'relationship gurus' such as Oprah Winfrey or John Gray. Both support links to Match.com on their personal websites, and the self-actualization ideology of relationships and love that they propagate feeds into the advisory content posted on Match.com, often with references back to Oprah and Gray. Problems of loneliness and finding love are presented as caused by an inability to open oneself up to experiences, or as the result of inadequate communication skills. People trying unsuccessfully to find love are encouraged first to look into themselves and 'resolve, access and recognize: take notice of the patterns of your life that you want to change' (Entwistle, 'Relationship Strategies for the New Year', nd). Match.com offers

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a questionnaire to help with such assessment. Here, the advice for those who score below the top category is to 'broaden their horizons' and to consult Match.com's '15-day Love Challenge', a 15-day programme to achieve an opening up to new possibilities, positive thinking, a richer and more diverse personality and improved communication skills:

> Developing your interests makes you more interesting to others.
> Take time to practise your conversation skills with a co-worker or acquaintance, practise listening, asking questions and showing real curiosity in their answers. (Match.com, nd)

In common with the general self-help ideology, Match.com's approach to love ignores material and social factors. Rather, it is stressed frequently that true love is contingent on a compatibility of values and inner qualities. Users are encouraged to be 'revealing' with respect to their values: 'The values that matter most to you probably are the most important to your soul mate too.' But users are not encouraged to be revealing as to their material possessions or social qualities. The advice when constructing a profile is to:

> Go for quality. Your qualities, that is. As opposed to your possessions. That'll increase your odds of finding someone who appreciates a good listener, a kind heart and knockout kisses. Or do you prefer someone who most appreciates you for your salary and stash of frequent flyer miles? (Hecht, '12 Tip to Pen Perfect Profits', nd)

It seems particularly important to get this across to men, who seem to be stuck in a materialistic understanding of attraction.

> If you're passionate about your work (not your income, your work) share your enthusiasm with us. Same thing if you're the creative type, an avid traveller, a volunteer with your favourite charity, a political activist or a devoted pet owner. Tell us what makes you tick, what makes you happy, what makes you feel alive. (Hecht, '12 Tips', nd)

Users who have a problem finding love are encouraged to frame that problem in terms of their individual talents and capacities, and to cultivate communicative skills that give the impression that they have a deep and complex self to express: that there is indeed something about them to communicate. Regardless of whether these skills help in finding love or not, if they have a use-value for users or not, they certainly serve to make users valuable to the site as content producers. Such skills enhance the productivity of their communicative labour.

Match.com entertains a distinct ideal of how a 'Quality Single' should be or act:

> Someone who approaches new people themselves, moves in the centre of the circle, is witty and articulate, is open to new experiences, and is more worried

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> about his or her inner qualities than about possessions and social status. (Entwistle, 'Quiz: New Year's Love Resolutions', nd)

The site offers a number of ways to compare oneself more or less favourably with this 'Quality Single' ideal. Indeed, there is an omnipresent consciousness of hierarchy at the site, and users are encouraged not to reach beyond their value or realistic possibilities, 'not to set your expectations too high' (Entwistle, 'Relationship', nd). This sort of advice, which positions the user in relation to a 'Quality Single' ideal, is particularly prevalent in the advice given to people who are constructing a profile. This is especially important in relation to body size and income:

> If you're overweight, admit you're on the heavy side; if you're plain, don't tout your legendary beauty. (Kantor, nd)

When posting a photo:

> If you are not extra lean and muscular, keep your shirt on.
>
> Don't stand in front of a yacht if it isn't yours. (Schroeder, nd)

And be prepared to accept someone compatible:

> Need to drop ten pounds? Be open to dating someone who does too. (Hecht, '12 Tips', nd)

Men, it seems, are in particular need of such advice:

> If the list of adjectives you use to describe your ideal match places 'gorgeous' and 'sexy' before 'intelligent', we're going to notice. If you're 40 and looking for a woman aged 21 to 30, we're going to notice. If your body type is 'average' or 'a few extra pounds', but your match must be 'slim/slender' or 'athletic', we're going to notice. And we're going to draw conclusions that will not improve your chances of getting a date. (Hecht, 2003)

Like a distant echo of the protestant ethic (filtered through the self-help movement) the site proposes that body type mirrors the person's true inner self and that true love with a compatible partner is contingent on a truthful presentation of these qualities: 'accurate descriptions of your height, body type, smoking and drinking habits, marital status will attract someone to the real you – not a fantasy you can't deliver' (Hecht, '12 Tips', nd).

To some extent this ideal is enforced through disciplinary measures and sanctions. Match.com has a 'Quality Assurance Team' that 'reviews each and every profile to provide our members with a comfortable environment' and checks for 'any direct contact information' (this would undermine Match.com's monopoly on contact mediation, and hence their most

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important source of revenue – member subscriptions); abusive language, vulgarity, racism, 'discussions or descriptions of illegal acts or behaviour', solicitation of additional partners (Match.com keeps up the monogamy ideal) and 'overt sexual innuendo or discussion'. Furthermore, Match.com does not accept content from 'individuals under the age of 18', or 'incarcerated individuals' (who are clearly not 'Quality Singles'). Mostly, however, this ideal imposes itself through the very environment of the site. By presenting oneself on the site, consulting the advisory material or reflecting on love (and perhaps one's own lack of it) one quite naturally comes to frame these questions in terms of an equation of romantic success and attainment of the 'Quality Single' ideal. This ideal comes to function as a sort of tacit expectation to which one adapts one's self-presentation within the limits of the possible. Before one even begins to communicate with other members, the site has already interpellated the subject (to use Althusser's term) as a 'Quality Single'.

The 'Quality Single' ideal serves two purposes. On the one hand it has a value for users, it provides an embodiment, a 'materiality' (Slater, 1998) that presumably facilitates self-presentation and interaction on the site. When certain basic premises of the discourse have been established, when a distinct environment has been constructed, a certain *savoir* (to use Foucault's term) as to what love and intimacy is about has been elaborated, it is probably easier to engage in romantic communication with strangers. The emphasis on the self and its revelation gives users something to talk about, a topic around which communication and mutual imagining can unfold as the relationship solidifies. On the other hand, the 'Quality Single' ideal has a value for the site. On one level, its emphasis on values and intimate qualities and its explicit renunciation of material and social factors such as income or status serves to channel romantic communication onto such topics that can be explored on the artificial arena of the dating site. It serves to keep the communicative construction of fantasy on the site, where it continues to generate revenue. On another level, the 'Quality Single' ideal serves to construct Match.com's brand image. This is what users pay for – indeed, the point of paying subscription fees is that this supposedly facilitates access to a certain kind of single: the quality kind. (It is generally free to register, but to initiate contact one has to be a paying member. This makes sense, since on registration one effectively produces content for the site that paying members can fantasize about; as a non-paying member one remains food for other people's fantasies but with more limited possibilities to feed one's own.) But the 'Quality Single' also helps to construct the Match.com brand in the eyes of advertisers, giving it a distinct image of the Match.com user that makes its 'community' of users particularly valuable, enabling certain forms of cross-branding and marketing synergies. A strong brand serves the double purpose of legitimizing information-gathering as to lifestyle, income,

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habits and such, and valorizing the audience statistics that Match.com subsequently derives from the information provided:

> Our users readily input personal information on Match.com about their interests and habits to explore potential 'matches'. These comprehensive user profiles give us targetable information about these people's lifestyles. In fact, we know if they are pet owners, health nuts, social drinkers, or 6 feet tall. You can pinpoint the exact audience you are trying to reach with virtually no marketing waste. (www.abouttmcs.com/advertise/admatch.html)

CONCLUSION

Internet dating appears to be a comparatively efficient venue for finding a partner. The 2001 MSN survey of internet dating in Canada claims that nearly half of the people using online dating services had met one to five people in real life. Of them, 63 percent had had sex with at least one person that they met online, 60 percent had formed an enduring relationship and 23 percent had met a partner (Brym and Lenton, 2001). An investigation of Swiss online daters claimed that 23 percent had managed to find 'long-term love', and my own survey of Danish users gives comparable results.[6] Finally, Match.com's own statistics estimate that about 10 percent of all paying users find a partner within a year. It also seems to be a particular group of people who use internet dating services. Although this varies according to the particular site,

> compared to internet users in general, online daters are more likely to be male (most sites have a ration of 2 men per woman), single, divorced, employed in the paid labour force and urban. And internet users in general are more likely to [be] better educated and earn a higher income. (www.match.com/index/default)

Match.com also claims that its members 'tend to be college educated, professionals and residents of a large city and its suburbs' (www.match.com/index/default). In short, it seems that internet dating users in general, and Match.com members in particular, belong disproportionately to the urban, college-educated symbol analysts that make up the upper echelons of the new working class of the information economy. Interestingly, in the MSN survey, most users claim that their motivations for using dating sites had to do with the very particular working conditions that this class faces. Increased career and time pressures and higher rates of geographical mobility combine to decrease the opportunities available to meet partners offline, or to have a social life in general. In addition, an increasingly disciplined workplace environment (through the implementation of sexual harassment policies) makes it more difficult to find a partner at work, which used to be a traditional venue. In short, March.com caters to a symbol analytical labour which lacks both the time and freedom to pursue its basic reproductive and

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intimate needs. But it does this in ways that makes its fantasizing and communicative investments of affect evolve within a branded space, which in turn makes it directly economically productive. The basic biopolitical condition of this class of symbol analysts – the mediatization of their lifeworld and the mobility and flexibility of their productive condition – is positioned as a source of surplus value.

This suggests an interesting perspective for further research. One would want to investigate the role of dating sites (and other forms of computer-mediated sociality, such as MMORPGs) in relation to the general commodification of the communicative and affective capacity of this class or symbol analytical workers. How does the use of these venues relate to the overall surveillance and branding of their social life? How do these media fit into the rhythm of their lives? How does the particular conception of romantic subjectivity that Match.com proposes fit into a more general ideology of self-actualization proposed by consumer and corporate culture alike? Such a perspective would offer a view of the exploitative potential of computer-mediated sociality; how these media can function as a tool for the extraction of surplus value from life itself.

Notes

1 Durkheim meant that this did not apply to divorced women. He implied that this was because women generally lacked a strong sexual desire. Such opinions were very much *en vogue* at the time. Today, we tend to disagree.

2 Apparently, this abundance of fantasy material can cause fatigue. As one user posted on soc.single (19 January 2003): 'I'm just not feeling anything for anyone anymore. I sit here looking at face after face and profile after profile and I'm not even remotely attracted to anyone and the profiles just seem like words on a page'.

3 The following discussion is based on a qualitative content analysis of an explorative sample of 100 Match.com profiles belonging to men and women looking for heterosexual partners between 18 and 35 years of age within the Greater London area. The sample was made up of an equal number of men and women and divided to match approximately the ethnic make-up of users in the area (with regards to the major categories, 'White/Caucasian' (65%), 'Black/African descent' (15%), 'Asian' (15%) and 'Hispanic/Latino' (5%). Obviously the sample is too small to state anything final about differences or similarities in self-presentation across ethnic categories (and neither has this been a primary goal of this research); the conclusions here remain suggestive and tentative, to be substantiated by a larger quantitative survey.

4 The particular profile belonged to a 19-year-old woman who deviated from the Match.com norm in many respects. Generally, the most apparent deviations from the norm that was observed, such as the ones above, belonged to users who were far from the professional, urban, college-educated middle-class group that Match.com, like most dating sites, targets.

5 I would estimate that 80 per cent of the profiles surveyed conformed with this experiential ethic.

6 Four questions on internet dating were inserted in the Danish omnibus media survey in February 2005.

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