"Scientists, designers seek same for good conversation": A Workshop on Online Dating

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INTRODUCTION

Online personal advertisements have shed their stereotype as matchmakers for the awkward to claim a prominent role in the social lives of millions of users. This rapid transformation — a change more social than technical — has the potential to redefine typical (even archetypal) patterns of courtship. How are people using online personals today, and how might their patterns of usage affect our notions of dating and marriage? The way people use online personals and the way they think about dating and marriage are tightly coupled, each influencing the other.

Personals systems usually include personal profiles of users, which document their sex, age, build, religion, smoking and drinking habits, self-description, and preferences for these characteristics in a potential mate or date; a private messaging system; and a mechanism for indicating interest without writing a substantial message, variously termed "winking," "eye contact," or a "collect call." In contrast to other systems that support online communities, personals systems usually lack a common forum, where everyone can read what everyone contributes. Online personals are designed for styles of interaction different from those of the well-known computer-mediated communication environments. Thus, it is relevant to ask: What patterns of interaction have emerged, both within individual communities and across all communities? How do they mirror and how do they differ from those in better-known environments such as bulletin boards or chat rooms?

The design of social systems strongly influences the behavior of their users. In the case of online personals, design decisions assume an unusual gravity; these systems intimately affect the lives of many people.

TOPICS AND STRUCTURE

We will discuss the following broad topics in this workshop:

— How people are behaving in online personals systems and how best to study this behavior.

— How various personals Web sites handle self-expression, searching, matching, and communicating.

— How the design of personals systems interacts with individual and cultural constructs of relationships and attraction.

— How we can improve the design and user experience of these systems.

To structure the conversation, we will divide the workshop into two parts:

1. The study of behavior in online personals environments.

2. The design of online personals systems.

Because the study of existing systems naturally informs the design of new systems, we will devote the first half of the day to Part 1 and the second half of the day to Part 2.

Part 1: Studying Online Personals

Fundamental questions about interaction in online personals environments remain unanswered. In the first part of this workshop, we will discuss both methodology for and results from more careful study of online personals. Sociological, psychological, and ethnographic perspectives each have a place in this dialogue. The following sections describe several broad topics that we will discuss.

Observed Behavior in Online Personals

Numerous researchers have written quantitative and qualitative descriptions of the patterns of interaction in computer-mediated communication environments like chat rooms and newsgroups (e.g., [6, 3, 5, 4]). These patterns

have not yet been documented for online personals systems. Some of the relevant behavioral questions:

— What are the populations of various personals systems in terms of gender, age, religion, race, education, smoking habits, drinking habits, etc.?

— What characteristics have the greatest effect on the number of replies a user gets?

— In which characteristics do people seek others who are similar to them? Different from them?

— How densely connected are the social networks among users? How homogeneous are they with respect to characteristics like smoking habits, drinking habits, religion, etc.?

— How do people of different genders and sexual orientations vary in search preferences and interactional patterns?

Broader Questions
We would also like to discuss some questions that might not have simple answers:

— What constitutes a successful match?

— How much do people exaggerate in their profiles or private messages? How does exaggeration affect subsequent face-to-face meetings?

— Do relationships initiated through online personals differ significantly from those initiated through offline contact?

— What norms of behavior vary locally? What must a newcomer to a specific personals system learn in order to participate successfully?

— What is the effect of having so many potential dating partners from which to choose? How does one make an optimal choice? (cf. [2] on "marriage markets.")

Problems with Online Personals
What problems have we observed with online personals systems? These might be problems with the design of the systems, problems with the nature of online interaction, problems with the matching algorithms that sites use, or larger social problems related to the use of online personals.

Part 2: Designing Personals Systems
Two conflicting goals face designers of online personals systems:

1. Support users who want to meet a partner with whom they can have a successful relationship.

2. Support the growth of the site by retaining users for as long as possible.

These goals conflict because a user who succeeds in finding a good match will no longer need the site. A system that proves too successful in this sense might not receive the revenue it needs to stay in business. Even a non-commercial system needs to retain a critical mass of users to remain useful. In considering the design of personals systems, we should keep in mind the tension between these goals. We might discover that we can serve one only at the expense of the other.

We would like to discuss a variety of issues in the design of online personals systems:

— Which design elements are universal?

— Which elements are unusual? Unique to a single site or a type of site?

— What characteristics of a user do sites choose to include in profiles? Which do they highlight through their design?

— How might the design of a system influence the matching criteria people consider important? Should we minimize this influence, or shape it to specific ends?

— How do sites for a specific subpopulation (e.g., JDate.com for Jewish people, Manhunt.net for gay men) differ from those for the general population?

— How do sites market themselves? What is the cost structure for members, if any, and how does it influence interaction?

— How can we improve the design of personals systems? (Incremental improvements? Radical structural changes? Playful, provocative explorations?)

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