

In an increasingly hectic era, where many professionals find it difficult to make the time to do more than manage the basic essentials of staying alive (eating, sleeping, shopping, cleaning) other demanding activities such as social interaction may suffer as a result. The effects of this have been most evident in the west, where a "short-cut" approach to life, love and romance has become quite common. While speed-dating is the most obvious manifestation of this (surely the idea that you can identify potential life-partner in three minutes is delusion of the most serious kind!), other such methods also point in the same direction (i.e., the desire for concrete results with less effort). Yes, this is the "instant gratification" generation speaking!

The Internet has played a particularly important role in many of these initiatives e.g., religion or nationality-based matchmaking sites. However, along with the more

# COMPLEX COMMUNICATIONS

extreme possibilities it offers to members of the lunatic fringe, the Internet has also revolutionised romantic possibilities across the globe. A friend of mine, who studied at a co-educational institution in India, recalled with fondness the excitement that greeted the advent of Internet chat-rooms. For the first year or so, the boys spent a lot of time creating fictitious identities as girls, and pretending to chat up other boys on the net (either for practice, or as a joke). The fact that their victims were fooled, probably speaks volumes about how little they knew about real girls...!

Invariably, in some cases, things got complicated. For example, at one point there was a hoax programme that you could send to someone whom you were interested in, to find out whom they were really interested in. The program would appear as a message in your inbox, and ask you to provide the names of three potential partners, promising to help you select which of the three you would be most well-suited to.

The idea that you might believe that you could rely on a computer program to do this for you is worrying in itself, but apparently any number of people fell for it! This included my friend who sent off the names, and was horrified a few minutes later to receive in response, NOT the name of his dream girl, but a notice informing him

that the information provided would now be sent to the person who had sent him the message in the first place (i.e., the person who was secretly interested in him, who turned out to be one of his friends!)

Being a person of unusual initiative (and truly horrified at the prospect of this girl finding out about all the other girls he was interested in!), he decided to take immediate action. He got into a car and drove 80 km to the college when his friend studied, managed to get hold of her, marched her to the Internet cafe where she opened her account, and made her delete the e-mail without reading it!! It was a valuable lesson.

Not that these kinds of activities are in any way new, in spirit at least. In the pre-Internet era, it was simply the methods available that were different - the (immobile) phone being pre-eminent in those days! The most common activity for bored teenagers (usually in the afternoon, when their parents were asleep...) was to ring up random numbers in the hope of chatting to someone of the opposite sex. The trick of course, was to find someone willing at the other end!

But in a surprising number of cases, these "phone friendships" blossomed, leading to conversational

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exchanges that lasted for at least some weeks, and often even longer. In a minority of cases, it could even lead to a "room-date". I should clarify that at one time, this simply meant meeting up with the person you are chatting to, but in recent years it appears to have taken on a rather more intimate meaning, and is open to interpretation! Indeed, the suggestion of a room-date had to be carefully timed, since a girl who was asked on one might feel that she was being rushed into something...!

A colleague of mine, who had the rather peculiar habit of listening into other people's conversations during the