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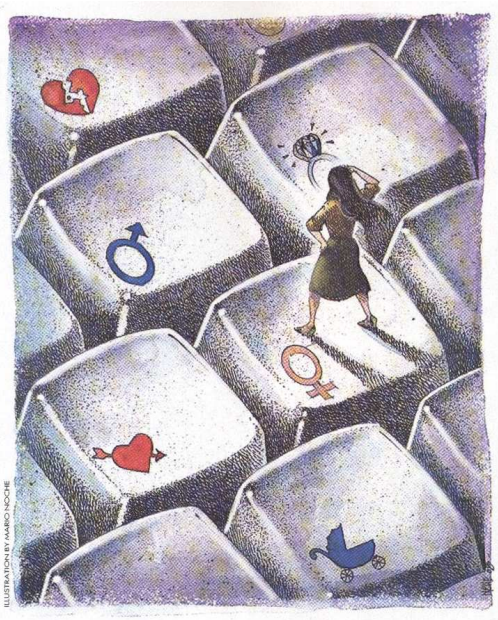

Plugging in to e-dating

Denise, a 32-year-old Grandview resident, was able to witness the turmoil of a friend's relationship unfold within 24 hours simply by going online. As Ashley's argument with her boyfriend progressed, Denise watched as her friend changed the personal status on her Facebook.com profile from "in a relationship" to "it's complicated" to "single," then back to "in a relationship." If nothing else, following the frenetic evolution of Ashley's love life play out on the Internet made for high drama–and a more accurate assessment than depending on something as old-fashioned as gossip.

Denise is no stranger to online relationships herself. When she broke off an engagement several years ago and started to date again, she found inspiration in an unlikely source–a "Seinfeld" character. "I did the George Costanza, where you do the opposite of what you used to do," she says. "What I used to do didn't work, so I tried the opposite–Internet dating." (Denise's identity, like all others cited by only their first names in this story, has been disguised.)

Using online personals, she did have a few relationships and ended up becoming friends with several people she may not have known otherwise. It was through one of those friends that she met her current boyfriend, whom she has been seeing for the past year. Denise says if she hadn't tried online dating, "My life would be completely different."

She isn't alone. In Columbus, about 10,000 people are registered with the free dating site OkCupid.com, says Sam Yagan, CEO and co-founder of the national website. He notes subscription-based dating websites make $1 billion annually. "People are spending more money on dating than pretty much anything else in terms of content or service–with the exception of gambling and porn," Yagan says.

Employing the Internet to find dates is becoming more acceptable, says Jim Buckmaster, CEO of Craigslist.org, a popular San Francisco-based free classifieds website. "I think there's a lot more acceptance of using the Internet for all kinds of purposes in general, but also certainly for personals," he says. "The urban myth of it being sketchy using Internet personals–that is on its way out."

People also are comfortable with the Internet, especially those in OkCupid's core age group of 18 to 35, says Yagan. In the era of having MySpace and Facebook personal pages and a résumé on LinkedIn.com, web users don't have as many qualms about creating a dating profile, he says.

Justin, an Ohio State grad student in his 30s, has profiles on Friendster.com, MySpace and Facebook. He says the relationship status boxes provide interesting insights into other people's personal lives, enabling observations such

as, "Hey, those two have been going out for a while and his status is still 'single.' " Of the status boxes, he says, "It's always fun to see who changes it first," from "single" to "in a relationship."

Yagan sees it as an update of an age-old discussion. "Every new couple that gets together has that conversation: Are we exclusive or not? And I think in the old days, it was done much more privately."

With so many facts available at social networking sites, it's also not hard to piece together information. For example, Ursula, a 27-year-old OSU grad student, was interested in a guy who called her only on Sundays. A friend joked that she must be his Sunday girl and that he already had a Saturday girl. Several days after a "horrible" Sunday date, says Ursula, his Facebook status changed to "in a relationship"–with another woman. Ursula says, laughing, "He did have a Saturday girl!"

Jessica, a 27-year-old campus-area resident, met someone in a New York-based touring band a few years ago. They spoke on the phone, exchanged e-mails and made plans to see each other when he was in town. Then she came across his online profile. "That's how I found out the one guy I was seeing was married," she says.

While social networks and dating sites might be ways to meet people or keep in touch, Mansfield psychologist Dennis Marikis warns, "What it often does is, it creates a dramatic false sense of intimacy–'I really know this person based on their profile or the way they communicate on Facebook or their MySpace.' Well, they don't really."

Maybe this lack of intimacy has led to the growing practice of breaking up by e-mail or even text message. (Remember when delivering the news over the phone was considered bad form?) Marikis says that while it may seem like an easy solution, in the long run it is a "much more problematic way of dealing with someone." The people who break up via text are not dealing with the consequences of their actions, he notes.

Perhaps that will lend some small comfort to those who have been on the receiving end of an It's-not-you-it's-me message. Jessica, for example, got a long note from a guy she was dating. Since her screen held only 140 characters at a time, the message arrived as 32 separate text messages. "I had to piece it together," she recalls. "Then, I realized I had been dumped."

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