

## **The Internet: Friend or Foe?**

**By Alan Bennett Ilagan**

Want to hear about the newest, most comfortable, guaranteed-to-find-you-a-date gay pick-up place? A few hints: there is no nasty smoke to fan away, no shady drug-dealing corners, and no chance of being caught on the eleven o'clock news. It doesn't offer drinks or food or fancy lighting, and there is no loud thumping dance music or soft lounge-like jazz. It's not a bar or a cafe or a bookstore or the supermarket. It's not even Home Depot. Would you believe that the easiest place to pick up potential gay mates is right here in Amsterdam, New York? Even closer than your backyard, the most happening place for us to meet is in our very own homes: on the Internet.

Amsterdam has not exactly been known as a gay mecca, and with good reason. I am still one of the only openly-gay people I know, and the gay scene in this city is simply non-existent. The Internet has enabled all of us to come out of the closet and tip-toe timidly across the room to the computer, where we can create a personality profile of ourselves wherein we acknowledge our sexuality while cloaked in cute code names. For some gay men and women, the relative anonymity and mask of a computer profile is the only way in which they can be (somewhat) openly gay.

The Internet offers a place of safety and refuge for those of us who remain closeted. For young people who cannot come out to their parents, it has become a way to express frustration and unhappiness, while serving as a vital connection to other gay people ~ a necessary and sometimes life-saving system in which they do not feel so alone. I have heard of a number of gay kids who have gone so far as to credit the Internet for saving their lives. It opens up a world of similar youngsters who are dealing with the same problems, and sometimes that small sense of community is all that is needed. For married gay people with children and families, the Internet is often the sole outlet for inner struggles of sexuality and loneliness, offering a small chance at being completely honest with themselves and others, if only for a moment. There are support groups and chat rooms for every type of person ~ serious information for medical and legal questions, fun dating prospects, or just another guy or gal who wants to talk. There are other benefits to the Internet as well. In this age of Matthew Shephard and hate crimes, the computer offers relative safety from an uncertain outside world. No one is going to reach through the screen and stab anyone for flirting with them. There is a certain amount of discretion allowed over the Internet, an ability to weed out the deranged loonies that might not be afforded in a face-to-face interview (though does anyone really think the truly deranged will list that trait on their AOL personality profile?) {For the intents and

purport of this article, and in the name of brevity, I will not delve into the Pandora's box of pornography and cyber sex on the Internet. Sorry to disappoint anyone.}

Dating in the gay world used to be about ducking into a dark, smoky gay bar and hoping that someone half-way decent might be there too. We were making strides and coming out of the darkness when the Internet craze arrived. Suddenly it was no longer necessary for us to venture out of our homes and into a bar or café. Just when it seemed that gay people were comfortable enough to meet on the street, in a restaurant, or at the mall ~ and society was slowly beginning to concede that we were indeed human ~ we turned around and headed back into our empty homes, dimly lit by the glow of the computer screen. By utilizing the Internet we had in effect isolated ourselves, an ironic situation brought about by the supposed ease of meeting others through chat rooms and the like.

I am not condemning or judging those who choose to use the Internet as a way of meeting people or maintaining human contact with other gay men and women ~ I simply wonder at how connected we are truly becoming. At its most basic level, the Internet allows personal access to others in ways not available to many of us; those who cannot come out due to our jobs, families, political aspirations, or religious affiliations have a way to be gay without the usual societal repercussions. But what has this freedom actually allowed us? A moment of suspended reality, a brief escape from our real existence, or a chance to be our true selves?

There are those who argue that the Internet has created the most efficient way of meeting prospective dates and friends. (And if you consider someone with whom you have shared fifteen minutes of screen time and a fuzzy downloaded picture a true friend, then you probably have a lot more friends than I do.) In truth, a computer offers us connections to others, but on a limited scale. The immediacy of the Internet is tempered with a blind distance. We are getting closer to many, but truly close to no one. I know some people who wake up, log on, go to work, come home, log on again, and stay stationed at their computer until they go to bed. They slowly lose sight of their social interaction skills while honing new ways to make smiley faces with semi-colons and parentheses. If these people ran into one of their Internet friends on the street, there's a good chance they would pass by without even realizing it.

I'd rather take my chances on a real human connection, the feeling of looking into someone else's eyes and seeing recognition and hope ~ the fantastic frisson of that magical moment when first eyeing a sexy stranger from across the room ~ these are enchantments which can not occur over cable or phone wires, but rather through pulling ourselves away from the world wide web and into the scary, exciting, wonderful, and risky real world.