

Dear Abby

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ABBY TAKES A BOW

Washington, DC - After 45 years of providing the world with her unique brand of uncommonly common-sense advice, Ms. Abigail Van Buren announces her retirement from the popular syndicated column. Hoping to spend more time with her family, travel the globe and realize her life-long dream of hip-hop stardom, Abby promises to fill her petite yet palpable void with trusted colleagues representing a diverse array of disciplines. Equipped with wit, intellect and loyalty to the “Dear Abby Trademark” of old-fashioned values, Ms. Van Buren’s cornucopia of uncommon concerns will be penned by the alternating team of **Lawrence Lessig** and **Langdon Winner**. Every week’s advice will be provided by one of these scholars, so expect answers that will be as varied and unique as our readership’s neuroses.

In taking her final bow, Abby would like to assert the following advice, which, when taken to heart, can be used to circumvent any of life’s many challenges. While one can argue that technology facilitates (even strengthens) one’s Agency (or ability to affect change), in actuality, technology produces circumstances and conditions that serve to regulate said Agency more than liberate it. In fact, there can even be circumstances when our perceived Agency can be illusionary, as posited by the power of the Internet to embolden alter-egos and avatars of our hidden desires.

Rather than a somnambulist approach to technology (where consciousness is conceded to convenience), a more prudent strategy would be to find freedom within its confines. Exploit the advantages presented by innovation while working to diffuse the disadvantages presented by the inherent trade-off. The Van Buren family assures the world that with or without Abby, the new “Abbies” of Lessig and Winner will help you be aware Agents for Change while equipping you with the requisite consciousness that will leave your agency intact.

Note: be sure to watch out for Abby’s debut urban single, “Mind Yo Manners”, due this Holiday season.

IT MAY BE YOUR SLUMBER PARTY, BUT IT'S STILL *THEIR* HOUSE

Dear Langdon,

I am a single, 19 year old college student who has always had problems meeting new people, especially those that I find myself attracted to. My roommate told me that everyone on campus meets through an online chat and peer-to-peer sharing service that our Dean of Student Affairs runs to help students integrate into the university. Sure it was supposed to help students share ideas and build a “virtual academic community,” but in reality, with students posting far more than their “career interests” in their profiles, everyone uses it to “hook-up.” I want to try it out, but I’m concerned about what kind of agency I would have in making new friends and meeting potential partners in this virtual forum. Can I really affect change in my relationships when our big slumber party is being watched over by these grown-up hall monitors?

Cautiously Courting Temptation in Washington, DC.

Dear CCT,

In my book, “The Whale and the Reactor,” I offer the example of two neighbors traveling down a street - one driving a car, the other on foot.¹ Notice that while the driver has the ability to travel faster and arguably in far greater comfort than the pedestrian, the latter is able to admire a nearby garden or even stop into a friend’s kitchen for a quick bite; the driver, on the other hand, is confined to the conventions and laws that govern safe driving (and so cannot simply swerve his vehicle into a living room to ask, “how is the family?”). The pedestrian is free to execute self-initiated directives while the driver must first consider whether similar directives (such as stopping the car in the middle of the street to say hello) conforms to the flow of traffic and obeys safety laws. Both characters are empowered with a degree of agency (emphasis on “degree”), although

¹ Langdon Winner, *The Whale and The Reactor*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.

the driver's efficacy is modified, perhaps even restricted, by social norms and legal regulations.

Now, CCT, let's consider the emerging "culture" of Internet dating. Like the story of the pedestrian and the driver, there is an inherent trade-off in the convenience of meeting people online. While there is an undeniable benefit to an instant "connection" to a wide variety of students and the ability to screen profiles for matched interest that facilitates a more effective method of pursuit, it does not necessarily strengthen a relationship nor the agency to procure it. As I mention in my book, "choices about technology have important consequences for the form and quality of human associations."² Old-fashioned opportunities to meet (such as classes, parties and bars) may impede the speed by which you filter those who have similar interests or backgrounds (one cannot simply "glance" at someone's statistics like a chat profile when you meet them in person), but it does offer an immediate and tangible interaction that typing on a keyboard cannot.

Like automotive technology, the Internet provides a faster means to an end, but only in the context of serious limitations that (as my colleague Lawrence Lessig will likely argue) are mired in the code-based architecture of the forum. Be wary of the credibility of chat profiles and aware that your interaction is largely limited to those students that actively use this service. Larry will agree when I caution that "seemingly innocuous design features in... technologies actually mask social choices of profound significance."³

There is a concern that this service is being provided by your Dean of Student Affairs and that there appears to be little assurance that they are *not* monitoring more than your use of the forum. To this I offer the example of Robert Moses' overpasses which "were deliberately designed and built... to achieve a particular social affect."⁴ In wanting to regulate who was able to access public parks which were reserved (at least unofficially) for higher-class whites, Moses created a

² Winner, *The Whale and The Reactor*, 33

³ Winner, *The Whale and The Reactor*, 28

⁴ Winner, *The Whale and The Reactor*, 23

system of bridges that were high enough for car owners to traverse through but too low for the busses that many African-Americans and the underprivileged used to travel.

While this despicable prejudice may not extend to the Dean's peer-to-peer application, it does illustrate that "the design or arrangement of a device or system could provide a convenient means of establishing patterns of power and authority in a given setting."⁵ One need not indulge in conjectures of conspiracy, but is it so implausible to view this forum as a system of control much like the Moses overpasses? Whether the university is merely monitoring system usage or actively tracking dating patterns amongst its students, the university is serving a myriad of self-interests by encouraging a common assumption (if not belief) that this heightened level of virtual interconnectivity is actually serving a public interest as well. After all, Moses' overpasses also facilitated travel (although limited), a benefit that did well to mask a more insidious nature of the architecture. Similarly, in asking students to invest in its system, the university can collect academic and personal data (whether in an open or clandestine manner) that may or may not be transparent to its users. Data mining is a valuable exercise in determining marketing strategies for recruiting new students or assessing the efficacy of new technologies (neither of which are altogether maleficent), but what is to stop the university from selling said data to private industries in exchange for sizeable donations?

Before you eject your Ethernet card and drop your enrollment, allow me to explain that I am not suggesting that your agency is completely curtailed by your participation in the Dean's virtual community. Rather, I caution you to consider that no technology is liberated from politics or authority and that "the adoption of a given technical system actually requires the creation and maintenance of a particular set of social conditions as the operating environment of that system."⁶ In other words, learn the conditions to more effectively participate in the system.

⁵ Winner, *The Whale and The Reactor*, 38

Be honest about yourself when you construct your profile (though learn to develop a sense for false claims when viewing the profiles of other users), become acquainted with the simple rules of net etiquette (don't TYPE IN ALL CAPS unless you want to appear clinically insane) and by all means use a "real," current photo (unless you *were* a character on TV's *Baywatch*, don't act so surprised when your date realizes you do not resemble a bronzed beach deity). Be aware of these social conditions, stay informed, and you may just find Mr./Ms. Right/ Right Now with your agency intact.

THE PERFECT LOVE OF MY CODED DREAMS

Dear Larry,

I am a 22 year old art history major and an avid reader of this newly revised column. Upon reading Langdon's advice last week to *Cautiously Courting Temptation*, I decided to try online dating aware that this technology is imbued with socio-political constructs that could either undermine or embolden my Agency. Believe it or not, I actually *met* someone who, at least online, seems to fulfill every one of my criteria (even the one that requires proficiency in underwater basket weaving). My problem is that I've also just begun a relationship with a person in my study group. This *real* person isn't as "perfect" as the one online, but I'm hesitant to bring the virtual world into reality in fear that said reality would be disappointing. My question, therefore, is whether I have any agency at all when I keep my virtual fantasies virtual? Who should I keep – the one sitting on my bed or the one weaving on my "desktop?"

Confounding Concept with Tangibility in Arlington, VA

⁶ Winner, *The Whale and The Reactor*, 32

Dear CCT,

Like my colleague Langdon, I will begin my advice with a quick story. Consider Jake, for example. Jake is a regular student in a U.S. Mid-Western university- an average guy, run-of-the-mill, hardly noticeable at all. And like other regular students, Jake uses the Internet to connect with people from all over the world, using a very common interactive forum. What friends Jake cannot make on campus he makes online; what thoughts he cannot express in class he does so in a web-based newsgroup; and what stories Jake cannot get published amongst even the most deviant of publications, has a readership of thousands if not millions in the seemingly limitless, unregulated world of the internet. I say “seemingly” because after a story involving violence against women led to an investigation which provided proof that Jake proposed to physically enact the atrocious acts featured in his writing, federal charges were brought against him, doctors determined his mental disturbance and the once legally boundless opportunities of the internet was hurled to the ground by the hubris of an Icarus that had flown too high (or in this case, too low).⁷

What we can derive from this true story is that agency can exist even if it is illusionary at its inception. While Jake was unable to affect change in his social condition amongst his student peers, “cyberspace allowed him to escape the constraints of real space”⁸ thereby empowering him to entertain his desires and actuate them across a world of computer screens through a virtual persona. If physical tangibility of the effects of change is not a requisite for agency, then even at the illusory level of online newsgroups, Jack exercised a powerful form of agency that inevitably (perhaps predictably) yearned to materialize.

Central to this concept of real/virtual agency is the consideration of identity (both on and offline); and, as Jake discovered, central to regulation is the authentication of identity,⁹ particularly

⁷ Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 16

⁸ Lawrence Lessig, *Code*, 17

⁹ Lawrence Lessig, *Code*, 50

within the context of what many people consider to be the net's most powerful (and problematic) gift: anonymity.¹⁰

As I mention in my book, "Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace," the distinctions between "the architectures of identity in real space and in cyberspace has profound consequences for the *regulability* of behavior in cyberspace" which provides "no self-authenticating facts about identity."¹¹ While mechanisms have been developed that will facilitate and strengthen online identification, for the most part we face a coded web infrastructure that provides anonymity without restraint or safeguards on behavior. This makes the Internet both liberating to peruse and fundamentally difficult to control; it also renders our agency in pursuing partners based on profiles alone too nebulous to gauge without other considerations.

Not that control over the Internet is wholly desirable; after all, "the designers were not interested in advancing social control; they were concerned with network efficiency."¹² However, in the interest of Internet dating, consideration should be made about how "real" we want our personas to be, lest we base our agency on an online entity that is fundamentally false. While we thank the architects of both the net (and the lovelorn innovators behind the prototypes of romantic chat groups) for providing us with such an efficient network in which to interact, consideration must now be made about how such interaction can be based on credibility that allows such interaction to migrate seamlessly into reality.

With regards to your precarious position betwixt the person of your (online) dreams and the one in your arms, I offer this suggestion. Like my colleague Langdon, I caution you to stay aware of the architecture that surrounds you. The masonry, the cars, the bell and whistles all contain a political essence that extends beyond their utility; but most of all, stay aware of that which you

¹⁰ Lawrence Lessig, *Code*, 33

¹¹ Lawrence Lessig, *Code*, 33

¹² Lawrence Lessig, *Code*, 34

cannot touch - the architecture of a virtual community, the code that regulates identity - for it embodies the mechanisms that propel far more than a yearning for convenience. It embodies commercial interests, government regulation and a society's dalliance with deviance that hides a fear of the unknown. At its heart, the code does have the power to propel you towards love. But unless code becomes reality, unless the virtual becomes physical, unless you can assure that the profile *is* the person, then I would suggest you hold on to what is tangible.

However, should you choose to make the jump to reality, make sure the person you meet looks like the photo they posted online. Base your Agency on truth.

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