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With the Internet, the blind date is vanishing

By Rebecca Heslin, Gannett News Service

Typing fingers have replaced sweaty palms. Computer chimes substitute for awkward silences. And Internet supersleuths who want to know what they're getting into are phasing out the blind date.

"You can get online to research a person and find out who they are before meeting them," says Bridget Koza of Colonia, N.J. "It's never really a blind date anymore."

Using the Web to research people before making contact is becoming the norm for many teens and twenty-somethings. They want to see everything from a potential date's picture to his or her credit history. Love might be many things, but with the Web, blind doesn't have to be one of them.

"Technological improvements made possible another way of imagining human relationships," says Sorin Matei, a communications assistant professor at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Ind. "Before, dating was the product of fate, luck and the quest for romance."

Eyes wide open

Personals: Peruse national sites like Match.com and eHarmony; check your local newspaper's website for online personal ads.

Now, "some would-be daters want to imagine a world where you take the fate and luck aspects out and put in some sort of rationality."



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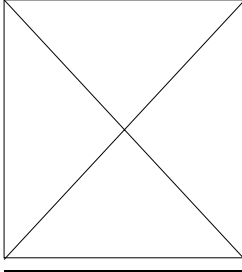
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Social networks: Websites such as Thefacebook, Friendster and MySpace allow you to meet your friends' friends.

Search engines: Using engines such as Google and Yahoo, type the name of the person in quotations for specific results. This is less helpful if you're researching someone with a common name.

Background checks: If you're looking for an address, credit history or a criminal record, you can usually find help for a small price. Sites include ZABAsrch, Pretrieve, Easy Background Check and Background Check Gateway.

Technology has made anonymity largely a thing of the past. The Internet is now the little black book, a clearinghouse to meet and research potential dates.

"There are all kinds of services that allow anyone to do on-the-spot background searches," Matei says. "The amount of information you can get on someone is just scary. These things have become so accessible and so cheap you can do lots of research."

Web sites including Google, online social networks such as Thefacebook.com and online background searches allow people to check others out without having to leave their chairs.

That's not necessarily a good thing, says Kathleen McNerney of Cincinnati. She says it's "creepy" to know little details about a person before a first date. "Our culture is always seeking control, and we want to be in control of the situation," she says. "We don't

want to trust someone blindly."

And some old fundamentals still apply. "At the end of the day, what matters in dating is how well people get along and whether they're attracted to one another," says Chris Hughes, a Harvard student and co-creator of Thefacebook, originally a tool designed at Harvard to digitize the old-fashioned yearbook and provide interesting facts to allow the freshman class to get to know one another. "Technology can provide preliminary information, but it won't transform the dating scene."

McNerney agrees.

"Regular dating won't disappear, and after a while I think people will revert back to it," she says. "Technology can become alienating after a while, and people will want to sit down for a meal instead of at their computer screen."

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