

The Politics of Online Dating

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With around 350 million yearly users, online dating apps have revolutionized romance in the modern age. Some have celebrated online dating for the ways it has opened previously unimaginable avenues to meeting partners, particularly to sexual minorities. Others have criticized dating apps' well-documented track record of exposing users to racism and sexism, among other forms of physical and psychological harm. Whatever position one takes, it's hard to disagree that the multibillion dollar dating app industry has immense power over people's lives. By supplying the algorithms that determine how people enter into new relationships, dating apps have the power to shape the ways society reproduces itself.

In a recent APSR article, Elsa Kugelberg proposes a framework for assessing the actions of dating app companies, asking what it would mean for dating app companies to exercise their power in line with individuals' interests. On the one hand, Kugelberg argues, dating apps have the potential to address many of the injustices that people face in the traditional (non-digital) dating world. On the other hand, this potential has been either unevenly distributed or unfulfilled. Kugelberg suggests policy interventions that would bring the digital sexual sphere closer to realizing people's claims to justice.

On Kugelberg's account, all people have a set of basic claims to justice, which also apply to the sexual realm. All individuals in the sexual sphere have the right not to be harmed or coerced (a claim to noninterference); a right to be seen as an equal and hence as a person who could be someone's potential partner, even if not necessarily our own (a claim to equal standing); and a right to opportunities to follow what Kugelberg calls our "sexual life plans" (a claim to choice improvement).



In the traditional (non-digital) dating sphere, these claims often go unfulfilled. For sexual minorities or in-

dividuals with non-normative sexual life plans, it can be difficult to find potential partners. For individuals looking for sexual partners, it can be a challenge to determine if other individuals are available or interested in pursuing a relationship. And for individuals who don't wish to conform to widely accepted social norms for example, the expectation that women be modest and feminine the pursuit of one's sexual life plans can prove an impossible task.

In order to be justified, dating apps must not undermine these claims. On Kugelberg's account, various features of dating apps have the potential to reduce the injustices people face when dating in the "real world." For instance, the "matching" function, which only enables users to message each other after they've expressed mutual interest in each other's profiles, furthers users' interests in noninterference because it reduces the risk of being contacted without one's consent. Apps can also improve users' sexual standing: the fact that dating apps allow more privacy than dating in the "real world" means that those wishing to pursue non-normative sexual life plans can do so without as much social stigma, and that they can more easily find partners with similar preferences.

Yet despite dating apps' immense potential to realize the justice claims of their users, they only partially and unequally realize this potential. More often, the design of dating apps the ways that apps are programmed to moderate users' actions on the app; amplify certain users' profiles in discriminatory ways; or enable users to predefine their preferences for users of certain ages or races through filters only serves to diminish users' sexual standing. Kugelberg's argument thus holds important stakes for policymakers, app designers, and professional organizations. We cannot expect the digital market to correct itself to become more just of its own accord. Dating app companies and their employees must become more transparent in how they use users' data and design their algorithms; more guided by the insights of sexologists and therapists; and more ethically oriented if they are to realize their users' claims to justice. ■

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