Will the all-seeing eye of the Internet help keep us all in line? Ask Bin Laden or the Mafia if they're worried about being embarrassed.

By Joe Queenan, JOE QUEENAN writes frequently for Barron's, the New York Times Book Review and the Guardian.
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IN THE AUDACIOUSLY predictable style for which he is famous, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman recently rhapsodized about the many ways in which "transparency" is making our "global discussion … so much richer."

The theory was that the 24/7 surveillance wrought by camera phones, blogs, YouTube, Facebook and MySpace have turned all of us into public figures. Because everything we say or do is now apt to turn up on the Internet — potentially with humiliating results — we must now live our lives more judiciously, cognizant that in the new "transparent" age, there is nowhere to hide.

Not long ago, such a society would have been deemed an Orwellian nightmare, a living hell where the brain police spied on everyone. But somehow Friedman has gotten it into his head that although surveillance is a bad idea when the government does it, it is just peachy keen when done by amateurs.

I'm not so sure. It seems to me that if YouTube had been around when George Washington failed to prevent his Indian allies from butchering unarmed French prisoners (and thereby started the French and Indian War), his career could've been ruined at the start, paving the way for some circumspect scoundrel like Aaron Burr or Benedict Arnold to sabotage the republic before it even got off the ground.

If camera phones had been widely available in the 1930s, shots of FDR's wheelchair would have been posted all over the Internet, and Roosevelt might very well have lost the 1936 election to one of the gutless clowns the Republicans regularly ran against him.

Friedman's argument that "the whole world is watching" — thereby compelling mankind to be on its best behavior — ignores reality. The Taliban is simply not concerned that some blogger, hammering away at his laptop in his mommy's basement, doesn't approve of its activities. Hamas is not worried about having its latest depredations captured on cellphone cameras.

Hugo Chavez doesn't care how many videos poking fun at him are posted on YouTube — he's still going to silence the media, suppress the opposition and wreck Venezuela's economy. By the looks of it, Chavez feels the same way about blogs: Sticks and stones may break his bones, but words will never hurt him.

Friedman suggests that the "digital footprint" young people leave on MySpace and Facebook means — and he doesn't seem to think this is necessarily bad — that it will be extremely difficult for them to recover from the mistakes of their youth. Deceitful resumes, compromising photos, ill-advised confessions of sexual predilections could all come back to haunt them. But this assumes that some future version of American
come back to haunt them. But this assumes that some future version of American
society will actually hold people accountable for their bozo-like past behavior. Get
real. When the 35-year-old twit who once posted a video of himself mooning Dick
Cheney applies for a job with the International Monetary Fund, the 36-year-old
interviewing him for the position will be the guy who once blogged about imprisoning
George Bush on the planet Alderaan and getting the Death Star to destroy the State
Department. That's not a digital footprint. It's a digital handshake.

The one seemingly valid point that Friedman makes is that transparency will force
corporations to be on their best behavior. But even this is a flawed assumption.
Camera phones and YouTube videos are useful when depicting pollution or botched
surgical procedures. But transparency doesn't work well in the bond market or the
private equity field because finance is an abstraction and cellphone cameras cannot
capture the invisible. You cannot post a picture of a hyped stock. You cannot post a
video of a rigged initial public offering. You cannot depict felonious stock market
activity on MySpace unless some white-collar crook agrees to be videotaped.

If "the new transparency" could actually deter obnoxious or criminal behavior, it might
be worth getting the whole world watching. But YouTube postings are not going to
prevent real estate developers from building hideous McMansions, and no amount of
blogging is going to keep lunatics in Hummers from plowing into Chevrolet Cavaliers.
Muggers, drug dealers, car thieves, ax murderers, hedge fund managers and Antonin
Scalia are not afraid of the blogosphere. Especially Scalia.

The weapons of transparency may be good at embarrassing people, but this approach
only works with people who worry about being embarrassed. The Mafia doesn't.
Osama bin Laden doesn't. The guy who's going to key your car tonight just because
you stole his parking space doesn't. And the woman who might conceivably confront
you with your quasi-pornographic, falsehood-swollen online profile 10 years from now
isn't going to because she's the gal who once posted a video of herself puking her
guts all over her wedding cake.

In a society in which everyone has already decided to immortalize their stupidity, being
an idiot isn't going to hurt anyone's career. The new "transparency" is just like the old
television: The whole world may be watching, but nobody seems to be paying much
attention.
Editorial: Now, not September, is the time for the administration to begin working with Congress on an Iraq pullout.

Mailbag: Clarence is come; false, fleeting, perjured Clarence

Bit Player
By Jon Healey
No blogging for a while

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