The Lessons of 'Lonelygirl': We Can Be Fooled, And We Probably Don't Care

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Three months and millions of page views after lonelygirl15's debut, the most recent Internet phenomenon turned into a detective story and came to a conclusion last week.

A teenage girl calling herself Bree posted her first video blog (vlog) on YouTube over the summer. She said she was 16 years old, was home-schooled and liked all sorts of geeky stuff. Which, because she is attractive, instantly got her tons of male fans. Her first video, all 1 minute, 35 seconds of it, has been viewed more than 350,000 times. Bree's "channel" -- her collection of films -- is the most-subscribed-to in the history of YouTube.

In subsequent weeks, Bree posted 29 more vlogs, mainly of her talking to a webcam in what appeared to be her bedroom, mainly about her life. A few times, she went on location, such as to a swimming hole with her friend Daniel. There were narrative strings -- she told YouTubers in successive videos that she'd been invited to a party, her father had said no, and she'd gone anyway and then had been punished for it. She hinted at occultist rituals and other spooky stuff, a strange counterpoint to her fresh-scrubbed appearance.

Nobody self-polices like the wiki world of the Internet. Something about Bree and the whole lonelygirl15 shtick smelled fishy to some Web sleuths. They baited a sting and lured her via e-mail to a MySpace page that had tracking software installed. It traced the origin of lonelygirl15's e-mail to Creative Artists Agency, the Hollywood
talent powerhouse once run by Michael Ovitz. This led the sleuths to suspect -- and post on the Internet -- that lonelygirl15 was not a real lonely girl in a bedroom but actually a marketing device.

It turned out, they're sort of right.

Recent reports revealed that lonelygirl15 is Jessica Rose, 19, an accent-hiding actress from New Zealand living in Los Angeles. The YouTube vlogs -- which seemed of suspiciously high quality -- were created by filmmakers Ramesh Flinders and Miles Beckett. In the aftermath of the exposure, Flinders and Beckett said that they never intended to portray Bree as a real person and that the films are not a promotional gimmick for a Hollywood studio. However, the filmmakers are now represented by CAA and say they will continue to make the vlogs.

The lonelygirl15 arc was predicted by cyberpunk author William Gibson in his excellent 2003 novel, "Pattern Recognition." The plot centers on mysterious bits of video posted anonymously on the Internet. The shadowy black-and-white videos, called "the footage," appear to feature a pair of lovers and hint deliciously at a larger, magnetically compelling story. The footage inspires a cultish following on the Web, including chat rooms, parodies and investigations -- just like those created around lonelygirl15 -- and the novel's hero is dispatched by an advertising wizard to track down the filmmakers so the phenomenon can be monetized.

The case of lonelygirl15 tells us a few things.

Chiefly, people hunger for stories. Unlike Emmalina, a summer YouTube phenom who had tons of fans but no point, Bree's vlogs have a story. What will happen to Bree? Will she get to the party?

Also, the power to create popular content is shifting from the entertainment industry to anybody with a digital camera, high-speed Internet and a story idea. The tools have been around for years, but the establishment still held the hole card: distribution, in the form of movie theaters, television networks and Wal-Marts.

In theory, the Internet should have bypassed traditional distribution, enabling content creators to get their product directly to viewers. But it didn't. Instead, the Web created a massive, churning ocean of content with no easy way to find things you'd like to see.

Sites such as YouTube provide what was missing: a menu and an infrastructure where users can vote the best content to the top.

Finally, the Bree vlogs powerfully illustrate the Internet's infuriating, entrancing ability to warp reality. And to question whether we even care, as long as it puts on a good show.

As a coda to this whole episode, I look forward to the time when the Internet throws up a phenomenon that is not an attractive young woman behaving in a semi-provocative manner. Up until then, the popularity of every lonelygirl15 will only remind us of the Internet's dark underside. Proof enough comes from Emmalina, who pulled her videos from YouTube last month after someone hacked her computer.