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A Web of Exhibitionists

By Robert J. Samuelson
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Call it the ExhibitioNet. It turns out that the Internet has unleashed the greatest outburst of mass exhibitionism in human history. Everyone may not be entitled, as Andy Warhol once suggested, to 15 minutes of fame. But everyone is entitled to strive for 15 minutes -- or 30, 90 or much more. We have blogs, "social networking" sites (MySpace.com, Facebook), YouTube and all their rivals. Everything about these sites is a scream for attention. Look at me. Listen to me. Laugh with me -- or at me.

This is no longer fringe behavior. MySpace has 56 million American "members." Facebook -- which started as a site for college students and has expanded to high school students and others -- has 9 million members. (For the unsavvy: MySpace and Facebook allow members to post personal pages with pictures and text.) About 12 million American adults (8 percent of Internet users) blog, estimates the Pew Internet & American Life Project. YouTube -- a site where anyone can post home videos -- says 100 million videos are watched daily.

Exhibitionism is now a big business. In 2005 Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. bought MySpace for a reported $580 million. All these sites aim to make money, mainly through ads and fees. What's interesting culturally and politically is that their popularity contradicts the belief that people fear the Internet will violate their right to privacy. In reality, millions of Americans are gleefully discarding -- or at least cheerfully compromising -- their right to privacy. They're posting personal and intimate stuff in places where thousands or millions can see it.
People seem to crave popularity or celebrity more than they fear the loss of privacy. Some of this extroversion is crass self-promotion. The Internet is a cheap way to advertise ideas and projects. Anyone can post a video on YouTube, free; you can start a blog free (some companies don't charge for "hosting" a site). Last week a popular series of videos -- Lonelygirl15 -- on YouTube was revealed to be a scripted drama, written by three aspiring filmmakers, and not a teenager's random meditations.

But the ExhibitioNet is more than a marketing tool. The same impulse that inspires people to spill their guts on "Jerry Springer" or to participate in "reality TV" shows (MTV's "The Real World" and its kin) has now found a mass outlet. MySpace aims at an 18-to-34-year-old audience; many of the pages are proudly raunchy. U.S. News & World Report recently described MySpace as "Lake Wobegon gone horribly wrong: a place where all the women are fast [and] the men are hard-drinking."

The blogosphere is often seen as mainly a political arena. That's a myth. According to the Pew estimates, most bloggers (37 percent) focus on "my life and personal experiences." Politics and government are a very distant second (11 percent), followed by entertainment (7 percent) and sports (6 percent). Even these figures may exaggerate the importance of politics. Half of bloggers say they're mainly interested in expressing themselves "creatively."

Self-revelation and attitude are what seem to appeal. Heather Armstrong maintains one of the most popular personal blogs (Dooce.com). "I never had a cup of coffee until I was 23-years-old," she writes. "I had premarital sex for the first time at age 22, but BY GOD I waited an extra year for the coffee." She started her blog in 2001, got fired from her job as a Web designer in Los Angeles for writing about work ("My advice to you is BE YE NOT SO STUPID."); became "an unemployed drunk," got married and moved to Salt Lake City, where she had a child.

Armstrong is a graceful and often funny writer. ("I am no longer a practicing Mormon or someone who believes that Rush Limbaugh speaks to God. My family is understandably disappointed.") The popular site now has so many ads that her husband quit his job. Recent postings include an ode to her 2-year-old daughter, a story about her dog and a plug for her friend Maggie's book, "No One Cares What You Had for Lunch: 100 Ideas for Your Blog." Idea No. 32: breaking up. Naturally, Armstrong expounds on her busted relationships.

Up to a point, the blogs and "social networking" sites represent new forms of electronic schmoozing -- extensions of e-mail and instant messaging. What's different is the undiluted passion for self-publicity. But even among the devoted, there are occasional doubts about whether this is all upside. Facebook recently announced a new service. Its computers would regularly scan the
pages of its members and flash news of the latest postings as headlines to their friends' pages. There was an uproar. Suppose your girlfriend decides she's had enough. The potential headline to your pals: "Susan dumps George." Countless students regarded the relentless electronic snooping and automatic messaging as threatening -- "stalking," as many put it. Facebook modified the service by allowing members to opt out.

The larger reality is that today's exhibitionism may last a lifetime. What goes on the Internet often stays on the Internet. Something that seems harmless, silly or merely impetuous today may seem offensive, stupid or reckless in two weeks, two years or two decades. Still, we are clearly at a special moment. Thoreau famously remarked that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Thanks to technology, that's no longer necessary. People can now lead lives of noisy and ostentatious desperation. Or at least they can try.