



Levy: In Digital Age, Nothing's Really Private

Will fear of exposure on the Internet cause people to lose every day spontaneity?

By Steven Levy
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Dec. 11, 2006 issue - By now you've heard enough about Michael Richards's racist meltdown at a Los Angeles comedy club. Plenty has been said about the content of his outburst, but not as much on the speed and thoroughness with which the news spread. The enabler of this ubiquity was a combination of two related technologies: cheap, portable video recording and broadband Internet. It's a one-two punch that will increasingly affect our public life—even for some people who aren't in public life to begin with.

It's a new fact of life in the digital age: any time you step outside your door, the possibility exists that you may wind up an unwilling figure of shame and ridicule—if not in the "Borat" movie, then at least on YouTube. It's surprising how celebrities and politicians have been slow to grasp this reality. Certainly one would have thought that George Allen, running to retain his Virginia senatorial seat, might have understood that directing the term "macaca" to a person of color might have had reverberations beyond that small campaign stop. But two Bank of America employees at a private function celebrating the company's merger with MBNA couldn't have anticipated what happened to them. Their over-the-top rendition of U2's "One" (with custom lyrics like "Integration has never had us feeling so good") wound up being mocked by thousands of Internet critics. (Adding injury to insult, lawyers for U2's record label threatened a lawsuit for copyright infringement.) And what about all the hapless nerds who dance, lip-sync or fight imaginary foes with toy light sabers, and wind up as global icons of loserdom?

There used to be a safer middle ground between an inviolate privacy sanctuary and a no-holds-barred public space, a zone of local accountability and global anonymity, where a gaffe, a humiliation or even a serious lapse in judgment could occur without making waves from San Diego to Sydney. No more—all it takes is one digital rubberneck who quietly captures the event with a cell-phone camera and posts it to a Web site. From there the aberrant behavior is subject to a social-networking mob of looky-loos who unfailingly unearth and promulgate the most chatter-worthy clips.

In some ways, this "little-brother surveillance" can have a tonic effect. Maybe the threat of "Truman Show" exposure will lead fewer people to expose themselves on the subway. Maybe more people will pick up after their puppies. Certainly there's a benefit to documenting instances of police brutality and schoolbus bullying. If everyone knew that such transgressions might be broadcast to the world, surely we would see fewer of them.

But I wonder whether fear of such exposure might generate a chilling effect—not just for racists whose utterances *should* be chilled but for less loony people who don't want to risk a career-killing gaffe. If you were an edgy comedian trying out material in small clubs, maybe you'd keep a safe distance from the edge—and be less funny. And it would be a shame if politicians took the lesson from George Allen that spontaneity could be deadly—every appearance before a small group would be as guarded and bland as a performance in a presidential debate.

Lately people on the Web have been talking about the concept of "radical transparency." This is a state attained when previously hard-to-find information becomes instantly available and searchable, from public records to MySpace. Avoiding this means cultivating opacity—hiding one's transactions and acting in public as if one moment of petty crime or candor might lead to a global undressing. It would be a shame if we had to live in either extreme. Has the Internet killed translucency?

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