



WORLD USA COMMENTARY MONEY ENVIRONMENT INNOVATION ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT BOOKS LIVING LEARNING THE HOME FORUM

Art, Movies, Music / Performing Arts, Sports, TV

Subscribe | E-mail newsletters | RSS

Subscribe to *The Christian Science Monitor* weekly edition

Save automatically with **way2save**<sup>®</sup>

- Save when you use your check card
- Earn a bonus just for saving

[Start Saving Now >](#)

Photos | Blogs | Environment

**Photos of the Day** Photos of the Day

 A photograph showing two people shaking hands in a celebratory or agreement gesture. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people in a crowd.

**Daily podcast**

**Monitor Reports**

Discussions with Monitor reporters from around the world

**Today**



0:00 / 5:25

South African workers use strikes to get their message across.

Subscribe in iTunes | RSS feed | All Audio

**Click here to start following**

MOST VIEWED

# The Internet as online confessional

**As the number of sites inviting anonymous confessions grow, what do all these revelations achieve?**

By **Mark Guarino** | Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor  
from the July 27, 2009 edition

[Print this](#) | [Letter to the Editor](#) | [Republish](#) | [Email and share](#) | [E-mail newsletters](#) | [RSS](#)

Mom was right: Television is no good for us. Even if you forgo the content and just focus on the activity, there's little doubt that staring at a screen inside your home is not as healthy for a community's well-being as sitting on your front stoop and getting to know your neighbors.

That is, unless your neighbors are inside, too. In the 2000 bestseller "Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community," public-policy thinker Robert D. Putnam blamed the boob tube, among other factors, for disconnecting us from one another, leading to a crisis in American life that is making us more fearful, stressed, unhappy, and less willing to look over the fence to understand the dynamics of who lives next door.

But if television made us hermits, the Internet is making us hermits with access to a fabulous social life. The immediacy of online media coupled with the development of user-friendly technology is creating a culture of status seekers who find comfort with an anonymous nation of friends (Facebook), followers (Twitter), and no shortage of advocates, cheerleaders, confessors, admirers, and confidants we all invite into our homes without ever having to look them straight in the eye.

Like television, the Internet is enabling us to disconnect from the physical world, except it is going one step further and replacing it with one that is virtual.

Dmitri Williams, assistant professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, says that while the combination of suburban development and living-room technology has whittled civic life from what it was generations ago, the sudden advancement in social networking has brought us back in touch with our neighbors, even if they are on another continent.

"It's like when the dam bursts and water's flooding in: You say, 'Wow, there are people out there.' When you think about this in terms of supply and demand, demand has always been there but it was pent-up," says Dr. Williams. "People connecting with each other are just humans being humans. Humans are social. [The Internet] is just reintroducing each other to our fellow humans."

Over the past two years, niche sites have hit the ground running, going beyond the simple connectivity offered by social-network giants Facebook and MySpace. ExperienceProject.com, TruuConfessions.com, FMyLife.com, PostSecret.com, and many others encourage users to anonymously post diary entries that range from mundane thoughts to game-changing epiphanies.

The volume of these entries in such a short span of time (Experience Project, for instance, boasts 2.3 million unique visits per month since launching in 2007), suggests people are more relaxed sharing intimacies online than they would be when the computer is powered down.

The public purging is a natural extension of the reality television boom of the last decade, according to Michael Stefanone, assistant professor of communication at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). His research found that ever since the Internet evolved from a place where users could access content to one where they actually produced content themselves, users more often than not modeled their behavior on what is considered the norm on reality television shows: frank discussions about sexuality, intimate disclosures of family history, a willingness to share personal videos and photos.

"In each case it was always reality television ... that explained how much time and energy people were investing in the new tools online," says Dr. Stefanone. As a result, he says, "people's boundaries of privacy are generally becoming more relaxed."

"All of these behaviors are nondirected self-disclosure. So instead of me calling you to tell you something,

1. Professor and policeman to join Obama at picnic table peace talks
2. What should have happened in Gates confrontation?
3. Pakistan says India's nuclear sub threatens regional peace
4. Bill Cosby 'shocked' at Obama's statement on Harvard prof's arrest
5. Obama cites that great Chinese philosopher, Yao Ming
6. Even after 911 tape released in Gates case, questions linger
7. Why are HDMI cables so expensive?
8. Seven North Carolinians charged in terror plot
9. A trigger lock for the gun lobby
10. Twitter not banned in Obama White House after all

## MAKING A DIFFERENCE

What happens when ordinary people decide to pay it forward? Extraordinary change. See how individuals are making a difference, finding solutions, overcoming adversity, and giving back globally.



Lyndon Harris, a pastor in New York, builds 'Gardens of Forgiveness' around the world to help promote the power of reconciliation.

Ann Hermes/The Christian Science Monitor

### People making a difference: Lyndon Harris

During 9/11, this New York clergyman experienced true heroism. But he still had to find his own path to forgiveness.

CSMonitorMall.com

[Learn More](#) | All Stores



Any purchase you make will directly support the Monitor.

now I'm using technology and broadcasting it to a mass audience," he says.

But if postings are anonymous, what do users gain from revealing so much of their inner lives to strangers? Some, like Michelle, a 44-year-old mother who lives outside San Francisco and did not want her last name used, says it allowed her to read feedback from other users who were experiencing marriage difficulties like hers when she first signed onto Experience Project two years ago.

"Let's face it, it's cheaper than a psychologist," she says with a laugh. "The only thing you don't get [online] that you can face to face is, you can't get a hug. That's irreplaceable."

Michelle says the community she found online was largely nonjudgmental, and she feared being judged if she divulged the same details to her closest friends. "Unless you are in the same situation, how can you give the same kind of perspective on an issue you don't really understand?" she asks.

Haley Overland, from Toronto, says she posts to TruuConfessions.com, a site targeting women, whenever she needs "to unleash a feeling." Although she already publishes a blog that is read by her friends and family, she directs her more impulsive thoughts on motherhood to the confessional site where she knows that whatever she says won't hurt the parties involved.

"If you're exhausted or frustrated ... it really helps to write it down and get feedback," says Ms. Overland. "You would think the way the media is today, exploiting the bad mother, this site would be kind of unhealthy. But it's ... really good for mothers."

Romi Lassally, the TruuConfessions founder, says such rigorous online exposure creates "a really candid, uncensored conversation," which is often lacking in real life. "So even in our culture that encourages this honest conversation, this pulls the curtain back further," says Ms. Lassally, who is based in Los Angeles. "Anonymity is the key piece here."

Because women like mothers and military wives tend to be so isolated, Lassally says there are risks from self-exploitation that may outweigh the benefits of anonymous feedback. "I think there are tremendous benefits from purging yourself from some of these thoughts. It's a fine line we're walking," she says, between confession and unlimited exposure.

When that line is crossed, there is the potential that all that content may be bogus, especially for sites that cloak identities and allow users to solicit commentary on their posting.

To Gabriel Jeffrey, the founder of GroupHug.us, the danger of so much public exhibitionism is that it's turning the Internet into "a big talent show." "It's a big glass house, except it's also all fake," he says.

Because GroupHug does not allow users to post feedback, he says his site guards against obvious attention-seekers. "The only sense of accomplishment is to confess something you did and that you own that now," he says.

On sites that allow interaction among members, sites from Facebook to Experience Project, however, "you kind of get gold stars no matter what you do," Mr. Jeffrey says. "I can say 'I'm in Miami now' and I can get 50 comments saying how awesome it is I'm in Miami, even though I'm not there. There's a loop there that encourages being cool."

USC's Williams says that in his research with online gamers, he learned that abundant Internet exposure "can be a negative" when the user fails to explore the possible depths of relationships they already have.

"It's a quality issue," Williams says. "A lot of people have formed social relationships online that are relatively shallow," he says. "So if you're going to those networks in lieu of more substantive local support, what you really have is a displacement effect; if you add to one thing, you're taking away from another. And it's not a one-size-fits-all kind of thing."

Get Monitor stories by e-mail:  Your e-mail address

(Your e-mail address will be protected by csmonitor.com's tough [privacy policy](#).)

ENVIRONMENT



Were they really predicting an ice age in the 1970s?

INNOVATION



Skype's a threat to Russian national security? So say Russian phone companies.

USA



Tests for California's 'pot economy'

POLITICS



For Palin, Act I closes, exit stage right

Ads by Google

[\(About these ads\)](#)

**Free Home Electricity**

How to Make Low Cost Solar Panels. Reduce Your Electricity Bill by 90%  
[www.make-solar-panel-now.com](http://www.make-solar-panel-now.com)

**People Search-Search Free**

Current Phone, Address, Age & More. Updated Daily-Accurate. Search Free  
[www.Intelius.com](http://www.Intelius.com)

**Confessions on ABC Family**

See Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen during Campus Crush. Log on!  
[ABCFamily.go.com](http://ABCFamily.go.com)

Ads by Google

Sponsored Links

**Booking Agency**

Grabow Entertainment Agency

**Business Resources**

Business Cards  
Checks

**Graphic Design**

Logo Design - LogoBee

**Real Estate**

International Shipping  
Mortgage Calculator  
Moving  
Moving Companies  
Real Estate

**Speakers Bureau**

Motivational Speakers

**Web Services**

Dedicated Servers  
Web Hosting

Local Business Directory

- 401K Plans
- Accounting
- Advertising & Marketing
- Air Charter
- Air Travel
- Annuities
- Answering Services
- Antivirus / Antispam Solutions
- Apartment Loans
- Appliances
- Aquariums
- Architects
- Asphalt / Paving
- Assembly Services
- Asset-Based Finance
- Audio Conferencing
- Auto Accessories
- Auto Financing

**the new economy** blog  

[Home](#) | [About Us/Help](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Archive](#) | [Text](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Make Us Your Home Page](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Rights & Permissions](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Monitor Mall](#) | [Today's Article on Christian Science](#)

www.csmonitor.com | Copyright © 2009 The Christian Science Monitor. All rights reserved.