# Questions for Hal Niedzviecki, author of *The Peep Diaries:* How We're Learning to Love Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors

# In the Peep Diaries, you talk about the shift from pop culture to Peep culture. What is Peep culture?

Peep culture is the evolution of pop culture in our digital age. It's an interactive, grassroots pop culture. Essentially, it's what happens when we entertain ourselves by watching real people do real things, as opposed to watching actors and performers pretend to do real things. Peep culture is YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and Reality TV.

#### So people are watching funny videos on the Internet. What's the big deal?

The big deal is that we are getting used to the idea that our everyday lives are a potential source of entertainment for other people. This causes people to do things they wouldn't normally do, and show things they wouldn't normally show. In the book I talk to a family enticed to go on Reality TV, I talk to bloggers posting the most detailed intimate information about their lives, I talk to middle class suburban women who post naked pictures of themselves to amateur sex sites and revel in the attention they get. People get addicted to the feeling of attention and go further and further into it. But they forget that not everyone watching shares their values and thinks what they're doing is okay. We think it's just fun and games, until it's too late to take it back.

#### What do you mean 'too late to take it back?'

Among other things, people are losing their jobs, becoming alienated from their spouses and family members, finding themselves on the wrong end of a lawsuit and even ending up in jail because of what they're putting out there. We're creating what we think is entertainment, but it's being used in ways that we didn't anticipate by police, teachers, government, corporations and even our neighbors. Once something is posted, we find out that it never goes away and even if it's something we did or said when we were 17 years old, it's going to keep coming up again and again. It could ruin your life. After writing the book, I'm really careful what I put up online. Part of what I want to do with this book is help people realize just how much of what they're doing is being observed by people who don't have their best interests at heart.

#### What about the people who don't post? Who just watch?

Even for those of us who just watch, there are consequences. We start to think of people's lives and problems as entertainment. We watch two girls beating up another girl as if it was a sitcom. There are cases where teenagers have assaulted someone just so they could put the videos up on the Internet. In their mind they weren't necessarily doing something wrong, they were just taking part in this new kind of pop culture. We, the watchers, help create this kind of attitude. We comment on the blogs of other people's lives as if they were

fictional characters. When a young man committed suicide on a live feed, the other people in the chat room laughed and called him a faker and a loser right up until the police came in and covered up the webcam. Peep culture teaches us that we don't need to take any responsibility, we can just sit back and watch it all happen. Maybe pop some popcorn. At one point in the book I started tracking my wife with a GPS device when she left the house. I was amazed how addictive it was, and how entertaining. I wanted to see where she was all the time. And when I couldn't figure out where she was, I wanted more. I wanted to have a video camera on her. We anonymous watchers get used to watching people and we lose our sense of right and wrong, of boundaries.

## Why are we all so addicted to Peep culture?

There are two things going on here. The first is that we all want to experience what it's like to be paid attention to the way we see our celebrities being paid attention to. Celebrities are the height of achievement in our culture, so why wouldn't we want to be noticed in the same way? The other thing is that we're lonely. For most of human life, we lived in tight knit communities where everyone knew everyone, where everyone had a role and a place in society. Even if that role was restricting, it still gave us an identity and a community. Now we're isolated, each of us living in our own box, and there's less and less to define us, to give us purpose. So Peep culture is a way to find the community we feel like we're missing. You put those two things together: the feeling of community and the feeling of celebrity, and you get a phenomenon with incredible power to pull people towards it.

## What about privacy? Don't people worry about that?

Well we don't worry about privacy as much as most people think we do. In the book I make the following argument: As a result of just how lonely and lost we feel, we're increasingly willing to exchange privacy for the opportunity to have others notice us and pay attention to us. I also argue that abandoning your privacy isn't necessarily a bad thing. In many ways, privacy benefits banks and corporations more than it benefits people – you need your house, your yard, your fence, your alarm system, your SUV, your private school for the kids, your private vacation home, your giant screen surround sound entertainment system, your smart phone and iPod – all this stuff to keep people at a distance, to maintain your privacy. Privacy is expensive! Over the last hundred years or so we've gone too far toward privacy at the expense of community. That's why the pendulum is swinging the other way all of a sudden and we're turning to Peep culture.

#### So is Peep culture all bad?

Not at all. There are lots of great things about Peep culture. There's the opportunity to foster and enrich community, the ability to be in contact with people who make you feel less alone, less like a freak. At one point in the book I go to a dinner party attended exclusively by people who post pictures and movies of themselves naked and having sex to a particular website. I couldn't

believe how much community and friendship some of these people had found through this 'hobby'. Other people are trying to harness the power of Peep to do things like clean up troubled neighborhoods or expose men who methodically cheat on women. I challenged myself to start a blog and talk about my personal life and though I struggled to really reveal myself, I was surprised by how validated I felt when people read my posts and responded with supportive comments, ideas and suggestions.

#### Why did you write The Peep Diaries?

Mostly where Peep goes bad is when third parties encourage us to use our private lives as commodities without telling us about what might happen somewhere down the line. The more we find ourselves unwittingly trading our lives for attention, money and goods and services, the more we enter a situation of unexpected consequences. I wrote this book because I don't want the legacy of 21<sup>st</sup> century Peep culture to be surveillance cameras on every block, corporations reselling our every keystroke, and parents putting their children in embarrassing situations so they can post the video to YouTube or sell it to Reality TV.