

**THE  
PEEP  
DIARIES**

**HOW WE'RE LEARNING TO LOVE WATCHING  
OURSELVES AND OUR NEIGHBORS**

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## Introducing Peep Culture

Peeping Tom, a nick name for a curious prying fellow.

—Grose's *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, 1796

overshare (verb): to divulge excessive personal information, as in a blog or broadcast interview, prompting reactions ranging from alarmed discomfort to approval.

—Word of the Year 2008, *Webster's New World Dictionary*

In December of 2008, the editors of *Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus* chose the verb “overshare” as their word of the year. It's a new term—the aforementioned editors describe it as “emerging English.” A weird word for a weird time, the awkward end to an awkward year, and, though it's unlikely to be remembered as such, a potent marker indicating a major cultural shift. In 2008 a dynamic new president of the United States was elected, Apple released the iPhone 3G, and global capitalism teetered, all turning points we won't soon forget. And yet that single ungainly word, “overshare,” may prove to be more significant. For 2008 was the year we unequivocally and unceremoniously ushered in a new era: the Era of Peep Culture.

Peep culture is reality TV, YouTube, Twitter, Flickr, MySpace and Facebook. It's blogs, chat rooms, amateur porn sites, virally spread digital movies of a fat kid pretending to be a Jedi Knight,

cell phone photos—posted online—of your drunk friend making out with her ex-boyfriend, and citizen surveillance. Peep is the backbone of Web 2.0 and the engine of corporate and government data mining. It's like the famous line about pornography: you know it when you see it. And you do see it. All the time, every day, everywhere.

Peep, like the sudden stunning rise of television in the 1950s, seems relatively innocent. Friends connecting. Overly enthusiastic teenagers pushing boundaries. People of all stripes and demographics gathering (virtually) to talk about their lives, likes, dislikes, and problems. But look at what happened with television: Such virtuous fare as *Rin Tin Tin*, *Gunsmoke*, *Father Knows Best*, and *You Bet Your Life* somehow led us to TV dinners, childhood obesity, and bowling alone. In less than a decade, television changed how we ate, socialized, and maybe even thought. Television changed society forever, but while it was happening it was hard to notice. We were too busy transfixed to what TV was showing (as opposed to doing). Elvis gyrated his pelvis, Sputnik pierced space, Cuba was blockaded, and we watched, somehow missing the big story.

It's the same today. While we monitor the overlapping “wars” on “terror,” get close-up views of global warming, and access the intimate details of the lives of celebrities, how we socialize, shop, play, date, mate, and maybe even process information are all undergoing fundamental transformation. But there's nothing in particular to worry about or pay attention to. Kids will be kids, “overshare” is the word of the year, and if you want me, I'll be online, updating my status, posting my book reviews, and uploading videos of my root canal.



The first indication that something new but not yet fully understood has taken root in our society is the sprouting of fresh

vocabulary. That's where we were at the end of 2008: giving tentative names to the swirling miasma of strangely unsettling activities that can all be grouped together under the rubric of "Peep culture." A year to name names, 2008 is behind us now and it's time to ask: What do we really know about the world that these new words, innocent as babes in arms and portentous as armed teenagers, are trying to describe?

Take "overshare." It seems like the perfect (emerging) word. We immediately get it. Sharing is good, right? And so is networking, updating, uploading, tweeting, blogging, friending, messaging, and linking. But oversharing. That's like overdoing it. That's like having so much fun you end up face down in the gutter wearing nothing but your underwear. Sharing is fun, oversharing is even more fun—sometimes too much fun. Dig deeper and we find that a word like "overshare" raises more questions about Peep culture than it answers. Certainly it suggests the way Peep works: creeping in, promising good times, making it easy to say and do things you'd never thought possible, or, when you really stop to think about it, never considered advisable. But it doesn't even begin to tell us why we're suddenly so eager to share. Or who's on the other side, digesting those pictures of our loved ones, those details of our health problems, those lists of our top ten offbeat comedies. And, most importantly, how do we know when we've crossed the line from sharing to oversharing?

Let's move beyond labels. Let's ask ourselves: What are we really talking about here? For starters, there's what I'm calling Peep culture. Throughout this book, I use the term "Peep culture" (or just "Peep") to refer to what I see as a rapidly emerging phenomenon, a cultural movement steeped in and made possible by technological change, though it would be dangerous and foolhardy to dismiss it as a generational trend solely spurred by the arrival of a new array of techno gadgets. Peep is not just the tweens or the twentysomethings any more than it's the millennials, the boomers, the sandwichers, or the generations X, Y, Z. Young people

dabble in Peep without knowing what the implications of their actions will ultimately be. Older generations ponder phenomena like reality TV and social networking, wonder where this seemingly unending narcissistic urge to self-revelation comes from, and then suddenly find themselves with Facebook pages of their own. Though there may be significant generational divides, we're all part of Peep culture. We're all learning to love watching ourselves and our neighbors. Peep's power is that it is widespread and elusive. It's a whispered, hypnotic idea: You need to know. You need to be known. In Peep we feel the cathartic release of confession, the allure and danger of gossip, and the timeless comfort of ritual. When we peer in on each other, we experience the thrill of performance, the purge of the talking cure, the erotic frisson of forbidden sex. Peep culture takes from all those things, but isn't any of them.

If you want to see what Peep looks and feels like, put down this book and turn on your television. (Don't do that: keep reading, watch TV later.) There are hundreds of television shows and at least three channels entirely dedicated to Peep culture. The shows you should watch include game shows (*Moment of Truth*), talent shows (*American Idol*; *America's Next Top Model*), cooking shows (*Hell's Kitchen*), sitcoms (*The Real World*), sci-fi shows (UFO Hunters, Ghost Hunters), detective shows (*Arrest and Trial*, *Dog the Bounty Hunter*), romance shows (*The Bachelor*, *A Shot at Love*), outdoor adventure shows (*Survivor*, *Crocodile Hunter*), home improvement shows (*Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*), travel shows (*The Amazing Race*), soap operas (*The Hills*), dramas (*The Real Housewives of Orange County*), self-help shows (*Intervention*, *Nanny 911*), sports shows (*Bound For Glory*, *American Gladiators*), business shows (*The Apprentice*), and comedies (*The Simple Life*, *The Surreal Life*). The channels you should watch are Fox Reality—"all reality all the time"; TruTV—formally Court TV (new tagline: "not reality, actuality"); and VH1—once MTV's nerdy light-rock-loving cousin but now the go-to channel for

B-list-celebrity reality TV (think of it as MTV's kind of crazy middle-aged aunt).

Now I don't want to give the impression that Peep culture is in any way confined to reality TV. In fact, I want to give the opposite impression: there are three specialty channels and hundreds of shows devoted to reality because Peep is so completely mainstream that it can, like golf, weather, and food, easily support dedicated twenty-four-hour streams of infotainment. I'm starting with reality TV because it's the one example of Peep we can all instantly recognize. The names and formats of the shows may come and go, but the concept—ordinary people watch ordinary people in settings from the domestic to the exotic—stays the same.

Reality TV is the most obvious incarnation of Peep culture, but the predominance of celebrity "news" runs a strong second. Celebrity gossip site PerezHilton.com alone gets 4.5 million hits a day. TMZ.com (founded by Harvey Levin—who made his name reporting on the O. J. Simpson trial—and now run in partnership with AOL) is widely credited for being the first to bring us such media events as the mug-shot photo and details of Mel Gibson's drunk-driving arrest and subsequent anti-Semitic rant; *Seinfeld* star Michael Richard's racist harangue at a comedy club; photographs of the interior of Anna Nicole Smith's "death fridge" stocked with methadone and SlimFast; and, last but not least, the complete audio of the raving answering-machine message that Alec Baldwin left for his eleven-year-old daughter, in which he calls her "a thoughtless little pig." (TMZ poll: Should the judge terminate Baldwin's visitation rights? Yes: 59 percent, no: 41 percent, total votes: 432,818.)

We're not just talking about the tabloid press here. Even the mainstream news media are crazy for this stuff, endlessly reporting on everything from the divorce of Paul McCartney to the possibly Nazi-themed bondage sex orgy of Max Mosley, the Formula One motor racing head, who, in summer 2008, won a judgment

against the tabloid newspaper *News of the World* for parlaying a secretly recorded video into a front-page story and worldwide peeping. (According to his lawyer, Mosley's spanking was viewed 3.5 million times on the paper's Web site and on YouTube.)

All this, plus, of course, the seemingly unending travails of Britney Spears. "Now and for the foreseeable future," says an internal memo penned by Frank Baker, the Los Angeles assistant bureau chief of Associated Press, the venerable wire service, "virtually everything involving Britney is a big deal." The leaked memo, written three days after Spears was released from the hospital in the wake of a much-publicized breakdown, prompted one commentator to respond, "Not a good day for journalism as a discipline." More like not a good *decade* for a discipline that increasingly seems to function as an adjunct to the entertainment industry, which itself is becoming an adjunct to our hunger for a Peep culture that has spread to every conceivable medium and made true Andy Warhol's sardonic pronouncement on the perfect picture—"one that's in focus and of a famous person doing something unfamous."

Our daily lives are punctuated with urgent, expedited revelations regarding the problems of celebrities. Is it surprising, then, that our appetite for other people's issues, our need to be entertained by the "truth," spills off the pages of *People* and into our own lives? We don't need to wait for the next celebrity breakdown or pregnancy to have our fun. Online, in print, and of course on television, folks are openly and happily revealing and discussing their own particular problems, kinks, or lifestyle. This, again, is Peep culture: entertainment derived from peeping into the real lives of others, most of them ordinary, if by "ordinary" we mean not (yet) famous.

The new interactive possibilities of the Web have generated new ways to make our lives public, and more and more of us are trying out Peep. You can dismiss reality and talk TV and celebrity gossip as corporate distractions engineered to keep us happy and

buying stuff while the world sizzles like Krispy Kreme batter in the deep fryer, but how do you explain the many millions who are emulating the tell-all culture of television through everything from blogs to online profiles to video uploads? A Pew Internet & American Life Project report estimated in 2006 that one in every ten adult Americans had a blog. And they weren't including the rapidly expanding cohort of people who use chat rooms and/or sites like YouTube, Blogtv.com, and Justin.tv to show and tell all. Not only are there a lot of blogs, but there are a lot of readers of blogs. The same Pew study concluded that 39 percent of Internet users, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs. Three years later I think it's fair to say that at least 100 million Americans, a solid third of the country, read blogs.

Obviously blog creation and readership is a slippery number, but for our purposes all we really need to know is that these are big numbers, growing numbers, numbers that clearly suggest universal social acceptance: "Ordinary" people want to put their lives into the (mass) mediated environment. And other "ordinary" people want to read about those lives, which is why when you start a blog you never know who's going to read it. For every blog visited by ten, twenty or one hundred people, there are blogs like Jennette Fulda's *Half of Me*, about the Indianapolis woman's commitment to losing weight. Fulda's blog started like all blogs, with little or no readership, but now has almost 50,000 unique visitors a month who follow her attempts to go from 350 to 160 pounds.

And still the number of bloggers pales in comparison to the number of us who are regular users of social networks like MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Reunion, MyYearbook, and LinkedIn. We're talking about over 200 million people with profiles, who every day post status updates, pictures of themselves and their friends, and more. In Canada there are ten million Facebook users, a staggering one-third of the country's population and second only to the thirty million U.S. users, which, though falling

well short of Canada's Facebook obsession, is still a huge number: 10 percent of the entire U.S. population. (As of fall 2008 there were an estimated hundred million or so Facebookers worldwide.) Anyone who's ever lost a few hours clicking on the profile pictures of friends and friends' friends knows what Peep is all about. It's about feeling the hours slipping away as you drift wherever the current takes you. It's about wanting to know everything about everyone and, in turn, wanting to make sure that everyone knows everything about you. As with all things Peep, social networks are addictive and instinctual—why wouldn't you want to make “friends” with the click of button? In an age where parks are replaced by condos and fewer and fewer people know their neighbors, the urge to connect to like-minded people can be incredibly powerful. No wonder there are now social networks for recovering addicts; book lovers; divorcees; people with cats, dogs, and kindergartners; people living with chronic illness; and those who aspire to be on reality TV.

Social networking shares many characteristics with online dating—the posting of profiles, the eagerness to connect, the (often unspoken) promise that disembodied revelation might one day lead to actual physical interaction. So it's no surprise that dating sites continue to do a brisk business as both a way for people to meet and a way for people to peep each other. Popular dating site Plentyoffish.com attracts 600,000 people a day. Jdate.com, a site for Jewish singles, boasts 500,000 regular users, and Ashley-Madison.com, a site for married people on the prowl for discreet affairs, claims 125,000 daily visitors. You may not think of these sites as Peep culture but they are. Your dating profile is inevitably a source of entertainment for other users. I remember hanging out with a friend, recently divorced, who had joined several dating sites. We spent hours reading profiles, looking at pictures, contemplating the mixed messages behind the communiqués sent to him by possibly interested women. In the age of Peep, personals and dating sites are fair game as recreational Web surfing.

So how do you keep in touch with all your new friends, on-line sex partners, and fellow micro-beers-of-the-Pacific-Northwest enthusiasts? You use Twitter, of course. Estimates for this mini-blogging service—that allows people to follow your short updates answering the question “what am I doing right now” via instant message or online—puts current users at around five million people (the Twitter creators don’t make their numbers public). Here’s a sample of the many million “tweets” sent every day: “bbq at amy + rd’s. picking up wine first” (sent by “babiejenks” of Los Angeles, at 2:37 p.m., April 13, 2008). If Twitter’s not your thing, you might consider using relative newcomer Seismic, which merges the brevity of Twitter with the functionality of YouTube to create a network devoted to what it calls “Video Conversation”—basically, people posting very short videos responding to or initiating “conversations” with other users.

It’s no wonder that another exploding Peep service is amalgamating all of your various social networks, blogs, tweets, and other various connective applications into one easy-to-use stream that manages your online presence and those of the friends you follow. There are fifty or more such nascent services, with names like Ping, Lifestream, FriendFeed, Plaxbo, Digbsy, Profilactic (funny!), and the presumably ironic iStalker, which comes with a feature that lets you chart your life on a timeline. The value of Lifestream is ultimately that it’s one-stop shopping for your pals to drop by and peep you. “Lifestream is a media and social aggregator,” reads the accompanying promotional text, “that will keep you and your friends informed about what you’re doing online at a glance and in realtime. With Lifestream you can put all your profiles and activity from your favorite web services on one page, making it easy for your friends to see your newest bookmarks, your favorite videos, your tweets, photos you’ve uploaded, your newest blog posts, and more.”

As the need for Lifestream suggests, more than ever we’re putting everything online, particularly photos and videos. On

sites like Liveleak, RedClouds, VoyeurWeb, Dailymotion, Flickr, Shutterfly, Snapfish, Metacafe, Revver, and Brightcove, billions of images are uploaded and archived, millions more added monthly. Google, owner of YouTube, reports that roughly thirteen hours of content are uploaded to the video storing and sharing service every *minute*. Everything from sober family gatherings to drunken frat parties to kinky amateur sex parties are online all the time for all to see. We are creating public archives of the events of our lives like never before. Our friends and relatives appreciate our generous uploads. But who else is watching? We don't know, and we may not even care. This apparent lack of concern is a major aspect of Peep culture—we're not just, or even primarily, sharing with people we actually know. We're putting material out there for everyone to see. In doing this, we're showing ourselves to be naïve, optimistic, wildly enthusiastic, and more than a bit confused. The thing is, what we post online can and will be used against us. And what we innocently give away to the entire world has a hidden, potential value that most of us can't even imagine.

All these blog posts, images, videos, tweets, dating profiles, and friend updates can be easy to lose track of, which is why in the age of Peep culture we're not shy about searching the Internet for information about friends, coworkers, potential dates, and, really, anybody we want to find out about, including ourselves. Want to know how ingrained Peep culture has already become in our society? I've got one word for you: Google. Several studies have shown that using a search engine is the "solid No. 2" activity "among online tasks after sending and receiving e-mail messages." Sure, we use search engines to find out if a restaurant is recommended or what kind of soil grows the biggest turnips, but more and more we're using online searches to find out about each other. Yet another Pew Internet & American Life study determined that one in three Internet users had looked someone else's name up online and the searches were overwhelmingly for "personal

reasons.” More recently scholar Mark Andrejevic reported that in his own survey of Internet use “more than three-quarters of the respondents” said that they “had used the Internet to search for information about someone they knew.” Half of those people reported that they did searches of that nature more than “several times a year or more.” So who are they looking for? “More than two-thirds of those who said they’d searched for information online indicated they were looking up their friends, and almost two-thirds had looked up information about a current or former significant other.” And why are they researching their friends online? “Several respondents indicated that googling friends online was a form of entertainment born of curiosity, it was just something to do when whiling away the time online.”

It’s getting harder and harder to keep a secret, so why not just go ahead and make your secrets public? A growing number of projects seem to exist exclusively to encourage confession and revelation as a form of entertainment. The “Cringe” and “Mortified” reading series in New York and Los Angeles, respectively, are ongoing events where you can regale a live audience with something embarrassing like a love letter or a diary entry written back when you were a hormone-addled teen. The widely popular series both have books out now, as well, featuring the most cringe-worthy and mortifying samples of hormonal penmanship. Then there are projects like PostSecret (anonymous secrets written on a postcard and sent to a Web site, also now a series of books and a traveling art show), Bar Mitzvah Disco (Web site and book featuring photos and stories about embarrassing seventies Jewish coming-of-age parties) and *Found*, a zine, Web site and book series dedicated to found notes such as “Mario, I fucking hate you, you said you had to work so whys your car here at her place?? You’re a fucking liar, I hate you, I fucking hate you. Amber. P.S. Page me later.”

You can’t make this stuff up. That’s why we’re drawn to it. Again and again, Peep culture shows us how easy it is for reality

to trump fiction. *SMITH Magazine* has started the online site Memoirville, which features various themed “memoirs” that are more like Twitters or blog posts than carefully considered reflections on life lived. The options include the “Six Word Memoir” in which you are charged with the task of telling your story in six words (there’s a book of these titled after one of the submissions: *Not Quite What I Was Planning*). Or you can tell a story about a past relationship: “Everyone has an ex. Spill your guts, search your soul, and tell us all about it. You’ll be glad you did.” Then there’s the invitation to recount “encounters with celebrities”: “Tell us a personal story about an unexpected encounter with a celebrity as he or she entered your world . . . landing, like an alien, without warning.”

The Sausalito, California-based journal *Memoir (and)*, proclaims that memoir is “the genre of the 21st century.” It’s a claim that’s hard to dispute when, in the week I’m writing this, five of the top ten nonfiction hardcover books on the *New York Times* best-seller list are memoirs, including those of Tori Spelling, Julie Andrews, and Valerie Bertinelli, plus a father’s account of his son’s meth addiction, and, the number-one best seller, *Mistaken Identity*, a memoir by the families of two girls whose identities were confused after authorities dealing with a tragic car accident mixed up the victims. All this somehow inevitably leads to the publication in 2008 of not one but two books by white suburban couples in their early forties, both recounting the experience of making and keeping what I’m branding right here and now “the middle-class sex pact.” In *365 Nights: A Memoir of Intimacy*, Charla gives Brad a year of sex for his birthday. In *Just Do It: How One Couple Turned Off the TV and Turned On Their Sex Lives for 101 Days*, hubby Douglas Brown tells us about the pact he and his wife made in 2006 to have sex every day for 101 days. Apparently, after the Browns completed their sex marathon, they went sexless for a month and now average what *People* magazine happily describes as “six to eight trysts monthly.” Naturally one wonders:

which came first, these selfless acts of resurgent intimacy or the book deals and talk show bookings?

Does it matter? In the age of Peep, everyone wants to know everything (and everyone wants everyone else to know everything) about who they are, why they are, and how they are. After the memoir, one of the most notable mainstream cultural trends has been the rise of the documentary as a medium of entertainment/confession/personal revelation. Movies like Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003) have spawned a host of similar projects. These are documentaries that harvest home movies (on video or film) to tell the stories of seemingly normal people. The widespread use of video to capture the forgettable for all time creates immense banks of images to be picked over and turned into high drama, given the right (usually unfortunate) circumstances. Think of Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), a film that employs the personal video-camera footage of a wilderness recluse to tell the harrowing story of his mounting obsession with living in the wild among some of nature's most savage and unpredictable animals. Another must-watch example of the Peep culture documentary is Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004), a breakthrough, low-budget hit, in which a former extreme sports announcer chronicles what happens to his physical and mental health when he sets himself the task of eating only at McDonald's for a solid month. Movies like these made possible a project like Eric Steel's *The Bridge* (2006). In that doc, hidden cameras are used to catch actual suicides in the moments before and after they throw themselves off the Golden Gate Bridge. Though the film played to generally favorable reviews, it was hard not to notice the cat-and-mouse game the filmmakers played with the footage they had of the actual suicides—is that figure we're slowly zooming in on a happy-go-lucky German tourist or a despairing jumper? As one newspaper critic politely put it, "*The Bridge* raises age-old moral and aesthetic questions about the detachment from one's surroundings that gazing through the camera's lens tends to produce."

The same could be said of many of the current generation of Peep documentaries. The 2008 lineup for the Hot Docs film festival in Toronto, one of the world's premier festivals for documentary, was awash in the undertaking of personal journeys that, just coincidentally, happen to occur with the camera on. Randomly picking one day, I see that twenty-three films are playing. Eight of them, or just about one-third of the day's program, are part of what I consider to be Peep culture. For example, there's *Wild Blue Yonder*, in which Celia Maysles explores her acclaimed filmmaking father's absent presence in a "first-person search for answers in images, in the hope they might bring back the dead." Then there's *Second Skin*, which peeps into the lives of those devoted to Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) gaming, including *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*. In the film, "four friends bond and break up; a couple falls in love without meeting; a disabled man grows wings; a gaming addict enters rehab." Then there's *Searching for Sandeep*: "Poppy sends Sandeep a camera and we watch as their virtual long-distance crush blossoms into a very real physical relationship. But they face obstacles greater than the vast oceans that separate them. Sandeep is Sikh, lives at home with her conservative family and, at 31, is still in the closet about her sexuality." Finally, there's a documentary that tells the story of, as the title puts it, *The Art Star and the Sudanese Twins*. It's about New York artist Vanessa Beecroft's attempt to adopt Sudanese twins while making art that tackles the theme of Western neglect of Africa.

As Beecroft's creative choices, life choices, and "true story" merge, so too do the forms of documentary and art. Documentary is increasingly driven by the paradigms of Peep—real-life revelation for the purposes of entertainment and catharsis (entertaining catharsis)—and art is increasingly about turning individual life into a vehicle for self-revelation, narrative reinvention, and, inevitably, entertainment. I know of at least two projects centered around artists taking photographs of everything they've

eaten over the course of a month or a year. London-based Lebanese artist Mona Hatoum has exhibited photos and videos of the interior of her body as a camera is inserted and passed through various orifices. Berlin-based Canadian artist Michelle Teran stages public screenings of CCTV camera feeds showing back alleys and baby's bedrooms. New Jersey art professor Hasan Elah has put more than 20,000 time-stamped photos of himself online after the FBI mistakenly put him on a terrorist watch list. Margot Lovejoy's *Turns*, an online work displayed at the Whitney Museum of American Art, is composed of the contributions of viewers who write essays about important moments in their lives. The essays can, in turn, be sifted through and sorted by viewers, who are invited to add to the project. Finally and decisively, prize-winning German artist Gregor Schneider has proposed putting a dying person on display in a gallery. "The dying person would determine everything in advance, he would be the absolute centre of attention," Schneider told the London *Times*. "Everything will be done in consultation with the relatives, and the public will watch the death in an appropriately private atmosphere." These Peep artists, a small sample of what's out there, suggest not just how much Peep is happening but how much remains yet to be understood, explored, and known about this shift to Peep culture. Artists explore the gaps in culture, the cracks where meanings dissemble, and so it's no accident that they are increasingly attuned to the multiple meanings and endless fragmentation that Peep represents.

Art merges with documentary, documentary becomes more like reality TV, and television becomes more like life. And life? Life, it seems, seeks to become more and more like all of the above. In Peep, life is lived on constant record because you never know when you're going to want to be able to rewind something, see it again, confront a family member, show it to the police, sell it to the highest bidder, or post it on your blog. To assist us with this goal, we are offered a powerful arsenal of Peep products and services.

Most of these products “empower” us to watch each other. In doing so, they undermine trust even among friends and family, and create further demand for services that, in previous eras, would have been both morally and technologically unimaginable.

First, the increasingly ubiquitous nanny cam, which comes embedded in a stuffed animal or a clock radio. You can check in online any time during the day, or review the footage after work, the kids tucked into bed, a cold drink by your side, your slippers feet propped up on the coffee table. Then there are special cell phones for kids that let you monitor who your child is calling and how long they talk. Plus you have the option of preventing undesirables from calling or being called, by blocking their numbers. Thanks to your monitoring, it’s likely that your child will safely turn sixteen and apply for a driver’s license. Now it’s time to buy a GPS device that tracks where the family car goes, how fast it goes, and if there’s erratic or dangerous driving. You can set this device to notify you if the car leaves a certain area or pulls onto a “forbidden” highway. Of course you’ll want to know what your kids are up to: did they drink, do drugs, see that boy they’re forbidden to get within 100 miles of? Why not pick up a portable lie detector device like the Handy Truster, a \$99 portable “voice-stress analyzer.” “Is she cheating on you?” the online advertising asks. “Is he really working late? What are your kids really doing?” And it goes without saying that you’ll want to drop \$50 on PC Pandora, a program that takes a screen capture of the computer it’s surreptitiously installed on every fifteen seconds. Particularly handy for getting your hands on your kids’ hidden passwords. Finally, your safety and security are not assured until you spend \$65 on Advanced Spy, “a hi-tech tool that will help you to monitor and record all activities on your computer. Perfect for monitoring spouses, children, co-workers, or anyone else!”

Not all Peep products and services involve quasi-spying. A growing number of them, as with Twitter and Facebook, are more about consensual peeping. Loopt, offered by Sprint Nextel

and available on Apple's iPhone, lets those in the mostly college crowd who use it see the locations of friends who also have the service and have agreed to share their whereabouts. They appear as dots on a map on your cell phone, with labels identifying your buddies' names so you can tell who's at the bar, who's getting their hair done, and who's staying home with a good book. (What book? Check their list on GoodReads or Facebook, or see if they've added anything to their Amazon.com reading wish list.) With Loopt safely ensconced on iPhone, around a million people are now using the service. And there's reason to suspect that more will sign up: almost 55 percent of all mobile phones sold today in the United States come equipped with the technology necessary to enable tracking services.

Obviously this explosion of new products is made possible by technological innovation, specifically those gizmos, gadgets, and programs that enable us to become increasingly integrated into wireless networks. Less obvious are the social forces that have led to our rapid adoption of Peep ideas and services. Peep emerges, at least in part, from our increasing and ongoing desire to adopt the mantle of celebrity and try out life lived in front of and for an audience. This desire has been slowly but inevitably merging with the notion that we are somehow safer when under surveillance, and that there's little or no downside to helping corporations and governments serve us better by allowing them to store and analyze our preferences and personal details. Meanwhile, the more we're encouraged to reveal ourselves, the more we're becoming used to being observed constantly and perpetually—whether by surveillance cameras on the street, our friends, our employers, or the banks, telephone companies, and ISPs that make our interconnected mass-mediated lives possible. And so we are increasingly tangled in the web of Peep. Are we the spiders or their prey?

One thing we know for sure: Peep culture is infectious. To come in contact with it is to be overcome with the urge to want

to see everything and, in turn, want other people to see *our* everything. In this way we restate the terms of privacy, community, individuality, and even society. Even as we hide in gated communities and cancel out the world via the preprogrammed earbuds of our cell phone/MP3 players, we show and tell all on our blog, our various “my pages,” in the photos and videos we upload, on television, and anywhere where else we can think of. Peep culture is human nature gone digital and electronic—which makes it both all-inclusive and dangerously instantaneous. Despite all the navel gazing, this is not primarily, or even necessarily, a culture of reflection. It happens too fast, and it’s too addictive, and we’re all part of it whether we like it or not, whether we think about it or not. Peep culture’s rapid propagation and allure are rooted in the electronic grid that makes seemingly instantaneous pop culture possible, but, like all major cultural shifts, it’s more about radical change to society than it is about what we’re actually watching, reading, or recording. Peep coalesces the sensibility of twenty-first-century techno society into a never-ending spectacle of bodies and souls bared in the name of entertainment, self-betterment, and instantaneous recognition. Peep is a portal into a collective consciousness no longer content to sit on the sidelines and watch: We want to *do*.

But do we really know what we’re doing? Once upon a time we were taught to avert our eyes, not electronically enhance them. We were taught that spying, peering, and peeking in on people, is no way to behave. For centuries, the legend of Peeping Tom has offered a cautionary tale to that effect. When Lady Godiva rode naked through the town in a bid to convince her husband to lower taxes on the peasants, all the townspeople were ordered to avert their eyes and had the good sense to do so. All except the tailor Tom, who was promptly struck dead, or struck blind, or tarred, feathered, and excommunicated. Well, you get the idea. Since then, poor Tom’s been held up as the example, the go-to nickname for curious prying fellows who like to watch.

The story of Peeping Tom coalesced into fable in the 1700s, though its origins are thought to be in Lady Godiva's Coventry around the turn of the first millennium. In other words, this is a thousand-year-old story, an enduring parable with an obvious, helpful moral: "Creeps who peep get what they deserve." But today we're apt to feel for poor Tom: He just wanted to get a little peek. What's so wrong about that? And obviously the good Lady Godiva, the medieval equivalent of the celebrity who arrives at the movie launch gala sans undergarments, wanted someone to see her. Why else tell us not to look? Anyway, she was lucky (or unlucky by the public relations standards of today) that Tom wasn't wielding a Handycam set to instant YouTube upload. Juxtapose the seemingly ancient definition of "Peeping Tom" with a new vocabulary of verbs like "overshare" and "Google," not to mention the exploding cyber hobby of amateur online nude posing (more on that later), and you get the ultimate culture clash.

Today we're all happily peeping away, seemingly free of social approbation. Governments, corporations, friends, and family all tell us (for different reasons) that it's okay to peer over the fence and see what's going on with the neighbors, particularly if what the neighbors are up to could in any way be construed as scandalous, scurrilous, seditious, or sexual—something entertaining enough to attract the millions of viewers up for grabs. Meanwhile, the neighbors are doing what they're doing precisely because they know that they are being watched. Just as we are willing voyeurs—no one forced us to look—they are willing performers. The voyeurs (us) and the people we're watching (us) are two groups acting together in cybernetic harmony, each one encouraging the other, neither stopping to think about what's happening and why.

When a thousand-year prohibition is readily cast aside, it's probably a good idea to wonder how that happened and what it means for the future of our society. What has transformed us into so many Peeping Toms? And will we, too, get our peeping

comeuppance? The hidden forces pushing us toward Peep culture are also pushing us toward a new, unexplored, and in many cases unintended society. It's a culture of instant judgment, stolen innocence, and mass delusion, a culture that threatens to assign a price tag to every secret, scandal, and crime, every seemingly commonplace domestic moment. But it's also a culture of immense possibility, a culture of potentially widespread democracy and equality. Like Lady Godiva, we're innocently and optimistically baring our bodies and souls, not out of prurience but because we want to do good—we seek to connect, communicate, commiserate. But the difference between us and Lady G. is that we aren't ordering our fellow townspeople to stay inside and avert their eyes. We're begging them to look. Even better, take a picture. It's a difference replete with ramifications. Suddenly all things once sacred and private—from religious ceremonies to acts of copulation, to the last moments of life itself—are to be observed and consumed. This results in fundamental changes to our lives. Put a camera on something, introduce an audience, however small, and it's no longer what it once was. So what is it—and who are we now?



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