



CHAPTER ONE

THE ABSENCE OF PRIVACY ON A GLOBAL SCALE

“The Internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow.”

—Bill Gates, Founder of Microsoft

Humanity is in the beginning stages of an information revolution which is dramatically changing the way people learn about each other. If a person needs to know something about someone, they no longer turn to a private investigator, they turn to their favorite search engine. This socially accepted behavior has introduced a new and unique problem that humankind has not yet seen or dealt with before: the absence of privacy on a global scale.

The Internet has allowed the average person to find out about people as though they were next door neighbors, from thousands of miles away behind the warm glow of a computer monitor. In turn, they are judging people based on very limited information assembled from the Internet, regardless of the truthfulness of that information. In a 2006 study by ExecuNet, 77% of executive recruiters use the

Internet to research job candidates. Thirty-five percent of candidates were eliminated based on the search results. That was in 2006 and its only gotten worse since.

Who Are You Online?: Why It Matters and What You Can Do About It! is a how-to guide for people navigating the perfect social storm created by the Internet. Rather than seeing the Internet as a problem, people need to use the Internet as an opportunity to achieve goals such as career aspirations, new relationships, protection from slander, and educational goals amongst others. *Who Are You Online?: Why It Matters and What You Can Do About It!* shows you the way.

THE INTERNET AND ITS TRANSFORMING EFFECT ON OUR LIVES

Ladies and Gentlemen, stop the presses. I have an earth-shattering proclamation for you. It's the most important bit of knowledge you will ever learn in your lifetime. Without further ado. Can I get a drum roll please? Dadadadadadada.... It's official, the Internet is here to stay!

Impossible! Inconceivable!! He's out of his gourd!!!! I paid \$39.99 for this book and this is what I learned!!!! Before you run back to your local bookstore, I promise, it gets better. This tidbit of information is the premise on which this book is written. If the Internet were going away, who would care about who they were online. The Internet is here to stay is the one and only simple truth about the Internet.

"The Internet is here to stay" conveys exactly how permanent of a fixture the Internet has quickly become in our lives. Not long before the dotcom crash of 2000, people were predicting the downfall of the Internet. While many of pets.coms' failed, (sites which really had no chance of survival), the critics of the Internet were wrong. The Internet hasn't gone anywhere and rather, it is thriving. It's get-

ting harder and harder to name areas where the Internet can't impact your life. Need to eat? Order a pizza at the click of a button. Looking for love? Look no further than online dating sites. Need to check references on a baby-sitter? Become their friend on Facebook. Need to get tickets to a concert? Skip the box office and go online. Need to find a rare part for a 1957 Chevrolet Bel-Aire Convertible? View the inventory of a thousand junk yards from your garage. When you really think about it, when was the last time you used a travel agent, the phone book, the card catalogue system at the library, or heaven forbid an encyclopedia? Chances are, it has been a long time.

How many times a day do you access the Internet? Furthermore, how many times do you think, "I need to look that up on the Internet"? If you don't know how to use the Internet, how often are you told to "look it up online" or to "send an e-mail" instead of calling them? No matter who you are, you can't escape the reach of the Internet.

There is no debate as to whether or not the Internet will survive in the 21st century. The real question is, will you survive the 21st century? You might be asking yourself, "Why wouldn't I survive the 21st century?" Well the long and short of it is the ability to survive and thrive with life-changing technology. Life is changing rapidly now and from the looks of things, we have barely seen the tip of the iceberg. As an example of the speed of change, modern innovations such as Internet browsers, MP3 players, GPS units, and digital cameras didn't exist in 1990 and now it's hard to imagine life without them.

With any innovation, it changes our lives. Most of the time, change is quite positive. With digital cameras, we can take as many pictures as we want to without incurring the expenses like we used to with regular film cameras. Furthermore, at the same time we don't have to develop pictures anymore. We can simply e-mail them. Yet at the same time, technology has made it easier for people who commit heinous acts to work more efficiently. Scam artists, identity thieves, pedophiles, stalkers, robbers, all have access to the Internet. With a powerful tool like the Internet, you are going to find there is the ability to do great things, while at the same time the Internet can be used for

insidious purposes. When it comes to our personal lives, the Internet can be used to showcase who we are and what we desire out of this life. The challenge for this generation and the ones to come is to harness the power of the Internet and use it for good.

The Internet has been one of mankind's greatest innovations. As a convergence of multiple technologies, the Internet has amazing capabilities and carries with it the promise of transforming all aspects of interaction with other people. The Internet has brought with it a whole new range of expected skills a person has to have on the job. As the Internet generation moves further into the workforce, the skills required to use the technology will be an essential job skill. Knowledge workers will need to use the Internet to find information on the things they are working on. Marketers will need the Internet to track trends and target niche markets. HR specialists will use the Internet to profile and do background checks on job candidates.

The largest impact to your life in the 21st century will be the interconnectivity the Internet brings. The interconnectivity of the Internet has changed the rules of most aspects of our lives. In order to be a part of the evolving society, adaptation is required to utilize the tools being built for everyday living. Failure to adapt and use the Internet will be very detrimental to a career which will depend on use of the Internet. To be able to adapt, you will need to learn new skills which show your ability to interact with other people in a digital manner.

From a social point of view, the Internet is transforming our lives in many positive ways. People are able to find love who previously could not. People are able to gather with groups of people who share their viewpoints as well as read opposing viewpoints. Acceptance of using the Internet for social means is growing. From dating to using it as a gathering place for friends, society is becoming more accepting of the Internet as a tool for social interaction.

Back in 1997 when I met my wife online, I was embarrassed to admit that we met on AOL. In fact, we told a lot of people we met at church. When they inevitably would press for more information, we feigned embarrassment and admitted to meeting online. Of course,

we were very quick to point out we never dated over the Internet. That being said, the mere fact that we met on the Internet raised a few eyebrows and questions about building a relationship with someone over the Internet. At the time we were pioneers. We paved the way for future generations to meet online. Now, everyone and their dog seem to be meeting online. (Seriously, have you tried looking for your next puppy online? There are puppy websites everywhere.) The social stigma about the using the Internet for everything is leaving as rapidly as online dating sites (and puppy sites) are appearing.

While the social use of the Internet has brought about positive changes for social interaction, it has also brought out a darker side of interaction. As people use the Internet for social interaction, many of their activities are recorded for later consumption. That type of social interaction would be fine if what you wrote on the Internet was only seen by the intended parties. However, the Internet is becoming a massive reference check station for anyone who cares to use it in that fashion. With relative anonymity, you can search for anything and everyone you want to, unless of course, you live in a country which filters Internet searches.

Nevertheless, as individuals turn to the Internet for information more and more in their personal lives, they are going to find information about other people on the Internet. Increasingly as people you interact with find information about you they are using it to make decisions about you. The decisions people are making range from whether or not you get an interview, to whether or not you are marriage material. Often when people have limited information about you, they will tend to make the wrong decision. Have you ever been asked in an in a job interview, "So is it difficult being Jewish?" With a follow up question regarding your sexuality, "do your orthodox parents know you are gay?" Chances are you haven't been asked those questions and for a reason. Not only do they have no bearing whatsoever on how you will perform on the job, they are discriminatory and illegal (at least in more developed countries). The reason you haven't been asked these questions are because they could be the basis for a lawsuit against the company, and yet people will publish this informa-

tion about themselves willingly and all the time. Yet they still wonder why they can't seem to figure out why the trail went cold on a job opportunity or why people eventually find out about some of the information they like to keep private in work settings.

THE UNINTENTIONAL LOSS OF PRIVACY

We, as a people, are just barely learning how to use the Internet and our new found interconnectivity. Most people see the Internet as a means of getting shopping done or transacting business. Socially, we have started communicating with each other over social networking web sites. As an information gathering tool, we have started to use the Internet to find out information about things we don't know. For instance, companies are starting to monitor blogging to see how their product is perceived. But we still have just scratched the surface of what is possible in an interconnected world.

Imagine the possibilities of the world of tomorrow in an Internet connected home. Imagine how great it would be if your home could tell you what you needed to buy at the grocery store. Or better still, your home could analyze what you tend to use in a two week period and could arrange for the grocery store to deliver the items you need for the next two weeks. Or even better yet, your home could do diet planning for you. It could be connected to your toilet and analyze your nutritional needs. Your home could figure out the optimal diet for you to maintain your perfect weight. And what if your dentist could talk with your home and see how often you really floss? (OK, when did this turn into a scenario from hell?) While this is all technically possible today, the largest deterrent to this scenario is not the expense required, it's the potential loss of privacy. There would be high incentive for criminals to hack your home. If they could hack your home, all of the sensors required for your home to be fully interactive with you could be used to monitor you. Imagine if someone

could listen into everything that was said in your house. What if your employer could monitor everything you said about them and then act on what they heard and saw? It wouldn't take long for most of us to be out a job except for me, because I never bad mouth anybody when I am at home.

Now imagine if you will, that it didn't take an act of crime for someone to spy in on your home to see what and who you are in your private life. What if you could choose to publicly display your life for your friends and family, or anyone else who stumbles across your Internet feed? Would you broadcast your home life over the Internet? Of course you wouldn't. Your home is your sanctuary. Putting what goes on in our home life in the Internet makes as little sense as putting our private lives on public display. Yet, putting private lives on public display is exactly what many people are doing as they create personal blogs, online journals, and haphazardly use social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. What's worse is people aren't stopping at documenting and posting the lurid details of their lives, they're taking us all under at the same time. By posting details of their life, if you happen to be one of their friends or family members, you can get included in their postings.

So why is this happening? Surely people are aware of the consequences of their actions. In most cases, people are aware what they do can have repercussions. People are smart enough to know what to say in front of their employer and what not to say in front of their employer. Those of us who don't know how to behave are taught by having an employer fire or likewise reprimand them. The problem with the Internet is all of us are still adapting to the technology. As we adapt to technology, we will experiment with the technology to see how it can solve the problems we all face every day. With experimentation, we will make mistakes from time to time, which is how a lot of us learn. The biggest mistake private individuals have made to date is thinking that they are anonymous on the Internet.

ANONYMITY ON THE INTERNET

The belief that people think they are anonymous on the Internet is fueled by people thinking the Internet is vast and huge, and they are a small player on the Internet. Further, the belief is backed up by the thought that only the people they want to see their information have access or would seek out that information.

Yet, the belief that you can keep yourself off the Internet is a myth. There are too many players who can contribute to the knowledge that can be found on the Internet. You, your friends, your enemies, your family members, the organizations you associate with have the ability to contribute and put information about you out on the Internet. Yet people still behave as if they are invisible on the Internet. People will post “funny” write-ups about themselves for the people in their social circles. Yet they do not realize that everything that is posted with their name on it can easily be associated with them. It’s like the person who picks their nose while driving in their car down the road. Sure it’s a disgusting habit, but people do it in their car because they feel as if they have anonymity. They think no one is looking, never mind the fact, that all of their actions are on public display and people are looking.

Almost all news articles which cite stories of people being fired from stuff found on MySpace or Facebook contain the sentiment, “I didn’t think anyone reads my blog” or “Why would people care what I have to say” or “It was just a joke”. The fact is, that many people, including your employer, care what you have to say. Just ask Bob Namechanged. He was fired from a major big box store for integrity issues for writing the following on his MySpace page, “Drop a bomb on all the big box stores, trailer parks, ghettos, monster truck shows, and retarded fake ‘pro wrestling’ events, and the average I.Q. score would probably double.”

Funny, maybe. Maybe not. It depends on whether or not you believe the stereotype that all people who shop at this particular big box store, live in the ghettos and trailer parks or attend truck shows

have low I.Q. It was enough for his employer to feel like they could fire him for cause. After all, why would the big box store want to offend its customer base? Where Bob, and most people like him went wrong was making the joke in the first place. Secondly, in today's world, Bob made a mistake by assuming that he had the anonymity or the deniability he needed to make statements like that. Had Bob made the comment to a coworker in passing, it likely would not been enough to fire him since it would be Bob's word against his co-worker's word. Unfortunately for him, he recorded his comic thought on his MySpace page which was easily reproduced by the big box store. He failed to realize that when you associate yourself with a comment that can be reproduced it is difficult to argue against it.

There should be no doubt in your mind that your employer, people you work with, and people who know you are turning to the Internet to find information about you and those around you. Sure they might not tell you they've been snooping in your business. Societal norms prevent people from telling you that they have been poking around in your personal life, but rest assured you've been searched for more than once. This prying leads us to a place where privacy and separation between all aspects of our lives no longer exist. Yet, the Internet provides information about you and those around you all of the time to people willing to look for it. And the sad part is, the skill level required to find this information decreases daily. Furthermore, there are more things available to find as more content is published about you. Better yet, the tools to find the information are being refined, and in most cases, improved.

Many people believe they can hide behind the protections offered by the websites they subscribe to. For example, many people will say that with the protections offered by sites like Facebook and MySpace, they are safe. And to some extent they are right. They have the capability to lock their profile down to only the people they give access to see their profile. In theory, this lock down on their profile should protect people from the dangers of putting information out on the Internet but often it does not.

Yet, what happens when the people whom you have entrusted with the information found on your MySpace or Facebook page use that information against you? Let me tell you a little story about Darla Madeupname. Darla, was an employee of a grocery store chain in Canada. Darla, along with 186 other people became a fan of a group on Facebook dedicated as a gathering place for current and past grocery chain store employees. When one of the group's fans, brought the postings of Darla to the attention of management of this grocery chain store, Darla was promptly fired. Never mind the fact that Darla had been given several raises and a promotion in the few years she had been with the company.

What Darla wrote online isn't important and neither is why the company fired her. What is important is Darla thought she had anonymity because someone couldn't find this information by using a search engine. In order to access this information a person has to subscribe to these groups. This often gives people a false sense of security. Unfortunately for Darla, the people she interacted with provided management with access to this private information. By interacting with people on the internet, Darla gave away the ability to remain anonymous.

It would be one thing if you were the only person who would put information about you on the Internet. In that case, it might actually be possible to keep yourself anonymous on the Internet. However, you aren't the only player when it comes to keeping information about you off the Internet. People and organizations that are associated with you somehow, can write all about you and post it on their website at anytime. Depending on what is put out about you on the Internet has the ability to help or harm you. With every new post on a blog or on a post on a Facebook or MySpace page, information about you on the Internet has the potential to grow. The days of avoiding the Internet are rapidly decreasing. You seemingly won't be able to hide.

WHY PEOPLE ARE SEARCHING FOR YOU?

Chances are you run into people you barely know all the time. So why not pry a little when you don't know someone very well? It sure is easy to find information if it is out on the web. The ability to attain knowledge on your own has never been easier. We are able to find out the who, what, when, where, why and how of almost anything. The best and somewhat troubling part is it is getting easier to do so. While there can be a strong argument made about the reliability of the information which can be found on the Internet, it only matters which information people discern as credible.

Moreover, it has become common practice for people to re-search the unknown. When we travel to a new place, the information you need to make better decisions awaits you on the Internet. Twenty years ago, the inability to find information usually gave an excuse for misdeeds such as going on a date with a psycho or not researching a company before a job interview. Now, researching on the Internet is the expected practice before meeting with someone you don't know or going to a job interview.

This trend of easier access to information will continue to the point where finding the right information on the Internet is as second nature as breathing. Back in 1995, search engines weren't very good at finding you the right information. Crafty web site owners were able to manipulate search engine results and thus searching often resulted in crappy results with lots of links to porn sites.

Now, Google has rewritten the rules of the game for search engine technology. With improved search technology, people are starting to get to the information they seek. Usually the difficulty resides in the user for providing too broad or too narrow search terms. People search for each other for a multitude of reasons. The term "Googling" has been coined to mean to search for someone or something. (Kudos to Google for making themselves into a verb.) When you "google" someone you are attempting to find all of the available information about that person so you can make an informed judgment about them.

Some search out of curiosity, others search to protect themselves, some search to verify the truthfulness of what they're being told.

While the practice of "Googling" might be considered an invasion of privacy at worst and prying at best, it is becoming accepted as a societal norm. Someday real soon, it will be just what you do before and after you meet someone. Even if people won't admit to searching for information about you, because of the anonymity the Internet has, it doesn't have to be socially accepted. It can happen all the time and I'm here to tell you that it is happening right now and at increasing pace. You can thank the trends of the early 2000s for that.

SOMETHING HAS CHANGED SINCE 2003, ENTER WEB 2.0

Over the course of the last five years, we have seen explosive growth in the social aspect areas of the Internet. Socializing on the Internet exposes your private life in a public medium. Whether it's Facebook, your personal blog, or your children's blog, there are so many ways that you can be exposed on the Internet. But the damage doesn't stop there. As companies ask you to socialize on their websites by soliciting comments or content from you, you are contributing further to your online reputation. Better still, the companies use your comments to sell product, allowing those remarks to live forever (at least until they are no longer useful). You can do quite a bit of damage to your reputation long before you realize what you have done.

Don't blame the companies for the destruction of your online reputation. Those companies have a good reason for doing it. They want to make their websites more useful to you and other customers. The focus of many companies' efforts in the early part of the 21st century will be to make the Internet experience richer through user involvement. To facilitate the tools necessary for user involvement, enter the concept called Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is not an upgrade, per se to the Internet. Rather, Web 2.0 is a trend of what companies are trying

to do to make their customers interact more with their website.

Companies aren't going to do you any favors when it comes to protecting your online image. Companies have realized that user involvement adds value to their Internet endeavors. The more people that use the user interactivity features, the higher the value for the company. In return, the company creates loyal customers by appearing to value the opinion of their customers. While most companies have seen the explosive success of the social networking sites on the Internet, they have learned the lesson and figured out how to take advantage of the social networking trend for regular websites. Companies now provide you with a way to interact on their website. If the company sells product, you can read and write reviews of products for sale on their websites. If the company writes articles, you can comment on those articles.

Web 2.0's focus is user involvement. The websites which are built for the sole purpose of user involvement are referred to as social networking websites. These companies center on photo sharing, video, networking, and blogging websites. Publishing to these media types, especially video, would have been almost next to impossible for an average user a few years back, now can be accomplished with the click of a button. Through innovation and the advent of new classes of product, the ability to publish video and photos has never been easier.

Social networking companies like Facebook, YouTube, and MySpace are driving people to publish content in droves. It works for the social networking companies because all they need to do is provide the tools with which people can interact with one another. It works for you because you get free space on some fun technology. It can be quite enjoyable to catch up with old friends, or make new ones which is why these technologies have really taken hold.

However, the tools the social networking companies provide would be worthless without you. In fact, the more outrageous things these companies can get you to do on their technology, the more value you add to their community. For instance, consider the case of Chris Crocker, and his "Leave Britney alone" video. While most of us agree that Britney Spears should be left alone, his video was a bit over the

top in support of leaving Britney alone. We rushed in droves to view the videos and even the spoofs of the videos on YouTube. You can bet YouTube wasn't complaining about all the bandwidth his video was eating up on their servers. Not to say that these companies like it if you make a fool out of yourself, but they are not going to stop you.

Additionally, companies which provide services to you like social networking, want you to tell all about yourself. Now you might ask, well why would the company care about my interests and my demographic information? The answer is simple, money from targeted advertising. The better the company knows you, the better they are able to put ads in front of you which you will actually pay attention to. The better these companies can match up ads that people will look at, the better the company can get paid from advertisers. Think of how valuable knowing your romantic relationship status is to people who want to market a singles website. Now, what if they knew you were looking for a relationship. The advertisers would practically trip all over themselves to get an ad in front of you.

While providing the most private details of our lives might be fine for the companies' marketing efforts, the fact of the matter is they are not going to stop you from putting information on the Internet which could hurt you. Rather, they want anything and everything you will provide them. Unfortunately, when a person starts putting information like religion or sexual orientation out on the Internet it can impact their life. As was the case with a Las Vegas Catholic school teacher who was fired for posting he was gay on his MySpace page. In this case, it was enough to prove that he acted contrary to the beliefs of the Church which is why he was dismissed. For the Catholic school teacher, the Web 2.0 technology burned him badly.

The focus of web 2.0 technologies is to increase user involvement through collaboration with tools such as message boards, social networking, and blogs. The industry has signaled that it intends to provide the tools necessary to support the Web 2.0 demands of the Internet community as a whole. Further, the Internet community has welcomed Web 2.0 technologies with open arms. So I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for these technologies to go away.

ADAPTATION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING

The Internet generation, people born after 1975, has been very quick to adapt to using Web 2.0 technologies, like social networking. Seemingly, the younger you are the more likely you are to have a Facebook or MySpace account. In a study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project towards the end of 2006, found that 55% of teens age 12-17 have created profiles online. But a closer look at the statistic shows the 15-17 age range had 64% of teens with profiles with 70% of teenage girls age 15-17 having profiles on social networking websites. But social networking is not just a teenage fad. Over 80% of MySpace users are over 18, and the fastest growing demographic of users is the 30-plus demographic. As a society we have embraced social networking with open arms. We have allowed ourselves to write about what is on our minds at any time with no regard to the impact on our online image.

Most of the recent press has demonized social networking because of the inherent risks involved. It is not that social networking websites are inherently evil. In fact, social networking sites are a good way for people to connect. Unfortunately, it is when people put up things that could hurt them in their future endeavors. In a study done by the University of Florida focusing on its 800 medical students and their use of Facebook, the University of Florida found about half of its (362) medical students had a Facebook page. Of those that had a Facebook account, only 37% (134) of the students, turned on the basic privacy feature which would block their profile from being publicly viewable. That means 228 future doctors had private information available publicly on the Internet. What they did find however, was how loose the would-be doctors (over 50%) were with their private information. The would-be doctors published their political opinions, sexual orientation, and drinking habits all over their public facing Facebook pages. I don't know about you, but I for one don't want to go to a doctor who is on the sauce when they are deciding if I am having a heart attack or a bad case of indigestion.

FALL OUT OF WEB 2.0

What we are starting to see are the ramifications of a very public, private life. To some segments of the population, this is nothing new. Celebrities have dealt with tabloids exposing the most intimate details of their private life for years. As such, celebrities have learned to avoid the spotlight and when they do have a problem, to involve someone who can do damage control. For the average John Q. Public, the consequences of exposing their private life on the Internet is starting to sink in. As firings over social networking, blogs, and websites increase, people are responding by pulling back on use of the available technology.

There are several high profile cases where people have been fired for blogging, but what we are seeing is the tip of a very large iceberg. Most employment discrimination that occurs because of what is published on the Internet goes unannounced. It happens before any interview ever takes place. Any organization, company, or person which has a selective process for candidate evaluation (employment, college admission, dating, etc.) is going to use the Internet to assist in the decision making process. People are going to soon learn that their misdeeds of the past are going to cost them dearly when they attempt to reach their goals unless they change their approach to the Internet.

To date, most of the discussion in the Online Image Management community has been about prevention and/or recovery of unfavorable content. So in effect, people are attempting to become anonymous by removing themselves from the Internet through prevention and recovery methods.

The focus on keeping yourself anonymous, as best as possible, is misguided. In a world where all of us can be researched on the Internet, not having a presence can be worse than remaining anonymous. Over the course of time, the societal expectation will be that you can get a good feel for who someone is by viewing who they are online. If you can't view information about that individual, the

assumption will be that you are a nobody, you have no professional connections, or you have provided a false identity. It will be difficult for you to succeed in an increasingly smaller world. Even if you were to successfully hide, which I know is somewhat doubtful; it probably wouldn't be the best course of action for you. It's quickly becoming a catch-22 for many people wishing to remain anonymous and wanting to be part of society. However it doesn't have to be.

SUMMING IT ALL UP

People are using the Internet to find out about anything and anyone. Don't blame people for causing you this headache, chances are you've done it too. What you need to be asking yourself is, "how am I going to react and adapt to this new reality?" The focus of how to use the Internet from the individual perspective needs to shift from seeing the Internet as your enemy to using the Internet as a tool to help you separate yourself from the pack, in a good way. Controlling how you appear on the Internet will help you reach the goals you desire. As time marches on, it will not be optional to control how you appear on the Internet, it will be expected.

Embracing the Internet and effectively portraying yourself on the Internet for the world to see will be the critical social skill of the 21st century.