

Will Technology Return Shame to Our Society?



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*The sex police are out there on the streets
Make sure the pass laws are not broken*

Undercover (of the Night), The Rolling Stones

So, now we know that browsing porn in “incognito” mode doesn’t prevent those sites from leaking your dirty data courtesy of the friendly folks at Google and Facebook. 93 per cent of porn sites leak user data to a third party. Of these, Google tracks about 74 per cent of the analyzed porn sites, while Oracle tracks nearly 24 per cent sites and Facebook tracks nearly 10 per cent porn sites. Yet, despite such stats, 30 per cent of all internet traffic still relates to porn sites.

The hacker who perpetrated the enormous Capital One data beach outed herself by oversharing on GitHub. Had she been able to keep her trap shut, we’d probably still not know that she was in our wallets. Did she want to get caught, or was she simply unashamed of having stolen a Queen’s ransom worth of financial data?

Many have lamented that shame (along with irony, truth and proper grammar) is dead. I disagree. I think that shame has been on the outward leg of a boomerang

trajectory fueled by technology and is accelerating on the return trip to whack us noobs in the back of our unsuspecting heads.

Technology has allowed us to do all sorts of stuff privately that we used to have to muster the gumption to do in public. Buying Penthouse the old-fashioned way meant you had to brave the drugstore cashier, who could turn out to be a cheerleader at your high school or your Mom's PTA friend. Buying the Biggie Bag at Wendy's meant enduring the disapproving stares of vegans buying salads and diet iced tea. Let's not even talk about ED medication or baldness cures.

All your petty vices and vanity purchases can now be indulged in the sanctity of your bedroom. Or so you thought. There is no free lunch, naked or otherwise, we are coming to find. How will society respond?

Country music advises us to dance like no one is watching and to love like we'll never get hurt. When we are alone, we can act closer to our baser instincts. This is why privacy is protective of creativity and subversive behaviors, and why in societies without privacy, people's behavior regresses toward the most socially acceptable responses. As my partner Ted Claypoole wrote in *Privacy in the Age of Big Data*,

"We all behave differently when we know we are being watched and listened to, and the resulting change in behavior is simply a loss of freedom - the freedom to behave in a private and comfortable fashion; the freedom to allow the less socially -careful branches of our personalities to flower. Loss of privacy reduces the spectrum of choices we can make about the most important aspects of our lives.

By providing a broader range of choices, and by freeing our choices from immediate review and censure from society, privacy enables us to be creative and to make decisions about ourselves that are outside the mainstream. Privacy grants us the room to be as creative and thought-provoking as we want to be. British scholar and law dean Timothy Macklem succinctly argues that the "isolating shield of privacy enables people to develop and exchange ideas, or to foster and share activities, that the presence or even awareness of other people might stifle. For better and for worse, then, privacy is a sponsor and guardian to the creative and the subversive."

For the past two decades we have let down our guard, exercising our most subversive and embarrassing expressions of id in what we thought was a private space. Now we see that such privacy was likely an illusion, and we feel as if we've been somehow gas lighted into showing our noteworthy bad behavior in the disapproving public square.

Exposure of the Ashley Madison affair-seeking population should have taught us this lesson, but it seems that each generation needs to learn in its own way.

The nerds will, inevitably, figure out how to continue to work and play largely unobserved. But what of the rest of us? Will the pincer attack of the advancing surveillance state and the denizens of the Dark Web bring shame back as a

countervailing force to govern our behavior? Will the next decade be marked as the New Puritanism?

Dwight Lyman Moody, a predominant 19th century evangelist, author, and publisher, famously said, "Character is what you are in the dark." Through the night vision goggles of technology, more and more of your neighbors can see who you really are and there are very few of us who can bear that kind of scrutiny. Maybe Mick Jagger had it right all the way back in 1983, when he advised "Curl up baby/Keep it all out of sight." Undercover of the night indeed.

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