



NEW YORK
nymag.com

 **PRINT THIS**

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

FEATURES

Say Everything

As younger people reveal their private lives on the Internet, the older generation looks on with alarm and misapprehension not seen since the early days of rock and roll. The future belongs to the uninhibited.

By [Emily Nussbaum](#)



Yeah, I am naked on the Internet,” says Kitty Ostapowicz, laughing. “But I’ve always said I wouldn’t ever put up anything I wouldn’t want my mother to see.”

She hands me a Bud Lite. Kitty, 26, is a bartender at Kabin in the East Village, and she is frankly adorable, with bright-red hair, a button nose, and pretty features. She knows it, too: Kitty tells me that she used to participate in “ratings communities,” like “nonuglies,” where people would post photos to be judged by strangers. She has a MySpace page and a Livejournal. And she tells me that the Internet brought her to New York, when a friend she met in a chat room introduced her to his Website, which linked to his friends, one of whom was a photographer. Kitty posed for that photographer in Buffalo, where she grew up, then followed him to New York. “Pretty much just wanted a change,” she says. “A drastic, drastic change.”

Her Livejournal has gotten less personal over time, she tells me. At first it was “just a lot of day-to-day bulls**t, quizzes and

stuff,” but now she tries to “keep it concise to important events.” When I ask her how she thinks she’ll feel at 35, when her postings are a Google search away, she’s okay with that. “I’ll be proud!” she says. “It’s a documentation of my youth, in a way. Even if it’s just me, going back and Googling myself in 25 or 30 years. It’s my self—what I used to be, what I used to do.”

We settle up and I go home to search for Kitty’s profile. I’m expecting tame stuff: updates to friends, plus those blurry nudes. But, as it turns out, the photos we talked about (artistic shots of Kitty in bed or, in one picture, in a snowdrift, wearing stilettos) are the least revelatory thing I find. In posts tracing back to college, her story scrolls down my screen in raw and affecting detail: the death of her parents, her breakups, her insecurities, her ambitions. There are photos, but they are candid and unstylized, like a close-up of a tattoo of a butterfly, adjacent (explains the caption) to a bruise she got by bumping into the cash register. A recent entry encourages posters to share stories of sexual assault anonymously.

Some posts read like diary entries: “My period is way late, and I haven’t been laid in months, so I don’t know what the f*** is up.” There are bar anecdotes: “I had a weird guy last night come into work and tell me all about how if I were in the South Bronx, I’d be raped if I were lucky. It was totally unprovoked, and he told me all about my stupid generation and how he fought in Vietnam, and how today’s Navy and Marines are a bunch of p*****s.” But the roughest material comes in her early posts, where she struggles with losing her parents. “I lost her four years ago today. A few hours ago to be precise,” she writes. “What may well be the worst day of my life.”

Talking to her the night before, I had liked Kitty: She was warm and funny and humble, despite the “nonuglies” business. But reading her Livejournal, I feel thrown off. Some of it makes me wince. Much of it is witty and insightful. Mainly, I feel bizarrely protective of her, someone I’ve met once—she seems so exposed. And that feeling makes me feel very, very old.

Because the truth is, at 26, Kitty is herself an old lady, in Internet terms. She left her teens several years before the revolution began in earnest: the forest of arms waving cell-phone cameras at concerts, the MySpace pages blinking pink neon revelations, Xanga and Sconex and YouTube and Lastnightsparty.com and Flickr and Facebook and del.icio.us and Wikipedia and especially, the ordinary, endless stream of daily documentation that is built into the life of anyone growing up today. You can see the evidence everywhere, from the rural 15-year-old who records videos for thousands of subscribers to the NYU students texting come-ons from beneath the bar. Even 9-year-olds have their own site, Club Penguin, to play games and plan parties. The change has rippled through pretty much every act of growing up. Go through your first big breakup and you may need to change your status on Facebook from “In a relationship” to “Single.” Everyone will see it on your “feed,” including your ex, and that’s part of the point.

HEY NINETEEN

It’s been a long time since there was a true generation gap, perhaps 50 years—you have to go back to the early years of rock and roll, when old people still talked about “jungle rhythms.” Everything associated with that music and its greasy, shaggy culture felt baffling and divisive, from the crude slang to the dirty thoughts it was rumored to trigger in little girls. That musical divide has all but disappeared. But in the past ten years, a new set of values has sneaked in to take its place, erecting another barrier between young and old. And as it did in the fifties, the older generation has responded with a disgusted, dismissive squawk. It goes something like this:



Kids today. They have no sense of shame. They have no sense of privacy. They are show-offs, fame whores, pornographic little loons who post their diaries, their phone numbers, their stupid poetry—for God’s sake, their dirty photos!—online. They have virtual friends instead of real ones. They talk in illiterate instant messages. They are interested only in attention—and yet they have zero attention span, flitting like hummingbirds from one virtual stage to another.

“When it is more important to be seen than to be talented, it is hardly surprising that the less gifted among us are willing to fart our way into the spotlight,” sneers Lakshmi Chaudhry in the current issue of *The Nation*. “Without any meaningful standard by which to measure our worth, we turn to the public eye for affirmation.”

Clay Shirky, a 42-year-old professor of new media at NYU’s Interactive Telecommunications Program, who has studied these phenomena since 1993, has a theory about that response. “Whenever young people are allowed to indulge in something old people are not allowed to, it makes us bitter. What did we have? The mall and the parking lot of the 7-Eleven? It sucked to grow up when we did! And we’re mad about it now.” People are always eager to believe that their behavior is a matter of morality, not chronology, Shirky argues. “You didn’t behave like that because nobody gave you the option.”

None of this is to suggest that older people aren’t online, of course; they are, in huge numbers. It’s just that it doesn’t come naturally to them. “It is a constant surprise to those of us over a certain age, let’s say 30, that large parts of our life can end up online,” says Shirky. “But that’s not a behavior anyone under 30 has had to unlearn.” Despite his expertise, Shirky himself can feel the gulf growing between himself and his students, even in the past five years. “It used to be that we were all in this together. But now my job is not to demystify, but to get the students to see that it’s strange or unusual at all. Because they’re soaking in it.”

One night at Two Boots pizza, I meet some tourists visiting from Kansas City: Kent Gasaway, his daughter Hannah, and two of her friends. The girls are 15. They have identical shiny hair and Ugg boots, and they answer my questions in a tangle of upspeak. Everyone has a Facebook, they tell me. Everyone used to have a Xanga (“So seventh grade!”). They got computers in third grade. Yes, they post party pictures. Yes, they use “away messages.” When I ask them why they’d like to appear on a reality show, they explain, “It’s the fame and the—well, not the fame, just the whole, ‘Oh, my God, weren’t you on TV?’”

After a few minutes of this, I turn to Gasaway and ask if he has a Web page. He seems baffled by the question. “I don’t know why I would,” he says, speaking slowly. “I like my privacy.” He’s never seen Hannah’s Facebook profile. “I haven’t gone on it. I don’t know how to get into it!” I ask him if he takes pictures when he attends parties, and he looks at me like I have three heads. “There are a lot of weirdos out there,” he emphasizes. “There are a lot of strangers out there.”

There is plenty of variation among this younger cohort, including a set of Luddite dissenters: “If I want to contact someone, I’ll write them a letter!” grouses Katherine Gillespie, a student at Hunter College. (Although when I look her up online, I find that she too has a profile.) But these variations blur when you widen your view. One 2006 government study—framed, as such studies are, around the stranger-danger issue—showed that 61 percent of 13-to-17-year-olds have a profile online, half with photos. A recent pew Internet Project study put it at 55 percent of 12-to-17-year-olds. These numbers are rising rapidly.

It’s hard to pinpoint when the change began. Was it 1992, the first season of *The Real World*? (Or maybe the third season, when cast members began to play to the cameras? Or the seventh, at which point the seven strangers were so media-savvy there was little difference between their being totally self-conscious and utterly unself-conscious?) Or you could peg the true beginning as that primal national drama of the Paris Hilton sex tape, those strange weeks in 2004 when what initially struck me as a genuine and indelible humiliation—the kind of thing that lost former Miss America Vanessa Williams her crown twenty years earlier—transformed, in a matter of days, from a shocker into no big deal, and then into just another piece of publicity, and then into a kind of power.



But maybe it’s a cheap shot to talk about reality television and Paris Hilton. Because what we’re discussing is something more radical if only because it is more ordinary: the fact that we are in the sticky center of a vast psychological experiment, one that’s only just begun to show results. More young people are putting more personal information out in public than any older person ever would—and yet they seem mysteriously healthy and normal, save for an entirely different definition of privacy. From their perspective, it’s the extreme caution of the earlier generation that’s the narcissistic thing. Or, as Kitty put it to me, “Why not? What’s the worst that’s going to happen? Twenty years down the road, someone’s gonna find your picture? Just make sure it’s a great picture.”

And after all, there is another way to look at this shift. Younger people, one could point out, are the only ones for whom it seems to have sunk in that the idea of a truly private life is already an illusion. Every street in New York has a surveillance camera. Each time you swipe your debit card at Duane Reade or use your MetroCard, that transaction is tracked. Your employer owns your e-mails. The NSA owns your phone calls. Your life is being lived in public whether you choose to acknowledge it or not.

So it may be time to consider the possibility that young people who behave as if privacy doesn’t exist are actually the sane people, not the insane ones. For someone like me, who grew up sealing my diary with a literal lock, this may be tough to accept. But under current circumstances, a defiant belief in holding things close to your chest might not be high-minded. It might be an

artifact—quaint and naïve, like a determined faith that virginity keeps ladies pure. Or at least that might be true for someone who has grown up “putting themselves out there” and found that the benefits of being transparent make the risks worth it.

Shirky describes this generational shift in terms of pidgin versus Creole. “Do you know that distinction? Pidgin is what gets spoken when people patch things together from different languages, so it serves well enough to communicate. But Creole is what the children speak, the children of pidgin speakers. They impose rules and structure, which makes the Creole language completely coherent and expressive, on par with any language. What we are witnessing is the Creolization of media.”

That’s a cool metaphor, I respond. “I actually don’t think it’s a metaphor,” he says. “I think there may actually be real neurological changes involved.”

CHANGE 1: THEY THINK OF THEMSELVES AS HAVING AN AUDIENCE

I’m crouched awkwardly on the floor of Xiyin Tang’s Columbia dorm room, peering up at her laptop as she shows me her first blog entries, a 13-year-old Xiyin’s musings on Good Charlotte and the perfidy of her friends. A Warhol Marilyn print gazes over our shoulders. “I always find myself more motivated to write things,” Xiyin, now 19, explains, “when I know that somebody, somewhere, might be reading it.”

From the age of 8, Xiyin, who grew up in Maryland, kept a private journal on her computer. But in fifth grade, she decided to go public and created two online periodicals: a fashion ’zine and a newsletter for “stories and novellas and whatnot.” In sixth grade, she began distributing her journal to 200 readers. Even so, she still thought of this writing as personal.

“When I first started out with my Livejournal, I was very honest,” she remembers. “I basically wrote as if there was no one reading it. And if people wanted to read it, then great.” But as more people linked to her, she became correspondingly self-aware. By tenth grade, she was part of a group of about 100 mostly older kids who knew one another through “this web of MySpacing or Livejournal or music shows.” They called themselves “The Family” and centered their attentions around a local band called Spoot. When a Family member commented on Xiyin’s entries, it was a compliment; when someone “Friended” her, it was a bigger compliment. “So I would try to write things that would not put them off,” she remembers. “Things that were not silly. I tried to make my posts highly stylized and short, about things I would imagine people would want to read or comment on.”

Since she’s gone to college, she’s kept in touch with friends through her journal. Her romances have a strong online component. But lately she’s compelled by a new aspect of her public life, what she calls, with a certain hilarious spokeswoman-for-the-cause affect, the “party-photo phenomenon.” Xiyin clicks to her Facebook profile, which features 88 photos. Some are snapshots. Some are modeling poses she took for a friend’s portfolio. And then there are her MisShapes shots: images from a popular party in Tribeca, where photographers shoot attendees against a backdrop. In these photos, Xiyin wears eighties fashions—a thick belt and an asymmetrical top that give me my own high-school flashback—and strikes a world-weary pose. “To me, or to a lot of people, it’s like, why go to a party if you’re not going to get your picture taken?”

Among this gallery, one photo stands out: a window-view shot of Xiyin walking down below in the street, as if she’d been snapped by a spy camera. It’s part of a series of “stalker photos” a friend has been taking, she informs me: He snaps surreptitious, paparazzi-like photos of his friends and then uploads them and “tags” the images with their names, so they’ll come across them later. “Here’s one where he caught his friend Hannah talking on the phone.”

Xiyin knows there’s a scare factor in having such a big online viewership—you could get stalked for real, or your employer could bust you for partying. But her actual experience has been that if someone is watching, it’s probably a good thing. If you see a hot guy at a party, you can look up his photo and get in touch. When she worked at American Apparel, management posted encouraging remarks on employee MySpace pages. A friend was offered an internship by a magazine’s editor-in-chief after he read her profile. All sorts of opportunities—romantic, professional, creative—seem to Xiyin to be directly linked to her willingness to reveal herself a little.

When I was in high school, you’d have to be a megalomaniac or the most popular kid around to think of yourself as having a fan base. But people 25 and under are just being realistic when they think of themselves that way, says media researcher Danah Boyd,

who calls the phenomenon “invisible audiences.” Since their early adolescence, they’ve learned to modulate their voice to address a set of listeners that may shrink or expand at any time: talking to one friend via instant message (who could cut-and-paste the transcript), addressing an e-mail distribution list (archived and accessible years later), arguing with someone on a posting board (anonymous, semi-anonymous, then linked to by a snarky blog). It’s a form of communication that requires a person to be constantly aware that anything you say can and will be used against you, but somehow not to mind.

This is an entirely new set of negotiations for an adolescent. But it does also have strong psychological similarities to two particular demographics: celebrities and politicians, people who have always had to learn to parse each sentence they form, unsure whether it will be ignored or redound into sudden notoriety (Macaca!). In essence, every young person in America has become, in the literal sense, a public figure. And so they have adopted the skills that celebrities learn in order not to go crazy: enjoying the attention instead of fighting it—and doing their own publicity before somebody does it for them.

CHANGE 2: THEY HAVE ARCHIVED THEIR ADOLESCENCE

I remember very little from junior-high school and high school, and I’ve always believed that was probably a good thing. Caitlin Oppermann, 17, has spent her adolescence making sure this doesn’t happen to her. At 12, she was blogging; at 14, she was snapping digital photos; at 15, she edited a documentary about her school marching band. But right now the high-school senior is most excited about her first “serious project,” caitlinoppermann.com. On it, she lists her e-mail and AIM accounts, complains about the school’s Web censors, and links to photos and videos. There’s nothing racy, but it’s the type of information overload that tends to terrify parents. Oppermann’s are supportive: “They know me and they know I’m not careless with the power I have on the Internet.”

As we talk, I peer into Oppermann’s bedroom. I’m at a café in the West Village, and Oppermann is in Kansas City—just like those Ugg girls, who might, for all I know, be linked to her somehow. And as we talk via iChat, her face floats in the corner of my screen, blonde and deadpan. By swiveling her Webcam, she gives me a tour: her walls, each painted a different color of pink; storage lockers; a subway map from last summer, when she came to Manhattan for a Parsons design fellowship. On one wall, I recognize a peace banner I’ve seen in one of her videos.

I ask her about that Xanga, the blog she kept when she was 12. Did she delete it?

“It’s still out there!” she says. “Xanga, a Blogger, a Facebook, my Flickr account, my Vimeo account. Basically, what I do is sign up for everything. I kind of weed out what I like.” I ask if she has a MySpace page, and she laughs and gives me an amused, pixellated grimace. “Unfortunately I do! I was so against MySpace, but I wanted to look at people’s pictures. I just really don’t like MySpace. ‘Cause I think it’s just so ... I don’t know if *superficial* is the right word. But plastic. These profiles of people just parading themselves. I kind of have it in for them.”

Oppermann prefers sites like Noah K Everyday, where a sad-eyed, 26-year-old Brooklyn man has posted a single photo of himself each day since he was 19, a low-tech piece of art that is oddly moving—capturing the way each day brings some small change. Her favorite site is Vimeo, a kind of hipster YouTube. (She’s become friends with the site’s creator, Jakob Lodwick, and when she visited New York, they went to the Williamsburg short-film festival.) The videos she’s posted there are mostly charming slices of life: a “typical day at a school,” hula-hooping in Washington Square Park, conversations set to music. Like Oppermann herself, they seem revelatory without being revealing, operating in a space midway between behavior and performance.

At 17, Oppermann is conversant with the conventional wisdom about the online world—that it’s a sketchy bus station packed with pedophiles. (In fact, that’s pretty much the standard response I’ve gotten when I’ve spoken about this piece with anyone over 39: “But what about the perverts?” For teenagers, who have grown up laughing at porn pop-ups and the occasional instant message from a skeezy stranger, this is about as logical as the question “How can you move to New York? You’ll get mugged!”) She argues that when it comes to online relationships, “you’re getting what you’re being.” All last summer, as she bopped around downtown Manhattan, Oppermann met dozens of people she already knew, or who knew her, from online. All of which means that her memories of her time in New York are stored both in her memory, where they will decay, and on her site, where they will not, giving her (and me) an unsettlingly crystalline record of her seventeenth summer.

Oppermann is not the only one squirreling away an archive of her adolescence, accidentally or on purpose. “I have a logger program that can show me drafts of a paper I wrote three years ago,” explains Melissa Mooneyham, a graduate of Hunter College. “And if someone says something in instant message, then later on, if you have an argument, you can say, ‘No, wait: You said *this* on *this* day at *this* time.’”

As for that defunct Xanga, Oppermann read it not long ago. “It was interesting. I just look at my junior-high self, kind of ignorant of what the future holds. And I thought, *You know, I don’t think I gave myself enough credit: I’m really witty!*” She pauses and considers. “If I don’t delete it, I’m still gonna be there. My generation is going to have all this history; we can document anything so easily. I’m a very sentimental person; I’m sure that has something to do with it.”

CHANGE 3: THEIR SKIN IS THICKER THAN YOURS

The biggest issue of living in public, of course, is simply that when people see you, they judge you. It’s no wonder Paris Hilton has become a peculiarly contemporary role model, blurring as she does the distinction between exposing oneself and being exposed, mortifying details spilling from her at regular intervals like hard candy from a piñata. She may not be likable, but she offers a perverse blueprint for surviving scandal: Just keep walking through those flames until you find a way to take them as a compliment.

This does not mean, as many an apocalyptic op-ed has suggested, that young people have no sense of shame. There’s a difference between being able to absorb embarrassment and not feeling it. But we live in a time in which humiliation and fame are not such easily distinguished quantities. And this generation seems to have a high tolerance for what used to be personal information splashed in the public square.

Consider Casey Serin. On Iamfacingforeclosure.com, the 24-year-old émigré from Uzbekistan has blogged a truly disastrous financial saga: He purchased eight houses in eight months, looking to “fix ’n’ flip,” only to end up in massive debt. The details, which include scans of his financial documents, are raw enough that people have accused him of being a hoax, à la YouTube’s Lonelygirl15. (“ForeclosureBoy24,” he jokes.) He’s real, he insists. Serin simply decided that airing his bad investments could win him helpful feedback—someone might even buy his properties. “A lot of people wonder, ‘Aren’t you embarrassed?’ Maybe it’s naïve, but I’m not going to run from responsibility.” Flaming commenters don’t bug him. And ironically, the impetus for the site came when Serin was denied a loan after a lender discovered an earlier, friends-only site. Rather than delete it, he swung the doors open. “Once you put something online, you really cannot take it back,” he points out. “You’ve got to be careful what you say—but once you say it, you’ve got to stand by it. And the only way to repair it is to continue to talk, to explain myself, to see it through. If I shut down, I’m at the mercy of what other people say.”

Any new technology has its victims, of course: the people who get caught during that ugly interregnum when a technology is new but no one knows how to use it yet. Take “Susie,” a girl whose real name I won’t use because I don’t want to make her any more Googleable. Back in 2000, Susie filmed some videos for her then-boyfriend: she stripped, masturbated, blew kisses at the Webcam—surely just one of many to use her new computer this way. Then someone (it’s not clear who, but probably her boyfriend’s roommate) uploaded the videos. This was years before YouTube, when Kaazaa and Morpheus ruled. Susie’s films became the earliest viral videos and turned her into an accidental online porn star, with her own Wikipedia entry.

When I reached her at work, she politely took my information down and called back from her cell. And she told me that she’d made a choice that she knew set her outside her own generation. “I never do MySpace or Facebook,” she told me. “I’m deathly afraid to Google myself.” Instead, she’s become stoic, walling herself off from the exposure. “I’ve had to choose not to be upset about it because then I’d be upset all the time. They want a really strong reaction. I don’t want to be that person.”

She had another option, she knows: She could have embraced her notoriety. “I had everyone calling my mom: Dr. Phil, Jerry Springer, *Playboy*. I could have been like Paris Hilton, but that’s not me. That thing is so unlike my personality; it’s not the person I am. I guess I didn’t think it was real.” As these experiences become commonplace, she tells me, “it’s not going to be such a big deal for people. Because now it’s happened to a million people.”

And it's true that in the years since Susie's tapes went public, the leaked sex tape has become a perverse, established social convention; it happens at every high school and to every B-list celebrity. At Hunter College last year, a student named Elvin Chaung allegedly used Facebook accounts to blackmail female students into sending him nude photos. In movies like *Road Trip*, "oops porn" has become a comic convention, and the online stuff regularly includes a moment when the participant turns to the camera and says, "You're not going to put this online, are you?"

But Susie is right: For better or worse, people's responses have already begun to change. Just two years after her tapes were leaked, another girl had a tape released on the Internet. The poster was her ex, whom we'll call Jim Bastard. It was a parody of the MasterCard commercial: listing funds spent on the relationship, then his "priceless" revenge for getting dumped—a clip of the two having sex. (To the casual viewer, the source of the embarrassment is somewhat unclear: The girl is gorgeous and the sex is not all that revealing, while the boy in question is wearing socks.) Then, after the credits, the money shot: her name, her e-mail addresses, and her AIM screen names.

Like Susie, the subject tried, unsuccessfully, to pull the video offline; she filed suit and transferred out of school. For legal reasons, she wouldn't talk to me. But although she's only two years younger than Susie, she hasn't followed in her footsteps. She has a MySpace account. She has a Facebook account. She's planned parties online. And shortly after one such party last October, a new site appeared on MySpace: seemingly a little revenge of her own. The community is titled "The Society to Chemically Castrate Jim Bastard," and it features a picture of her tormentor with the large red letters loser written on his forehead—not the most high-minded solution, perhaps, but one alternative to retreating for good.

Like anyone who lives online, Xiyin Tang has been stung a few times by criticism, like the night she was reading BoredatButler.com, an anonymous Website posted on by Columbia students, and saw that someone had called her "pathetic and a whore." She stared at her name for a while, she says. "At first, I got incredibly upset, thinking, *Well now, all these people can just go Facebook me and point and form judgments.*" Then she did what she knew she had to do: She brushed it off. "I thought, *Well, I guess you have to be sort of honored that someone takes the time to write about you, good or bad.*"

I tell Xiyin about Susie and her sex tape. She's sympathetic with Susie's emotional response, she says, but she's most shocked by her decision to log off entirely. "My philosophy about putting things online is that I don't have any secrets," says Xiyin. "And whatever you do, you should be able to do it so that you're not ashamed of it. And in that sense, I put myself out there online because I don't care—I'm proud of what I do and I'm not ashamed of any aspect of that. And if someone forms a judgment about me, that's their opinion.

"If that girl's video got published, if she did it in the first place, she should be thick-skinned enough to just brush it off," Xiyin muses. "I understand that it's really humiliating and everything. But if something like that happened to me, I hope I'd just say, well, that was a terrible thing for a guy to do, to put it online. But I did it and that's me. So I am a sexual person and I shouldn't have to hide my sexuality. I did this for my boyfriend just like you probably do this for your boyfriend, just that yours is not published. But to me, it's all the same. It's either documented online for other people to see or it's not, but either way you're still doing it. So my philosophy is, why hide it?"

FUTURE SHOCK

For anyone over 30, this may be pretty hard to take. Perhaps you smell brimstone in the air, the sense of a devil's bargain: Is this what happens when we are all, eternally, onstage? It's not as if those fifties squares griping about Elvis were wrong, after all. As Clay Shirky points out, "All that stuff the elders said about rock and roll? They pretty much nailed it. Miscegenation, teenagers running wild, the end of marriage!"

Because the truth is, we're living in frontier country right now. We can take guesses at the future, but it's hard to gauge the effects of a drug while you're still taking it. What happens when a person who has archived her teens grows up? Will she regret her earlier decisions, or will she love the sturdy bridge she's built to her younger self—not to mention the access to the past lives of friends, enemies, romantic partners? On a more pragmatic level, what does this do when you apply for a job or meet the person you're going to marry? Will employers simply accept that everyone has a few videos of themselves trying to read the Bible while

stoned? Will your kids watch those stoner Bible videos when they're 16? Is there a point in the aging process when a person will want to pull back that curtain—or will the MySpace crowd maintain these flexible, cheerfully thick-skinned personae all the way into the nursing home?

And when you talk to the true believers, it's hard not to be swayed. Jakob Lodwick seems like he shouldn't be that kind of idealist. He's Caitlin Oppermann's friend, the co-founder of Vimeo and a co-creator of the raunchy CollegeHumor.com. Lodwick originated a popular feature in which college girls post topless photos; one of his first online memories was finding Susie's videos and thinking she seemed like the ideal girlfriend. But at 25, Lodwick has become rather sweetly enamored of the uses of video for things other than sex. His first viral breakthrough was a special-effects clip in which he runs into the street and appears to lie down in front of a moving bus—a convincing enough stunt that MSNBC, with classic older-generation cluelessness, used it to illustrate a segment about kids doing dangerous things on the Internet.

But that was just an ordinary film, he says: no different from a TV segment. What he's really compelled by these days is the potential for self-documentation to deepen the intimacy of daily life. Back in college, Lodwick experimented with a Website on which he planned to post a profile of every person he knew. Suddenly he had fans, not just of his work, but of him. "There was a clear return on investment when I put myself out there: I get attention in return. And it felt good." He began making "vidblogs," aiming his camera at himself, then turning it around to capture "what I'd see. I'd try to edit as little as possible so I could catch, say, a one-second glimpse of conversation. And that was what resonated with people. It was like they were having a dream that only I could have had, by watching this four or five minutes. Like they were remembering my memories. It didn't tell them what it was like to hang out with me. It showed them what it was like to be me."

This is Jakob's vision: a place where topless photos are no big deal—but also where everyone can be known, simply by making him- or herself a bit vulnerable. Still, even for someone like me who is struggling to embrace the online world, Lodwick's vision can seem so utopian it tilts into the impossible. "I think we're gradually moving away from the age of investing in something negative," he muses about the crueller side of online culture. "For me, a fundamental principle is that if you like something, you should show your love for it; if you don't like it, ignore it, don't waste your time." Before that great transition, some Susies will get crushed in the gears of change. But soon, he predicts, online worlds will become more like real life: Reputation will be the rule of law. People will be ashamed if they act badly, because they'll be doing so in front of all 3,000 of their friends. "If it works in real life, why wouldn't it work online?"

If this seems too good to be true, it's comforting to remember that technology always has aftershocks. Surely, when telephones took off, there was a mourning period for that lost, glorious golden age of eye contact.

Right now the big question for anyone of my generation seems to be, endlessly, "Why would anyone do that?" This is not a meaningful question for a 16-year-old. The benefits are obvious: The public life is fun. It's creative. It's where their friends are. It's theater, but it's also community: In this linked, logged world, you have a place to think out loud and be listened to, to meet strangers and go deeper with friends. And, yes, there are all sorts of crappy side effects: the passive-aggressive drama ("you know who you are!"), the shaming outbursts, the chill a person can feel in cyberspace on a particularly bad day. There are lousy side effects of most social changes (see feminism, democracy, the creation of the interstate highway system). But the real question is, as with any revolution, which side are you on?