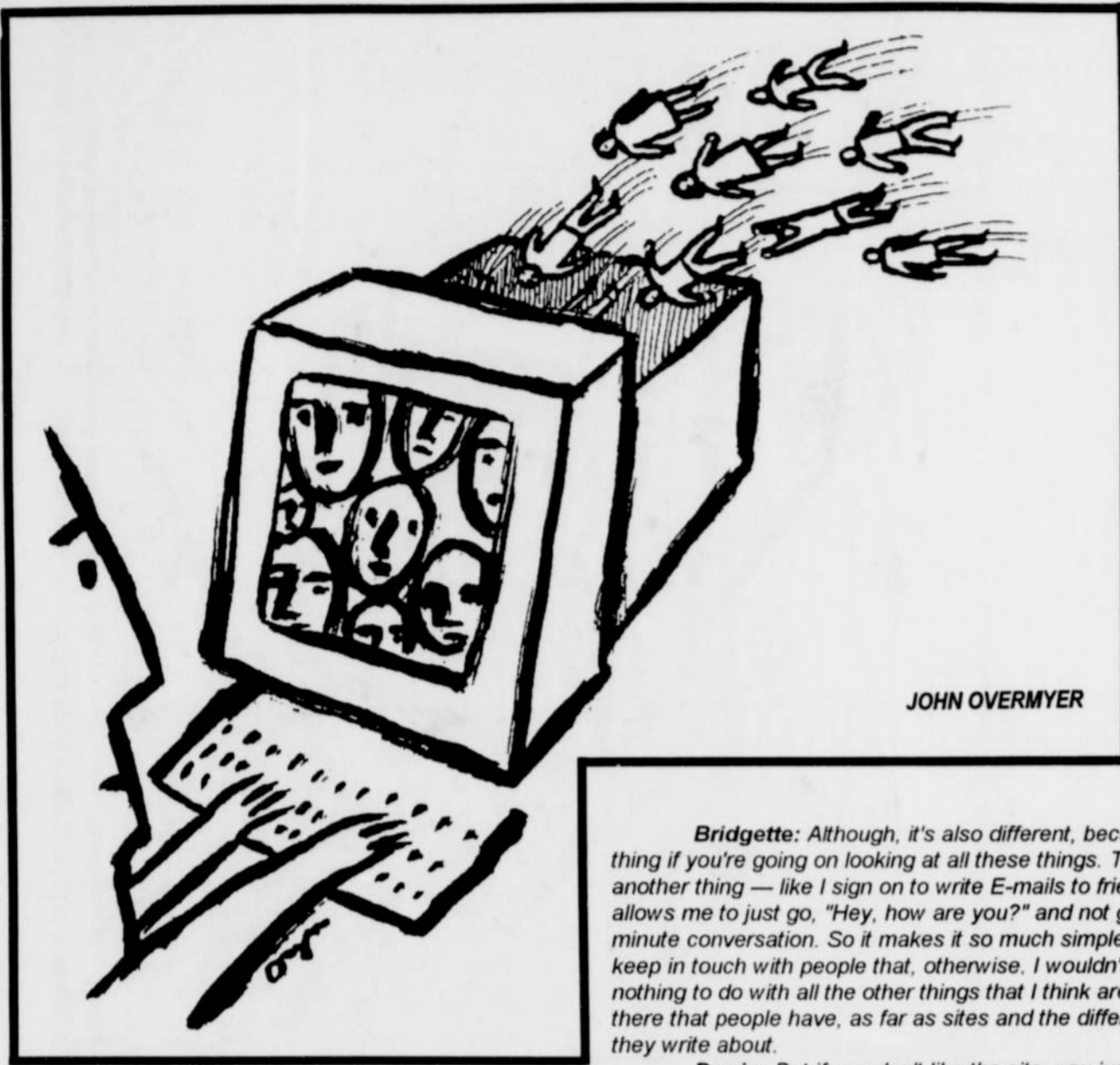


CONFESSIONS OF AN ONLINE DIARIST



BY JUDITH GRIFFIS

Around the time my ex-husband and I moved to Oregon in 1988, I started reading *The Whole Earth Review*. They made references to the 'WELL', or 'Whole Earth' Electronic Link, an early, and apparently primarily Deadhead, version of the Internet. They also published frequent articles on Jaron Lanier and his work as a developer of Virtual Reality. The WELL intrigued me. VR made me fume. Thanks for doing the CIA's work for them, I thought — someday we will be unable to tell whether the world in front of us is real or fake, and you will have a big hand in it.

The ever-increasing presence of computers and the development of the Internet as a substitute for face-to-face human interaction worried me greatly for a long time, and so did its capacity to destroy privacy by means of insecure and infinitely reproducible electronic files. Over time, though, I needed literary resources that I just did not have without it, so I gave in — I bought a computer and went online. By that time, I had long since begun to see the whole of the 'reality' that lies before me as open to question in innumerable ways, whether the military/industrial complex has anything to do with it or not. And the Internet has developed into a fascinating place to witness a mode of strangeness that may or may not be 'real' in the form of the group mind in action.

By 'group mind' I mean what used to be called the 'collective unconscious' by Jungians; I say "used to" because, while it previously existed on a level that was subliminal for most people, the Internet sector of it is now becoming more and more self-aware and sophisticated because the individuals who comprise it can communicate more freely and at the same time more precisely than any of us could ever have imagined just a few years ago. So while some may still refer to it as 'unconscious', have they been paying attention?

These thoughts were slowly turning themselves over in my mind when I ran across a news item at the *www.diarist.net* Web site a few weeks ago. They quoted some rather hostile remarks about personal Web pages and online diarists that were made during an episode of the ABC television show *Politically Incorrect* (with Bill Maher). I followed the link *diarist.net* provided to the transcript of the broadcast. Here are the remarks in full:

Bill: Okay, well — so, now, I thanked you. First of all, you paid \$47,000. You must be doing awfully well in your day job.

Darrin: I do very well.

Bill: Whatever that is. You're a model and a financial planner.

Darrin: Correct

(Laughter)

Bill: And that's what people want in their financial planner — abs. (Laughter) Any way, what we did is we auctioned off this seat on the Internet, as people know, and you paid \$47,000 for it. And I'm not trying to be picky here, but, you know, I'm not an Internet guy. Mostly I think — and this sort of feeds into my point — is because I think it's about ego, the Internet. I think it's about people just wanting to share more than the rest of us really need to have shared with. You know? Websites with people's diaries — who cares? E-mail, "Hi, every thought I ever had in my head, I'd like to share it now."

(Laughter)

What happened to the days when diaries were under lock and key? Now people get pissed off if you don't read their diary. I don't want to know every thought that's in everybody's mind.

O'Reilly: But I agree with you. First of all, I'm computer illiterate. And I think that the people who really get absorbed in this lose sight of what's going on outside. They don't know what the weather is. I mean, they just get so absorbed in it.

Bill: Very frightening.

Drew: I think you're allowed to go on and look for whatever you want on the Internet. If you want to read somebody's diary, if you want to see pictures of somebody's day, you know, so what? That's your prerogative.

Bill: Why would you, Drew?

Drew: I don't know. I don't know why people do a lot of the things they do. But, you know, what the hell do I have to do with it?

Bridgette: Although, it's also different, because it's one thing if you're going on looking at all these things. There's also another thing — like I sign on to write E-mails to friends. And it allows me to just go, "Hey, how are you?" and not get into a 30-minute conversation. So it makes it so much simpler to actually keep in touch with people that, otherwise, I wouldn't. Which has nothing to do with all the other things that I think are weird on there that people have, as far as sites and the different things they write about.

Darrin: But if you don't like the site, you just don't go to that site.

Bill: I know, but why...

Drew: If somebody wants to start — some chick wants to start a college dorm room cam, good. (Laughter) Yeah, I really wanna know what happened in your day.

O'Reilly: He's rethinking the Internet thing.

Bill: No.

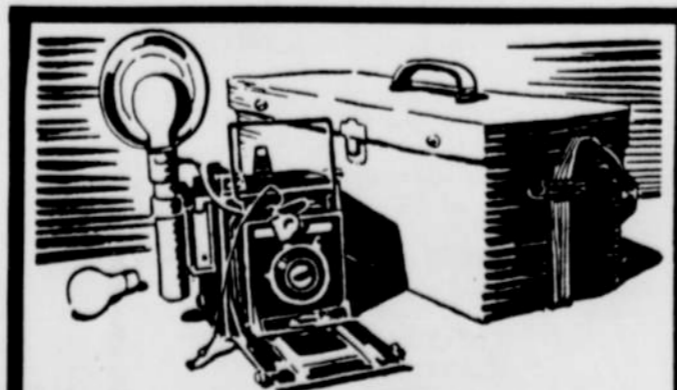
O'Reilly: He's rethinking the Internet thing. You can see him going — "Dorm room thing?"

Bill: But what does it say about the world when people think that they have to share every bit of their, you know, interior monologue, really? And there's a reason why it's called an "interior monologue", because it should stay interior. I mean, you used to have talent before you were published.

The defensive tone of these remarks is what clued me in to the seriousness that underlies them. Why would a TV show host feel concerned that 'interior monologue' should stay interior? Why should it stay there? Something is happening on the Net, and it has everything to do with privacy and the lack thereof — something we are all starting to feel more and more. I suspect, and increasingly feel inclined to believe, that I am seeing a very large portion of the human world in the act of turning itself inside-out. This is a radical notion and a far more radical act; its implications are bound to be disturbing to those who still like to feel that they can keep certain aspects of their lives to themselves.

Now that a TV show has informed that it is a shameful thing to be, I confess: I am an online diarist. I maintain a diary at what is called a 'hive' site, or collective Web site, where anyone who wishes can start a diary. It is free, and the diary can be public or private; the only condition is that it has to be anonymous, which means that we all write under pseudonyms. Diarists can receive notes from readers if they choose; notes can either be from anyone at all or only from registered diarists who are logged in. The site address is *www.opendiary.com*.

These open diaries are thus private and public at once: Anyone with Internet access can browse the site and read any public entries, including past ones going all the way back to the start of each diary, but family members and other unwanted intimates cannot read a given author's diary unless they know the pseudonym. Keeping a diary on these terms and receiving notes, especially if the option to accept all notes is chosen, can easily become an experiment in discovering how much self-revelation one can bear. What I learned is probably typical. Because the overwhelming majority of notes is supportive, and because the other writers — there are purportedly more than 200,000 diarists at OD — are writing away like mad on topics at least as personal, the need for privacy tends to diminish very quickly. I have never served in the military, but I imagine the experience of using mass toilets produces a loss of physical modesty similar to the Internet journalist's psychological loss of modesty. The commentators on *Politically Incorrect* assume that this exhibitionism, if it really deserves to be called that, immediately runs into egotism; in my view it goes the opposite way. When countless other writers are telling virtually the same real-life stories, except that a lot of them are infinitely more fascinating than one's own will ever be, a sort of comfortable humility sets in: One is not as distinguished as one might have preferred to think, but one is not as hopelessly incompetent either.



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The opportunity to observe others as described by themselves and to study the words of non-professional authors in an effort to understand what they really mean to say has held a few outright surprises. I discovered Napster around the same time that I started my diary. I also happened upon a Web site maintained by a disgruntled former member of the Ordo Templi Orientis, a ritual magick organization. One of the articles at the OTO site gave a history of David Bowie's involvement with that group. It also described the cut-up technique he used to compose lyrics for his songs. A nostalgic bent had already caused me to download some Bowie songs that were great favorites of mine when I was about 13-14 years old. On listening to them again after a number of years, I realized that the lyrics really were cut up, sometimes almost gibberish on the surface, yet with all sorts of odd connections forming underneath. When I was a kid, that all made perfect sense to me, or so I thought. When I started to read diaries by some of the more expressive teenagers at OD, I saw what was going on: They assume they understand what is happening around them and what is being said to and in front of them, but apparently they miss a lot of it without even noticing the gaps — they are not much more than children in years, after all — so they fill in what is lacking with imagination and intuition. They write the way they perceive. Some of their diaries are so loose and so subjective that they make almost no surface sense, and yet they convey meaning — sometimes a great deal of very poignant meaning. So many of them lament the fact that the world they are growing up in is so bizarrely unreal. Every day countless teens at OD contemplate suicide or describe their latest actual attempts. More mature OD friends assure me that this largely drama. While I don't disagree, I feel that the need for drama of this particular intensity springs from fairly desperate sources. The teens' confusion now strikes me as deeper than I ever realized before, for more basic cognitive and linguistic reasons than I can recall hearing acknowledged. And of course their distress at growing up in an unreal toxic hyper-commercial 'reality' is perfectly reasonable. That they have places like OD where they can vent their outrage and form connections with peers and elders who can support the legitimacy of their desire to dissent gives them a great advantage that former generations never had. It seems to me that they use it well, although their anguish is still great.

Through notes, diarists become acquainted with each other and form little subsets within the hive. If a reader notices an interesting diarist who exchanges notes with another writer frequently, they can easily follow the notes to the diary they came from — signed notes from OD members contain hyperlinks that lead to the note-leaver's Diary Contents page. There the diarist is free to introduce their diary by telling as much or as little about themselves as they wish. Usually it is possible to determine at once if they are likely to be of interest. OD also offers the option of searching for diarists by age, location, membership in content-oriented diary circles, or random recent entries. I have found intriguing writers each way. By the exchange of notes, ongoing dialogues and sometimes multiparty conversations can freely develop. I once saw one of these become disturbingly emotional, but that was due to one party's genuinely traumatic circumstances. The overall tone of OD exchanges is not merely civil; it is kind.

The diaries I frequent, like the entries I write, tend to focus precisely on the place where the territory of reality as we perceive it diverges from official consensus reality. For some of us, that leads into outright magic and mysticism; for many more it generates discussion of dreams and personal insights, and it leads us to remark to one another with great frequency that we have just experienced yet another stunning OD synchronicity.

Recently I have felt myself approaching a breakthrough, a moment of psychic/psychological enlargement. I have encouraged it with meditation and special attentiveness to my dreams. Another diarist, who is also an E-mail correspondent of mine because of our shared interests, has been going through a spiritual crisis. We have never met in Real Life, but we passed through an extreme opening together the week of the earthquake. Would this have happened to us independently had we never met through our diaries? We have been writing back and forth on more than one level, and we have influenced each other. Certainly without OD the change would come in a different way. Other diarists are watching it happen. As one of them lately remarked in a note, we seem to go through mass mood swings together. Surely that is a function of the collective mind.

My history at the open diary site only goes back for half a year, but in that time, and in the time I have been thinking about the Internet in general, I have made a few observations about its implications for that mind: If the 'real world' around us is hopelessly tainted by mind-control propaganda foisted upon us relentlessly by organized religion, the military/industrial complex, rightwing conspiracy theorists, our refined sugar-aspartame-prozac-fluoride-GMO-tainted brains, and — above all else — the commercial mass media, the Internet gives us one more chance to fight back. Still uncontrolled, cheaper and easier of access every year, and not merely tolerant but friendly toward dissenters and eccentrics, our personal pages and Web diaries provide us with the means to download the contents of our actual life experiences and observations and preserve them in a publicly accessible mass-memory where they can serve the needs of others who are seeking support and corroboration.

Back in the heyday of the women's movement, a quotation was popular that went something like, *if just one woman would tell the truth about her life, the world would split open*. Millions of diarists are telling the truth about their lives online — you can see for yourself any moment you choose that the cracks are beginning to show. The change may feel ominous to some, but I suspect that 'privacy' has always been more a figment of denial than an actuality and the loss of it merely means a return to the condition that most of humanity has taken for granted for tens of thousands of years: the extended family/village mentality in which everyone knows everything that the other members have ever said or done. That knowing runs deep, so deep it might in part become telepathic. Right now, participation in such a future is optional. I would not count on its remaining that way. Once the thought of being dragged into the world it implies would have frightened me out of my wits. Now that my diary and I have tested it, my tentative conclusion is that its potential to enlarge the very ground of our conscious existence can be made to outweigh its potential for harm.

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