

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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## The IV drip of perpetual connectivity

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I hate Facebook. I've grown to dread the banal, relentless churn of it: the minutiae of people's status updates, the way it turns otherwise decent people into crass self-promoters. Its "friendships" are often so rootless that I, for instance, am a "Facebook friend" with Hal Niedzviecki, a guy I have on rare occasions worked with, but with whom I don't socialize and in fact hardly know. Yet Facebook has become such a juggernaut, I feel like I can't leave it. It's become the world's biggest phone book, and a helpful resource for journalists. So there I am, stuck in "peep culture."

In *The Peep Diaries*, author, social critic and indie-culture poster boy Hal Niedzviecki explores, with humour and insight, how we got hooked up to this IV drip of perpetual connectivity, of watching and being watched. It's a great read; it mixes frank interviews with people pushing the boundaries of voyeurism and exhibitionism, alongside a bracing critique of the social context that got us into peep culture and the forces that now exploit our participation in it.

Niedzviecki defines "peep culture" broadly as the ways in which we now display personal – even very private – details for public consumption. This is a world that includes reality TV, celebrity gossip news and surveillance by closed-circuit cameras in public places. Most significantly, it also includes social media such as blogs, social networking websites and videos uploaded to YouTube.

Reality TV may promise to make celebrities out of "real people," but the social-media revolution allows anyone to control the means of production. We can all become the creators and subjects of our own narratives. Niedzviecki isn't arguing that all uses of social media are about display and voyeurism, but he's certainly suggesting that it's a compelling and prominent feature of it.

*The Peep Diaries* begins in well-documented territory: bloggers and vloggers who maintain their anonymity and yet reveal extraordinary amounts about their personal, emotional and sexual lives. We meet Padme, a suburban British Columbia woman who is in a "total power exchange relationship" with her husband. Niedzviecki writes: "It's as if for Padme being a slave is only half of it. The other half is telling people about it. The same secret that isolates can also be a source of connection. But once you start spilling your guts, it's hard to know when, or if, you should stop."

If this level of exposure is on the extreme end, Niedzviecki goes on to show us how involved many of us are in peep culture, even him. Aware, I'm sure, that he's offering us a bit of a peep show of his own, he experiments with peep: He tracks his wife (with her permission), tries to get on reality TV, blogs, watches the alley behind his house on camera. You start to see how our growing culture of peeping and being peeped at looks pretty bizarre from the outside.

The argument underpinning *The Peep Diaries* is that we have become so isolated by the ideology of individualism and pop culture's cult of individual celebrity that we're desperate for the kind of

connectedness that once bound communities together.

We're naive, though, if we see peep culture's connectedness as a return to true community, because all this "sharing" we're doing exists in the context of power structures: corporations, governments, policing bodies, all of which have an interest in documenting and cataloguing our activity. "We keep slaving away for someone else's benefit. How many of YouTube's top video posters, who draw millions of eyeballs to the site, are Google shareholders? But we don't think of it like that. ... As with the Peep phenomenon overall, we rarely, if ever, see what we're doing as giving away our private information. And even if we did, would we necessarily care?"

Niedzviecki is not coming at this from an old-media, "leave communication to the professionals" perspective. As founder of *Broken Pencil*, a magazine that tracks indie culture, he's a believer in the power of democratized expression. What he is arguing against is the way our basic desire for connection is twisted by the prevailing social and economic context.

I think Niedzviecki is right about the troubling ease with which we've squandered our privacy. Of course, there's more to social media than exhibitionism and voyeurism (reality TV may just be beyond the pale). It can be, and is, used for alternative community building. Ashton Kutcher may be using Twitter to promote his celebrity, but lots of us use these tools for the communication of information, or for mobilization. I'm sure Niedzviecki knows this.

The thing is, there's a delicate dance going on here. Documenting yourself and your interests may lead to "oversharing," but it's also what's leading us into a real "socialization of information": a world where information and understanding are generated collaboratively, swapped and expanded on by people who are connected by networks of sharing.

More and more, the social and the informational are really braided together. There's tremendous potential in this, but what we really need is to articulate an ethics of social media: a sense of the social norms, values and politics associated with using them. *The Peep Diaries* is a welcome, and entertaining, contribution to that conversation.

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