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Is our world becoming an Internet peep show?

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The Peep Diaries

How We're Learning to Love

Watching Ourselves and Our Neighbors

By Hal Niedzviecki

City Lights, 296 pages, \$18

IS the Internet turning North Americans into exhibitionists and voyeurs?

That's the question one of Canada's leading alt-culture gurus, Hal Niedzviecki, asks in this insightful work of popular sociology.

His main theme is that we're becoming less inhibited and more prone to trading our private lives for attention, catharsis, convenience or money.

Toronto-based Niedzviecki, who will be at the Winnipeg International Writers Festival in September, is well-positioned to comment upon our particular zeitgeist, where individualism is colliding with a "need-to-know" attitude.

He is a recognized social critic and mainstream media gadfly, founder of *Broken Pencil* magazine, and a prominent blogger whose quick wit and terse commentary have earned him praise and scorn alike.

His earlier book, *Hello, I'm Special* (2004), garnered acclaim for arguing how individuality was the new conformity, and how "specialness" was being depicted via reality TV shows and homemade porn.

The Peep Diaries, published by San Francisco-based City Lights, is a compilation of revealing narratives, blog posts and researched sociological observations, all interestingly intertwined.

It leads to the conclusion that today "life is lived on constant record because you never know when you're going to want to rewind something, see it again, confront a family member, show it to the police, sell it to the highest bidder, or post it on your blog."

The accompanying notes and index reveal a scholarly approach. Unfortunately, like blogs themselves, the book contains numerous grammatical and spelling errors. There are even two chapter sixes.

But besides these irritations, the book reminds us that George Orwell and Marshall McLuhan were ahead of the curve.

Tracing the evolution of pop culture from its fascination with movie and TV celebrities to its present mania for social media like Facebook and Twitter, Niedzviecki paints a disturbing picture of modern society.

Technology has enabled us to be "stars," he argues. We can post pictures on the web, where others can watch, critique and comment.

What began as the need for surveillance to prevent crime has morphed into a peep show where those spied upon are often willing participants.

Why do so many of us want to reveal our innermost thoughts on blogs or submit grainy photos to YouTube, and why are so-called "reality shows" replacing professional actors and their studios?

One contributor to this diary, presiding over a wildly popular website where submitted "secrets" are openly available for voyeurs, feels the answer may be in the universal human dilemma: To tell, or not to tell?

Confessional booths in quiet places of worship or reflection have been replaced by forums in cyberspace. Unfortunately, as Niedzviecki reminds us, most of this technological voyeurism is being packaged as a commodity, then bought and sold on the Internet and used for purposes far removed from the original intent.

While recognizing the positive contributions of peep culture, like exposing a child molester or a pilfering employee, Niedzviecki says it has become so all-intrusive that privacy as we understand it no longer exists.

Equal parts dialogue, diary, meditation and social history, *The Peep Diaries* should give pause to bloggers and other Internet addicts.

Joseph Hnatiuk is a retired teacher in Winnipeg.

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