



**KISS AND BLOG:**  
Jessica Cutler was  
an online juicy-  
diarist pioneer.

aj = The intern in my office whom I want to fuck.

f = Married man who pays me for sex. Chief of Staff at one of the gov. agencies, appointed by Bush. ...

r = AKA Threesome Dude. Somebody I would rather forget about.

rs = My new office bf with whom I am embroiled in an office sex scandal.

w = A sugar daddy who wants nothing but anal. Keep trying to end it with him, but the money is too good.

POSTED MAY 11, 2004, BY JESSICA CUTLER,  
WASHINGTONIAN.BLOGSPOT.COM

---

# THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE PRIVATE SELF

ONCE UPON A TIME, PEOPLE KEPT SECRETS. TODAY'S TELL-ALL BLOGGERS AND MYSPACE DENIZENS HAVE MADE THE NOTION OF A GUARDED PERSONAL LIFE FEEL OBSOLETE. WHAT EFFECT DOES SUCH EXPOSURE HAVE ON THE PSYCHE? BY CARLIN FLORA

secrets, to unburden their consciences, and to show off, but in times past these admissions were aimed at confidants—priests, soul mates, diaries. Telling secrets can be therapeutic, but when confession targets the masses, what's really being processed, and who benefits from the disclosure?

**IRONICALLY**, HUMANS NOW ENJOY MORE privacy than ever, says Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, president of the University of Haifa and author of *Love Online: Emotions on the Internet*. "Two hundred years ago, when people lived in villages or very dense cities, everyone's behavior was evident to many and it was extremely hard to hide it," he says. Today, e-mail and "chatting" online allow for completely anonymous interactions. We can talk and make plans without the whole household or office knowing. But if we're so able to keep things to ourselves, then why are we doing exactly the opposite?

For those engaging in online conversations or message-board discussions, the Internet can be more disinhibiting than the stiffest drink. Electronic disclosure eliminates the normal self-censorship mechanisms that have evolved over human history—and therein lies the primary explanation for the Jessica Cutler phenomenon.

"We've been shaped to be very sensitive to each other on a face-to-face basis," says Daniel Wegner, a Harvard psychologist. When someone is in front of you, you can read how they're reacting to your admissions, keeping track—as you're hard-wired to do—of whether they're comfortable, disapproving, or rapt. But when you're alone in a room and typing on a computer, explains Wegner, it's easy to forget there's somebody on the other end of the line and become oblivious to the consequences of sharing information. "When people post to blogs, they may be thinking, 'I'm not going to worry too much about who the target of my revelation might be; I'm just going to go ahead and let go.'" Hairdressers, bartenders, and strangers on a train have long been recipients of anonymous confessions, but they're also participants who keep you from getting too lost in your head or revealing too much.

This is the trap that snared Cutler, who never expected an audience beyond her close, like-minded friends. "The big problem as I saw it was using e-mails, since those could get forwarded," says Cutler. "I thought my blog was a more private way to share stuff."

It's one thing to risk full exposure, but quite another to eponymously title your proudly unexpurgated blog. In *I Can't Believe I'm Still Single: The Eric Schaeffer Blog*, a 45-year-old screenwriter and director intersperses tales of dating mishaps, recipes, musings on Gandhi, and an excruciatingly detailed account

---

**ON** MAY 11, 2004, JESSICA CUTLER WROTE a handy guide to keeping her love life straight and posted it on *The Washingtonienne*, a blog about her sexual adventures as a young Hill staffer. Five days later, on Cutler's 26th birthday, *Wonkette*, a political gossip site that draws about 80,000 daily visitors, linked to the blog. Wily Internet users easily deduced the identities of her high-powered paramours, and Cutler was soon denounced in the press as a privileged young woman who was cynical, loose, and proud of it.

Prostitution may be the world's oldest profession, but thinly disguised blogs about sex-for-cash are a new—and growing—phenomenon. Though she was fired from her job in the Senate, Cutler was rewarded generously for her extreme public disclosures with a centerfold in *Playboy*, a \$300,000 book contract, and an HBO deal. Her most recent appearance in the papers was in January, as Robert Steinbuch, the former Capitol Hill lawyer she identified as "RS"—her "current favorite"—sued her for \$20 million. (The court date isn't yet set.)

A leading lady of tell-all bloggers, Cutler came to fame just as online diaries began to proliferate. They're now a nation more than 65 million strong, collectively dishing a lot of personal dirt. Bookstores and talk shows have long trafficked in the confessions of not-necessarily-notables, but the Internet has democratized and amplified personal gut spilling. Web sites such as *postsecret.com* and *mysecret.tv* bring bathroom-wall-variety confessions, such as "I only love two of my children," "I had gay sex at church camp," and "I pee in the sink," to—and from—the masses. Meanwhile, teenagers telegraph their deep thoughts and petty observations for YouTube prowlers hungry for novelty and diversion.

Such waves of revelation are fast eroding our notions of private identity. People have always been inclined to share their

---

I need to get home to check the barometer of my self-esteem, the blinking red light on the answering machine. It will contain all the fabulous jobs and women that will make my life perfect. POSTED AUGUST 17, 2006, BY ERIC SCHAEFFER, ICANTBELIEVEIMSTILLSINGLE.COM



**OUT THERE:**  
Eric Schaeffer's  
musings have met  
sharp criticism.



MOTHER'S LITTLE HELPER: Irina Kendall blogs to clear her head.

of a visit from a professional dominatrix. (A defense of his preference for younger women reads: "I don't get mad when women like black guys, or young guys or buff guys, it's their preference. God bless them. STOP GETTING MAD AT ME AND THE REST OF US 45 YEAR OLD MEN WHOSE CUT OFF IS 36 OKAY?!!!" )

In exchange for his brutal honesty, he's suffered a barrage of online criticism and mockery. Though he considers most of his life's work to be infused with autobiographical elements, he did pause before writing the blog and a memoir: "I thought, do I want everyone to know the deep recesses of my sexuality, my parents, all that stuff? The fear was that then people would judge me, that perhaps they wouldn't like me. But I didn't want to act out of fear, so I asked myself, is there a positive reason to do this? And that would be connecting to people who appreciate me expressing myself and revealing my weaknesses."

Perhaps we simply have less to be ashamed of in an increasingly free-to-be-you-and-me era. "More and more people believe they are entitled to behave according to their own values and not the norms prevailing in society," Ben-Ze'ev says. That means there is less of a need to keep a protected private self, free from the scrutiny of strangers. Each of us has our own (sometimes curious) sense of what's appropriate: Cutler is more embarrassed about a blog entry in which she gushed about some now-outdated earrings than the ones about taking

money from paramours. "I didn't tell them to pay me—that's their shame," she says. "I'm single. I can date as many people as I want. Apologizing for that would be stupid."

Nor do self-disclosers feel sheepish about craving the spotlight. "I've always thought of myself as being in a movie, that my world is larger than life," says Schaeffer. "There's a way in which our lives seem valid only if they obtain some veneer of media recognition," says Jefferson Singer, a psychologist at Connecticut College. A blog makes your mundane life into an electronic saga that turns you into something more than an anonymous drone in a technological and impersonal world. "You now have a story and perhaps you've even become the focus of other watchers and listeners," says Singer. "You become a character, a speaking part, in the larger theater of society." Even if you're playing the role of the loser—blogging about being unhappy and unattractive—at least you're part of the show.

Schaeffer is contemplative about the vitriol his blog has garnered. "I wonder why I am not an antihero. Maybe it's because other people purely play the schlub, whereas I claim my successes as well as my weaknesses. I embrace both."

**WHAT** DOES ALL THIS GUT SPILLING DO FOR THE spillers? Is it healthy to expose your struggles, fears, and adventures to an audience? In the second of his bestselling memoirs,

My appetite has been unbearable and chaotic and although my caloric intake may only be marginally affected, eating all day long, even a bite here and bite there, leaves me feeling out of control and overly full. I'm beyond broke...

POSTED JANUARY 9, 2007, BY IRINA KENDALL, SPECTACULARLYNORMAL.COM

Dry, Augusten Burroughs explains why public disclosure, at least in front of a small, like-minded audience, is so appealing to the confessor: "It's like some sort of love affair, stripped of the courtship phase. I feel bathed in safety."

He's right: Telling secrets has been shown to have a positive effect on the person who's doing the confessing, because keeping them requires a lot of mental work. Wegner has found that actively trying to suppress a thought (like trying not to think about a white bear) actually seems to repeatedly refresh your mental browser and bring it to mind. "It's almost as though there's a little corner of the mind that's looking for the very thing you're trying not to think about," he says. Sharing the secret, though, "unprimes" the information, freeing the mind to focus on other things and breaking the cycle of worry. By recounting their sins and lapses, the AA member and the blogger can unload pesky thoughts and mull more productive ones for the rest of the day.

Recording concerns in a journal or similar medium can be particularly effective. "When people write about secrets, they report feeling better; they acknowledge the events and can organize them," says Jamie Pennebaker, professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. In one study, he asked subjects to write for 15 minutes a day for several days. They showed positive changes in immune function and psychological well-being. Other research shows that when couples are asked to keep reflective diaries in which they write about their relationship, they stay together longer.

Pennebaker isn't convinced that these benefits apply to public disclosers, because bloggers, who write for an audience, probably won't engage in the same level of emotional processing as they would if writing just for themselves. Though their audience may be small and their true identity concealed, bloggers type with an eye toward self-presentation. They may resist the urge to lie, but they'll be tempted to blunt the edges of ugly revelations with humorous comments.

"Blogging has elements of theater," he says. "If you're writing and you know lots of people are going to be looking at it, you're going to change things to make yourself look good." Whether he realizes it or not, the online scribe cultivates an identity that anticipates and responds to its audience. "Blogging as therapy is not a good idea," says Cutler. "When you're blogging, you're not thinking, 'What's my motivation?' You're thinking, 'This is what I did today.'"

But Irina Kendall, who writes the blog *Spectacularly Normal*, is convinced of the benefits. "Blogging has been immensely therapeutic for me," she says. When she started posting about

her life a year ago, Kendall, 31, a mother of a five-year-old daughter, was unhappy. Her fiancé had no idea she was anorexic and bulimic. "There was so much going on in my head and I felt really alone," she says. After reading and feeling a kinship with other personal bloggers such as Heather Armstrong of *dooce.com*, Kendall set up her own page. Sharing her daily external and internal happenings has helped her sort out her feelings.

She's even found that her "open diary" can be a helpful supplement to pillow talk. "Sometimes I wake up on a weekend morning and I'm really depressed but can't explain why," Kendall says. "So I'll sit down and post about what's going on in my head. And my fiancé will realize what I'm doing. He'll read it and then he'll come in where I'm huddled under the covers, and he'll say, 'OK, I get this, let's talk about it.'"

That "post-posting" conversation is crucial to fostering intimacy and understanding in the wake of a disclosure. "Writing things down and getting reactions is a start, but I don't think it's an end point," says Singer. "You need a sustained reaction from a concerned and involved listener, so that the story doesn't just end, but keeps getting written. The two of you write it together."

Otherwise, Singer says, the solo secret teller runs the risk of turning herself into an object in a story, of dissociating from her "real" life to the point where she feels like events happen to her persona and not to her. Spinning questionable actions into an amusing read can even reduce her guilt—she may start feeling less responsible to the flesh-and-blood people in her life and more beholden to her online readers. "Those situations were funny to me," Cutler says of her blog material. "It's the sort of thing where you see things happening and you can feel detached, where you think, 'I can't wait to tell my friends about this!' Maybe it's a weird coping mechanism."

Blogging may have helped Cutler justify her own actions. Or maybe, as she says, she never had qualms about them in the first place. But without their permission, she dragged other characters onto her stage. Robert Steinbuch claims in his lawsuit that he was subjected to "humiliation and anguish beyond that which any reasonable person should be expected to bear in a decent and civilized society."

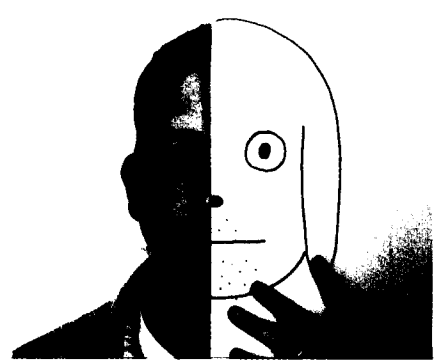
For every citizen who employs freedom of speech to the hilt, there's someone equally determined to keep a few gems—or at least trysts—to herself. And those impulses can co-exist in one person. Cutler says she gleaned insight into her D.C. affairs when writing her novel, *The Washingtonienne*. But she's not interested in disclosing it. "In a way," she says, "that's for me to know." ■



Call him the translator. **EDWARD LEVINE**, *PT*'s creative director, has the tricky job of taking amorphous topics and fashioning them into visual splendor. Along the way he must help editors visualize ideas and show artists the needs of editors. Tough or not, the process can be a lot of fun. For him, each issue is akin to decorating a new house. He asks: "What's the appropriate paint and furnishings?" In the end, of course, he has to get all the housemates to agree. A tricky job indeed.



Around Valentine's Day, **HELEN FISHER** is the planet's most sought-after scientist, fielding thousands of media requests. In four books to date, the Rutgers University research anthropologist explores the evolution of human love. Her current work probes why we fall for one person over another (see "The Laws of Chemistry") and draws on her sideline as a science adviser to the dating site Chemistry.com. She says, "It's a fascinating way to help my fellow humans at life's most important endeavor—forming a pair bond."



It's been 17 years since illustrator **GREG CLARKE** said goodbye to his cubicle. "I miss the camaraderie, but not the drama or politics." (See "Workwise.") Now, he juggles multiple clients. If he suffers a personality clash, he doesn't work with that client again. "It's not a forced march." Working from home, however, has its challenges: Try fitting creativity into a hectic parenting schedule. Clarke, though, reads manuscripts and sketches thumbnails on the soccer sidelines. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker* and *Time*.



When *PT* Associate Editor **CARLIN FLORA** started researching gut feelings, she found out that the conscious brain is largely not in charge (see "Gut Almighty"). "But it likes to think it is," she says. Like anyone else, she agonizes over pro-and-con lists. So it was nice to learn that when you're facing big decisions, it's better to go with your hunches and not overthink things. "I moved to New York, for example, without a job or a plan. I'd always had a feeling I would be happy here, and that turned out to be true."



Science writer **JILL NEIMARK** has always thought of herself as a moody and anxious pessimist. So she was surprised while researching "The Optimism Revolution" to discover that she's an extreme optimist and always has been. "Optimism is a strategy more than a state of mind," she says, "and is based on the assumption that you can affect your world." Neimark, co-author of *Why Good Things Happen to Good People* and author of *Bloodsong*, is also a poet, children's book author, and novelist.



**GEOF KERN** often hears a voice in his head, but not the kind you worry about. He knows it's his gut—something he uses in every area of life. When he met his wife, he heard the voice and knew "right off the bat" that he was going to marry her. And when it comes to work, he won't take a job if it doesn't feel right. He had an instinct the story "Gut Almighty" wouldn't be easy. Taking a topic like intuition and putting it into imagery was a challenge, but he gladly took it on. Kern also photo-illustrates for *Glamour* and *Marie Claire*.