

Secrets Secrets are no Fun.
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What do you want to say? How do you want to say it? What's more, who do you want to know about it? We are a society of graphoholics. We all have a life. We all have an opinion. And, it seems, the majority of us have the need to write about it. And why not? A pen and a paper cost very little these days. The overhead for small-time authorship is next to nothing. Most of us write on a semi-regular basis to keep track of things in our daily lives. To remember the good times, explore the bad, banish the intolerable. Those of us who keep a journal do so for a myriad of reasons. What ever our reasons for writing personally, it is becoming evident that more and more of us are making our personal writing public.

The tradition of writing in one's journal usually involved a semi-private space with semi-private thoughts. You and your mind, free to think and write and express and explore and conspire as you please. Being able to admit things to ones-self has an enormous impact on the make-up of one's being. Consistent journal-writers might even attain the level of pure disclosure to the page with no form of self-censorship whatsoever. As our notion of privacy has changed in the age of virtuality, so to has the fundamental notion of "ourselves." What once was kept under lock and key and guarded by big sister, is now accessible, and in some cases, advertised for public rummaging. The more we represent ourselves on-line, the less likely we are to be entirely truthful about that representation.

25,595,766 hits to PostSecret and counting. PostSecret is a weblog whose simple rules state, "You are invited to anonymously contribute your secrets to PostSecret." Ah. Anonymity. That's where the popularity comes from. Catharsis with no consequence. But what about something more in line with our traditional notions of privacy? My-diary.org posits, "Everyone can have their own personal diary or journal on the Internet." My own personal diary on the internet? What could be better? Reading other peoples personal diaries on the internet! The very first category heading on my-diary.org's site entreats, "Read what others have written." I would put forth that the overwhelming majority of my-diary.org's users are not only well aware of the fact that their "personal diaries" are for all "on the internet" to see and read, but that they long for this kind of exposure. It changes the make-up of what they write. Dresses it up. Truths become liquid.

There is certainly nothing perverse about the human need for empathy and connectivity to a greater community. It is my position however that the more our society tends towards peddling our emotional wares through the annals of the web and the more we continue to raise future generations with this notion of personal expression, the less private, the less personal, the less meaningful, and the less truthful a web log or journal become. This is to say, the more we make it a habit to journal online rather than in a real-world journal, the more our relation to the truth of introspection changes due to the expectation of the content coming in contact with an eventual audience. As Sarah Boxer of the New York Times writes in a review of PostSecret from May of 2005,

The secret sharers here aren't mindless flashers but practiced strippers. They don't want to get rid of their secrets. They love them. They arrange them. They tend them. They turn them into fetishes. And that's the secret of PostSecret. It isn't really a true confessional after all. It is a piece of collaborative art.

Of course it's exhibitionist, it's modern art.

What does this mean then for future generations of would-be journal and diary keepers. As our personal text becomes histrionic we sit back and laugh ourselves into oblivion and we will never question our methods, so long as we are entertained. I think this is a real danger.

Online journaling removes the padding of privacy from writing and thus diminishes the truth and connection that a writer has to her text. I have decided to conduct an experiment with these thoughts in mind. I keep a student blog at <http://www.itp.nyu.edu/~ajs510/blog>. I invite people to see this blog and can imagine directing future collaborators to this site to get a sense of my aesthetic and a cross-section of my graduate work here at NYU. For many years, I have also kept a physical journal. This journal, while mostly unread by anyone but myself is not at all private. I regularly leave a volume out in the open, flipped to a past entry that I may have been reading. Sometimes I'll even voluntarily put my thoughts forth by reading from this record of daily thoughts and experiments in writing. A look back at some of the samplings of entries runs the gamut of the insufferably mundane to the eerily personal, even damning. Well, if I claim to be so frank and honest when documenting the day's thoughts in this closable and geo-specific notebook even though it is not a private thing, then I should have no problem doing so on the internet. For the past couple of weeks I have been journaling as usual in my Mead Graph-ruled notebook on a semi-daily basis. The only catch is, now I scan it in and post it on the internet for all to see. The amount of privacy is relatively the same. Anyone can view it, however I do not advertise its existence.

Will my most personal writing change as a result of an expansion of possible readership? We shall see.