

Web makes 15 mins fame a lifetime of shame

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A journalist looks at the Gawker.com internet site showing a shirtless New York Republican Congressman Christopher Lee flexing in a mirror. Lee stepped down after the publication of the picture.

Thought the Internet was a place for anonymity? Ask Christopher Lee, who resigned as a US congressman this week.

The married Republican must have thought the famous dating section of Craigslist the perfect vehicle for organizing trysts.

The next thing he knew his cheesy self-portrait photo of his muscular torso had been shipped by his would-be date to Gawker.com, a gossip website, and from there into career-killing infamy.

In the early days, the Web resembled a virtual, parallel world, where anything went. Now it is not only perhaps less private than the real world

-- but far less forgiving.

"The microscope is coming to a theater near you and everyone is going to live under a microscope," says Michael Fertik, CEO of Reputation.com, which helps people worried about their online presence.

That "microscope" is astonishing in power, drawing on everything from blog entries and [Facebook](#) postings to food orders and search histories.

Fertik rattled off data a typical person reveals online:

"Your musical preferences, who your friends are, what you buy, where you live, where you travel, where you surf on the Internet, what your health hazards are, what you eat, what exercise, what size clothes you wear, what the names of all your family members are, your political affiliations."

And that's without the drunken photos, sexual boasts, online rants, or other lapses in judgment that Internet tools like Facebook, [Flickr](#), YouTube, [Twitter](#) and the like encourage.

Lee's online search for a mistress was probably bound to get him in trouble.

But what about Ashley Payne, a US school teacher sacked over Facebook photos that showed her holding wine and beer glasses while on holiday in Europe? Or the Connecticut woman fired by an ambulance company because she complained on Facebook about her boss?

The growing reality is that far from being able to hide behind avatars, pseudonyms and [privacy settings](#), going online more resembles going into a public street and shouting. That off-the-record chat once confined to around the office water cooler -- it's gone global.



The office of former Republican Representative Christopher Lee of New York is seen on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, February 10. Lee resigned late Wednesday after apparently sending a shirtless photo of himself and flirty messages to a woman not his wife in reply to her online personal ad on Craigslist.

-- Forget about forgetting --

Even scarier, web watchers say, is that in Web world, with its vast and constantly expanding archive, your past becomes permanent.

"Right now, there is no delete button for the Internet," Fertik said.

For advertisers, that sea of Web data is a goldmine allowing them to target millions of people with ads tailored to their online profiles. For bosses and the simply curious, it's also a giant keyhole to peep through.

Hiring managers routinely Google applicants -- it's dubbed the Google Handshake -- and a Microsoft survey found that 70 percent of company representatives had turned down candidates after finding something they didn't like.

Meanwhile, if you're on a first date, an iPhone app called Date Check

will even let you search criminal records and property ownership of the potential lover sitting across the table.

A big weapon of the future is likely to be facial-recognition technology, allowing you to search an individual online by photo, not name.

The impossibility of escaping your past heralds a disturbing new era, says Viktor Mayer-Schoenberger, a cyber specialist at the Oxford Internet Institute.

"I think it's an existential crisis," he said, "because in order to forgive, we also need to forget."

And for all those Internet-addicted youths out there now, the revenge of the Web has barely begun. Wait till they apply for sensitive jobs or political posts in a decade, like last year's congressional candidate, Krystal Ball, who was slammed by the reemergence of embarrassing party pictures on the net.

"We are underestimating the problem, because the problem manifests itself usually much later than when we shared the information," Mayer-Schoenberger warned.

Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg has said that society will adapt and find a way to deal with the morass of public embarrassment.

"People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people," Zuckerberg says. "That social norm is just something that has evolved over time."

But with awareness only spreading gradually, concerns are growing. A Gallup poll this week found that 52 percent of Google users and nearly

70 percent of Facebook members are worried that they are risking their privacy.

The skeptics found a new champion in First Lady Michelle Obama who on Wednesday revealed that she was not rushing to get her daughters, aged 12 and nine, onto Facebook.

While the site has a lower age limit of 13, children often sign up by lying about their age. "I'm not a big fan of young kids having Facebook," Obama said. "It's not something they need. It's not necessary."

Fertik's company can clean up a person's Internet history, deleting some unwanted posts and burying the rest in more positive information so that at least an initial Google Handshake comes up clean.

But he says that the power of the data collecting giants prevents serious enactment of privacy measures, leaving consumers to face an uncertain future.

"Some people say the culture changes. I agree a photograph of someone drinking today may not matter in 30 years," Fertik said. "But there'll be something that does matter that we don't think of today."

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