

# **"The thrill of putting it all out there"**

## **For exhibitionists, the Internet is an ideal fantasy playground**

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BALTIMORE — Not long into my instant message conversation with “Don”, it’s obvious there is no way to know if he is who he says he is, if he's answering my questions honestly, or if he's playing me for a chump.

All I know for sure is that Don placed an image on his IM profile that appeared on my monitor when we began chatting. At first the image he used to represent himself was that of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow. But he's just replaced that one with another so now I'm looking at a shot of a torso complete with an erect penis. I assume that’s him. But then again, you never know.

Don, an American, says he is on a business trip to Europe and doing what he often does during downtime. Firing up his webcam and exposing himself to the World. The body parts look to be about the right age (49) and his conversation seems mature enough. Plus I have managed to contact Don through other online exhibitionists I have met in person. Still, it’s possible Don is actually a lonely retiree in Yellowknife, Canada who's surfing the Internet between glances at "Wheel of Fortune."

This is exactly the point of online exhibitionism and why so many people have started doing it. You can be as free as you want to expose as much of yourself as you want without looking over your shoulder for the county sheriff. This makes the Internet an ideal fantasy playground where anybody can launch naked signal flares into the digital sky to announce “I’m here and I’m hot.”

Homemade erotica has been around forever. When Polaroid introduced its Model 95 camera in 1948, average people were given the power to produce personal porn on a mass scale because nobody had to develop the pictures. But digital culture has broadened the possibilities. There are dozens of ways to use digital media to expose yourself ranging from the mild to the X-rated.

Bikini retailers host online “customer galleries” featuring women (and sometimes men) wearing thongs and see-through tops or no tops at all. On some sites, Web surfers can send e-mails to their favorite bikini-clad woman stating just how much they appreciate the view.

Popular exhibitionist Web sites such as Red Clouds, Watcher's Web, Voyeurweb and True Voyeur offer the same service allowing every man and woman the chance to let the World see what they look like naked on a rubber float in the backyard pool or spread-eagle in the Barcalounger and to read how excited (or not) that makes others. The sites appear to have a strong following. Among users of the Alexa Web search Toolbar, for instance, Voyeurweb ranks as the 398th most popular website over the past 3 months. In other words, out of every million users, 1,075 go to Voyeurweb and average 17.7 page views.

There also are sex blogs everywhere now and MySpace and Flickr are populated by people posing like porn stars.

Of course, "online exhibitionism" sounds creepily similar to "online predator" and "kiddie porn" and the potential for that kind of abuse is great. But the exhibitionists I contacted all stress that not only are they concerned parents themselves who closely monitor the Internet use of their kids but they also regard such use of the technology as a scourge.

### **The mom next door**

For Susan, Internet exhibitionism has uses of a very interactive kind. I visited Susan in her Maryland home with "Michael" (who asked I not use his real first name), a man Susan met online. Susan uses the Net to trade images of herself with individuals and couples she meets through computer chats and online ads. Sometimes she is naked; sometimes she's performing a sex act.

Susan describes herself "as very much an exhibitionist". But she's nothing like the grizzled guy in the trench coat. She is a middle-aged medical professional, a church-goer, and a mother. She is studying for an advanced degree. She calls herself "Rubenesque" and though she is attractive, she does not look like a centerfold model.

"Something I am not interested in is losing my sexuality," she says. "For a woman, that is more of a fight." Taking digital pictures of herself, trading them with others and knowing they appreciate them helps her reclaim her feminine sexual identity.

Michael and Susan met when she answered an ad he placed on Craigslist (where ads for sex partners often display the advertiser's genitals). They exchanged nude pictures, met in person, and have now struck up what Michael (also a middle-aged professional who works as an executive at a high-tech company and is a father) calls "an intimate friendship." Sometimes they include other people they meet online in their lovemaking in threesomes or foursomes.

For Michael and Susan, the digital realm is liberating. "I can be free to think the things I want to think and not only think them but act upon them," he says. "How cool is that? You can dream the dream and then go make it real. This is a portal into a parallel universe. I mean, it's a wild world!"

That world has been further fueled by technology. Thanks to broadband connections, web cams, and instant messaging, anybody can carve out a space in which they can act in ways they might not outside the virtual world.

"At church ... or wherever your community is, you cannot be real open and talk about your sexuality," Susan says. "But you sure can online. And you can very easily find somebody who is interested in the same things you are."

Many online exhibitionists have no idea who is on the other end of a web cam and don't really want to know. But some like Susan and Michael eventually drop the anonymity because their ultimate goal is to make online fantasies real. "My goal is skin-to-skin," Susan says.

Don, Susan and Michael do not generally put their pictures up on public web sites, preferring instead to trade and communicate (often using Instant Messaging) with a more select audience of their own choosing. Susan, for example, has occasionally viewed Don's camming sessions. She says finding an audience is not difficult.

"I do have ads up on a couple of different websites. But I think there are networks of people," Susan says. "If you meet somebody and they know 20 people who know 20 people who know 20 people, it is pretty easy to get an expanded community."

That is just what Don has created. At first, he surfed the Web looking for still images of naked female exhibitionists. Then around the year 2000 "when I learned that computers could broadcast cams, I watched a few ladies, usually only topless, perform for me on the Web ... Eventually I met a woman from Florida who showed me everything and begged me to get a cam. I did and soon found myself stripping for her. I looked for others who liked it too and didn't have to look far."

For Don, "camming" usually means displaying himself masturbating, often with one or more women, and sometimes a man, as his audience. Often the camming is mutual, with Don and a woman, using her Web cam to display herself to Don, instant messaging dirty talk back and forth.

### **'Avenue of escape'**

Now, Don tells me, he has about 120 regulars with whom he frequently chats and "cams." He has had virtual sex over the cam with many more people than that and he does it most nights when he is on the road.

"The digital world," he says, "gives me an avenue of escape to secret desires where I can find fulfillment." He is able to satisfy "a private hard-core lover hidden inside of me" that he can express online in anonymity.

That anonymity is important because Don (who tells me he is a conservative Republican Catholic and somewhat shy in real life) is married with children. His wife knows nothing about his online sex life.

"I am basically a moral person but flawed major league when it comes to sex," he says. "And yet there is this secret side to me that must be satisfied ... I have always had a streak of exhibitionism in me and felt guilty about that."

He is torn. On the one hand he worries there might be something wrong with him. On the other, he feels release when he's "camming."

"I think of online exhibitionism as pure erotic expression of human desire," he says. "We seek escape from our difficulties, from our routine or pressures, and this gives it to us."

So far, it's tough to say whether Don's form of escape will continue to grow or if the novelty of digitally mediated exhibitionism will wear off. But it's clear that for now at least, many Americans are thrilled by the prospect of being their own porn star.