

The all-seeing eye

by the Omaha World-Herald

The voracious hunger of the Internet for information is like nothing else in history. It sustains itself in part on titillation, sucking up huge quantities of text and images and displaying them for the use and entertainment of the public.

All this has been aided by the development of inexpensive, portable cell phones that can record sounds and images and post them immediately, on the World Wide Web, before the eyes of the world.

Some of the more extreme enthusiasts have labeled this process with an oxymoron: citizen journalism. There is also what could be called citizen voyeurism, as in the case of the cell-phone video recording of Saddam Hussein's execution.

Video recording can serve a useful purpose in some instances. But there also can be a dark side. At the same time many people have worried about preserving individual privacy in the face of government snooping, private-sector snooping has exposed itself as the more immediate concern.

Examples, in recent weeks, have included the publication of behavior that in a previous era would have gone relatively unnoticed:

A Nevada beauty queen loses her title when photos show up on the Internet showing her engaged in indiscreet behavior at a party. A young mother in California is appalled, and files a lawsuit, upon learning that a professional pornography company is marketing a snapshot showing her, at a beach resort, partially disrobed.

Political candidates are shadowed by camera-wielding operatives dispatched by their political opponents in hopes of catching misstatements or displays of bad judgment.

This is not to excuse politicians' foolish behavior or a private individual's public nudity. But it is also true that it is a rare life that fails to contain deeply embarrassing moments - moments that if photographed and displayed to the world would subject a person at best to ridicule and at worst to humiliation and disrepute.

How many careers will be sidetracked, how many political campaigns derailed, how many relationships strained by the all-seeing eyes of the public and its ubiquitous cameras?

Not too long ago, such virtues as modesty, integrity and self-control were passed along for their own sake. Now there's an additional reason to govern one's life with discretion: self-preservation.

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