

The background of the entire page is white, covered with numerous red blood splatters of various sizes and shapes. Some are large and irregular, while others are small dots. The splatters are scattered across the page, with a higher concentration on the left side. The author's name is printed in a clean, black, sans-serif font in the upper right quadrant.

JEAN-ANNE  
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# The Dark Side of the Internet

*A Story of Disinhibition and Murder*

**W**atching Barbara Schroeder's "[Talhotblond: Everybody Lies Online](#)" is like trying to NOT watch an accident site that you pass on the highway. Knowing the image won't be pretty, you gawk anyway. If this were a fictional, blockbuster film, we'd all leave the theatre saying, "That could never happen. Not *really*." Sadly, this documentary details real events, extraordinary though they are. As the documentary's website summates:

*Talhotblond is the true story (and screen name) of a beautiful teenage vixen who uses Internet game rooms to lure men into her cyberspace web.*

*When she discovers she's been double crossed and lied to by one of her victims, she wants revenge, and unleashes a fantasy online that escalates into real life murder – all because of a girl no one ever met in person.*

*Drawing from exclusive access to internet messages, secret notes and letters, as well as police evidence files and exclusive prison interviews, talhotblond details the horrific results of what can happen when people lie online.*

This documentary offers essential lessons concerning cyberspace. It exposes the dark side of the internet; the presence of predators and liars, the potential addiction to excitement and secret-keeping and, the interactional dynamics of online communication. It is on this last point that I shall focus.

As we all know, the internet provides a landscape for us to construct new identities and say things we would not ordinarily say. The rules of interaction

change dramatically when we move from face-to-face (f2f) to computer technology. Researchers across disciplines have explored online interactional behaviors, specifically the tendency for people to disclose far more of themselves online than one would in f2f settings. In 2004, John Suler wrote his oft-cited piece in what he coined the term Online Disinhibition Effect (ODE hereafter) which outlines six factors which help explain the deterioration of psycho-social barriers that typically block us from such hyper self-disclosure.

I don't want to offer too much of the plot as the twists and turns are too rich for me to reveal. I only seek to set the stage so that we can think about this movie as a teaching tool for ODE, as it applies to text communication (video chat being less prolific at the time). As online therapists, we can learn much from these stories of the "dark side of the internet". We can examine the fantasies humans construct in light of what may be considered partial information about the other person, and relate that to our work in understanding ODE. However, this needs to be done without buying into the fantasy the client has and also not allowing ourselves to be disinhibited online to the detriment of the client.

Thomas Montgomery is a 47 year old married father with two young daughters. He goes to work, barbeques out back with his family, and teaches Sunday school. He appears as the prototype of the middle-aged, devoted dad, husband and community member. But he is restless. Problems exist in his marriage and he's told by church advisors to open communication with his wife. Seemingly incapable of doing so, Tom instead begins a slow retreat into the internet, beginning with extended hours of game playing. During one of his gaming sessions, he receives a message from another player Jesse (aka talhotblond) asking if he is aware that the site is for kids. His response unleashes what



EVERYBODY LIES ONLINE

# talhotblond:

A documentary by Barbara Schroeder

will manifest into a maddening online relationship that will result in the destruction of families and even murder. The middle-aged Tom replied to Jesse, "I'm 18."

Jesse is a beautiful 18 year old West Virginian with long, blond hair (thus the user name). She and "Tommy," the 18 year old that Tom constructs, begin a wrenching online love affair. They send pictures – he, a photo of himself as a young, U.S. Marine, fresh from Parris Island boot camp (actually an old picture of the middle-aged Tom). She sends numerous pictures in various poses and clothing. "Tommy" is smitten and the two fall in love. Like two teens, they pledge an eternal bond, even as he is (fictionally, of course) shipped off to the war in Iraq. Jesse is in so deep that she considers herself engaged to Tommy.

In time, Tom's wife discovers the "affair" and the duplicity of her husband's actions. She writes to Jesse, telling her the truth. Naturally, Jesse is devastated and a period of silence ensues but the communication between she and Tom resumes. Jesse's mom intervenes, telling Tom to leave her daughter alone. Against the pleas from family, they continue to talk, fluctuating between bursts of vicious anger and tearful declarations of love. Even as Jesse knows Tommy to be fictional, she wants his continued presence. One demands the other stop all contact. But they participate in the pulling back in.

In the period of reprisal, when Jesse is furious at Tom for deceiving her, she reaches out to a co-worker of Tom's, 23 year old Brian Barrett. Brian begins a love affair with Jesse which, like the one with Tom, includes photos and sex via text. Tom grows increasingly jealous and he and Jesse begin their communication again. Brian, egged-on by Jesse, exposes Tom in their workplace. Eventually, however, Brian breaks off with Jesse whom he has come to see as "crazy."

Back and forth go the communications between Tom and Jesse. Months go by without Brian in the picture... until Jesse reaches out again to Brian through his MySpace page. Tom sees Brian's name appear on Jesse's page and is incensed. Even as Jesse assures him that she and Brian are not "together," Tom's rage against Brian increases. Tom's anger flares and his threats intensify, taking on a volatile (and exceedingly racist!) tone. Eventually, true to the Marine, sniper persona he created online, he shoots and kills Brian.



Tom and Jesse's disclosure of personal information was immediate (whether "true" or not). As research on other forms of online media (e.g., Second Life, Facebook) has shown, something about cyberspace encourages us to spew more emotions than we would f2f.

So how does this relate to online mental health interventions? In online therapy and coaching, the same phenomenon is possible; a client will divulge quickly and with more detail than they would f2f. From the practitioner's perspective, it can appear as an instant rapport. As I discussed this article with DeeAnna Merz Nagel, co-editor of TILT, she noted, "We (Online Therapy Institute) teach therapists that it is typical for someone to divulge more than they would in f2f. But the client could also experience feelings of vulnerability because they shared too quickly. It is up to the therapist to pace disclosure because without that knowledge, online therapy could be a train wreck."

Taking Suler's factors for ODE, we can see how the phenomenon applied to Tom and Jessie's situation. Learning from this, we can appreciate the importance of recognizing when our clients' tendencies to behave in a disinhibited way need attention, both outwith the therapeutic relationship and also within it.

**1** **DISSOCIATIVE ANONYMITY** refers to the process whereby we separate our actions online from our actions in-person. The relative anonymity of the internet can help us feel less vulnerability when self-disclosing and acting out. Anonymity allows for the freedom to discuss otherwise difficult topics. Like putting on a mask and stepping out in public, online interaction allows us to hide our “real” identities and create new personas, should we wish to ([Psyblog, 2010](#)).

Tom adorned the mask of “Tommy.” He was 18 years, muscular (of course) and a Marine. Even as it became more and more clear that Jesse was falling in love with a fictitious man, Tom continued the seduction. In the beginning, he felt little to no accountability for his actions stating that he could, after all, stop anytime he chose. In this early stage of the relationship, Tom still regarded Jesse as an abstract. He was restless and she served as a delicious distraction from his mundane life. She was not “real” to him in the sense that he need worry about her reaction should he cease communication.

A recent Saturday Night Live skit called “[The Comments Section](#)” spoofed those individuals with user names such as “xxxdeathbyfartsxxx,” “ultimatestud2good2betru, or “DaTruf.” When the show “moderator” asks “xxxdeathbyfartsxxx” why he commented so hatefully on a video, the commenter replies, proudly, “Hey, I just calls ‘em like I see’s em.” To that the moderator replies, sardonically, “That and there’s no consequences as you’ll never meet and of these people.” Much to deathbyfart’s surprise, the old lady he’d ridiculed online is invited on stage to shame him.

The anonymity that technology provides creates a kind of “flaming,” as Daniel Goleman, of the New York Times pointed out. In a piece entitled, “[Flame First, Think Later](#),” Goleman describes an “old”

internet problem that exists. Sitting alone with our computers or phones leads to a kind of dialogue (or monologue!) that more than likely would not happen f2f. With seeming anonymity, we are more likely to send a message that “is taken as offensive, embarrassing or downright rude.”

In psychological terms, this phenomenon is also known as dissociation or, “the disconnection or lack of connection between things usually associated with each other.” ([ISTDD, 2011](#)) Depending on the person’s ability to compartmentalize or dissociate behavior, affect, sensation or knowledge in his or her real life experience and to what extent this dissociation has been functional or problematic (Braun, 1988) may determine how dissociated a person may be from the online experience.

**2** **INVISIBILITY** means just that: we can’t be seen; on message boards, through blogging, and chats. This invisibility, like anonymity, fuels the likelihood of over-sharing.

We can’t see the body language of those with whom we interact; the rolling of eyes, the sigh of displeasure, blushing, sweating, or the crossing of arms. We can avoid eye contact. Invisible, we can sneak around naked (literally or figuratively) in our interactions with others.

Imagine the various cartoons or goofy movies you’ve seen that involve a character becoming invisible. Inevitably they stir up trouble for others or acquire, through scheming, something that they want to see, (for example, SpongeBob and Patrick episode involving invisible spray, as described on the [wiki](#) dedicated to the cartoon) In the same way, the invisibility factor cheers us on to do and say things that we’d ordinarily have to own-up to.

When Tom’s wife confronted him about his

virtual infidelity, asking why he did not work on their relationship instead of turning to “Jesse,” his response was that it was “easier for me to talk to someone I can’t see.” Tom pointed to the anger his wife felt in that moment and used it as evidence of why he felt he could not talk to her. Essentially he tells her, “See how angry you are right now.” With Jesse he could be intimate, angry, volatile and racist with no price tag attached.

Sociologist Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis (1959) posits that social life is much like a stage performance. We learn our roles through socialization and institutional structures and, these roles are reinforced through day-to-day interactions with others. Through clothing, language, and non-verbal cues, we actively present our SELF to the public. We perform for the audience (a.k.a society). Our “scripts” are largely written for us. For example, when someone steps into the role of “mother,” the behavior associated with that status is already written. In my research with mothers, I have never come across a mother that cannot answer this question: “What does it mean to be a “good mother?” From what many have said, “A good mother does not yell.” In front stage, a mother will seek to play that role appropriately, not screeching at her children in a public place. Back stage, however, a mother can let loose the constraints of the script and yell to her heart’s content.

Anders Persson, in his paper presented at the XVII World Congress of Sociology in 2010, uses the work of Goffman to examine interaction in social media, specifically his distinction of front stage and back stage. When we are front stage, we are performing. Back stage, of course, is hidden from the audience. In public we are front stage, constructing our presentation of self, following cultural norms. When front stage we typically do not divulge our secrets and emotions to strangers. That divulgence happens back stage, in our private lives, away from the eyes of strangers.

Persson argues that rather than talking front stage to front stage with strangers, the internet makes it so that we are actually interacting back stage to back stage. When logging into chat rooms or blogs, we are more often in our private (or back stage) places – our homes or offices. Safely back stage we let down the “performance” that is our essential self.

# 3

By **ASYNCHRONICITY**, Suler meant that in cyberspace, we don’t often interact in “real” time. There are delays between responses which allow for a type of dialogue not experienced f2f. As [Kate Anthony \(2009\)](#) explains:

In e-mail and message boards, where there are delays in feedback, people’s train of thought may progress more steadily and quickly towards *deeper expressions* of what they are thinking and feeling in comparison to instantaneous communications. Some people may even experience asynchronous communication as “running away” after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile. It feels safe putting it “out there” where it can be left behind.

While anonymity and invisibility can increase the likelihood of our over-sharing, the asynchronicity of technology allows us to stop and start conversations. We can post something inflammatory and then walk away. At the same time we can stop to collect our thoughts between exchanges.

As one of the facets of ODE, Tommy and Jesse would have experienced this from both sides – both as instigator of an “emotional hit & run” and in experiencing the unpleasantness of being on the receiving end.

## 4 SOLIPSISTIC INTROJECTION

refers to the process whereby we construct an image of the other partly by how they present themselves and partly by our internal representational system (built from life experiences). Even as we receive “data” from another (images and language) we then assign a voice, a tone and a visual to that person. Thus, our understanding of the “other” is based largely on what we bring to the interpretive process.



Jesse’s hunger for a love relationship helped construct the image of Tommy. All Jesse had was a photo and chat exchanges. However, she drew from her own desire for a man such as Tommy – one who could “rescue” her from the boredom of her West Virginia life – and in so doing helped solidify Tommy, the sniper Marine.

Similarly, Tommy, drawing from “voices in his head” participated in the construction of Jesse. Like he did for her, Jesse “rescued” Tom from his monotonous life. Jesse’s presentation of self was then filtered through Tom’s [“internal monologue.”](#)

As sociological social psychologists point out, the construction of the self is interactional. According to Charles Horton Cooley’s (1902) looking glass self we, 1) imagine how we look to others, 2) imagine how others judge what they see and, 3) develop a self-concept. How we *think* people feel about us is part of the construction of our own self. It is this interactional process that contributes to our global sense of self. It is not only how we present

ourselves, but how others go about defining the presentations that creates self-concept. In relation to online therapy and coaching, therapists need to be aware of their online presence - what (if any) picture they have on their website - what their searchable online identity “looks like” and to be aware of both the client’s perception of the therapist and the therapist’s perception of the client. This is why interjecting more cues (aural and visual) into the process may compromise the initial rapport. Imagine if Jesse and Tommy had talked early on or seen real images of one another?

## 5 DISSOCIATIVE IMAGINATION

reminds us that what happens online can become a kind of make believe world that allows us to enter and exit at will. Rex Beaber, the clinical psychologist whose analysis is offered throughout the film, notes that what makes relationships particularly satisfying is the “fantasy of what is possible.” With that we can

begin to imagine just how intense were the feelings between Jesse and Tom. After all, the whole of their relationship was a colossal, unending sense of what might be. This is important in relation to our online work as we as practitioners must attempt to avoid this fantasy creation within the client, and – likewise – the therapist.

Many psychologists will argue that this story is one of addiction. This is correct, but Baer is quick to note that Jesse and Tom were not necessarily addicted to the *internet*, per se. Rather, he argues, they were addicted to the excitement and intrigue that the relationship provided. Love is powerful, Baer reminds us, even pathological love. Tom “took the step through the looking glass hole and into a world of unreal.”

In cyberworld, anything is possible. A 47 year old, average Joe of an American guy, with mortgages and mundane work, can transform into an 18 year old hunk of a boy, full of wonder and excitement about his future with the lovely Jesse. And this fantasy is exactly what Tom loved about “Tommy.” As Tom told the filmmaker, the relationship with Jesse made him “feel like a kid again.” Through his construction of Tommy he could accomplish the very things he’d desired as a kid of 18. He could be the strapping, sexy sniper, Marine.

Of course, the same rule of love and interaction do not apply in the make-believe world. Here, one can click the stop button and end the “game.” After all, we feel anonymous and invisible anyway, and our task as therapists is to keep the dialogue real, holding oneself and the client accountable to the process.

But, for Tom, the make-believe world began to suddenly and then tragically enter his real-life world. It seems as though Tom was living out the [W.I.] Thomas theorem (1928) which states

that, if we define something as real, it is real in its consequences. To Tom, Jesse was not only “real,” but she was his love, his woman. To Tom, Jesse’s dalliance with Brian was “real.” On that fateful evening as Brian walked to his truck, Tom’s sense of jealous vehemence was real. Though by now Jesse was nothing but a MySpace name, Tom shot him point blank into the head and neck.

**6** A **MINIMIZATION OF AUTHORITY** can exist in cyberspace. From the perspective of a social control or exchange theorist, when we are making (rational) choices to deviate, we weigh the costs and benefits. Whether it’s a violation of a social norm (e.g., blatantly mean comments) or of a law (e.g., sex with a minor) – we unconsciously ask ourselves, does the benefit of this action outweigh the cost of this action? In f2f settings, these decisions can be made fairly easily if an authority figure’s presence is clear. That is, we are far less likely to rant, as does xxxdeathbyfartsxxx” in the SNL skit, if the person to whom the ridicule is directed stands in front of us. The cost is too high. What if she slugs back, but with a baseball bat? What if others reprimand and embarrass us? Online, negative sanctioning is far different than f2f (not that sanctioning doesn’t occur in chat rooms – it most certainly can and does). Online, if punished, one can usually slink away and find another group, with little cost to us.

Just as we can be negatively sanctioned, we can also receive positive sanctions. In a therapeutic situation, this can be as simple as a client divulging something perceived as shameful, yet the response from the therapist reframes the client’s perception of the information he or she has divulged.

When Brian and Jesse conspired to make Tom’s actions known in the workplace, Tom exploded.

Prior to that, Tom did not have a sense of shame that might derive from social disapproval. When Brian uncovered Tom's actions (which followed his wife's discovery), the fantasy world came crashing down on him. Suddenly there was a sense of authority looming. And with the authority came Tom's sense of shame and, perhaps, self-loathing. Indeed it might not be a stretch to say that it was self-loathing that led Tom to kill Brian.

Therapists (and often coaches) should keep ODE in mind when particularly difficult content is revealed by the client. This film allows and helps us to develop an understanding of ODE as it may potentially affect client's lives (such as leading to murder); how to manage the HUGE fantasy that the recipient puts into the text (either outside the therapy or within it); and how as online therapists we can relate that to our work in understanding ODE without either buying into the fantasy the client has or allowing ourselves to be disinhibited online to the detriment of the client. Media such as this should be embraced by our professional

community as a learning tool for the future of online work. ●

### INTERESTED IN VIEWING **talhotblond**?

#### **Purchase here:**

<http://astore.amazon.com/onlitherinst-20/detail/B0036K9CVO>

#### **Or download to your Kindle:**

<http://astore.amazon.com/onlitherinst-20/detail/B0030949FU>



This documentary has recently been made into a Lifetime movie so check Lifetime's viewing schedule:

<http://www.mylifetime.com/movies/talhotblond>

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