

You Are What You Post

Bosses are using Google to peer into places job interviews can't take them

One drizzly night in Seattle in 2001, Josh Santangelo was hanging out on his computer, clicking through an obscure Web site called Fray. After reading a post that asked if anyone had ever had a bad drug trip, the 22-year-old straightened up and began banging away. "Actually yes, about 36 hours ago..." he wrote. "Two Rolls Royces and four hits of liquid later, I was at a Playboy-themed birthday party with a head as dense as a brick.... It's hard to say no," he explained, "when a pretty girl is popping things into your mouth."

That was back when Santangelo was an up-all-night raver in giant pants and flame-red hair. Today he's a Web development guy with a shaved head who shows up at meetings on time and in khakis. Clients have included such family-friendly enterprises as Walt Disney ([DIS](#)) and Nickelodeon, as well as Starbucks ([SBUX](#)), AT&T, and Microsoft ([MSFT](#)). You can read all about it if you Google ([GOOG](#)) him, right alongside the bold-faced entry: "Josh Santangelo on drugs and..."

Oh, the horror. Shortly after Santangelo's late-night overshare, famed blogger Jason Kottke linked to it on his site. That bagged so much traffic that five years later the "drug dump" still ranks No. 7 out of a total 92,600 Google hits that come up when you type in Santangelo's name. He says with a half-laugh that so far "it hasn't hurt me too bad," but he fears for the MySpacing, YouTube, Facebooking masses -- the bloggers and vloggers (video bloggers) who fail to realize that there is no such thing as an eraser on the Internet. "I see people do that sort of thing now, and I think: 'Oh man, that could come back and bite you.'"

Do you give good Google? It's the preoccupation du jour as Google hits become the new Q ratings for the creative class. Search engines provide endless opportunities for ego surfing, Google bombing (influencing traffic so it spikes a particular site), and Google juicing (enhancing one's "brand" in the era of micro-celebrity). Follow someone too closely and you could be accused of being a Google stalker. Follow yourself too closely: Google narcissist.

But Googling people is also becoming a way for bosses and headhunters to do continuous and stealthy background checks on employees, no disclosure required. Google is an end run around discrimination laws, inasmuch as employers can find out all manner of information -- some of it for a nominal fee -- that is legally off limits in interviews: your age, your marital status, the value of your house (along with an aerial photograph of it), the average net worth of your neighbors, fraternity pranks, stuff you wrote in college, liens, bankruptcies, political affiliations, and the names and ages of your children. Former Delta Air Lines ([DAL](#)) flight attendant Ellen Simonetti lost her job because she posted suggestive pictures of herself in uniform on her "Queen of Sky" blog -- even though she didn't mention the airline by name. "We need Sarbanes and Oxley to come up with a Fair Google Reporting Act," says Brian Sullivan, CEO of recruitment firm Christian & Timbers. "I mean, what the hell do you do if there is stuff out there on Google that is unflattering or, God forbid, incorrect?"

Not a whole lot. That's because today there are two of you. There's the analog, warm-blooded version: the person who presses flesh at business conferences and interprets the corporate kabuki in meetings. Then there's the online you, your digital doppelgänger; that's the one that is growing larger and more impossible to control every day.

Because anyone, anywhere, at any time can say anything about you on the Web, reputations are scarily open-source. And because entire companies dedicate themselves to recording every inch of information on the Web, it's becoming difficult to unplug from the Google matrix, let alone make anything on the Internet go away. "This takes people's own agency out of how they want to present themselves," says Alice Marwick, a technology consultant and PhD candidate in New York University's Culture & Communications Dept. The Internet started out with avatars and anonymity. Now online and offline are bleeding together. "It's consolidating personal information into the aggregate," says Marwick, even though "our social practices haven't figured out how to keep up with the technology."

Search engines make it possible for employers to scour all manner of digital dirt to vet employees. Online profile company Ziggs.com CEO Tim DeMello fired an intern after he discovered that on the intern's Facebook profile he divulged that while at Ziggs he would "spend most of my days screwing around on IM and talking to my friends and getting paid for it."

There's also the risk of having no hits at all. (Translation: You are not a player.) Or the risk of having one too many. For lawyers, Google is paradise, often delivering more damning information than the discovery process does. Employment attorney Eric C. Bellafronto was recently on the phone with a client who had an employee with a history of being MIA. The slacker's excuse that day was that he was in Arizona taking care of a sick grandmother. While talking to the client, Bellafronto Googled the suspected faker and up came the fact that he was in Sacramento, being arraigned in federal court.

"PEOPLE CAN SEE EVERYTHING"

Schools are warning parents about Google's danger to the MySpace generation, for whom the Internet functions as a virtual diary-meets-barstool confessional. Adolescents try on identities and new behaviors like sweaters. Only now they are trying them on in front of the world. A Pew Research survey found that more than half of all online teenagers are ripping, mixing, and burning their own content, usually placing their creations right alongside their names and photos. The teenagers on the "companies and co-workers" section of MySpace who are talking smack about employers like Blockbuster (**BB!**), Target (**TGT**), and Gap (**GPS**) are clearly unaware of the implications. "People need to realize that this is like putting stuff up on the 6 o'clock news," says employment lawyer Garry G. Mathiason, a partner at San Francisco's Littler Mendelson. "Once you've opened the drapes, people can see everything. They can see your past life."

That's why Dave Fonseca, a senior at the University of Massachusetts, pulled his Facebook profile down in December. "Employers are looking at these things," he says. (It's easy for people to get passwords and noodle around on the site.) Fonseca even knows the verb for people who get fired for what they put on their Web sites: "dooched." The name comes from Dooce.com, the blog of Heather B. Armstrong, who got canned after writing about her job on her blog. Even Friendster, a social networking site that thrives on getting people to reveal everything about themselves, has been insistent on old-school discretion in-house. The company terminated esteemed engineer Joyce Park 18 months ago for mentioning Friendster on her blog, Troutgirl. The rumor on the Web was that the offending entry referred to Friendster's earlier sluggish performance. But the info was already widely known.

Oh, the irony.

PLAYBOOK: SMART STRATEGIES

Managing Your **Digital** Doppelgänger

Your current boss and future employer have a new best friend in **Google**. Some tips to clean up your digital dirt:

- 1** Register with an online profile manager such as Ziggs or LinkedIn. They're free.
- 2** If you must MySpace, refrain from posting the risqué; consider cloaking or using an avatar.
- 3** Order a background check from Zabasearch or Argali. Contact vendors if you find incorrect info.
- 4** Think before you blog. Anything personal that you post may come back to haunt you.
- 5** Fight fire with fire: Drive traffic with your own blog or by hiring a search-engine optimization outfit.

Source: http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/06_13/b3977071.htm?chan=search