Online we lose our decency/pants

By John Robson
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Did we lose our minds, and our pants, when we went online? I have to ask because of a news story about a guy who used women's Facebook profiles to hijack their e-mail accounts, retrieve the nude photos they'd sent of themselves, and humiliate or blackmail them. Yes. I said nude photos.

MSNBC says in nine months this wretch hijacked the accounts of hundreds of women and wound up with "more than 170 files of explicit photographs stolen from e-mail accounts he had hijacked." Remember, he wasn't able to target known senders of nude pictures. His victims were just foolish enough to list on Facebook the personal details you'd need to answer typical "Forgot your password?" questions about your mother's maiden name, favourite food etc. And hundreds of them had self-published porn pictures sitting around in their Sent Items folders.

Can someone tell me what is going on? In the pre-Internet era, how many women were sending out nude Polaroids of themselves? And at least back then it was laborious to create copies. The Internet seems to affect people the way that T-shirt says tequila does: First you think you're invulnerable, then you think you're invisible. Why?

The creepy perp, by the way, now faces up to six years in the Big House. Leaving aside the question of how he could be so nasty, how could he be so stupid as to think he wouldn't be tracked down?

Another MSNBC story earlier this month noted six girls in Nevada arrested over a Facebook invitation to an "Attack a Teacher Day" at two schools. A parent spotted that one, and you don't have to be too Internet-savvy to get the POS thing. (For those even less hip than I am, which means you're pretty much elbow: POS means "Parents Over Shoulder" so ixnay on the exsay.) How did anyone think they could post stuff like that online and not get caught?

Then there's Courtney Love, who once described herself as covered in "loser dust" and now faces a libel suit over some extremely nasty tweets. I am not so foolish as to speculate about the facts of the case in print or online but again, she apparently didn't realize sending abusive comments to 40,000 followers is not a great place to hide them. Lady, Twitter doesn't make you invisible or judgment-proof. Not legal judgment, anyway.

I'm not blaming the Internet for some cretin's dark impulse to humiliate and victimize women. At least not directly. On the surface it was just the venue for his stalking, and if all he wanted was nude photos, a fairly innocent online search for "naked women" would have given him 33 million hits in a tenth of a second.

I mean that literally; I tested it Wednesday. But I also noticed that the thumbnail descriptions suggested many of my results were not just girlie pix but extremely, wilfully nasty stuff. What amazes me is not that such evil lurks in the hearts of men but that they now seem to have no hesitation in shouting it to the world. And in that sense something funny is happening online.

As I say, I'm not blaming hypertext directly. People used to claim that capitalism debauched consumer tastes. I assure you, we didn't need any help then and we don't now. Capitalism simply offered us far more choices at far better prices and we did the rest.

So essentially, did the Internet, and in the process it offered many great benefits including a much smaller environmental footprint. But somehow, in magnifying our opportunities without improving our morals, cyberspace, far more than the marketplace, seems to be exposing not just our vices but our growing shamelessness.

The other day I read a piece on how to increase traffic to your website whose key tip was: Be a jerk. A deliberately rude comment will draw a host of even more obnoxious followers in a downward spiral to online popularity without the slightest embarrassment. Nor are people embarrassed to e-mail me notes about my column they wouldn't write on a bathroom wall, let alone stationary.

It also puzzles me that the victims of this Facebook/e-mail predator were careless in a way they surely would not have been in days gone by. Password security is increasingly an illusion in the face of high-speed attacks. But to post all those personal details online shows a weird lack of sense of privacy. Women who wouldn't walk around naked with the curtains open, or tell a stranger their birthday, expose themselves online, literally and figuratively, then sit there thinking "What could go wrong?" without even the sense to delete the sent nudie pix.

That's the part I really don't get. What is it about the Internet that makes people lose all sense of shame? It's not like it won't catch up with you and, when it does, it won't be any less embarrassing than it would have been when you had to Xerox your butt.

I ask again: Did we lose our minds as well as our pants when we logged on?

John Robson's column appears weekly.