Privacy, the Self and Psychotherapy Practice in the Era of the Internet
"The struggle with the land is finished...now the frontier is the computer, so it has become an internal thing. Computers cause protracted dreaming about what might be, and the frontier everyone is seeking is now in the imagination"

Sam Shepard, 1998
A Fundamental Paradox of Cybercommunication

- It presents a radical challenge to our traditional notions of privacy but also offers us a place to hide.
- “You can have a sense of self without being oneself”

-Sherry Turkle 1997
Twitter: “The enemy of contemplation”

--Keller, 2011
• “If you listen first and write later, then whatever you write will have had time to filter through your brain, and you will be in what you say. This is what makes you exist. If you are only a reflector of information, are you really there?”

--Jaron Lanier, Author of You Are Not a Gadget
Three Areas of Focus

• The contemporary view of the self
• The domain of privacy
• The intrusion of electronic communication into the therapist-patient relationship
The Self
Fluidity of the Self

- Facebook
- Second Life
- Splitting
  - “Cyberpassion: E-rotic Transference on the Internet”
  Gabbard GO, Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 2001
“CONNECTIVITY And ITS DISCONTENTS”

--Sherry Turkle, Alone Together, 2011
• We are tethered to our devices
• Losing the art of human interaction
• A radical new self is emerging
• We are surrounded by friends and family who are there but not there
• A self is shaped by what we want others to see
“A bunch of friends are coming over to stare at their phones.”
Search Engines

• Search engines now construct algorithms on everyone who conducts a search
• We now receive pleasant information that confirms all our beliefs
• Original concept of the Internet is being undermined
• “Hive mind” --Lanier 2010
Generational Differences

- Adolescence
- Winnicott—a segment of the true self must remain incommunicado
- Isolation preserves a sense of authenticity that is sacred to the emerging self
- Erikson—"time out"—a place of stillnesss
Authenticity

• “Be Authentic!”
• Adolescents and young adults must decide which version of the self will APPEAR “authentic” to others
• Appearing authentic and being authentic are not the same thing
• Little sense of agency—one reacts to external stimuli rather than acting from a center of autonomy
Object Relations

• Adolescents and young adults see others as part-objects to be summoned when needed
• Instant gratification
  - no struggle to delay
  - no struggle to accept that one can not always get what one wants
• Narcissistic object relatedness
• Divorce commonly linked to online behavior
The Indelible Self
A major change is afoot: the Internet used to be a place where one could change identity at will: Now what we email, tweet and text leaves a permanent record that is difficult to erase.

Facebook photos of medical students and psychiatric residents partying have influenced decisions regarding admission for further training.

Canadian psychotherapist stopped at border

False information can haunt you for years.
How the Internet Tried to Kill Me
By ZICK RUBIN
Boston

WHEN I Googled myself last month, I was alarmed to find the following item, from a Wikia.com site on psychology, ranked fourth among the results:

Zick Rubin (1944-1997) was an American social psychologist.“

This was a little disconcerting. I really was born in 1944 and I really was an American social psychologist. Before I entered law school in midlife, I was a professor of psychology at Harvard and Brandeis and had written books in the field. But, to the very best of my knowledge, I wasn’t dead.

I knew that the report of my death could be bad for business, so I logged into Wikia.com and removed the 1997.“ But when I checked a while later, I found the post had reverted to its prior form. I changed it again; again someone changed it back. Apparently the site had its doubts about some lawyer in Boston tinkering with the facts about American psychologists.
Wikipedia entry on Dr. Glen Gabbard

• “Dr Gabbard is currently an Awesome Ranger at the Cub Scout camp in Port Huron, New York.”
Privacy and the Therapist’s Anonymity
FACEBOOK

• Privacy has been radically re-defined
• One billion international members
• Only 20% of members use their privacy settings
• “The site has eroded natural barriers.”

--Stone 2009
Why can't Facebook understand that I value complete personal privacy between me and my

873 friends?
Clinical Example
• Privacy is disappearing
• “If you are doing something you don’t want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn’t be doing it in the first place.”

---Eric Schmidt, Google COO, 2010
Therapeutic Anonymity

- Relational, intersubjective, constructivist theory
- Google searches have eroded analytic anonymity
- Anything on the Web is public information
- “Rate Your Doctor” websites
- Clinical Example
Should therapists Google their patients?
The Intrusion of Electronic Communication into the Therapist-Patient Relationship
The Case of Mr. X
Mr. X

- 29 year-old man with borderline personality disorder
- Was being seen once per week for combined medication and psychotherapy
- Ongoing suicidal ideation but no history of attempts
- Cries for help came in the form of medication requests
“I need to keep sleeping because of my misery. How many clonazepams can I take in a day? Can you write a stronger prescription to knock me out? Thanks. I need it this weekend—cannot wait.”
“If you got my message and don’t plan to attend to it this weekend, let me know right away so I can look into alternative ways to get it if you won’t prescribe.”
My response: “I really don’t want to do anything different until I meet you and discuss this. Please call Donna Monday so we can get an appointment scheduled”
“Can you tell me how many clonazepam I can take in one day? I have the 0.5 mg tablets.”
My response: “Please take as directed until we talk.”
“Which is two a day and that is not keeping me sleeping. I will check Internet because I need a knockout punch. Being awake and conscious is torture.”
The Case of Ms. B
“Bad traffic. Will be late. Maybe 15 mins”
“Parking now”
“In waiting room now”
“Thinking about last night and can’t concentrate on work”
“Quick! Which male star would you rather see in a film—Brad Pitt or Ryan Gosling?”
Technical Dilemmas

• There is no “correct” way to do therapy
• Each patient must do therapy in the way that he must do it.
• Psychotherapy is not coercive
• We allow each patient to show us who he is.

--Gabbard GO: On gratitude and gratification. JAPA 2000
Technical Dilemmas (cont)

- On the other hand, we can allow the communication on electronic devices to be split off from the psychotherapy and remain frozen in an unanalyzed virtual universe.
- We must attempt to analyze however the patient chooses to communicate to us.
“Oh come on, Dr. Gabbard, this is 2011. Everyone is texting these days. Phone calls are obsolete. Sometimes you sound like a dinosaur.”
Implications for Psychotherapy
Can we incorporate these forms of communication into our technique?
Can we redefine the self of the therapist as an “open book” to the patient who is curious?
Or should we forbid our patients to text us, email us, or Google us, knowing, of course, that what is most forbidden is most enticing?
Can we allow our lifelong approach to our work to be transformed by the electronic transmission of information?
"For most of human history, people have lived in small tribes where everything they did was known by everyone they know. In some sense, we're becoming a global village. Privacy may turn out to have become an anomaly."