

Naked on the Internet Is Not Forever

As long as you were smart enough to get naked 10 years ago.

PATRICK DI JUSTO | FEB 7, 2014 | TECHNOLOGY



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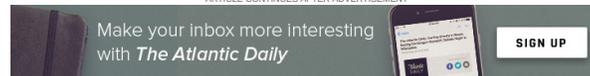
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In Autumn 2007, someone took a picture of me and put it on the web. In this low-angle shot taken at my peak weight, I looked like Jabba the Hutt wearing a blue T-shirt. Since the picture illustrated a popular blog post, it immediately became the first result when you did an image search on my name. Mortified at the sight of what I had become, I immediately did two things: I started to eat better and exercise in order to lose weight, and I flooded the Internet with better-looking images of myself hoping to drive the fat picture off the front page of search results. The second effort was a lot easier than the first, but eventually both were successful.

Recently I wanted to show someone what I used to look like, but the picture wouldn't turn up. Every search term I tried, every date range, every filter, returned nothing. While the picture is probably still sitting on a server somewhere, there seems to be no reasonable way to get at it. For all intents and purposes, I am no longer grossly obese on the Internet.

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This is in complete contrast to the warnings we've been hearing since the mid-1990s, that "On the Internet, pictures of you exist forever"; that "These pictures will resurface in the future"; that "You will be tagged forever."

Granted, these warnings were usually aimed at those posting photos of naked teenage hijinks, not of chubby, fully-clothed writers. But it seems that even the naked teens of the early 2000s may not find their lives ruined someday by the rediscovery of a long-forgotten online photo.

Take the case of Margaret R. [not her real name], 30, currently the chief financial officer of a boutique consulting firm. When she turned 18, Margaret R. became a nude model for a website that tried to blur the edges between porn and subculture (vaguely like *Suicide Girls*, but without the drama). One of the site's most popular models, she did numerous photo shoots and videos, and her images regularly migrated to porn aggregator sites all over the Internet.

By the time she quit the business at 21, an image search on her modeling name returned page after page of these photos.

As the quintessential naked teenage girl on the Internet, Margaret R.'s life should have been ruined forever. But earlier this month, when we searched the Internet for her old pictures, Margaret R. and I discovered that they show up infrequently, if at all. Even better, it's almost always the tamest images that have survived, the ones any model might have in a portfolio. She told me that this confirms what she's known for the past 10 years: Her brief career in internet porn has never had any effect on her life since. "Once I quit and stopped being involved there hasn't been anything. I'm actually a little surprised about that, I sort of expected it to follow me more."



Why are the "experts" wrong about our Internet past sticking around forever? Is it that something has changed in the way we access information through search engines in the past 10 years? Or are these two examples—my unfortunate pictures and Ms. R.'s nude pictures—just weird anomalies?



According to Jon Kleinberg, professor of computer science at Cornell University, there's no real contradiction. "The question of why something stays in a search engine's results, and what causes it to show up in response to searches, is a composite of so many things that it's hard to point to any one overriding factor, but a useful working heuristic is that someone on the Internet has to exert at least a minimum of effort in order to keep it around—it has to remain on a machine somewhere that's getting indexed by a search engine, with some sort of way to get to it."

Further, according to Kleinberg, this minimum of effort is pretty minimal. Websites like YouTube and Flickr actively encourage the indexing of their content by search engines, so it's easy to find photos on them that go back many years. But have you searched for an image from your Friendster days? Kleinberg explains, "Our methods for searching pictures are more primitive than our methods for searching text. And pictures are huge—they take up a lot of bytes on a hard drive—so if the site goes away, the consolidation that keeps a lot of things current can also cause a lot of things to vanish all at once, when the effort is no longer being applied."

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According to a recent study, _____ percent of seniors would get a D or fail outright on a basic civics test at top U.S. universities.

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That's something Larry Zillox, president of Investigative Research Specialists of Bristow, Virginia, knows all too well. "Very often, places where pictures are posted on the Internet just go away," he says. "The company name gets sold, and the new owners just delete the old content. Sometimes they delete accounts if you haven't logged in in a while." Zillox, who specializes in opposition research for political candidates, does add this caveat: "If you have patience and are willing to sift through a lot of stuff, some gems might still show up." For this reason, he says, many people preparing to go into politics spend a lot of time trying to delete information from the Internet before they run for office. "Older stuff might be gone, but a lot more new content is shared in multiple places," he says. "If five, 10 copies of a picture are out there, chances are I'm going to find it."

But if you're not a political candidate, does being naked on the Internet even matter anymore? Maybe not, argues Anthony Rotolo, assistant professor of social media at Syracuse University. "There's a half life to the stuff that we share on line, and it's really short," he says. "The Internet lives on moments. It lives on what is viral right now, whether globally (like Justin Bieber getting arrested), or viral within your own social network. Then it's over very quickly. What we're seeing is that your naked pictures from 10 years ago are nowhere near as appealing as someone else's new naked pictures, which will be forgotten tomorrow anyway."

Rotolo credits Facebook with helping to foster this change. As recently as a decade ago, identities on the Internet were much more protected. It was seen as foolhardy to ever use your real name online, to the extent that people even had separate credit cards for their online purchases. Under those circumstances, it was easy to pretend that embarrassing Internet pictures were something that could never happen to the average person. Then Facebook came along, forcing everyone to use their real name. And in doing so, the blue F helped embarrassing Internet pictures become a normal part of being online. As Rotolo puts it, "Facebook made us realize that anyone claiming they haven't done embarrassing things on the Internet is probably lying."



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The Problem With #MeToo's Agenda

Caitlin Flanagan argues that the #MeToo movement is becoming big enough to be rendered meaningless.

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Bari Weiss and the Left-Wing Infatuation With Taking Offense

SHADI HAMID

The mob was unusually vociferous, even for Twitter. After the California-born ice skater Mirai Nagasu became the first American woman to land a triple axel at the Olympics, the *New York Times* writer Bari Weiss [commented](#) “Immigrants: They get the job done.”

What followed that innocuous tweet was one of the sillier, manufactured controversies I have ever seen on Twitter. Twitter’s socially conscious denizens probably only realized

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Airbnb and the Unintended Consequences of 'Disruption'

DEREK THOMPSON

The U.S economy is in the midst of a wrenching technological transformation that is fundamentally changing the way people [sleep](#), [work](#), [eat](#), [shop](#), [love](#), [read](#), and [interact](#).

At least, that’s one interpretation.

A second story of this age of technological transformation says that it’s mostly a facade—that the last 30 years have been a [productivity bust](#) and little has changed in everyday

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The Full Text of Mueller's Indictment of 13 Russians

PRISCILLA ALVAREZ AND TAYLOR HOSKING

On Friday, February 16, Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein announced that the special counsel, Robert Mueller, had indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian entities on charges that including conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and bank fraud, and aggravated identity theft. This is the full text of that [indictment](#).

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT

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Mueller's Message to America

PAUL ROSENZWEIG

With yet another blockbuster indictment (why is it always on a Friday afternoon?), Special Counsel Robert Mueller has, once again, upended Washington. And this time, it is possible that his efforts may have a wider effect outside the Beltway.

For those following the matter, there has been little doubt that Russian citizens attempted to interfere with the American presidential election. The American intelligence

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The Righteous Anger of the Parkland Shooting's Teen Survivors

ROBINSON MEYER

Something was different about the mass shooting this week in Parkland, Florida, in which 14 students and three adults were killed.

It was not only the death toll. The mass murder at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High became the deadliest high-school shooting in American history ([edging out Columbine](#), which killed 13 in 1999).

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Why Don't More Female Figure Skaters Wear Pants?

ASHLEY FETTERS

Last weekend, one of the buzzer stories out of the Olympic ladies' figure skating short program competition was one you might call ... surprisingly surprising. The French figure skater Maé-Bérénice Méité made headlines: for the fact that she skated to a Beyoncé medley, and even more so, for the fact that she did it in pants.

More accurately, she did it in a bedazzled black unitard, but that didn't stop news outlets and viewers on Twitter from *revelation was a little more subtle* *asked to perform in pants*

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When Malls Saved the Suburbs From Despair

IAN BOGOST

"Okay, we'll see you in two-and-a-half hours," the clerk tells me, taking the iPhone from my hand. I'm at the Apple Store, availing myself of a cheap smartphone battery replacement, an offer the company made after taking heat for deliberately slowing down devices. A test run by a young woman typing at a feverish, unnatural pace on an iPad confirms that mine desperately needed the swap. As she typed, I panicked. What will I do in the mall for so long, and without a phone? How far the mall has fallen that I rack my brain for

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The Swiss Have Liberal Gun Laws, Too

KRISHNADEV CALAMUR

In February 2011, Swiss citizens voted in a referendum that called for a national gun registry and for firearms owned by members of the military to be stored in public arsenals.

"It is a question of trust between the state and the citizen. The citizen is not just a citizen, he is also a soldier," Hermann Suter, who at the time was vice president of the Swiss gun-rights group Pro Tell, told the BBC then. "The gun at home is the best way to avoid dictatorships—only *dictatorship takes some sense from the citizens.*"

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'Show Us the Carnage'

JAMES FALLOWS

After a previous horrific massacre via AR-15, the one in Las Vegas last winter in which a single murderer killed or injured *more than 900* people, readers wrote about that weapon and its history. For reference, those items were:

- o "Why the AR-15 Is So Lethal"
- o "The Nature of the AR-15"
- o "Why the AR-15 Was Never Meant to be in Civilian Hands"

It's time for the US to demand #FullBan #BanAR15

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Beware the Northside Skull and Bone Gang

EMILY BUDER

For 200 years, this Mardi Gras krewe has kicked off the festival at the crack of dawn with a very important message.

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DAVID FRUM



Conservatives Must Save the Republican Party From Itself

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NADINE AJAKA

In a StoryCorps animation, Patrick Haggerty remembers the remarkable advice he got from his dairy farmer dad.

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