Reviews

*We Live in Public*, dir. Ondi Timoner (1999)

“We Live in Public, the newest documentary from director Ondi Timoner, looks at internet technology and how it’s changing us...
The unexamined life is not worth living, to be sure, but what *We Live in Public* asks -- as a pertinent question in the age of blogging and MySpace and Facebook and Twitter -- is if perpetually broadcasting your life is the same thing as examining it, and asks the question of who, exactly, is doing the watching...
Many of the insights Calacanis, Harris, Timoner and the film offer are fascinating. How much of our lives are we sacrificing for the illusory intimacy of Facebook and the 140-character blurps of Twitter? Has the ability to say what we’re thinking to a broader and broader group diluted the quality of what we have to say? Who owns these electric extensions of our self, and how long will they endure? (I can't help but wait for the first news story about a political candidate undone by the revelation of their Twitter feed or status updates -- if that hasn't happened yet.) Were people meant to live in the absence of privacy, or with their every utterance stored in digital database 'memories' that remember for them? And who's ultimately profiting from all of this?...
I walked out of *We Live in Public* ready to use my smartphone to Twitter a reaction -- as I, and so many of my peers have been doing to make post-film snap judgments and endorsements during this year’s Sundance -- but actually instead took pause after the film’s conclusion: Why would I be doing that? To say something real? To look clever? To reach out to a like-minded community when far from home? To be ‘First’? To avoid actually thinking? Ultimately, *We Live in Public* made me take a 24-hour vow of silence from Twitter, and made me think about my own signal-to-noise ratio in the interconnected world. (I tried to go for a similar break from Facebook, but Scrabulous is a cruel taskmaster.) Watching the film's finale -- Harris living and working in Ethiopia far from the numb hum of the modern age he helped create -- you can't help but wonder about our new age of miracles, and how soon it will be too much, and what refuge or relief we'll seek out when that happens. Timoner hasn't made the definitive documentary about the internet -- who could? -- but she's crafted a incisive, exciting and thought-provoking examination of the ways our new chances to live in public both make and mar the way we now live.”
-James Rocchi

“After watching the documentary *We Live in Public*, a hyperventilated account of the rise and weird fall of the dot-com millionaire turned self-declared artist Josh Harris, you might want to run home, lower all the shades and unplug yourself from the Internet. Certainly Mr. Harris, who earned a sizable fortune from different Internet ventures only to become increasingly consumed with issues of privacy, control and surveillance — a complex of obsessions that helped him lose much of that fortune — could have used some alone time...
Although the men and women in “Quiet” knew they were being observed, the ubiquity of the cameras and monitors meant that their actions were part of a visual stream that blurred their individual actions, turning them into an undifferentiated mass...
Ms. Timoner questions [Josh Harris’s] mental health, but she doesn’t seriously engage with the issues her documentary raises, including whether the right to privacy will survive given how eagerly so many now surrender themselves to the camera. At one point she describes “Quiet” as a metaphor for how Mr. Harris believed we would live in the Internet age. Later, citing the example of how online sites mine our data, she asserts: “We all willingly share this information. We enjoy the attention, the feedback, the comments.” We do and we don’t, but she doesn’t
"Is this where we are headed? Did Harris predict yet another step in the evolution of a modern community? An interlocking matrix of technology has already changed how we interact with one another through innovations like texting, blogging, Facebook, and Twitter, and the proliferation of mobile Internet only expands that access to others. Perhaps it’s only natural that today’s podcasts and Ustreams will progress into tomorrow’s live video chat (like PalTalk) inviting our friends and family into our lives on a more consistent basis. Or maybe civilization will ultimately regress, like Harris’ escape to a remote apple farm or eventual seclusion in an Ethiopian village. Will the Internet be like any other vice — fast food, cigarettes, etc. — where overindulgence declines with the realization that it’s all bad for you? Or will the Internet become a way of life, shaping how we operate as a society?"

-Jeff Leins


"Indeed, there was a method to Harris’s madness (and I mean madness in the Hunter S. Thompson sense, from his clown avatar named Luvvy, who may have been inspired by Mrs. Howell from Gilligan’s Island, to his hiring a "surveillance artist," an "interrogation artist," and an "artillery artist" for the firing range in the underground bunker), born from a compelling desire to warn the world of how the Web was going to revolutionize not just social interaction, but the very essence of human behavior. "Quiet" proved that people would do things in front of a camera that they would never in a million years otherwise do. As one participant allows, the more she’s on camera the more detached she feels from herself. The experiment even visualized how the line between creativity and destruction becomes a mirage. And how someday soon we would all be living in public, under the watchful eye not of an authoritarian Big Brother, but, as Harris puts it, our own "collective conscious." In other words, the Facebook future is here today."

-Lauren Wissot


"This is a remarkable film about a strange and prophetic man. What does it tell us? Did living a virtual life destroy him? When Harris had a nervous breakdown after the "We Live in Public" Web experiment collapsed, was the experiment responsible? Remember Jenny Ringley? She was the pioneer of Webcams. From April 1996 until 2003, she lived her life online, getting, it was said, tens of millions of hits a week. She never discussed why she shut down Jennycam. Today, she says she doesn’t even have a MySpace page. And Josh Harris says Sidamo, Ethiopia, is the best place on Earth to live: "People know each other here."

-Roger Ebert

“What does any of this prove about privacy? Certainly not what Harris claims: that we're entering an age in which we will all willingly surrender ourselves to the scrutiny of others. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube aside, most people I know -- even, in the end, Harris himself -- still seem glad about one thing. All those gadgets and gizmos that connect us to each other still come, last I checked, with an off switch.”
-Michael O’Sullivan
http://www.washingtonpost.com/gog/movies/we-live-in-public,1157174/critic-review.html#reviewNum1

“Harris's canard, which Timoner echo-chambers, is to insist that the behavior of a flawed test sample—trend-susceptible extrovert extended-adolescent "artists"—observed under this unique set of circumstances has any relation to how most people use computers. (One bit of associative editing actually connects the "Stasi-type" interrogation rooms that were an element of designed dystopia in "Quiet" to keyword-sensitive advertising in e-mail browsers.)... Timoner takes Harris's erratic pulse—and diagnoses society. What is disturbing is not Harris's self-absorbed insistence that his own emotional hobbling—self-protection through technology, "explained" by a raised-by-the-TV childhood—somehow reflects an overarching social-technological pattern, but, instead, Timoner's uncritical cinematic collusion. She places her subject in a cultural vacuum, ignoring the long procession of justly better-remembered precedents that render Harris's "ideas" banal. Even his ultimate self-discovery, the revelation that Ethiopians are more "real" than Los Angelenos, is another putrid cliché—which Timoner swallows with barely a flinch.”
-Nick Pinkerton

“Long before MySpace, Facebook and Twitter were conceived, Harris predicted, and proved with uncanny accuracy, what would happen when the Internet finally and fully connected with the ego of a plugged-in mankind. In the early '90s, when the speed of images and data was still glacial, he was figuring out how to exploit this new virtual world...
So much that is the Internet culture today -- good and bad, online and offshoots - is foreshadowed in his 1999 millennium project, "Quiet: We Live in Public." Harris believed that the human desire to connect was so great, and human relations so fraught, that given the chance the masses would embrace the Web as a safe place to get emotionally, sometimes literally, and always publicly, naked. "Quiet" would test that notion...
In a twist worthy of Orwell, the residents became both subjects and observers. Everyone had their own monitors with continuous feeds from all those cameras and the ability to channel surf across the real-time activities of everyone around them. In the background was Timoner filming all that recording and watching and acting out -- her camera the biggest Big Brother of them all.
Harris' hypothesis proved true -- the bunker's residents were soon addicted to being seen. Anarchy, when it came, was naked and mad and playing to the camera. After the bunker was closed, Harris and a girlfriend moved into a loft and became the experiment. Timoner followed. Here the cameras were more invasive, the stakes higher, and the end even more difficult than "Quiet's." Seeing it all unfold now, it is hard not to wonder whether things might have turned out differently had we paid more attention then. Or is it only that Harris understood the Pandora's box inside the PC before the rest of us?”
-Betsy Sharkey