Chapter One

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On Chance, Distraction, and the Prepared Mind

Starting Over

I didn't have a particular topic in mind when I decided to take a break from paper-based publishing. I just had a vague sense I would use my blog, *text2cloud*, as a place to think about the emergence of the screen-centric world. From the start, my research question was—and remains—big, baggy, unmanageable: What happens when text moves into the cloud? Before I launched text2cloud.com in 2010, I'd spent a couple of years traveling the country giving talks about how the shift from a paper-based to a screen-centric world was wreaking havoc on the institutions, industries, and social structures that shape how we live and interact. Pick any area of public life—government, military service, homeland security, police protection, banking, commerce—and I could point to profound changes set in motion by mass data collection and mass data leaks. So too in the realm of private life, I could talk about how smart phones and the always-on, interactive Web were changing how we date, make friends, and entertain ourselves; how we are intimate; how we experience the passage of time; how we remember and

how we forget. And, with regard to education, I could speak at length about how the technological developments were changing what we learn, how we learn, where we learn, when we learn, and how we show that we've learned.

I could see that the trend of all these big picture changes was toward the end of privacy, as more and more data were being accumulated about more and more of us about more and more aspects of our lives—how we shop; what our musical tastes are; what networks of friends we have; and what we search for when we think no one is looking. I could see the significance of these changes at the macro level, but I didn't really have much of an understanding of how to contend with these issues at the micro level of the individual. I could, for example, talk about how these changes were redefining childhood, but back home, as I would watch my kids gaming on their devices, lost in the rush of computer-generated imagery that seemed more real than reality itself, I had no way of knowing whether there was cause for concern. I would listen as my kids avidly discussed fanfic, RPGs, and AI, only barely able to follow the strings of acronyms and code words. And I marveled at the funky used clothes they'd purchase online, not quite sure what PayPal was, or eBay, or Etsy, or how, really, there was money to be made in running what seemed to be a twenty-four-hour global yard sale. At home, at school, and in the news, there was this endless swirl of digital activity and a running soundtrack of references to memes, YouTube videos, social media, and file-sharing. I could see all these changes—who couldn't? The evidence was everywhere. But I didn't know how to get my thoughts about that evidence off the page and onto the Web.

In a word, Dear Reader, I could not post. I could not self-publish. I could not self-promote. And, eventually, the hypocrisy of depending on others to manage my "online presence" became too much for me to bear. If I was going to teach students who were sitting in classes in the twenty-first century how to write for the most powerful publishing network humans have ever created, I'd better learn how to do so myself.

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But, where to begin?

I took a seat before my computer, opened my browser, placed my cursor in the search engine box, and waited.

On the other side of that flashing line, the mystery of mysteries. There was anything and everything. Or so I'd been told. And so, I am certain, I must've told others.

Blink. Blink.

Or there was nothing.

Nothing but lies. Conspiracy theories. Porn.
Nothing.
And no one to be trusted.

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Early in my graduate education, I had a brilliant, quirky teacher who had no patience for the topic sentence. She was exasperated by all the formulaic writing students had been compelled to generate over the years in the service of the topic sentence's mandatory stance of certainty. Topic sentence pedagogy, one might say, promotes the idea that writing's principle function is to provide skimmable business reports for busy executives. It values order over insight and, leaving nothing to chance, drives the reader from one evidence-based certainty to the next, bullet by bullet. But "chance," my teacher declared more than once, "chance favors the prepared mind."

I was immediately taken with this phrase the first time I heard her say it, and I have quoted it many times since as a shorthand explanation for the essential role serendipity plays in the composing process as I experience it. And over those many years and many repeated citations, I've always attributed the saying to a certain famous American Transcendentalist because, well, that's the way I remembered it and it certainly seemed like something he would have written out in his cabin in Massachusetts.

Imagine my surprise, just now, when I discovered, after typing the phrase into my search engine, that for the past three decades I have been attributing it to the wrong person! It wasn't the Transcendentalist, alone with his thoughts, quill in hand; it was Louis Pasteur, the chemist whose name is now synonymous with food safety. My first reaction to this discovery was, "Well, there goes my explanation for how I came to spend seven years writing about suicide, voyeurism, and the end of privacy." But then, digging a little deeper, and with some assistance from Google Translate, I realized that Pasteur's observation, read in context, offers an even better explanation for how my effort to learn how to read and write using twenty-first-century tools turned into a series of meditations on a young college student's decision to have the penultimate act of his life be updating his Facebook status to read: "jumping off the gw bridge sorry."

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So, here's the story.

Louis Pasteur is making his first dean's address to the science faculty at the newly created University of Lille on December 7, 1854. With the university about to welcome its first class, Dean Pasteur chooses to speak to his

faculty about the school's pedagogical principles. He warns the teachers that there will be constant pressure from outside the school to have the students pursue only research that has clear, and preferably immediate, application for business and industry. Rejecting the idea that education is exclusively for vocational ends, Pasteur argues for an educational approach that "ignites the student's curiosity and interest," where all students, regardless of their future employment plans, learn how to think like scientists.

Pasteur warns his teachers they will need to be prepared to defend the value of pursuing scientific research that has no obvious, immediate revenue-generating application. He quotes Ben Franklin who, after demonstrating a "purely scientific discovery," responded to an observer's skeptical question, "but what purpose does it serve?" with a question of his own: "What purpose does a newborn child serve?"[1]

Pasteur then asks his faculty: "Do you know when, exactly, the electric telegraph, one of the most marvelous applications of modern science, first saw the light of day?" After a suitable pause, he continues, "It was in the memorable year of 1822."[2]

In that year the Swedish[3] physicist and chemist Hans Christian Ørsted ran a battery-powered current through a copper wire near a magnetized needle. Ørsted "suddenly saw, (by chance, you may say, but remember that in the fields of observation chance favors only the prepared mind), he saw all of the sudden the magnetized needle move and point in a direction very different from the one assigned to it by the earth's magnetic field." This was the moment, Pasteur maintains, the telegraph was born. But—and this is the point of Pasteur's extended anecdote—no one knew it at the time: "But what purpose did it serve? Almost twenty years passed before Ørsted's discovery gave rise to this practical application, nearly supernatural in its effects, of the electric telegraph."

So chance doesn't always favor the prepared mind, as I'd been saying for some three decades. The mind in question has to be working in an area where observation is essential. And then the mind working in that area has to be prepared to be surprised. And then, only if the prepared mind observes, is patient and vigilant, it is possible—it just might happen—that something comes into view that may turn out to be important at some time

1. I have been unable to find Pasteur's source for this anecdote.

2. It actually wasn't. But, because Pasteur did not have at his fingertips, as I do, the ability to check every factual claim in his writing, he didn't catch—and perhaps didn't know—that the event he's about to describe took place in 1820.

3. Actually, Danish. See above.

in the future. And whatever that unexpected thing might be and whatever form it might take, the prepared mind has to be open to the possibility that the importance of this unexpected observation might not be clear for a while or for a long time or, perhaps, maybe even ever.

The prepared mind has to know that discoveries don't arrive wrapped in topic sentences; they manifest as nagging questions, confusing data; they can be cloaked in the ordinary. For skeptics and funders interested only in research with immediate applications, this inconvenient fact about the nature of open-ended thinking is dismissed as a luxury and an indulgence; for bean counters and bureaucrats, it's just an excuse for low productivity. But for writers who want to think new thoughts, this fact is the foundation for the possibility of slipping the confines of the already known and the already said.

Publishing State Secrets

So, back to me.

There I was, sitting at my desk, a few months into my break from academic publishing. I'd started out looking into the technical hurdles Daniel Ellsberg encountered once he'd decided to leak the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971. Since Bradley Manning and WikiLeaks were so much in the news over the summer of 2010, reminding myself of what Ellsberg had done seemed like as reasonable a place as any to start an exploration into the differences between the paper-based and the screen-centric worlds.

To make the Pentagon's multivolume top secret report on the history of covert operations in Vietnam available to the public, Ellsberg first had to get its more than seven thousand pages out of the RAND Corporation's headquarters in Santa Monica, California, where he worked with the team that originally crafted the report. In October 1969 Ellsberg began moving the report, section by section, from the safe in his office to his briefcase; he then walked the briefcase past security, got in his car, and drove to an offsite copy machine. There Ellsberg and his collaborators worked through the night, collating the copies, and then, early the next morning, Ellsberg would put the original pages back in the briefcase, get in his car, drive back to the RAND Corporation, walk the briefcase back past security, and return the removed section to the safe.

In November 1969 Ellsberg boarded a plane with a portion of the report, flew across the country, and hand-delivered the copied section to Senator William Fulbright. Fulbright contacted the Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird, requesting that the documents be officially released to him. Laird declined the request.

A year passed.

The war dragged on.

Ellsberg reached out to other senators.

More time passed.

Frustrated by his inability to get the government to respond, Ellsberg contacted Neil Sheehan, a reporter at the *New York Times* in March 1971. They met in Boston, and Ellsberg made another copy of the entire set of the papers to hand over to Sheehan.

On June 13, 1971, the *Times* published its first installment on the history of America's covert operations in Vietnam, as detailed in the *Pentagon Papers*.

And then, twenty months after Ellsberg began moving the papers out of his office, all hell broke loose.

Ellsberg was arrested.

And this, improbably enough, set in motion the events that led to Richard Nixon's resignation as president of the United States in August 1974. On September 3, 1971, Nixon's "special investigations unit," code-named "The Plumbers," broke into Ellsberg's psychiatrist's office and, using a crowbar, pried open the drawers of the psychiatrist's file cabinet, hoping to find notes on Ellsberg's experience in psychoanalysis.

Why?

Because Nixon wanted to pry his way into Ellsberg's mind and get hold of Ellsberg's secrets—the dirtier the better—so he could discredit the whistleblower. And the only way he could get his hands on Ellsberg's private thoughts—his dreams, his fantasies, his anxieties, his fears—was via a crowbar.

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Dr. Fielding's damaged file cabinet has been preserved by the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. In its mute physicality, it memorializes Nixon's gross abuse of governmental power.

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On May 11, 1973, on the eighty-ninth day of Ellsberg's trial for espionage, theft, and conspiracy, Judge William Bryne Jr. declared a mistrial and dismissed all charges against Ellsberg and his codefendant, Anthony Russo Jr. The trial's shocking conclusion was triggered by a revelation about the government's misconduct that came out in two stages. First, two days prior to dismissal, evidence was presented at trial that established the FBI had illegally tapped Ellsberg's phone. And then, on the day the case was dismissed, the

prosecution stated, for the record, that the government records of those illegally recorded phone calls had been lost.

The fact of the crowbarred file cabinet and declaration that the file folders containing the paper transcripts of the illegal wiretaps were missing had, in Bryne's judgment, made a fair trial impossible. And, just like that, Ellsberg and Russo were free men.

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Fast-forward to April 5, 2010.

Everything in the rearview mirror seems to slow to a crawl. The copier scans a page, a copy eases its way into tray number one. A suitcase is filled weeks later. Ellsberg gets on an airplane and flies from the West Coast to the East Coast. Two years later the Plumbers fly from the East Coast to the West Coast. They have surveillance gear supplied by the FBI: defective walkie-talkies, a small camera, a glass cutter. They have a crowbar.

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On April 5, 2010, WikiLeaks, the brainchild of Julian Assange, released two videos, both entitled "Collateral Murder," one a thirty-eight-minute classified video clip from the gun-sight of a U.S. military Apache helicopter on patrol over Baghdad and the other an edited seventeen-minute version of the same clip. The footage "clearly shows" the helicopter gunners killing unarmed civilians, including a person later identified as a journalist and the people who had come to the journalist's rescue.

Over the next twenty-four hours, the video began to rack up tens of thousands of views on the WikiLeaks site and on YouTube; a Pentagon official, "speaking on condition of anonymity," confirmed the legitimacy of the footage; and the hunt was on to find the source of this damaging leak.

Eventually, that search would lead to Specialist Bradley Manning, an army intelligence analyst stationed outside Baghdad who had initiated contact with WikiLeaks early in January 2010. Before making contact, Manning copied nearly 500,000 documents from two databases onto a single CD, which he labelled "Lady Gaga." He subsequently transferred this information to an SD card, placed this fingernail-sized card in his digital camera, and at the end of January, carried the camera and the card with him to the United States for shore leave. Stateside, Manning reached out to the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* to discuss releasing the documents. Getting no response, he uploaded all the documents to WikiLeaks on February 3, 2010. Near the end of the month, he uploaded the Apache helicopter footage. And then on April 10 he passed on an additional 250,000 diplomatic cables.

Manning was arrested on May 27, 2010, and sentenced to thirty-five years in prison on August 21, 2013, for espionage and theft and a host of other charges.

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Side by side these two stories about divulging state secrets capture, in miniature, what the shift from the paper-based to the screen-centric world makes possible. On the one side we have the slow movement of physical files and the eventual decision by the news media to reveal the existence of the military's classified, carefully crafted history of covert operations in Vietnam. And then, eventually, that history becomes available to the public for purchase as a printed volume. On the other side we have the lightning-fast transfer of mountains of digital information by a low-level recruit and the decision by the stateless leader of WikiLeaks to enable global access, free of charge, to all of that classified raw data to anyone who cares to look.

When the *Pentagon Papers* went public, the document was readable; it was a single object created through research and revision; it could be printed, bound, and sold; and its very coherence, despite its massive length, was what made it so damning. When the Iraq and Afghan War logs and the diplomatic cables that Manning had leaked went live, what was made available in each instance was an enormous pile of undigested data, ready to be deployed in support of any number of narratives. What would it mean to read those databases responsibly? Ethically? Or even just practically? Where should one start? How should one proceed? When would one be finished? How would one know?

Ending It All: Committing Suicide in a Screen-Centric World

What was the coming end of privacy going to mean for education, for governance, for human relationships? What was literacy going to become in the shift from stories to databases?

I was turning these questions over in my mind as the new school year was gearing up in September 2010. At the center of my deliberations was my desire to understand what writing was becoming in all of this change. When I started teaching in the 1980s, the act of writing was something that most people did either by hand or with a typewriter. If you needed information, you went to your bookshelf or to the library. If you wanted to publish something you'd written, you'd have to find someone who had access to the means of production—namely, a publisher with a distribution network. At every stage in this process, the vast majority of the writer's work went on in private—the learning, the drafting, the revising, the waiting. But with the

advent of Web 2.0, anyone with access to the Internet could publish virtually anything instantly: a poem, a passing thought, a picture, a video, hundreds of thousands of classified documents. Anything that could be seen or heard was fair game. So dumps of raw data, be it diplomatic cables or nude pictures of celebrities, were becoming the new normal. Everyone, it seemed, was suddenly a potential activist and a potential voyeur.

And then, in the third week of the semester, on September 29, 2010, the news broke that Tyler Clementi, a first-year student at Rutgers, had committed suicide. Wrenchingly, his penultimate act appeared to be a status update to his Facebook page at 8:42 p.m. on September 22 that read, "jumping off the gw bridge sorry." In the immediate aftermath of this news, there were reports that Tyler had been spied on while having sex with another man and that his roommate had posted live video of the sexual encounter on the Internet for all to see. The leading hypothesis was that cyberbullying had driven Tyler to his death.

Tyler's story hit quite close to home for me. Suicide, the self's mysterious decision to end itself, has long preoccupied me. What gives rise to this momentous decision? As a teacher, I'd like to think that education can be a calming influence for those feeling the call of self-annihilation. But as a scholar who has spent decades writing about moments when education and violence intersect, I know that schools themselves can become hell for young people—and that, in those instances, suicide can promise relief from the schoolyard's violent grip. More specifically, I've written about how much my own thinking about schooling has been affected by the first-semester suicide of a young woman with whom I went to college. I've written as well about my father's two suicide attempts and the legacy they hold for me. I have studied the dark call, and I have heard it myself.

It also hit close to home because I have kids who were just a few years younger than Tyler when he died. Through them, I'd caught glimpses of social media's cruel energy and its ability to deliver pain at a distance without warning. And it hit close to home because I teach at Rutgers. One day Tyler could have been a student in one of my classes.

I wasn't looking for this. It found me. By chance. And when it did, I did what writers do. I started writing.

* * *

What follows is a significantly revised version of the writing I did during the year immediately after Tyler's suicide and, later, during the trial of his roommate, Dharun Ravi. It is neither a journalistic account nor a case study of cyberbullying. It is best read as a phenomenological account of what kind

of learning is possible now that the barrier between the public and the private has become permeable. Tyler's suicide is one thread in this account. The actions and inactions of Dharun Ravi and all the others who knew of the spying and did nothing about it are another thread. But these threads, when studied with care, lead outward to a much broader context, one that includes Chatroulette and PornoTube, Julian Assange and Bradley Manning, Hillary Clinton's server and Donald Trump's Twitter account—all subjects I knew either nothing or very little about back in September 2010 when I began to try to make sense of why no one came to Tyler's aid.

Tyler's story resonated far beyond the communities of people concerned with the suicide rates of LGBTQ teens; it struck a chord with everyone who has ever felt that, whatever conveniences digital technology provides, there are good reasons to fear its awesome powers. As a member of both communities, I came to see, though, that the facts of Tyler's online life, which emerged just days after his death, didn't support the media's portrayal of Tyler's actions in the days prior to his suicide. By writing alongside these facts as they emerged, I slowly realized that those who had been educated in the paper-based world, myself included, were using outdated understandings about human relations to make sense of human behavior that had taken place in the screen-centric world. Ultimately, I came to understand that Tyler's death held the national spotlight for as long as it did because it seemed to carry within it a warning that denizens of the paper-based world felt others needed to hear: in the bleak techno-future that lies ahead, there will be no privacy.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, 2010

So it's November 30, 2010. Hillary Clinton, President Obama's secretary of state, newly landed in Kazakhstan is trying to handle the fallout from the publication of U.S. diplomatic cables the day before her arrival. (The cables had been passed by Bradley Manning to WikiLeaks and from there on to the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, *El Pais*, and a number of other papers around the world.) According to the *New York Times* report on the visit, in her scheduled speech at Kazakhstan's Eurasian University, Clinton both defended the free flow of information and condemned the leaks as "a very irresponsible, thoughtless act that put at risk the lives of innocent people all over the world."

But how is a government to manage these two conflicting inclinations? In the account provided by the *New York Times,* Clinton referenced Tyler Clementi's suicide to help the students in the audience understand why gov-

ernments have a duty to restrict the flow of some kinds of information: "In the Internet age, Mrs. Clinton said, it was difficult to balance freedom and responsibility. Some governments, she said, were overreacting by throwing bloggers in jail. At the same time, spreading information online can be harmful, she said, citing the recent case of a young man in New Jersey who committed suicide after a fellow student posted video of him in a gay sexual encounter." If we were mapping the global reach of the story of Tyler Clementi's suicide, this would be a signal moment: two months after his death, students halfway around the world learned about the actions that led him to take his life from no less an authority than the secretary of state.

But did Hillary Clinton actually say what the *New York Times* says she said?

When I tracked down a transcript of Secretary Clinton's remarks to the "Town Hall on Empowering Civil Society for Central Asia's Future," which was held at Eurasian University in Kazakhstan, I discovered there's no record she mentioned "the case of a young man in New Jersey who committed suicide," as reported by the *Times*. According to the transcript, after Clinton gave her prepared statement on civil society in advance of the first summit meeting of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe ever to be held in Central Asia, she took questions from students in the audience, one of whom asked: "Where is [the] balance between freedom of expression and responsibility for information . . . [for Internet service providers]? Because it's our business and we have to understand: is it legal or it's illegal information?"

Declaring herself a "big believer in Internet freedom," Clinton went on to speak about the dangers inherent in a system that allows for instant publication and global distribution:

> But it's also true that some information is very hurtful. We have cases in my country where teenagers went on the Internet and said terrible things about other teenagers, totally lies, made up. And it's so distressing to—it was usually girls or boys. Sometimes it was about their behavior or their character. Sometimes it was true, like to say that a young boy was gay. But that was a private matter, but they put it on the Internet. And these young people have killed themselves. I mean, we've had a number of young people killing themselves because they felt so embarrassed, so humiliated because anything can be put on the Internet.

Could Clinton have been referring to Tyler Clementi here? Perhaps, but if so, what's the likelihood that any of the audience members in Kazakhstan picked up on the implicit connection? Clinton makes no mention of videos;

she doesn't single out New Jersey. Rather, the emphasis throughout her response is on speech and how easy it is for the young to use the Internet to share hurtful lies—and hurtful truths. What diplomatic correspondent Mark Landler reported in the *New York Times* is not what Clinton actually said but what he inferred from her remarks.

As we will see, what appeared in the *Times* is actually a double fiction: it is not just a story about something that was never actually said; it is a story about something that also never actually happened. So, if we are mapping the global reach of the story of Tyler Clementi's suicide, we need to relabel the significance of Landler's report on Clinton's visit to Kazakhstan: it's a prime example of the power Clementi's story has to cause those affected by it to see what isn't there and to hear what hasn't been said. There will be more.

Monica Lewinsky, Survivor, 2014

On May 28, 2014, *Vanity Fair* published "Shame and Survival," Monica Lewinsky's reflections on life after her affair with Bill Clinton became common knowledge in 1998. While the president was eventually allowed to go on with his life, Lewinsky was forever frozen in time, branded "That Woman," her name a synonym for adultery and blow jobs. Unable to escape the paparazzi and the leering of the crowds, Lewinsky withdrew from public life more than a decade ago, only to be dragged back into the spotlight early 2014 when Rand Paul, warming up for his 2016 presidential campaign, cited her as evidence that the Democrats had waged their own "war on women" by looking the other way when Bill Clinton preyed on "a 20-year-old girl . . . an intern in his office."

Given how ruthless the press coverage of her had been, it's fair to ask why Lewinsky orchestrated a grand return to the public stage in May 2014, when she appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Her featured essay within was accompanied by lush, sensual images from her photoshoot. By choosing this kind of self-exposure during the run-up to the 2016 presidential campaign, when Hillary Clinton was understood to essentially have a lock on the nomination, Lewinsky had to know she was setting herself up for more abuse from the press, from all those who use her name as shorthand for the former president's philandering ways, and from the Clinton campaign itself, which could be counted on to do everything in its power to shove her back into the shadows. So why did she do it?

Lewinsky credits a conversation she had with her mother as being the impetus behind this effort to retake control of the narrative of her life. Back in 2010, in the immediate aftermath of Clementi's jump from the George

Washington Bridge, Lewinsky was surprised not that the news upset her mother, but that it hurt her so deeply. After all, kids kill themselves every day. Soldiers kill themselves every day. More than thirty-six thousand people killed themselves in the United States in 2009; by the time the ball dropped in Times Square calling an end to 2010, over forty-two thousand people had killed themselves in the United States. Why, out of all this self-destruction, was Clementi's death so painful to Lewinsky's mother?

Eventually, Lewinsky figured out that Clementi's suicide had sent her mother back to the time when she feared her daughter "would be literally humiliated to death." Taking this affective connection seriously, Lewinsky came to see her own suffering in a new light. Perhaps, she thought, by sharing the details of how she herself had been bullied and humiliated by the press, by agents of the government, by pundits on the Left and the Right, and by the president and the first lady, she "might be able to help others in the darkest moments of humiliation."

People responded online with hoots of derision to Lewinsky's declaration that she was "arguably the most humiliated person in the world [in 1998]" and "possibly the first person whose global humiliation was driven by the Internet." Scorn-laced anonymous comment threads proliferated, filled with the rage of those who were not about to let Lewinsky off the hook for anything—for having had sex at all, for having had sex with her boss, for being a woman, for having worn a beret, for not being skinny, for going on with her life. Weirdly, some declared Lewinsky's most unforgivable act to be her use of Clementi's suicide to explain her motives for coming out of hiding. In so doing, these critics claimed, Lewinsky had appropriated Clementi's story, his suffering and his pain, equating grossly incommensurate situations in order to draw attention to herself. Soraya Nadia McDonald, writing in the *Washington Post*, offered this critique: "Whatever [Lewinsky's] intention, the appearance is that she took the tragic death of a victim of anti-gay harassment and made it all about her." And Richard Kim, in the *Nation,* sharpened McDonald's dismissal: "The comparison, however well-intentioned, is narcissistic and inaccurate." Lewinsky was harassed for something she'd done; Clementi for what he was. For both McDonald and Kim to miss the distinction between the two cases bordered on the criminal.

As we'll see, this battle over who gets to control the meaning of Clementi's death began as soon as the circumstances surrounding his suicide emerged. What I'd like to draw attention to here, though, is that Lewinsky's detractors have overlooked the most important distinction between the young woman in the beret and Clementi: they came of age in different worlds. A simple thought experiment will illustrate the magnitude of this

difference. Imagine what would have happened in the immediate aftermath of the revelation of Lewinsky's affair with President Clinton if the nation's focus had not been on the semen-stained blue dress hanging in her closet, but rather on a surreptitious digital recording of her times with the president in the Oval Office. Imagine, in other words, that Lewinsky had been in the position Clementi was believed to have been put in by his roommate. While one can debate whether or not Lewinsky would have been able to live through such a mortifying experience, even the most ardent admirer of President Clinton's evasive powers would have to concede that his presidency could not have survived the release of live footage of the president having sex in the Oval Office.

But because Lewinsky's affair with the president took place in the paper-based world, there was no possibility of a homemade sex tape, sexted photos, or transcripts of texted sex talk. Instead Independent Counsel Ken Starr had to rely on phone taps and DNA samples. He had to sift through hundreds of hours of depositions and public hearings. And when he was done, he released a final report that was eventually published as a five-hundred-page-long trade paperback. The physical evidence was easily summarized: the dress; the DNA-tested semen stains; some answering machine tapes; some gifts Lewinsky said she had received from the president.

That's it.

Everything else is words. Some X-rated, to be sure. Words about the number of times Lewinsky and Clinton had sex; the number of ejaculations; the number of orgasms; and words about the report's most unforgettable detail—"on one occasion, the President inserted a cigar into her vagina." There was everything the government could learn by pressing its eye to the keyhole, its ear against the wall; there was everything that the government had words for. And somehow, at the end of all those words, Bill Clinton was still in office, serving out his term.

Digital technology has, without question, made it much easier for Lewinsky's enemies to continue to harass her for actions that took place over twenty years ago. As awful as that has been and continues to be for her, it does not mean she (or the president, for that matter) ever had to experience the fear Tyler Clementi faced: the fear of being broadcast live while having sex. The difference between the two situations, I maintain, is not one of degree; it's one of kind. The invasion of Monica Lewinsky's privacy happened in a different world than the one where Tyler Clementi's occurred: hers happened in the paper-based world; his happened in the screen-centric world. That's the distinction that matters.

Reading Tyler Clementi's Facebook Status Update

To insist that these two worlds are, in fact, one and the same or that they are continuous are the common errors of our time. Decades ago, Marshall McLuhan found this tendency to deny present reality as typical of a "rear-view-mirror society," a clunky phrase he coined to capture a society blindly moving forward into the future, only able to see what is in its past. I watched this rearview-mirrorism manifest itself in the news coverage of Clementi's suicide. Newscasters and journalists, publishing largely in legacy paper-based venues, worked in tandem to perpetuate the idea that a sex video had been made by homophobic, nonwhite voyeurs to bully and humiliate Clementi, a closeted young gay man. For those who looked at the event this way, the work that remained was to identify the culprits, to file charges, to protest, to grieve for Tyler Clementi as an iconic victim of a lethal combination of malignant forces and invasive technology.

There was another set of journalists and interested parties, though, who went to work complicating this simplistic version of events by sharing information they'd discovered online in cached memory, on dating sites, and in chatrooms, information that transformed Clementi from being a representative victim into a three-dimensional person who left behind traces of his personal life and his inner life. As I read the work of these journalists and their collaborators, it became clear to me that they weren't just revealing Clementi's complex humanity; they were also showing that Clementi lived and felt at home in a layered, digitally-mediated reality I knew virtually nothing about. The meditations that follow track my efforts to delineate this layered complexity by methodically working my way through the timeline of events leading up to Clementi's suicide and then continuing on through Dharun Ravi's trial and conviction for having committed bias-motivated crimes against his now deceased college roommate.

This was not my plan when I set out to take my break from academic writing. But, when I first learned of Tyler's death, for reasons I didn't entirely understand, something in the detail of his status update, "jumping off the gw bridge sorry," pierced me to the core. In suicidology, so much emphasis is placed on the evidentiary value of the suicide note because it's the last sign survivors have of what their lost loved one was thinking. In the paper-based world, suicide notes are, almost exclusively, private affairs.

But what to make of a suicide note posted, in real time, to the Internet? Who was meant to find Tyler's note? How did Tyler want his note to be read? Upon first reading Tyler's last words, I was struck by these questions, but the very fact of Tyler's note was yet more confounding to me: by writing and

publishing such a note, Tyler seemed to have jumped to his death in a reality that was entirely unfamiliar to me.

The fact of that note continues to haunt me, even now, seven years after it was written. When I first learned of it, I felt it signified something beyond Tyler's state of distress. It was a message from another world, the one Tyler occupied, back to the one I continued to live in. It was a warning that things are not as they seem. And it was a call to reject the knowingness that inevitably would arise whenever I discussed how different students are now that they are connected to each other by the Internet.

I grew up in a world run by paper and ruled by its ways; Tyler had grown up in a world centered on the screen. In rejecting the temptation to domesticate Clementi's actions into a narrative that would be legible and compelling for a paper-based readership, I am motivated neither by techno-determinism nor by techno-utopianism. Rather, I do so because I believe we are living through the greatest change in human communication since the invention of the printing press. True, there have been all manner of technological advances since Gutenberg began printing and distributing bibles, but not one of these advances—not a single one—has gone straight to the very core of how we interact with ourselves and with one another, not one can compete with the awesome power the interactive Web has granted each and every one of us to publish and distribute, in an instant, whatever comes to mind.

And what does that mean?

It means that Tyler Clementi's last act was to author the most-read suicide note in the history of suicide notes.