



The Google Factor: Therapists' Transparency in the Era of Google and MySpace

Ofer Zur, PhD and Michael B. Donner, PhD

The Internet has transformed the nature of self-disclosure in psychotherapy. Clients can now access considerable amounts of information about their therapists (Zur, 2008). In addition, many clients now view themselves as much consumers as patients and these clients have increased expectations and demands for psychotherapist transparency. They may expect or even demand personal information about their psychotherapists' histories, marital status, spiritual practices, worldview or sexual orientation. While self-disclosure in psychotherapy has traditionally been defined as the revelation of personal rather than professional information by a psychotherapist to a client (Stricker & Fisher, 1990) the "Google Factor" of Internet transparency may introduce new dimensions to the therapeutic relationships. The effects of Internet transparency may require psychologists to reconsider the traditional definition of self-disclosure.

Generally, when a psychotherapist's disclosure goes beyond the basic professional disclosure of name, credentials, fees, emergency contacts, cancellation policies it has been considered self-disclosure (Farber, 2006; Stricker & Fisher, 1990; Zur, 2007). The traditional understanding and approach to the meaning of disclosures may need to give way to the significantly greater amounts of information that is now available online.

Although exact numbers are not available, increasing numbers of psychotherapists have professional web sites, MySpace, FaceBook or LinkedIn profiles, listings in professional directories, or web pages on their clinic, hospital or managed care organizations' web sites. In order to appear consumer friendly, many of these web sites include detailed personal information about the therapists' marital status, place of birth, sexual orientation, hobbies and much more. Although psychotherapists creating profiles and web pages may not be thinking about this as self-disclosure, psychotherapists may wish to consider the clinical, professional and personal implications of the Internet community. These disclosures, perhaps more accurately described as transparencies, have added a new dimension to the profession.

Many psychotherapists' personal lives can be easily viewed online. Zur (2007, 2008) and Behnke (2008) noted that there is no longer a clear line between the personal or private domain and the professional domain. He wrote, "In the space of a few years, the realm of what is private has receded significantly with a correspond-

ing expansion in the domain of what is public" (p. 75). One aspect to consider is that the technology of the Internet is developing far more rapidly than the field. There is very little information available to psychologists to consider the clinical impact of the availability of personal information online. Certainly the available professional and ethical standards regarding self-disclosure were not developed with the Internet in mind. The American Psychological Association

Ethical Principles Of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002) is intended to address professional conduct, and purely private conduct does not fall under the scope of the Ethics Code. Nevertheless, as the noted above, the line between public and private has become increasingly blurred by the Internet. Psychologists must be aware of this "Google Factor" and carefully con-

sider the many ways that clients can find information about them, the amount of information they provide themselves, and the broad implications to their professional and personal lives.

From Curiosity to Cyber-Stalking

Clients' search for information about their therapists may vary between normal curiosity and criminal stalking. In this article, we are proposing five categories under which clients' behavior may fall.

In this day and age, it is very common for clients or informed consumers to review their therapists or potential therapists web page. Clients may learn about the therapists web pages from therapists' business cards, marketing material, online directories, or other sources. Reviewing therapists' web pages may reveal the therapists' educational background, professional experience, family status, hobbies, and recreational preferences.

Many clients are appropriately curious about their therapists and will go beyond therapists' own web sites and conduct a simple Internet search (i.e., Google) about their therapists. Even the most basic Internet search is likely to yield information regarding the professional lives, such as education, training, and credentials and personal information that can vary from very minimal to highly extensive and detailed.

Some clients are more versed with the Internet and are more seriously looking for information about their therapists. They may employ more specialized searches, such as searching the licensing board's web site to see if a potential therapist has had any complaints

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filed against him or her, or what other professionals or clients have posted about that therapist. In our modern era of consumer rights and consumer power it is not uncommon for some clients to want to learn something much more in some depth about the people in whom they will place their trust and from whom they hope to learn.

Some clients may 'push the envelope' and intrusively search for information about their therapists. They may intrusively search their therapists due to intense curiosity or for obsessive reasons. Some may do it as a game, seeing how far they can get as well as how much they can get away with. Intrusive searches may target home addresses, marital status, family members, church affiliations, sexual orientation, community disputes, and court records. An intrusive search may also include disguising one's identity and joining social networks (i.e., FaceBook, MySpace or LinkedIn) listservs, chatrooms, etc., in order to find out more information about therapists professional and personal lives. Online services may legally gather information not readily available online. This may include divorce, criminal or other court records, and it is sometimes possible to locate an online camera that televises at public places where the therapists may visit. Many therapists are neither aware how common such cameras are nor realize that some clients may be able and willing to access them.

At the most intrusive levels clients can hire online services that may illegally gather information about the therapist. Clients can obtain information such as their therapists' credit reports, banking information, cell phone records, tax records, e-mail accounts, and other highly private information.

Internet Transparency- What Can You Do?

Therapists should always assume that *everything* that they post online, whether it is on their own Web site, private or public blogs, listservs, password protected bulletin boards, chats, social networks, etc., *may be read* by their clients.

Therapists should be very careful in discussing case studies online, and make sure that they either get permission from clients to discuss their cases, or make sure that identifying information is removed or significantly changed, and should be aware that their clients might read consultations they have posted with other therapists.

When therapists find out that a client, or potential client, has acted in an intrusive or criminal manner in regard to online searching, they must think about the clinical, ethical and legal ramifications, seek expert consultations and appropriately document their concerns.

Therapists would do well to search themselves online periodically so they are aware of what their clients, and the rest of the world, may be privy to. Use different combinations of name and degree, such as "Mark Smith," "Mark Smith, PhD," "M. Smith," "Smith, M.," "Dr. Smith," and utilize different search engines (i.e., Google, Yahoo) as well.

If you put your phone number into Google or other search engines, you may be able to determine whether information, such as your home address, comes up.

An easy way to keep track of one's online presence is by signing up for "Google Alerts" (at <http://www.google.com/alerts?hl=en>) in order to get instant alerts when one's name is mentioned in a new posting. It is free, safe, and simple.

If, in your search, you find private information about yourself that you do not want to be public, or you find misinformation that you want to correct, find out how it got there and whether you can have it removed. However, bear in mind that even if information has been removed from a web page, it is still available online.

Ultimately, therapists must come to terms that the Internet is here to stay and so is the professional and personal information available for all, online.

In summary, ultimately, therapists must come to recognize that professional and personal information about us is readily available online. Digital technologies have significantly and most importantly irreversibly increased therapists' transparency. This may have clinical, ethical or even legal significance. There is a vast body of literature on therapist self-disclosure, however most of this literature

addresses self-disclosure from within the therapeutic relationship. Although therapists from different theoretical perspectives may debate the meaning, risks or value of self disclosure from within the treatment, few if any have addressed the implications of the considerable amount of information psychologists may have "disclosed" via the Internet. Psychologists must learn to work with and be prepared to respond effectively to these new realities. All psychologists, not just the "Internet savvy" must be aware of the impact of this not so new technology, and consider how it may be affecting professional relationships. □

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*Ofer Zur, PhD, is a psychologist, author, expert witness, and consultant in private practice in Sonoma, CA. He is the director of the Zur Institute, LLC (www.zurinstitute.com), which offers dozens of free online resources and over 95 online courses for CE Credit for psychologists. Dr. Zur's latest book *Boundaries in Psychotherapy* was published in 2007 by APA Books.*

Michael B. Donner, PhD, is the Chair of the CPA Ethics Committee, an advanced candidate at the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis, and has a clinical and forensic practice in Oakland, CA.

Since the publication of this article, a number of Drs. Zur and Donner's points have been further addressed by professional organizations. Here are some important highlights.

On Having a Social Media Presence

There is an emerging professional standard for therapists with an online presence to distribute a social media policy. Such Social Media Policy can be part of the Informed Consent (See Zur Institute's [Clinical Forms](#)) or stand-alone Media Policies, such as [Dr. Kolms](#)

The ACA Code of Ethics states that Counselors should make efforts to keep separate personal and professional presences online.

The 2014 ACA Code also states that "personal virtual relationships" with clients should be avoided. This would very likely include "friending" on Facebook and similar sites. Other less direct social media relationships, such as a client following their therapist on Twitter, are less clear.