

[Back to Article](#)[Click to Print](#)

Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2006

Citizens of the New Digital Democracy

By LEV GROSSMAN

Leila

The Real [Lonelygirl](#)

Lonelygirl15 is one of the most viewed YouTube users of all time. She's young and pretty, with a complicated and absolutely compelling personal life. She's also a work of fiction—lonelygirl15 was created by two professional screenwriters and an actress from New Zealand, of all places. Well—to paraphrase Woody Allen—you can't have everything.

But that doesn't mean there aren't real lonelygirls out there. Take Leila. She's 20 and lives in Maryland, where she's studying to be a social worker. Her personal life really is complicated. Online she describes her ethnicity as Middle Eastern—she's half Lebanese—and her religion as Muslim. She struggles with depression and her crush on the guy at the 7-Eleven. You know—complicated.

Like lonelygirl15, Leila—she doesn't give out her last name—is a video blogger. Leila has posted 49 videos on YouTube under the user name pppppanic (that's five ps). She speaks directly into her webcam about her life, her opinions, her shifting moods, what she did that day. She says *um* and *ah* a lot. She has been known to drink and blog. Sometimes she doesn't speak at all, just runs words across the screen while melancholy singer-songwriter stuff plays in the background.

This isn't what YouTube was designed for—to be the public video diary of a generation of teens and twentysomethings. But sometimes the best inventions are the ones people find their own uses for. "You have people from all walks of life wanting to share a piece of their life with you," Leila says. "The feeling of togetherness is unbeatable. It's a beautiful thing."

There's certainly a narcissistic quality to video blogging—who doesn't love talking about him—or herself?—but the interest that bloggers take in their own lives is matched by their fascination with one another's. Leila no longer even bothers with TV. "I think people are bored with the mainstream media. I've been so caught up in watching other people's videos. I find it more entertaining. Much more real than the run-of-the-mill 'reality' show." Of course, in the post-lonelygirl15 era, there's always that question mark: How authentic are these faces on the computer screen? "I guess that's the only flaw," says Leila. "You can never really know the whole side of the story. You just get bits and pieces. You have to put blind faith in who the person is."

[Next>>](#)

—Reported by Jeremy Caplan and Kathleen Kingsbury/New York, Susan Jakes/Beijing, Jeffrey Ressler/Los Angeles, Grant Rosenberg/Paris and Bryan Walsh/Seoul

 [Click to Print](#)

Find this article at:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569526,00.html>
