

Top 10 Internet Scandals of All Time

By Dan Tynan, PC World

The Web is a great way to deliver information, but it's also a great way to expose, spread, or jump-start a scandal.

A United States senator once said it, so it must be true: The Internet isn't a dump truck, it's a [series of tubes](#). And many a reputation has gone swirling down those tubes, thanks to the Net's ability to expose scoundrels, scalawags, liars, cheats, and fools--and then broadcast the scandal to a billion glowing screens.

The Net's biggest scandals are nothing if not democratic, touching everyone from the most ordinary individuals to the highest office in the land. Not everyone deserved the notoriety. Some were hapless victims of privacy breaches; others were exposed by hackers or misguided crusaders. But in almost every case, somebody ended up getting fired, sued, or mortally embarrassed.

Here then, in descending order, are our picks for the 10 all-time biggest scandals on the Internet.

Sound Off: What's missing from the list?



10. Don't Ask, Don't Tell--And Don't Tell AOL

Senior Chief Petty Officer Timothy R. McVeigh figured there was no harm in listing his marital status as "gay" on his AOL profile. Even though he had not divulged his sexual preference to the military, McVeigh (no relation to the Oklahoma City bomber) chose not to disclose his full name or other identifying information to AOL. But his privacy--and his 17-year career in the Navy--were tossed overboard when an AOL employee [divulged his full identity](#) to a naval investigator in the fall of 1997.

AOL first denied outing McVeigh, then apologized for violating its own privacy policy, and then criticized the Navy for "tricking" its employee by pretending to be a friend of McVeigh's.

When the Navy accused the 17-year veteran of violating the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy and tried to discharge him, McVeigh sued. After a judge ruled in his favor, McVeigh was allowed to retire as a master chief petty officer, the rank he would have attained had AOL not spilled the beans in the first place.



9. The Rootkit of All Evil

Halloween 2005 was a scary night for Sony BMG Music, but not for the usual reasons. That day Microsoft Technical Fellow Mark Russinovich posted a curious entry on [his blog](#). While scanning his hard drive that day, Russinovich had discovered a rootkit--a tool often used by hackers to mask the presence of malware--and had traced it back to Get Right With the Man, a Sony BMG Music CD.

The scandal snowballed, as other bloggers weighed in and the mainstream media picked up the story. At first Sony denied that its copy-protection software had turned half a million PCs into hacker's toys. It then issued "fixes" that didn't work, and finally it [relented to public pressure](#) and offered to help users uninstall the kit and replace their CDs. By then, the company's reputation was as damaged as its customers' hard drives.

8. Sex-Video Scandal #387 in a Series

Stop us if you've seen this one before. Sexy starlet falls madly in love with Hollywood hunk. Sexy starlet and Hollywood hunk fall madly out of love three months later. Soon thereafter a video of the pair making the beast with two backs appears on the Net, though both parties deny all knowledge of it. (What, weren't they there?) It may be a jilted lover's revenge or just a cheap publicity stunt, but it's a little more exposure than any of us really needed. Memo to Pamela and Tommy Lee, Paris and Rick, Colin Farrell and Nicole, and all other would-be video exhibitionists: When you see somebody pointing a camera at you--and you're not on a movie set--put your clothes back on. It's generally not a good career move (though it's still a step up from [House of Wax](#)).

7. 'I Sue Dead People'



This is one of those scandals that never seem to end. Beginning in September 2003, the RIAA and MPAA took a new tack in their anti-swapping crusade by suing consumers for illegally downloading music and movie files. They hired firms to infiltrate peer-to-peer networks, capture IP addresses, and force ISPs to [reveal the names](#) of the customers who had been assigned them (though some, like Verizon, refused).

Twelve-year-old honor students, dead grandmothers, computerless families, and thousands of John Does are among the 18,000 U.S. consumers sued so far. The upshot: File sharing is continuing, CD sales are dwindling, and legal downloads are climbing. And the RIAA and MPAA are tied for second place as the Dilbert Awards' [Weaseliest Organizations of 2006](#).

6. The Not-So-Secret Service

In October 2004, Paris Hilton's T-Mobile Sidekick account was hacked by 21-year old Nicholas Jacobsen, who shared her private photos and address book [across the Net](#). No big deal; by that time thousands of Netizens had already seen as much of Paris as is possible to see without the aid of medical equipment.

The real scandal was who else got hacked in the same exploit: U.S. Secret Service agent Peter Cavicchia, who happened to be investigating Jacobsen at the time. Jacobsen produced memos that Cavicchia had e-mailed regarding ongoing investigations of Russian cybercrooks. In February 2006, Jacobsen pleaded guilty to one count of hacking, was fined \$10,000, and was sentenced to a year of home detention. By then, Cavicchia had already turned in his badge. Though the Secret Service says he should not have been using his personal device for work, Cavicchia said he resigned on his own and was

not asked to leave the agency.



5. Scandalous Feats

In 1986, Paul "Freck" Morgan lost the use of his legs following a boating accident. Sometime in the summer of 2001, the paraplegic hit upon a brilliant idea: to cut off his useless feet with a homemade guillotine and broadcast the deed live on the Internet. Those interested in the gruesome spectacle could watch Freck's Webcam for \$20 (or \$2 a toe); the money would go toward an operation for Morgan to be fitted for prosthetic limbs. Freck's site even featured a [charming cartoon depiction](#) of what the event, scheduled for January 2002, might look like.

For a time Freck spurred debate among Netizens: Should someone be allowed to mutilate themselves solely for money and a sick kind of fame? But the cut-off date came and went, and Freck's feet were still attached. Like OurFirstTime.com, where Webpreneur Ken Tipton boasted he would show two virgins deflowering each other on the Web, or [Manbeef.com](#), which

claimed to sell human flesh for consumption, CutOffMyFeet.com proved to be just another well-played hoax. In the end, Freck didn't have a leg to stand on. Or maybe he just got cold feet.



4. The China Syndrome

Several Net giants found themselves on the wrong side of "the Great Firewall" last year as they caught heat for cutting deals with China's Communist regime. Google, for one, announced a new Chinese version of its search engine that is censored by the Beijing government. Search for controversial topics like [Falun Gong](#), and the results will look quite different depending on which side of the Pacific you're on.

But Google declined to roll out Chinese versions of Blogger or Gmail, hoping to avoid the scandal that Yahoo brought upon itself when it turned over subscriber e-mail to the Chinese authorities, an action that resulted in the arrests of three dissidents. In late 2005, Microsoft voluntarily removed the blog of an outspoken Chinese journalist from MSN Spaces. Cisco has also come under fire for selling China the equipment to carefully filter Internet access for its 132 million Netizens. Rather than get cut out of the world's largest emerging market, these firms decided to hold their noses and take the money.

3. Dan Rather Bids a Font Farewell

They were supposed to be the smoking gun the Bush Administration was desperate to conceal: four documents, dating from the early 1970s, that allegedly proved that powerful friends of our current president pulled strings to keep him out of Vietnam and put him into the National Guard. But shortly after 60 Minutes host Dan Rather revealed the documents' existence in September 2004, the gun blew up in his face. Conservative blogs Free Republic, Little Green Footballs, and Power Line [questioned the authenticity](#) of the documents--specifically, whether a 1970s-era typewriter could produce the



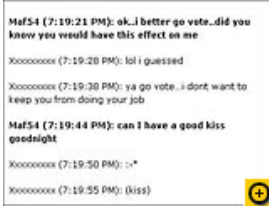
superscript *th* and curly apostrophes found in the four memos.

Instead of focusing on where W actually was when he was supposed to be serving with the National Guard in 1972, political bloggers immersed themselves in the arcana of typewriter fonts--and the mainstream media followed suit. Twelve days after airing the segment, Dan Rather publicly apologized for the story, saying he could not vouch for the documents' authenticity. A few months later, he quietly left CBS--with the inevitable "gate" permanently appended to his name.

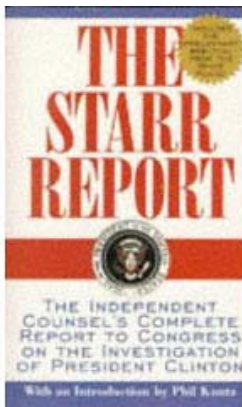


2. A Real Page Turner

The "overly friendly" interest that Representative Mark Foley (R-Florida) had in young male congressional pages wasn't really news to Washington, D.C.'s inner circle. But it took the Net--and [ABC reporter Brian Ross](#)--to expose Foley's predilections to the world.



When ABC [published the transcripts](#) of Foley's explicit text messages with an underage volunteer last September, not even the slickest Beltway spinmeister could shrug them off as benign. Foley's disgrace may not have brought about the Republican electoral debacle last November, but it didn't help his or his party's cause.



1. Monica-gate and Whitewater

On January 17, 1998, Matt Drudge broke the news that White House intern Monica Lewinsky was having an affair with President Bill Clinton. The story appeared on his Web site, the [Drudge Report](#), and quickly turned into one of the biggest scandals in our nation's history--and established the Internet as a news source to be reckoned with.

The Lewinsky scandal put the Internet on hyperalert, drawing its attention to an ongoing and arguably bigger scandal called Whitewater. Without the influence of the Net, Whitewater might have been remembered as an endless investigation into obscure Arkansas real estate deals; instead it gathered a great deal of attention. Meanwhile, the related Independent Counsel investigation eventually led to the impeachment of our 42nd president.

The Net-wide distribution of the [Starr Report](#) in September 1998 was a fitting coda to the Clintonian soap opera. Along the way we all learned more than most of us wanted to know about blue dresses, cigars, thongs, and "that woman." But what's more scandalous: Frat boy sex shenanigans in the Oval Office? Or spending \$40 million of taxpayer money for 445 pages of sordid details?

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