

Celebrities and politicians tell us their deepest, darkest secrets. Why?

Written by The Conversation USA

Public figures sharing private information is the norm nowadays. Our thirst for information, combined with the wonders of the internet and lax approaches to privacy, is creating a perfect storm.

News outlets, websites and social media swim with self-disclosure. Politicians share their private lives; celebrities explain their indiscretions; athletes appeal for understanding – while we mere mortals comment from the wings. Privacy is melting faster than the polar ice caps.

But is sharing always wise? How much should you share and with whom?

Seventy years ago, Franklin Roosevelt as President of the United States managed to keep secret that he was disabled and spent most of his time in a wheelchair. Imagine that now? The 24-hour news cycle and social media has changed our culture – we want detailed personal information about others, and we like to share in depth about ourselves. Sometimes injudiciously.

Social penetration

Self-disclosure is the process of revealing ourselves to others. The information we disclose can be anything: thoughts, feelings, fears ... even so-called secrets.

[Social penetration theory](#) tells us that self-disclosure is an important building block of intimacy. When we meet someone we start the process of intimacy by sharing a wide range of topics and comparing opinions and, by extension, compatibility. As we bond, we gradually extend the depth of information we share.

Knowing personal information about others gives us context. For public figures, this helps us understand their views and behaviour.

For friends and acquaintances, it's different – a dance of sorts as we skip down the path

together. Share too much and you frighten others (too keen!); share too little and you seem disinterested (too cool!). Each time we share, we get a response – and hopefully some reciprocal sharing. This helps us gauge whether to go further. Everyone has their limits, and I doubt anyone truly shares everything.

The benefits?

Self-disclosure aids self-awareness. By seeking responses to our own disclosures, we learn. Through the self-disclosure of others, we gain a yardstick to compare our own experiences.

Also, public disclosure of personal struggles reduces stigma. We learn that mental health problems are ubiquitous. We gain knowledge about seeking help.

Finally there are benefits to intimacy from self-disclosure. This was recently highlighted by the infamous “36 questions to fall in love” study. The idea received widespread [media attention](#). It was based on a

[1997 study](#)

that showed you could create interpersonal closeness through self-disclosure tasks.

Politicians

As time passes, our future leaders will be judged on their prior self-disclosure. This might include years of social media posts. How many of us would be happy for the world to know every thought and feeling we experienced as we grew and matured? Our ideas change and we sometimes cringe when we remember our past.

Currently the public finds it pretty hard to forgive past sins (perceived or real). Perhaps community standards will soften as we all gradually acclimatise to reduced privacy. But if harsh standards are maintained, the pool of people with no past indiscretions may be small and are they the most fit to lead? We might end up with a group of pretenders so adept at image sculpting that voting becomes guesswork – some might argue we’re already at this point!

Celebrities

Celebrities seem to struggle the most with self-disclosure. They know that if they don’t share personal information, the public will not connect with them. Reality programs and media tell-alls

fuel the frenzy. Mostly this works in the celebrities' favour – personal stories grab attention and increase awareness of their “brand”. Their fortunes increase with each disclosure.

But when celebrities face personal struggles, they are caught in a trap. Quite rightly they covet and ask for privacy. But their public feel an intimate connection and crave more information. They want to understand what has happened and why. Sudden withdrawal of self-disclosure isn't always greeted with acceptance – especially by the tabloids.

How much will you share?

I'm mostly a fan of self-disclosure. I like knowing the backgrounds of public figures.

As for sharing my own life and opinions, I've gradually increased my comfort, but not without some trepidation. I feel anxious at times. I still hesitate. Judgement can be cruel.

With respect to politicians and celebrities, I think we need to cut them a little slack. Each has the right to draw their own rules about what they share and to whom. We're all navigating this changing landscape together, and it's not surprising they trip as often as they do.

More than anything, I think we all need to step back and think twice.

The media – both social and regular – gives us the tools to peer into others' lives and open hidden doors on our own. But before we discard privacy altogether, we need the wisdom to know where to draw the line and the psychological fortitude to deal with any unintended outcomes.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/celebrities-and-politicians-tell-us-their-deepest-darkest-secrets-why-57559>