

Amina saga highlights frantic craving for believable causes

In the nobody-knows-you're-a-dog world of the internet, fragments of truth are gold.

THE INTERNET taught us that we could be anyone; it's a lesson that was comforting for high school geeks and convenient for fabulists who were not content with their "real" lives.

Thousands of people take advantage of it every day – fudge the truth, fake the numbers, fuss with the age and weight. The entire online dating business is powered by people whose online selves are a little taller and wealthier than their offline ones. People create throwaway personas that are used, then abandoned.

Last week it was revealed that Amina Arraf, the wildly popular gay Syrian female blogger, wasn't. Who she was: a straight man from Georgia, living in Scotland. On Monday, another twist: Paula Brooks, the deaf lesbian editor of *Lez Get Real* – who had criticised Tom MacMaster for creating the identity of Amina – wasn't either. She was Bill Graber, a straight man living in Ohio.

We could not make this up. Where do MacMaster's and Graber's actions belong on the continuum of authenticity? Just to the left of "a little taller, a littler richer"? Or on another spectrum? How neatly they fit into a long line of people who aren't who they seem online.


Kaycee Nicole was a high school basketball star whose brave battle with leukaemia enthralled her thousands of blog readers back in the early 2000s, until the day she died, when followers learned she had never existed at all. Kaycee was the alter ego of a suburban mum.

A few months ago, the web was alight with sympathy for Paula Bonhomme, a Colorado woman who learned her firefighter fiance hadn't died unexpectedly of liver cancer. He wasn't real – just a creation of another woman who got carried away. And, in a story that reeled in everyone back in the 1990s, Anthony Godby Johnson was a young boy with Aids who was really a disturbed New Jersey woman, spinning a telephone and online lie that got out of control.

The psychiatric community has even come up with a term to describe this sort of behaviour: Munchausen by internet.



Blogger Tom MacMaster, top right, created the persona of 25-year-old Syrian-American lesbian blogger Amina Abdallah Araf al Omari. Left, a Facebook page calling for her release. Above right, Londoner Jelena Lecic, whose photo was taken from Facebook and used for the Amina blog.

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In each of these instances, the lie got too big. The fake personality became too interesting to the real readers.

In the case of Amina, her fans cared more deeply than MacMaster thought they would when he told them that she had disappeared – the plot twist that prompted legions to investigate. He had been looking for an out. "I had been struggling for a way to let things up." He'd seen the Amina persona as a way to stretch his creative-writing muscles.

Where does creativity begin to bleed into conning? Is it the moment when strangers become emotionally invested? Is it the moment when famous journalist strangers become emotionally invested? (Andrew Sullivan and Peter Beinart, both well-known writers, were vocal supporters of "A Gay Girl in Damascus".)

Or is it the moment when the voice people are following begins to represent something bigger than any one person? In the nebulous, nobody-knows-you're-a-dog world of the internet, fragments of truth are sometimes more precious than in real life. Identities such as Amina or Kaycee Nicole seem like pure, unblemished spots in a murky world. Stories to

believe in, in a community based on doubt. Web surfers opened their hearts.

"People want to believe the best in those they choose to follow online," writes Davey Winder, a tech writer and author of *Being Virtual*. "To do otherwise would be a reflection of their own poor judgement. Everyone likes to think they're a good judge of character."

The fake existence of Amina Arraf was offensive to bloggers – and to Syrians, and to women, and to lesbians and gays, and to anyone else truly marginalised.

"He's stealing the voice of a marginalised person," says Liz Henry, a web producer at BlogHer who had recommended some of Amina's posts. "His way of describing what it's like to be gay in the Middle East goes down smooth with people who have a progressive bent." Her appreciation for the posts made her question herself.

The irony of "A Gay Girl in Damascus" is that it was really a lovely blog. If he had not been so emotionally resonant, so detailed, so seemingly "real", nobody would have cared so much when Amina disappeared, and nobody would have worked so hard to figure out what might have happened to her, and nobody would have learned that she was a pale bearded man from Georgia.

Which meant that, at least according to a chilling and narrow definition of what it means to be real on the internet, Tom MacMaster was very good indeed at being Amina.