

Weborexics: The Ethical Issues Surrounding Pro-Ana Websites

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Abstract

Pro-Ana's are young women who proclaim themselves to be proudly anorexic, and they have created a vibrant community online. This article will examine the nature of the Pro-Ana sites, analyzing their discursive community, and discuss the ethical issues surrounding the sites, wherein many have been censured or shut down by commercial website hosting sites, which has raised issues of censorship versus freedom of speech.

Keywords

Internet, Social Uses by Young Women, Anorexia, Pro-Ana, Freedom of Speech

INTRODUCTION

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, in 2001 in the United States alone there were 17 million youth between the ages of 12-17 using the Internet, which represents 73% of that age bracket. Teens are avid users of the Internet, and consider it 'an information resource, an entertainment utility, and a tool for social connection' (Pew Internet and American Life, 2001). An AOL survey found that teens use the Internet more than the telephone (Nua, 2002). Tweens and teen girls, in particular, are using the Internet to connect with friends via e-mail, chat and ICQ, form new social relationships, cruise the World Wide Web to play games or 'virtual shop', download music, and set up their own homepages. Increasingly, these young women are not reticent about exploring and playing on the Internet; they are technically adept and certainly not afraid to reveal personal information about themselves, as the increase in web-based diaries, webcams, and blogs reveals.

One group of young women that has formed an online community of websites and chat forums are those that call themselves 'Pro-Ana'. Pro-Ana refers to pro-anorexic, and for these young women, these websites provide them a 'place where anorexia is regarded as a lifestyle and a choice, not illness or disorder' (ana's underground grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id1.html>). Over the last few years, the number of these sites has grown, with many of them hosted on free homepage sites. However in 2001 the media—including Oprah Winfrey—became aware of many of these sites (Udovitch, 2001) and the public discourse that ensued led one of the homepage sites, Yahoo, to ban Pro-Ana content, while some of the Pro-Ana creators felt forced to remove their sites. Increasingly, many of these Pro-Ana sites are leading a peripatetic existence, migrating from one free homepage service to another. This article will examine the nature of the Pro-Ana sites, analyzing their discursive community, and discuss the ethical issues surrounding the sites, which have raised issues of censorship versus freedom of speech. It is a debate in which the 'Pro-Anaists' are politically savvy, using the web itself to counter their contested nature.

'IT'S A LIFESTYLE'

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) defines those considered anorexic as people that maintain 'a body weight at a level less than 85% of normal weight for age and height, an intense fear of fatness, disturbed experience of one's body

weight or shape, and amenorrhea for at least three consecutive menstrual cycles' (Polivy and Herman, 2002). While the causes of eating disorders (ED) such as anorexia have been widely debated, there is no doubt that there has been an increase of this disorder in affluent Western countries post World War II, with public attention reaching a crescendo in the 1980s. However, as historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg has documented, while anorexia was named and defined in the 1870s in England, France, and the United States, many women in medieval Europe refused food, with some considered female miracles and the manifestation of God's supernatural power—anorexia mirabilis (Brumberg, 1988, 57). The Victorians referred to this condition as 'fasting girls', with doctors, non-experts, and newspapers debating the causes of such fasting. Brumberg argues 'anorexia nervosa was an intense form of nonverbal discourse that honored the emotional guidelines governing the middle-class Victorian family' (ibid, 140) and thus these girls were materially and emotionally privileged.

As Polivy and Herman (2002) note, synthesizing the voluminous literature on anorexia, eating disorders do not occur uniformly in all cultures at all times. However, a core feature of eating disorders concentrated in cultures where food is abundant is an obsession with slimness. Whether or not the mass media is responsible for such obsessions and the cause of eating disorders has been widely debated.

Myers and Biocca (1992) contend that 'experiments show that watching media portrayals of the ideal female body can alter self-perceptions and moods and cause nervous disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia and eating disorders in young women' and that 'surveys show that women have an elastic body image which creates conflicts between the media-represented ideal body image and the self-perceived body image'. Harrison (1997) argues that interpersonal attraction to thin media personalities can influence eating disorders, and his study indicated that 'attraction to thin media personalities predicted 6 of 7 eating disorder indices, even when exposure to thinness-depicting and -promoting (TDP) media was controlled'. And, Thomsen, et.al. (2002) conducted a study which looked at the influence of women's beauty and fashion magazines on diet and weight control practices of adolescent females, finding that 'at least two of the most common diet/weight control practices of adolescent females—restricting calories below 1,200 a day and taking diet pills—may be influenced by the reading of women's beauty and fashion magazines'.

Countering these studies, Tierney (2001) argues that 'fashion models and other popular, unusually slender women have been erroneously linked to anorexia and its prevalence among young women. Anorexia is actually a fluctuating condition that may remain after a healthy weight has been achieved and media images rarely cause this psychological state.' Polivy and Herman (2002) also argue that 'exposure to the media is so widespread that if such exposure were the cause of EDs, then it would be difficult to explain why anyone would not be eating-disordered'.

DEFINITIONS OF PRO-ANA

The medical community and eating disorder advocacy groups argue that young women who develop anorexia and other eating disorders often do this at the onset of adolescence, as a way, perhaps, to stop physical growth. Anorexics, they contend, are unhappy, seek to control their every behavior, are perfectionists, seek approval by authoritarian figures, and have difficulty managing the stresses of growing up. They therefore have low self-esteem, think themselves fat when they're not, and are highly susceptible to the influence of media images prevalent in our celebrity-crazed culture.

However, Pro-Ana's vigorously deny that they are victims, sufferers, or mentally unstable. Writes one website creator: 'A true 'pro-ana' is not a 'victim' in any sense. Some of us may be 'survivors' of various traumas and unpleasantnesses in our lives, from which our endurance and survival have contributed to finding our way to this path. Beyond this, however, we are more than mere 'survivors'. We are 'thrivers!' We thrive upon challenge, upon competition, upon the raw stimulation of life, keenness of our senses, strength and artistry in our bodies, alertness and clarity in our minds' (ana's secret grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id1.html>).

Pro-Ana's recognize both the social stigma and the moral censure, and therefore proclaim the positive benefits of creating their own community: 'Pro-ED to me means there's no shame in how we are, and acceptance that this is how we will continue for an indefinite period of time. It means support for us so we don't have to deal with this alone' (<http://jaoui.lunarpages.com/proed.html>).

Many Pro-Ana's reject the notion that by controlling their dietary intake that they are *not* in control: 'Pro-ana thus becomes short for *proactive, volitional anorexia*. It refers to actively embracing the concept of anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than an illness. By the word 'choice' we indicate the active agency of volition, the seat of government in the human mind, the power of decision-making or of will.' (ana's secret grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id1.html>). Another writes that Pro-Ana 'Mean[s] having an Eating Disorder but **choosing NOT** to recover at this time' (her emphasis, Ana By Choice, <http://www.ana-by-choice.com/>)

Pro-Anas have appropriated the name of their 'disease', and reclaimed it in positive ways. Quart (2003, 140) argues that this is similar to how certain minority groups 'take back derogatory terms', such as gays calling themselves queer, to the pro-fat movement producing zines with titles of Fat Girl and Fat? So! But, for all of this sense of playfulness, for Pro-Anas, the desire to be thin is paramount: 'To me, anorexia is the desire to be thin, to be perfect' (<http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/MULA4993/default.htm>).

PRO-ANA'S ONLINE COMMUNITY

There have been hundreds of Pro-Ana sites created over the last few years, but many of them are currently inoperative, have moved, been closed down by their ISP, or abandoned by their creators. Some are peripatetic in nature, migrating from one free homepage website to another as a way of avoiding censure. This section will look at the motivations behind the creations of some of these sites, the content that is typically displayed on these sites, and the discursive practices employed by the Pro-Ana's.

One can imagine the isolation many anorexic young women must feel. Not only has their disease been framed in the media in highly sensationalized terms, but also popular media and culture have bombarded them with images and depictions of 'perfect' female bodies that make many of them feel inadequate. Anorexia, and other attendant eating disorders, is a secret and shameful practice that elicits shock and concern from their parents and other authoritarian figures. Before the Internet, how else could anorexics relate to each other and seek solace? The motivation for many of the Pro-Ana website creators has thus been 'to make a place where people who live with an eating disorder can get together and discuss their trials and tribulations together, as well as their joys and accomplishments. A place where people with similar circumstances can give and receive support. A place where people can see that there are others who deal with the same issues that they do, and that they are not alone' (Ana by Choice, <http://www.ana-by-choice.com/lettertoall.html>)

Typical of many of the Pro-Ana websites, this site includes a forum, a link to a Pro-Ana chatroom, a gallery (featuring fashion photographs of thin models often stretched to extremes by PhotoShop), artwork, and links to other websites (in many instances, to other Pro-Ana and ED support sites, but in some cases to recovery and health sites).

Titles of Pro-Ana websites and features within the sites often exhibit a sense of irony, and a good command of popular culture and current political issues. Examples include Operation Enduring Thinness, Survivor, Anorexic Nation, I Love You to the Bones, and Fat Like Me.

Pro-Ana creators have created communities to support those with eating disorders, but not support in 'curing' oneself of the eating disorder. Rather than supporting recovery, the sites are unabashedly supportive of the right to be Pro-Ana, couched in terms of a legitimate and conscious lifestyle decision: 'This is a pro-ana website. That means this is a place where anorexia is regarded as a lifestyle and a choice, not an illness or disorder. There are no victims here' (ana's underground grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id1.html>). Another site, Anorexic Nation, write that 'This is a place for people who realize that ana is a lifestyle and a decision, not an 'illness to be fixed'' (Anorexic Nation).

Because the community that is created is one which supports the lifestyle decision to lose weight, many of the sites offer advice on weight loss and solicit tips and tricks on how to shed weight: The Art of Reduction (<http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/SMIT8364/default.htm>) writes: 'Welcome to our web site. We started this site to support those who need help with their weight loss goals. Please make yourself at home in our community. If you have any information that might be of help to others, we ask that you submit it to us to post and share. It is our hope that this site helps you learn the true art of

reducing.’ It features a member gallery where young women post their current weight and their desired goal weights.

Food and health tips often include advice and information on what vitamins to take, a description of calories, fat grams, carbohydrates, BMI indexes, diets, homeopathic medicines, and pills. One site includes advice on how to eat in restaurants: ‘10. Set down fork after each bite. 11. Chew slowly and thoroughly. 12. Be discreet; don’t make a spectacle of yourself. You are there to survive the experience, savour your sense of control, and enjoy your time out -- not to draw attention to how weird you can be with food.’ (ana’s underground grotto).

Anger at the diet industry is exhibited in some of the Pro-Ana sites: ‘Personal Message to Diet Talk: Go to HELL, you’ve been ripping off Ana’s for year, well NO MORE!!!’, one site says, providing a hypertext link to www.ez-weightloss.com (Anorexic Nation)

Many of the Pro-Ana sites have ‘Thinspiration’ sections, usually featuring scanned photos of thin fashion models and actresses. Many of these are popular media figures–Kate Moss and Calista Flockhart are ubiquitous. In some cases Photoshop has been used to make the women in the photos even thinner.

Motivational messages and aphorisms dot the Pro-Ana sites. Many are ironic spins from the weight-loss, smoking cessation, and alcohol and drug addiction recovery movement: ‘Hunger hurts but starving works’; ‘THIS IS NOT A DIET. IT IS A LIFESTYLE’; ‘Food hinders your progress’. Others are more feisty proclamations, such as ‘I Refuse!’ from Celerystick: ‘I refuse to give in to the pathetic whimpers my body makes. I refuse to accept its supposed limitations. I will cross every line it tries to draw. I refuse to punish myself for crimes I have not committed. I refuse to live in a body that disgusts me. I refuse to pretend to like being fat. I refuse to squeeze myself into the mold of ‘large and in charge’ or ‘Fat and Happy’. I refuse to be anything but Thin and In Control’ (<http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/analog/id11.html>).

Many Pro-Ana sites are almost libertarian in sentiment, and certainly anti-authoritarian: ‘EDUCATE YOURSELF’; ‘Don’t believe everything you are told ... by anyone’; ‘... question everything’; ‘...do your own research’; ‘form your own conclusions ...’; ‘If the majority believes it, it is probably *wrong*’ (taken from ana’s underground grotto).

Other Pro-Ana sites see their movement, or cause as both a religion and an artform: ‘We thrive upon the fact that while all religions, philosophies, ideologies upon the earth extol the virtues of self-control and self-government, our path alone holds the key to unlock the most secret chambers of these mysteries in something so seemingly simple as an empty plate, in something so seemingly so shallow as a desire to be thin.’ (ana’s secret grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id1.html>). Shapeshifter writes: ‘Ana is an art form, a revival of the ancient art of body modification only instead of just piercing, tattooing and adorning, we are changing the structure and shape of the body itself. Ana is a science, the science of balancing nutrition, survival and metabolism’ (ana’s underground grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/analog/id3.html>)

THE CENSURING AND CENSORING OF PRO-ANA

In 2001, the American media became aware of the Pro-Ana sites and several newspaper and magazine articles were published, warning parents and teachers of the dangers of these sites, particularly when Holly Hoff, Director of Programs at the U.S. National Eating Disorders Association, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show to talk about Pro-Ana websites and her association’s campaign to ban them from the Internet. Hoff said that with the pressure to be thin in our society so pervasive, the Pro-Ana sites [are] ‘like placing a loaded gun in the hands of someone who is feeling suicidal’ (http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/p.asp?WebPage_ID=382). Hoff was finally successful in having Yahoo shut down the Pro-Ana websites (Holahan, 2001), but many of the sites simply went ‘underground’, resurfacing under different names or hosted on different homepage sites. Pro-Ana chat rooms, where discussion of dieting tips and Pro-Ana survival strategies is common, are also prevalent, often circulating under assumed names and different identities.

Many Pro-Ana members reacted negatively to Yahoo’s action, yet resolute to maintain their community. Wrote someone at Anorexic Nation: ‘If you are making your own Pro-Ana, Diary or Journal site...try not to host it on *any* of the free home page services such as MSN, Yahoo/Geocities,

Angelfire, Homestead, Talkcity, etc, etc, Since they are free they can and do censor and remove them at their whim ☹. Always back up your sites to disk so you can move them elsewhere at a moment notice!’ (Anorexic Nation, <http://members.tripod.com/escortjadeorl/links.htm>).

As other free homepage websites joined in taking off-line Pro-Ana sites, many argued that the actions targeting Pro-Ana were censorship. Characterizing it as a ‘witchhunt’, Anabelle wrote: ‘If someone posted a website advocating fat acceptance nobody would censor it. So censoring us just isn’t fair’ (ana’s underground grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/analog/id01.html>).

Another Pro-Ana argued that the Yahoo sites ‘are not promoting for people to be anorexic!! They aren’t sending out fliers or adds (sic) to join these groups, which is what promoting is. These clubs are not making or forcing people join them in being anorexic. The clubs are simply a place for people with anorexia to talk to someone, whether they want to give up anorexia or live with it. They aren’t nearly as bad as other websites that do promote things like pornography or cults or other things of this nature...Overeaters have as big of an eating disorder if not a worse disorder than anorexics, so try bothering them for a change!!! And leave us alone!!!’ (Barrett, 2001).

The inflamed passion and determination of Pro-Ana sites led ‘a California woman known as Sahara...to raise US\$1 million to lobby on behalf of anorexics’ right to choose to be skeletal’ (O’Neill, 2002). An online petition was started which argued for the right to create Pro-Ana sites ‘with disclaimers that express why we, as a community, should be allowed to discuss and express our illness/lifestyle on the internet, as long as we provide links to recovery sites, without our sites being deleted without our permission or knowledge’. Critiquing the pervasive media images of women, the creator of the petition, Broken Angel, wrote under the U.S. Bill of Rights ‘there is little done to protect the rights of women over the size of 12 from being harassed for her size, or anything done to police morality and change society’s view of thinness and beauty. Until this changes, we want our equal say about how to live with society’s image of beauty that is forced upon us, and how we are attempting to attain that’ (URL: <http://www.gopetition.com/region/237/855.html>).

Although many Pro-Ana sites became temporarily disabled due to censorship, failure of the creator to maintain subscription, or abandonment, other Pro-Ana websites sprung up with legal disclaimers. Ana’s secret grotto wrote that ‘If you are under the age of 18, current laws in your geographical region may require you to obtain parental consent to view the contents of this website. There is NO pornographic content in this website. However, various regions may have laws concerning types of *literary* content considered "adult". Therefore, by entering this site, you automatically certify that you are 18 or older, or have obtained parental consent to do so. In the event anyone under 18 should enter this site *without* obtaining parental consent, I will NOT be held responsible for their choice to do so, nor any federal, state or local law they may violate by said choice, nor liable for ANY resulting consequences to their physical, mental, emotional or spiritual health’ (ana’s secret grotto, <http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id1.html>). Another urged recovering anorexics to leave: ‘Welcome to Totally in Control! This is a diet website, However, if you are recovering from an eating disorder, leave now. There may be some triggering photos and quotes. I will not be responsible for any actions or consequences taken after viewing this web site’ (<http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/MULA4993/default.htm>). Ana by Choice also provided similar warnings: ‘This site does not encourage that you develop an eating disorder. This is a site for those that ALREADY have an eating disorder and do not wish to go into recovery. Warning! Some material here may be triggering. If you are thinking about becoming anorexic, click here’.

Was the Pro-Ana community unfairly targeted and censored? Many of the members were highly politicized, couching Yahoo’s actions and the desire of eating disorder organizations to rid the Internet of their sites censorship, and an affront to freedom of speech and the First Amendment. The ribbon was adapted as a symbol of resistance. This was a jpeg file to attach to Pro-Ana websites, featuring a red ribbon with the words underneath proclaiming ‘Anorexia is a lifestyle, not a disease’ (see figure 1).



(figure 1).

Many of the sites also featured the Blue Ribbon as a symbol of Free Speech Online, popularized over debates in the mid-1990s over the Communications Decency Act (CDA). Clearly the Pro-Ana movement decided not to acquiesce to the removal of these sites, but to actively resist. This they have done through a savvy sense of the political culture of the Internet as a bastion for divergent voices. However, the Pro-Ana cause has not been taken up by Internet public interest and civil libertarian groups, such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Center for Democracy and Technology, nor the ACLU, who have been champions and supporters of the right to free speech on the Internet (including, in some instances, hate speech).

Ridding the Internet of Pro-Ana sites is a futile act. Websites are mirrored, saved on hard drives, migrate from ISP to ISP, appear under different titles, are part of Webrings (Hunger for Perfection is one) and are propagated and promoted through the Pro-Ana community that also thrives on chatrooms, in Internet Relay Chat, and through e-mail networks. Perhaps Pro-Ana sites, despite their almost militant philosophy against recovery and their insistence that Pro-Ana is a lifestyle, is actually a healthy environment for these young women. As one young woman wrote: 'I have been on both sides of the issue. At first I was totally against pro-ana sites, but I realize that they are much needed for support. When you take away these sites you take away the wonderful support that each individual receives'. (ProAnorexic Views, http://www.geocities.com/proanorexic_views/)

CONCLUSION: ANA'S AND ANTI-ANA'S AS ACTIVE AGENTS

Girls and young women are increasingly critical agents in the creation of their own culture (Inness, 1998), and this is evident in how they have become avid consumers and creators of web content. Analyzing various websites created by adolescent girls, Stern (1999) concluded that they helped adolescent girls to construct their identity by providing an opportunity to openly express their thoughts, opinions, interests and doubts. Stories, poems, essays, and art are the focus of many of these webpages. Many of them are akin to personal diaries, in their honest and funny exposés of their mundane daily lives.

Pro-Ana sites, despite (or perhaps in spite of) their contested nature by health professionals, parents, and the media, are exemplary of young women creating their own discursive online community. Ironically, so too are the emergent anti-Pro-Ana sites created by young women. One such example is the Stop Pro Ana site (<http://stop-pro-ana.diaryland.com/stating.html>) created in order to petition DiaryLand.com (a free website for people to host their online diaries) to disable their Pro-Ana diaries. "We are NOT attacking eating disorders. We are NOT attacking the support network. We

ARE, however, attacking the culture of propagandizing anorexia, giving it cult status, as if it's something desirable to achieve." The creator of this site believes that social responsibility and ethics should prevail over profit, and has looked at the Terms of Service for various web providers related to acceptable content. Believing that the 'Three T's': tips, tricks, and 'Thinspiration' photos, are triggers for those contemplating or in the throes of anorexia, she advocates developing a 'coherent policy of tackling the dangers posed by pro-ana websites'. A pink-ribbon campaign has been initiated (see figure 2), and a lively discussion board, engaging both Pro-Ana's and anti-Pro-Ana's, allows both sides to debate each other. Unmediated by parents or authority figures, this online forum has the virtue of allowing young women to debate this issue in their own space and on their own terms.



(figure 2)

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ana's underground grotto
<http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto/id5.html>

Anorexic Nation
<http://www.futurebird.com/~dietpep/anorexicnation/>

The Art of Reduction
<http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/SMIT8364/default.htm>

Fat Like Me
<http://jaoui.lunarpages.com/>

I Love You To The Bones
<http://membres.lycos.fr/invisibleicequeen/destruction.htm>

Invisible Existence
<http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/MULA4993/default.htm>

Petition for pro ana sites
<http://www.gopetition.com/region/237/855.html>

Pro Ana Suicide Society – discussion board
<http://pub82.ezboard.com/fproanasuicidesocietyfrm14>

Shadows Truth
<http://www.futurebird.com/%7Eshadows/main.html>

Totally in Control
<http://myweb.ecomplanet.com/TOIC6711/default.htm>

Worship Ana
<http://www.eboards4all.com/752669/>

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