

Experts to students: Watch what you post

Information on sites such as MySpace.com could come back to haunt

From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

With the rise in social networking sites such as MySpace.com, experts are warning that students need to exercise more discretion in what they post about themselves online. Besides the obvious danger of posting personally identifying information, they say, the potential exists for embarrassing information to come back to bite students later in life when they apply for college or a job.

February 10, 2006—Much has been made of the danger of posting too much personal information on web sites such as MySpace.com, where millions of people—including online child predators—can, in seconds, find out where site users go to school, learn their interests, download their pictures, and instantly send them messages.

But there is another, less widely reported danger as well: that the information students post online could come back to haunt them later in life.

In recent weeks, a Dover, Del., newspaper reporter was fired from his job after someone alerted his editor to racially offensive comments he had posted to his personal blog on MySpace.com—and seven Lincoln, Neb., high school students were suspended for two weeks when a school staff member found a MySpace.com posting that mentioned the students drinking alcohol.

"This is a new arena for us," said Wendy Henrichs, athletic director for Lincoln East High School, where the seven suspended students were all varsity and junior varsity basketball players. "In the '70s or '80s ... people would say those things. Today, they write them."

She added, "The difference is putting it in print, basically documented proof of what's been said. I don't know if kids understand that."

MySpace, one of several popular social networking sites, is a free service that allows users to create web site profiles of themselves that can be personalized with information, pictures, and movies. MySpace reportedly boasts more than 180,000 new members per day and, according to web site traffic ranking service Alexa, was the seventh most popular destination for English-speaking internet users as of press time.

While today's students are undeniably savvy in their knowledge and adoption of technology, they aren't always as savvy in how they choose to deploy it—and often they are only vaguely aware of the digital "footprint" they leave behind when they post personal information.

And this footprint could play an increasingly important role in whether students land their dream job or even get into the college of their choice, experts say.

A recent Harris Interactive poll showed that 23 percent of people search the names of business associates or colleagues on the internet before meeting them—which probably means many employers are doing the same with job applicants, said Andrea Kay, a career consultant and author of "Interview Strategies That Will Get You the Job You Want."

"It's a wake--up call: You better be careful what you say and do, because it is your reputation. You're developing it early on," Kay said.

Many employers hire companies to conduct background checks, but "Googling" job applicants serves as an additional tool. It makes sense, especially when young applicants have few references or the job involves responsibility for people's health or finances, said Charles

Fleischer, an employment lawyer and author of "The Complete Hiring and Firing Handbook."

Given the relative ease of investigating someone online and the rate of technology's penetration into the college admissions process, it's conceivable that college admissions officers, too, could soon be Googling prospective students.

College admissions officers who spoke with eSchool News said it wasn't part of their typical practice yet--but if the trend of employers Googling applicants spreads to education, that could change.

Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director for the American Association of College Registrars and College Admissions Officers, said he isn't aware of "any [higher--education] institution that is Googling people or checking out MySpace for background information." However, he added that "it is within the rights of the institution, and it is not inconceivable that an institution could fact--check an application in this manner."

According to David Hawkins, director of public policy for the National Association for College Admissions Counseling, colleges are "aware of the enormous space blogs and aggregated web sites like MySpace.com & have taken in the lives of youths." But with an increase in the number of college applicants in recent years, he said, "there isn't always time to dig deeper on student applications."

Still, Hawkins said, "the potential for a student to trip himself up is certainly greater than it was even 10 years ago."

Kent Weaver, supervisor of guidance services for Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools, said the rise of social networking sites is such a new phenomenon that most guidance counselors haven't yet formed a policy for advising students to be discreet about the information they post about themselves online. But Weaver said his staff does advise students against using silly eMail addresses that seem cool at the time, but are unprofessional later on. The easiest way for students to guard against the information they post coming back to haunt them is not to post anything embarrassing. But users of most social networking sites also can control how much of the information they post is available to the general public.

The major "profile" sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, and LiveJournal, all allow for various privacy settings. MySpace uses the most public setting as its default. The others include prompts that make users choose a privacy setting when they post information. Users can opt to make the various parts of their profile available only to people they list as "friends." Even so, nothing guarantees that privacy policies in effect today will be honored in days and years to come.

Experts say it's important for students to understand that, when they use MySpace and other sites like it, they are building up a virtual archive of their online behavior. How that archive might be used in the future is anybody's guess.

Links:

MySpace.com
<http://www.myspace.com>

American Association of College Registrars and College Admissions Officers
<http://www.aacrao.org>

National Association for College Admissions Counseling
<http://www.nacacnet.org>