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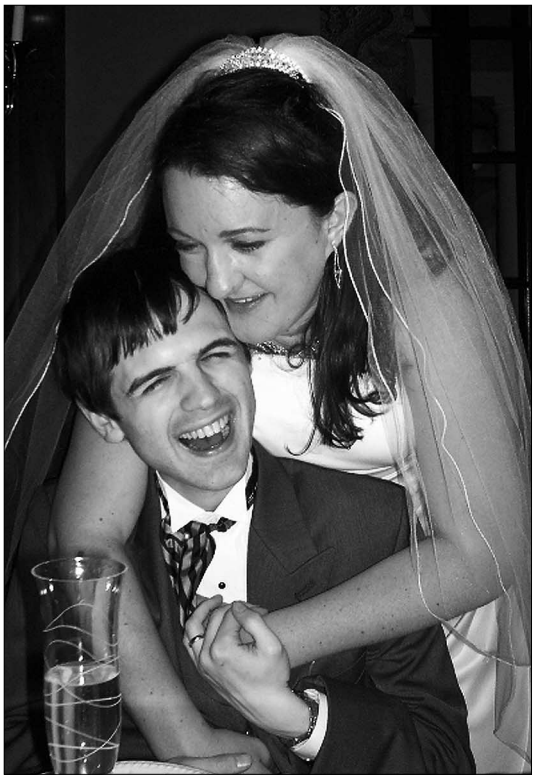
Cyber Socializing

Are Internet sites like MySpace potentially dangerous?

Internet socializing has become hugely popular, and Web sites that help people meet potential dates, find new friends and keep track of old ones are big business. Hundreds of sites attract tens of millions of users, and more sites come online daily. Born along with the Internet in the early 1970s, online socializing has helped people worldwide link to others with common interests for conversation and support. Nevertheless, new social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace raise more troubling privacy issues than traditional Internet chat rooms. Visitors to such sites can access not only individuals' posted profiles but also profiles of their friends. Parents and law-enforcement agencies worry that predators can use the information to contact vulnerable teens. Some states are considering requiring tighter security and confidentiality, and a bill introduced in the House of Representatives would require schools and libraries to block teenagers from the sites.



Paul Schnetlage and Cait Lynch married in March 2006 after meeting through the online dating service Match.com. Both are 24 and live in Reston, Va.

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Cyber Socializing

BY MARCIA CLEMMITT

THE ISSUES

Last year, Eddie Kenney and Matt Coenen were kicked off the Loyola University swim team after officials at the Chicago school found they belonged to a group that posted disparaging remarks about their coaches on the Internet social-networking site Facebook. [1]

Like many people who post profiles and photos and exchange messages on cyber-networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Xanga and Bebo, the students were shocked to find that university officials, not just their friends, were checking out the site. But Facebook, whose 8 million members are high-school or college students, alumni or faculty and staff members, is considered slightly less risky than sites with open membership rolls.

Nevertheless, said Kenney, who has since transferred to Purdue, "Facebook is dangerous right now. I've learned my lesson. You're supposed to have fun with this Facebook thing, but you need to be careful." [2]

But others see greater dangers than a lack of privacy lurking on social-networking Web sites. Last month, a 14-year-old Texas girl and her mother filed a $30 million lawsuit against MySpace, claiming the girl had been sexually assaulted by a 19-year-old man she met on the site. The man allegedly contacted the girl through her MySpace site in April, posing as a high-school senior. After a series of e-mails and phone calls, they arranged a date, when the alleged assault occurred. [3]

MySpace shares blame for the incident, the lawsuit argues, because users aren't required to verify their age, and security measures intended to prevent contacts with children under age 16 are "utterly ineffective." [4]

Getty Images/Bill Pugliano

Katherine Lester, 17, and her father leave the courthouse in Caro, Mich., on June 29, 2006, after prosecutors decided not to treat her as a runaway for flying to the Middle East to meet a man she had met on the Internet. As cyber socializing grows, so do fears that the Internet exposes the vulnerable — especially the young — to sexual predators.

Though computer networking was developed in the late 1960s to allow scientists to access remote computers for research, its users — initially just academic researchers — quickly saw its possibilities as a socializing tool. As early as 1973, for example, 75 percent of electronic traffic was e-mail, much of it purely social in nature.

Over the past 15 years, a slew of new Internet applications — from chat rooms to instant messaging and, most recently, social-networking Web sites — have made online socializing easier than ever. By the end of 2004, for example, about 70 million adults logged onto the Internet every day in the United States alone — up from 52 million four years earlier — and 63 percent of American adults were Internet users. Teens were logging on at even higher rates — 87 percent of those ages 12 to 17. [5]

Today, a great deal of online activity remains social in nature. For example, in a survey by the nonprofit Pew Internet and American Life Project, 34 percent of the people who said the Internet played an important role in a major decision they'd made said they had received advice and support from other people online. [6] And 84 percent of Internet users belong to a group or organization with an online presence; more than half joined only after they got Internet access. Members of online groups also say the Internet brings them into more contact with people outside their social class or their racial or age group. [7]

But as Internet socializing grows, so do fears that the practice exposes the vulnerable — especially young people — to sexual predators. [8] Some also worry that networking sites create added peer pressure for teens to engage in risky behavior, such as posting risqué pictures of themselves.

In the cyber social world, there has always been the possibility that the friendly stranger chatting about mountain biking or a favorite rock band is not who he says he is. Older socializing technologies, such as Internet discussion boards and chat rooms, allow users to converse about favorite topics, from quilting to astrophysics. Participants generally use screen names — pseudonyms — and conversation

Teens Feel Safe on MySpace

More than 80 percent of teens believe the cyber-networking site MySpace is safe. Teens spend an average of two hours a day, five days a week on the site. However, 83 percent of parents of MySpace users worry about online sexual predators.

What Teens Say About MySpace	What Parents of MySpace Users Say
• Typically visit 2 hours a day, 5 days a week	• 38% have not seen their teen's MySpace page
• 7-9% have been approached for a sexual liaison	• 43% don't know how often their teens are on MySpace
• 20% feel MySpace negatively affects school, job, family and friends	• 50% allow their teen to have a computer in the bedroom
• 83% believe MySpace is safe	• 62% have never talked to their teen about MySpace
• 70% would be comfortable showing their parents their MySpace page	• 83% worry about sexual predators on MySpace
• 35% are concerned about sexual predators on MySpace	• 75% worry MySpace fosters social isolation
• 15% are concerned that MySpace fosters social isolation	• 81% worry about their teen meeting online friends in person
• 36% are concerned about meeting online friends in person	• 63% believe there are "quite a few" sexual predators on MySpace
• 46% believe there are "some, but not too many," sexual predators on MySpace	

Source: Larry D. Rosen, "Adolescents in MySpace: Identity Formation, Friendship and Sexual Predators," California State University, Dominguez Hills, June 2006

centers on the forum topic, often with a minimum of personal information exchanged.

But social-networking sites have greatly increased Internet users' ability to discover other users' full personal information. For instance, newer social-networking sites utilize a personal profile — usually with photos and detailed descriptions of the person's likes and dislikes — as well as the names of friends with whom the person e-mails or instant messages. The page owner also can post comments and message on friends' pages.

Thus, while most Internet social networkers use pseudonyms, the wealth of information on their pages — plus information gleaned by reading their friends' pages — allows strangers to learn far more about a user than they could about someone posting a comment in a traditional cyber chat room. [9]

Moreover, today most cyber social-network users are between 12 and 25 years old. The largest networking site, MySpace, had more than 51 million unique U.S. visitors in May and boasts about 86 million members. [10] Traffic on the site jumped 367 percent between April 2005 and April 2006 while overall traffic on the top 10 social-networking sites grew by 47 percent. [11] Similarly, adult-oriented online dating sites are also attracting tens of millions of users. (*See sidebar, p. 636.*)

By now, most people — including teens — know it's risky to post personal information such as last name and phone number on the Internet, says Michelle Collins, director of the exploited child unit at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). But on today's social-networking sites, "You're only as safe as your friends are," says Collins. For example, a teenage girl may think she's playing it safe by not naming her school on MySpace, "but if she has four friends who all reveal the name of their school, then anyone who reads their pages can surmise" that she also goes there and could potentially track her down.

Last spring, concern about child predators spurred the Suburban Caucus — a new group in the House of Representatives — to introduce the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA). Building on the 2000 Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), DOPA would require schools and libraries to block young people's access to Internet sites through which strangers can contact them. [12]

The bill's purpose is to shield children from being approached by strangers when using the Internet away from home, an aim that's important to suburban families, according to sponsor Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick, R-Pa. "One-in-five children has been approached sexually on the Internet," he told a House subcommittee on June 10. "Child predation on the Internet is a growing problem." [13]

But many wonder if DOPA addresses the right problem. For one thing, the "one-in-five" figure is "more complicated than is being implied," given today's cultural norms, says Tim Lordan, executive director of the nonprofit Internet Education Foundation. As one teenage girl admitted, " 'Dad, if I wasn't getting sexually solicited by my peers, I would be doing something wrong,' " says Lordan.

"The media coverage of predators on MySpace implies that 1) all youth are at risk of being stalked and molested because of MySpace; and 2) prohibiting youth from participating in MySpace will stop predators from attacking

kids," said Danah Boyd, a University of California, Berkeley, doctoral student who studies how teens use online technology. "Both are misleading; neither is true. . . . Statistically speaking, kids are more at risk at a church picnic or a Boy Scout outing than . . . when they go to MySpace." [14]

In fact, the NCMEC report from which the one-in-five figure originates shows that 76 percent of online sexual solicitations "came from fellow children," and 96 percent of the adult solicitations came from adults 18 to 25, said Boyd. "Wanted and unwanted solicitations are both included. In other words, if an 18-year-old asks out a 17-year-old and both consent, this would still be seen as a sexual solicitation." [15]

Cyberspace presents no more danger than the real world, says Michigan State University Professor of Psychology Linda Jackson. "But there are dangers," she says, "such as the ease with which you can give away your information."

Unwary users giving out private information — perhaps permanently, since so much Internet content is archived — is the chief new danger posed by social networking, say many analysts.

Most teenagers who post MySpace pages "seem to have the sense that nobody is watching" except their closest friends, says Tamyra Pierce, an assistant professor of mass communication at California State University, Fresno, who is studying social-networking use among high-school students. For example, "a boy who posted about banging a mailbox last night" apparently was unaware that the posting exposed him to vandalism charges, she says.

"Teenage girls would be petrified if you read their diary, yet they are now posting online stuff that is much more personal," said Jeffrey Cole, director of the University of Southern California's Center for the Digital Future. "Clearly kids need guidance." [16]

Given the popularity of online socializing, it would be impossible to ban it, says Kaveri Subrahmanyam, an associate professor of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles. "The Internet is here to stay. If you ban it, they'll find a way to get around the ban. It will become a cat-and-mouse game," she says. "We need to teach kids how to keep safe."

Young Adults Are Most Likely to Date Online

About one-in-10 Internet users — or 16 million people — visited an online dating site in 2005. Those ages 18-29 were most likely to have used an online dating site.

Online Daters

(% of Internet users who have visited a dating site)

All Internet Users	**11%**
Sex	
Men	**12%**
Women	**9**
Race/Ethnicity	
White	**10%**
Black	**13**
Hispanic	**14**
Location	
Urban	**13%**
Suburban	**10**
Rural	**9**
Age	
18-29	**18%**
30-49	**11**
50-64	**6**
65+	**3**
Education Level	
Less Than High School	**14%**
High School Grad	**10**
Some College	**11**
College+	**10**

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project, March 5, 2006

Unfortunately, the new dangers posed by sites like MySpace "have not been integrated into the society's knowledge base," said Kevin Farnham, author of a book of safety tips for social-networking. "Common-sense teaching is [not] automatically passed from parents to child." [17]

But predators are not the only ones reading social-networking sites. Some employers routinely scan pages posted by job candidates, with potentially disastrous results, says Matthew Smith, a professor of communications at Ohio's Wittenberg University. "You may put up a birthday-party picture of yourself in your underwear, thinking you are showing how carefree you are," says Smith. "But a future employer may see it and decide you're irresponsible."

And the federal government may be next. The National Security Agency (NSA) is funding "research into the mass harvesting of the information that people post about themselves on social networks," according to Britain's *New Scientist* magazine. [18]

"You should always assume anything you write online is stapled to your résumé," said Jon Callas, chief security officer at PGP, a maker of encryption software. [19]

As lawmakers, parents and Internet companies confront new Internet security issues, here are some of the questions being discussed.

Is cyberspace more dangerous than real space?

Some legislators and worried parents warn that the online world increases opportunities for sexual predators to reach victims. Likewise, some women won't use online dating services because they fear they might meet unsavory characters. But defenders of online socializing argue that real-life encounters pose just as much risk of unwanted sexual advances or of being bullied or defrauded.

"There's a child-abuse epidemic that we don't even know about on

Survival Tips for Online Socializing

In the long run, the Internet is good for teens, bolstering their social development, creativity and even writing skills. Dangers do exist, however, mainly caused by teenagers not understanding how easily strangers can access posted information.

There's clear evidence that writing and creating art, music and videos on the social Internet is building literacy and creative skills in today's teens, says Northwestern University Professor of Communications Studies Justine Cassell.

In the early 1990s, educators were concerned about seriously declining interest in writing by American students. But today, "we have striking evidence that kids are willing to write, when they weren't before," a change that many analysts attribute to the popularity of e-mail, instant messaging and blogging, says Cassell. Today's teens even show sophisticated understanding of literary niceties such as tailoring one's writing style to suit the audience. "They don't use emoticons [symbols] with parents," for example, because they "understand that's a dialect," she says.

Benefits aside, however, dangers and misunderstandings also exist, exacerbated by the fact that kids have raced ahead of many adults in their use of Internet socializing tools, says John Carosella, vice president for content at the Internet security company Blue Coat. "We are the first generation of Internet parents, and we need to learn how our job has changed," Carosella says.

Here are experts' tips for handling the online social world:

- Parents must learn how to use the technology, says Cassell. "At the very least, IM (instant message) your kids." Parents who IM "report much less fear about the technology and more happiness because their kids keep in touch," she says.
- Parents should play with Internet search engines "to learn how easily they turn up information and then share that knowledge as they talk with their children about Internet privacy," she says.
- Privacy rules between parents and kids can't remain the same in an Internet world, says Kaveri Subrahmanyam, an associate professor of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles. "If it's a kid's diary, you don't look at it." But diaries are different from MySpace pages, "because nobody else is looking at them," Subrahmanyam says.

  When it comes to publicly posted information that strangers can access, "You do need to know what they do," she says. "You can say to your child, 'I don't need to know the content of the IM, but I do need to know whom you're sending it to.' "
- Age matters when it comes to teens understanding Internet privacy issues, according to Zheng Yan, an education professor at the State University of New York at Albany. Only children ages 12 to 13 or older can grasp the Internet's "social complexity," such as the large number of strangers who can access information posted on Web sites. [1]
- Web sites vary widely in how much public and private access they allow to posted material, and it's important to think about this when posting, says Alex Welch, founder and CEO of the photo-sharing Web site Photobucket. On Photobucket, the photo albums of people under age 18 are automatically kept private.

  However, even if they weren't, posting photos on Photobucket would be less risky than posting the same pictures on a social-networking site like MySpace, says Welch. That's because on MySpace photos are linked to additional personal information that may pique strangers' interest and provide clues to help them contact posters.
- It's also important to consider the future, including how employers or college admissions officers might view your online postings, says Henry Jenkins, director of the comparative media studies program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Much of what appears on the Internet today ends up archived somewhere and can be retrieved tomorrow, he says. "Kids don't recognize the permanence of what they put up there."
- Adults will probably learn a lot about the Internet from their children, and they should be open to that, says Jenkins. Parents "need to recognize that some unfamiliar experiences look scarier from the outside than they are. Take time to understand what you're seeing."

  Talking about teens' MySpace pages can open the door to family discussions of important, sometimes touchy issues, like contemporary fashion, media images and ideals, Jenkins says. "Ask your kid how they choose to represent themselves" on their MySpace pages "and why."
- Teens — and adults — who socialize on the Web should remember that, "when it comes to the rules for getting to know people," the Internet "parallels our world perfectly," says Patricia Handschiegel, founder and CEO of StyleDiary.net, a social-networking site focused on fashion.

  Often, young people have "a false sense that you can't be tracked" by people they correspond with online, Handschiegel says. "If you want to correspond, fine, but take your time getting to know people. Watch for cues" to ulterior motives, "such as somebody pushing too fast to know you."

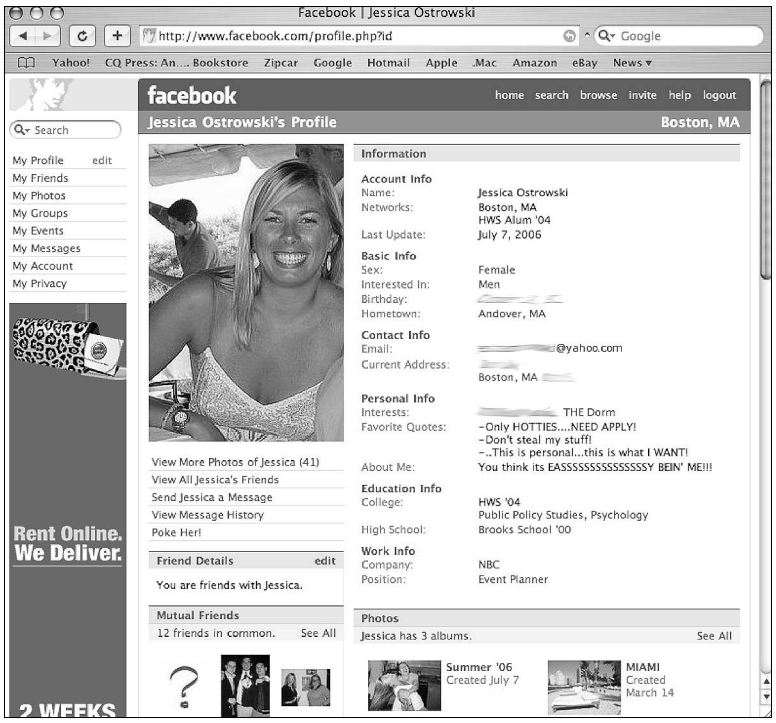
[1] Bruce Bower, "Growing Up Online," *Science News*, June 17, 2006, p. 376, www.sciencenews.org/articles/20060617/bob9.asp.

the Internet, which is how it stays so invisible, when a 45-year-old man engages in sexually explicit dialogue with a 12-year-old girl," says John Carosella, vice president for content control at Blue Coat Systems, a maker of security software and other tools for online communication.

"When it happens in real life you know it's happening," but on the Internet, even the girl herself may not know it's happening initially, he says. "This is why it can go on with such facility, and it's so easy to escalate because nobody can overhear it."

Internet communication is riskier than real-life meetings, according to Carosella, because many of the cues humans use to size up other people — such as gestures and tone of voice — are missing. "Most of our evolutionary clues [to risk] are stripped out" of online encounters, he says.

In addition, online acquaintances can do harm — especially to young people — even without offline meetings, he says. The Internet "is the most powerful tool yet invented" capable of bringing "every aspect of human behavior from the most sublime to the most debauched and depraved" right into our own homes, he says. And it's burgeoned so fast that "we've had no time to figure out how to deal with it."



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Shortly after graduating from Hobart and William Smith Colleges in 2004, Jessica Ostrowski joined the popular college social-networking site Facebook. She lives in Boston but stays connected to friends nationwide through the site, which has 8 million members.

Carosella also suggests that — while there is not enough research yet to prove it — easy access to online porn may prime some people to become aggressive or engage in sexual predation. "Lots of data suggest that pornography is a very significant factor in the emergence of criminal, aggressive behavior," he says. "You're whipping around the most powerful urge that people have. And the Internet has made pornography more accessible, more private, more extreme."

Moreover, peer pressure among teens may encourage risky sexual expression on cyber-networking sites, says Pierce of California State University. "The more stuff they have that is graphic and shocking, like links to porn and photos in risqué poses, the more friends they have on their lists," she says of recent studies of MySpace and Xanga and their use by more than 300 local high-school students. "Most who have upward of 500 friends have links to porn sites and graphic stuff."

Looking at social-networking sites can sometimes expose teenagers to porn, even when they don't seek it out, says Pierce. For example, in a group of 50 to 60 sites she recently examined, 10 contained automatic links that unexpectedly shift the viewer to a pornography site.

It "concerns me that our youth may be exposed to pornography" at the inadvertent click of a mouse, she says. "I don't know if individuals in the porn industry are creating 'fake' MySpace sites and then autolinking them or if the young persons themselves are getting involved. I just know that what appeared to be an innocent, young person's site automatically turned into porn" when the site user's photo was clicked.

Collins of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children says the Internet provides a "target-rich environment" for pedophiles. "Twenty years ago, people had to go to a park or a soccer game" to meet children and teens, she says. And the Internet allows predators to learn more about a potential victim, which may help him build a relationship.

There's little disagreement that dangers can lurk on the Internet. However, many analysts note that, even as Internet socializing has burgeoned, sex crimes have been decreasing, and data do not indicate an increase in sexual predation due to teens going online. "There is no evidence that the online world is more dangerous," says Justine Cassell, a professor of communications studies at Northwestern University.

In fact, predatory crimes against girls have declined during the past decade, even as the Internet was bringing more young people online, she says. All national data sets show that from 1994 to 2004, single-offender crimes, including assaults, by men against 12-to-19-year-old girls decreased, demonstrating that the online world has not put young people in more danger, says Cassell.

The number of sexual-abuse cases substantiated by child-protection agencies "dropped a remarkable 40 percent between 1992 and 2000," and evidence shows it was a "true decline," not a change in reporting methodology, wrote sociology Professor David Finkelhor and Assistant Professor of Psychology Lisa M. Jones, of the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center. [20]

Meanwhile, says Collins, tips about online enticement of young people reported to the NCECM have risen from 50 reports a week in 1998 to about 230 a week. But does that mean there are more online incidents today? Probably not, says Collins. "More people know where to report it today," thanks to the center's education campaigns and social-networking companies' putting links to NCECM's tipline on their sites. In addition, "more people, more kids, are wired today than ever before," Collins notes.

Even teenagers' fascination with online porn may be something of a passing fancy, not a long-term, negative behavior change, says Michigan State's Jackson, who recently completed research that tracked teens' Internet usage. "We went everywhere they went for 16 months," she says. "Porn sites were popular for the first three months, then it really died down."

As for the dangers of online dating, Eric Straus, CEO of Cupid.com, a popular dating site, rates the dangers of online and offline dating as about equal. Meeting potential romantic partners online is "a numbers game," and the Web lets you search for geographic proximity or mutual interests across a wide variety of potential dates. But "you shouldn't be fooled into feeling safe" from deception in either environment, he says. "If you talk to 100 people online, some are going to be unsavory. If you meet them in a bar, and they say they're not married, you shouldn't believe that either, and if you give them your phone number, that's dangerous."

New technology always spurs panic, says Paul DiMaggio, a sociology professor at Princeton. "MySpace is generating the same fear reaction that films and vaudeville got," says DiMaggio. "And all new technology and media generate more hysteria than threat."

"A lot of the behavior on sites like MySpace has been going on in teen hangouts for generations," wrote Anne Collier, editor of *NetFamilyNews*. [21] Dangerous behavior existed, "but parents weren't privy to it."

"One child being molested by an online predator is too many and has to be addressed," says Lordan, of the Internet Education Foundation. "Nevertheless, statistically, most molestations are family and acquaintance molestations, and the chance of your child being dragged through the computer screen by a predator is low."

Furthermore, "a lot of the stories that you hear" about teens running off with adults they met on MySpace, for example, "appear to be kids who would get in trouble in some other way if it weren't for the Internet," he says. "Once you start digging down, these don't appear to be typical families."

All youngsters are not at equal risk of being victimized, says Collins. "Some kids are using the Internet to fill a void, and these kids are going to be more susceptible," she says.

MySpace Users Are Most Loyal

Two-thirds of the visitors to MySpace return each month — more than any other social-networking site. MSN Groups caters to those with special interests, such as computers, cars, music, movies or sports.

Top Five Socializing Sites
(based on retention rate)

Site	Retention Rate (%)*
MySpace	67.0
MSN Groups	57.6
Facebook	51.7
Xanga.com	48.9
MSN Spaces	47.3

** Based on the number of March 2006 visitors who returned to the site in April*

Source: Nielsen/NetRatings

Should schools and public libraries block access to social-networking sites?

Rep. Fitzpatrick and other members of the Suburban Caucus have introduced legislation that would require public schools and libraries to bar access to social-networking sites and chat rooms as well as to pornography sites.

For adults, online social-networking sites "are fairly benign," but "for children they open the door to many dangers," including online bullying and exposure to child predators that have turned the Internet into a virtual hunting ground for children," Fitzpatrick said on the House floor May 9. [22]

"There are thousands of online predators who are trying to contact our kids using powerful engines like MySpace.com," said Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Ill. [23]

Blocking Internet social tools, at least temporarily, is a valid response, says Carosella of Blue Coat Systems. While educational responses are vital in the long run, "we haven't invented [that education] yet."

Furthermore, "while we are developing our educational response, predators are building and improving their game plans. It's an arms race," says Carosella. Blocking access in schools and libraries "is absolutely an answer," because supervision currently "is completely inadequate."

But critics of such proposals say blocking access is nearly impossible without inadvertently blocking valuable portions of the Internet. "It's brain-dead to say you should stop people from using some technology," says John Palfrey, clinical professor of law and executive director of Harvard Law School's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, pointing out that the technology isn't going away.

Boyd, of the University of California, pointed out that because technology plays a major role in the business world, it is unwise to deprive students of it in schools and libraries. "The law is so broadly defined that it would limit ac-

cess to any commercial site that allows users to create a profile and communicate with strangers." While it ostensibly targets MySpace, as written it would block many other sites, she said, including blogging tools, mailing lists, video and pod-cast sites, photo-sharing sites and educational sites like NeoPets, where kids create virtual pets and participate in educational games. [24]

Moreover, she continued, many technology companies now are using social software, such as features that help users find information, get recommendations and share ideas. "This would all be restricted," she wrote. [25]

Lynn Bradley, director of the American Library Association's government relations office, agrees. Fitzpatrick's proposal "is like using a water hose to brush your teeth." The legislation could also affect distance-learning programs, which use many technologies that the legislators want blocked. "Rural schools have increasingly started to rely on distance learning to supplement their curricula," said Bradley. "It would appear to us on reading this bill that [such programs] would be swept up in the blockage." [26]

Henry Jenkins, director of comparative media studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), says it would be unwise to keep teachers and librarians away from social-networking technology because "they are the best people to teach people how to use it constructively and safely." And, while Fitzpatrick's bill contains loopholes for educational uses, history suggests that fear and uncertainty would likely stop many schools from using those loopholes, he adds.

Blocking access at public schools and libraries would also worsen the already troubling "digital divide," says Jenkins. [27] Children in wealthier families could still access school-blocked Internet sites from home, but students without Internet at home "will be shut out," he says.

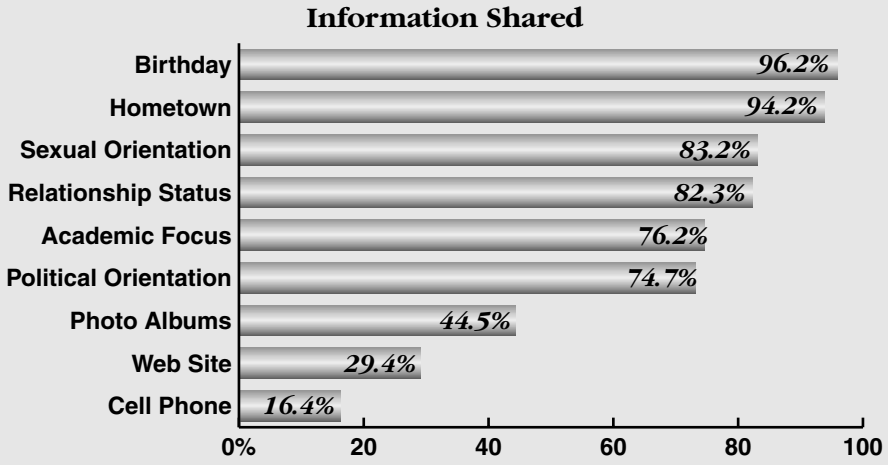
Policymakers who propose blocking as a "silver bullet" don't know how important online socializing is to teenagers, says the Internet Education Foundation's Lordan. "Kids feel quite attached to their own space," whether on MySpace or another site, and are "incredibly worried" about it being taken away, he says. If sites are blocked, "they'll go underground."

The bill should be called the "Send Social Networking Sites Off Shore Act," says Lordan, because there are social-networking sites all over the world and "stories of kids creating these sites themselves." If that happens, "we can't even help them."

Moreover, there are serious technical barriers, such as age verification, he says. Many blocking proposals would depend on age verification of site users, either to block out older users who might prey on kids or to keep younger kids from using the sites. But "age verification is a problem even in the real world," where kids use fake ID cards to buy alcohol and cigarettes, says Loran, and the problem is "worse in the online world."

Freshmen Share Many Personal Details

Most University of North Carolina freshmen reveal their birthday and hometown on social-networking sites. But only 16 percent give out more detailed personal information, like cell phone numbers.



Source: Fred Stutzman, "Social Networking on Campus," University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2006

Does Internet social networking foster good relationships?

For nearly as long as the Internet has existed, people have used it to stay in touch with old friends and meet new ones. [28] For just as long, skeptics have argued that online relationships are less rich, real and reliable than real-world interactions and that Internet socializing actually isolates people. Over the years, studies have found evidence bolstering both sides of the question.

No online community can support human bonding the way real-world communities do, said Clifford Stoll in his 1996 best-seller *Silicon Snake Oil: Second Thoughts on the Information Superhighway.* "What's missing from this ersatz neighborhood? A feeling of permanence, a sense of location, a warmth from the local history. Gone is the very essence of a neighborhood: friendly relations and a sense of being in it together." [29]

Some studies have found that Internet usage pulls people away from their real-world friends and family and

isolates the user. Research by Stanford University's Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (SIQSS), for example, finds that Internet use directly relates to social isolation. Based on survey findings, the Stanford researchers say that for every hour a person spends online, their face-to-face time with family and friends decreases by 23.5 minutes. [30]

Furthermore, "face-to-face interaction with close [friends and family] qualitatively differs from interactions in the virtual world online and is more important to one's psychological wellness," according to Lu Zheng, a Stanford doctoral student in sociology. [31]

Another SIQSS analysis found that "the more time people spend using the Internet the more they lose contact with their social environment." Internet users, for example, spend much less time talking on the phone to friends and family, according to the study. [32]

"E-mail is a way to stay in touch, but you can't share a coffee or a beer with somebody on e-mail or give them a hug," said SIQSS Director Norman Nie. "The Internet could be the ultimate isolating technology that further reduces our participation in communities." [33]

But other analysts insist that Internet socializing strengthens online and offline relationships. What looks to some like a "fading away" of social life as Internet usage increases is actually just a shift to new communication modes that strengthen many people's social ties, says a recent report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project and the University of Toronto. [34]

"The traditional human orientation to neighborhood- and village-based groups is moving toward communities . . . oriented around geographically dispersed social networks," the Pew report said. "The Internet and e-mail play an important role in maintaining these . . . networks" and "fit seamlessly" into people's social lives. As a result, the study concluded, Americans today "are probably more in contact with members of their communities and social networks than before."

For example, the analysts found that those who e-mail 80-100 percent of their closest friends and family weekly also speak regularly by phone with 25 percent more of their closest associates than those who e-mail less. For so-called second-tier (or "significant") social ties, the effects were even more pronounced: Those who weekly e-mail 80-100 percent of their second-tier contacts also regularly telephone twice as many of those contacts as do people who do not e-mail their friends. [35] Furthermore, 31 percent of those surveyed said their Internet use had increased their number of second-tier contacts — while only 2 percent said it had decreased them. [36]

A Canadian study of a housing development found similar results. University of Toronto researchers found that residents with high-speed connections had more informal, friendly contact with neighbors than residents who were not on the Internet. [37] Residents with broadband service knew the names of 25 neighbors, on average, compared to non-wired residents, who knew eight. Wired residents made 50 percent more visits to neighbors' homes than non-wired people, and their visits were more widely scattered around the housing development, according to the paper. [38]

And in a new and interesting wrinkle, the Internet may be helping to keep the lines of communication open between people on both sides of the recent Middle East violence. Since the cross-border shelling between Israel and Lebanon erupted earlier this month, Internet message boards, discussion forums and blogs have exploded with posts from Israeli and Lebanese nationals commenting on the fighting. "The fact that the citizens of two warring countries are maintaining a dialogue while a war is going on cannot be ignored," said Lisa Goldman, a Canadian-born freelance journalist who blogs from Tel Aviv and who points out that Internet discussions and socializing between Israelis and Lebanese predated the current conflict. [39]

Another significant new phenomenon among adolescents equipped with cell phones, instant messaging and social-networking pages is "tele-cocooning," says MIT's Jenkins. Coined by Mimi Ito, a research scientist at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center for Communication, tele-cocooning refers to "carrying your friends around with you, using technology to be literally in contact with them all the time."

Online socializing also helps kids who would otherwise have a hard time finding friendships, says Jenkins. "Kids who may be outcasts, or pariahs, or have interests that nobody in their school shares now can go online and meet kids all around the country who like the same comic books, music and sports," Jenkins says. "I watched my son go through that."

In addition, while online socializing creates opportunities for deception or misunderstanding, meeting people online first can sometimes help avoid superficial judgments. The Internet allows disadvantaged or physically different people to socialize without suffering the instantaneous negative judgment that may happen in person.

"If people consider you unattractive, for example — you have moles, a big nose — . . . you can get negative reactions in public," says Wittenberg's Smith. "Online, I can talk about my love of pets or my work with my church. I can put down what is lovable about me and bypass whatever I think is keeping me from getting fulfilled relationships" offline.

Internet dating also saves time, says Mark Brooks, editor of *Online Personals Watch*. "The great thing about Internet dating is being able to

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Chronology

1960s-1980s

As the Internet develops, its academic and technical users begin socializing online.

1967
The term "six degrees of separation" enters the lexicon after Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram claims to experimentally validate the theory that any two people on Earth are connected by an average of six intermediate contacts.

1972
E-mail is invented and quickly becomes the most widely used tool on the first wide-scale computer network, ARPANET.

1975
First ARPANET mailing lists link people with shared interests.

1979
First Usenet newsgroups are established.

1982
Carnegie Mellon University computer-science Professor Scott Fahlman invents the first emoticon, the smiley :-)

1988
Internet Relay Chat is invented, allowing computer users to exchange real-time messages with a group.

1990s

People flock to the Internet, mostly drawn by socializing tools like e-mail and chat rooms. Worries grow about sexual predators contacting teens through online socializing, but sex crimes against teenagers decrease overall.

1990
John Guare's play "Six Degrees of Separation" captures the public imagination with its portrayal of the power of social networks.

1994
Netscape's Mosaic Web browser is offered free on the company's Web site, helping draw millions of non-technical users online.

1996
AOL introduces the Buddy List, which alerts users when friends are online and ready to IM (instant message) each other.

1997
Sixdegrees.com becomes one of the first Internet social sites to link users to friends of friends, through three "degrees of separation." . . . AOL introduces AIM, allowing users for the first time to IM non-AOL users.

1998
eHarmony.com, the first online dating site to require users to complete a personality-matching test, is founded by evangelical Christian Neil Clark Warren.

2000s

Social-networking sites become teenagers' socializing tool of choice, while rock bands and other performers begin using the sites to build and strengthen their fan bases. Lawmakers become concerned that cyber social networking makes it easier for sexual predators to find teens.

2000
President Bill Clinton signs the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), requiring federally subsidized public and school libraries to use filtering software to block children's access to pornography.

2001
Columbia University Professor Duncan Watts uses forwarded e-mails to confirm Milgram's six-degrees-of-separation finding.

2003
MySpace is founded. . . . The U.S. Supreme Court upholds CIPA's requirement for public libraries to block Internet sites. . . . Vermont Gov. Howard Dean becomes a leading contender for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination by using the social-networking site Meetup to spur grass-roots organization.

2005
News Corp., a global company headed by Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch, buys MySpace for $580 million. . . . Several state legislatures consider bills requiring online dating sites to conduct background checks of users.

2006
NBC's television newsmagazine "Dateline" films sting operations around the country in which adults pose as teens in Internet chat rooms and arrange to meet sexual predators. . . . The Deleting Online Predators Act is introduced in Congress to require federally subsidized schools and libraries to block children's access to social-networking sites, chat rooms and other socializing technology. . . . Social software continues to spread with Internet companies including AOL, Netscape, Google and Yahoo jumping on board. . . . Americans spend $521 million on online dating, making it one of the biggest income generators on the World Wide Web.

Do You Take This Online Stranger . . . ?

Soon after moving to Washington, D.C., from upstate New York to attend community college, Cait Lynch signed up with the popular Internet dating site Match.com. "I'd just moved to the area and I didn't really know anyone. I was interested in meeting new people," she says. Moreover, her mother had met her husband of eight years online. "I figured if it went well for her, I should give it a shot."

After a few months, Lynch came across a promising profile. Paul Schnetlage was getting his master's degree at Johns Hopkins University, and they shared an interest in cafes, movies, reading and art. Moreover, they were the same age — 22 — and both were in school full time while working.

After e-mailing for a month, they met for coffee, and Paul admitted he had "met several really strange girls" before meeting her. For her part, Lynch says she "didn't take anything seriously at all" on the site. Nonetheless, their relationship slowly blossomed, and last March, nearly two years after meeting, they married. Without Match.com, "I don't think I ever would have met someone like Paul," says Lynch, who works for a real estate developer. Her husband is a software designer.

Launched in 1995 as the first online dating service, Match.com now has some 15 million paid members. It claims that more than 300 marriages or engagements occur between members or former members each month and that 400,000 people find the person they are seeking each year. The "vast majority aren't marriages," says spokesperson Kristin Kelly, "but a lot of people are telling us they found a great relationship."

Today, Internet sites devoted to matchmaking constitute one of the top online income generators, with the U.S. market valued at $521 million. [1] Nearly one-third of American adults know someone who has used a dating Web site, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project. [2]

But after steady increases in membership, the 25 most-visited online dating sites showed a 4 percent decline in American visitors in the past year compared to a 4 percent increase in the total U.S. Internet audience. [3]

"There is a natural limit to the number of people who want to participate in this industry, and they are getting to that number," explained Jupiter Research analyst Nate Elliot." [4]

And Mary Madden, a Pew senior research specialist, points out the Internet is still very low on the list of ways people meet their significant others. "We asked all Internet users who are married or in a committed relationship if they met their partner online or offline, and only 3 percent said they met them online," she says.

There are clearly cases where online dating does foster meaningful relationships, says Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, co-director of Rutgers University's National Marriage Project. "But to what degree it's a very reliable source of finding a partner is the open question," she says.

Stan Woll, a psychology professor at California State University, Fullerton, says Internet dating sites are good at introducing people to large numbers of potential mates they might not otherwise meet. However, he finds that the number of possibilities tends to make members overlook people they would ordinarily enjoy. "There is an array of other people, and you keep wanting to go on and find somebody better or closer," argues Woll.

Andrea Baker, a sociology professor at Ohio University and author of the 2005 book *Double Click: Romance and Commitment of Online Couples*, argues that online dating sites are better than chance meetings at helping members find partners with common interests.

But online dating has its drawbacks. Whitehead says she often hears criticism about untruthful member profiles. Lynch says members she met online often embellished their résumés to enhance

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find the right people," something that is harder in the real world, where there's no search function, he says. By meeting someone online first, "I don't need to go out with somebody who smokes or who has kids. You can ask the difficult questions up front."

Social-networking sites also draw criticism for their emphasis on having a lengthy list of friends, as sites like MySpace tend to do. Encouraging the how-many-friends-do-my-friends-have game sets up bad behaviors, according to technology entrepreneur Christopher Allen. "It is not the number of connections but the quality" that counts, a fact obscured by concentration on long friend lists, he said. [40]

Social networking is based on a faulty view of friendship — the "premise that . . . if A is a friend of B, and B is a friend of C, then A can be a friend of C, too," said the University of California's Boyd. "Just because you're friends with somebody doesn't mean their friends are similar" to the friends you would choose. [41]

A social-networking site can also be used as "an electronic bathroom wall," potentially increasing the reach of school bullying, says NCMEC's Collins. "There's capacity for large-scale humiliation," Collins says, citing an incident in which a girl created a page laden with pornography and put an ex-friend's name on it.

But Boyd isn't so sure. "Bullying, sexual teasing and other peer-to-peer harassment are rampant among teenagers" because they are "tools through which youth learn to make meaning of popularity, social status and cultural norms," she said. It is unclear whether online embarrassment is any more damaging than offline humiliation, she added, conceding the Internet "may help spread rumors faster." [42] ■

their appeal, such as the man who said he liked chess but didn't know the rules when they sat down to play. And the Pew project found that 66 percent of Internet users think cyber dating is dangerous because its puts personal information online. [5]

Online-dating experts have found that people are turning to the Internet to find love for a number of different social and cultural reasons. For instance, busy work schedules make it harder for people to find compatible partners in the offline world, Baker says.

The Internet also allows busy singles to meet people who live across town whom they would not normally bump into, contends Kelly. It can "cut across boundaries that used to limit people's opportunities to meet people, like geography," adds Whitehead.

Compared to a generation ago, people are much more likely to live in a city where they did not grow up, Kelly points out. Because people's lives are no longer dictated by geography, traditional "friendship networks are down," says Bernardo Carducci, a professor of psychology at Indiana University Southeast. He argues that people are lonely and don't have a local friendship network that can produce dates.

Yahoo Drew Most Visitors

Each month Internet dating sites entice millions of hopeful visitors searching for the perfect mate.

Top 10 Dating Sites

Site	Unique Visitors (in thousands)
Yahoo! Personals	6,052
Match.com Sites	3,893
MarketRange Inc.	2,676
Spark Networks	2,638
Mate1.com	2,354
True.com	2,093
eHarmony.com	1,796
Love@AOL	1,516
Zencon Technologies Dating Sites	1,091
Lovehappens.com	976

Source: comScore Media Metrix, a division of comScore Networks, Inc., January 2006

And Whitehead and Kelly agree that singles are also turning to the Internet to find a mate because they are not finding them in the old places, such as college or high school.

While online-dating sites do provide more conveniences, Madden says the majority of people she surveyed did not find online dating more efficient than offline dating. Users "still have the complex challenges of negotiating relationships [including] norms and social skills that are different from face-to-face communication."

Some, like Carducci, describe online dating as just one more tool in the dating arsenal. Others, including Whitehead, think it is a big tool that is going to have a lasting force in society.

Kelly predicts that "some of the stigma about online dating is a generation gap" that will disappear over time.

— Melissa J. Hipolit

[1] Ginanne Brownell, "The Five-Year Itch," *Newsweek*, Feb. 27, 2006.
[2] Pew Internet and American Life Project, "Online Dating," March 5, 2006.
[3] comScore Media Metrix, January 2006.
[4] Brownell, *op. cit.*
[5] Pew Internet and American Life Project, *op. cit.*

BACKGROUND

Wired Love

Virtually all communications technology, no matter why it was developed, has quickly become a socializing tool, with teenagers usually leading the way. And — from the telegraph to MySpace — parents have always worried what kind of trouble teens may get into with the new technology.

Northwestern's Cassell recounts a newspaper story entitled "Wired Love," which describes how a father followed his 16-year-old daughter to a tryst she'd arranged with a man she had met online and was arrested after threatening to kill the man and the girl. The father had bought his daughter the new technology — a telegraph — according to the 1886 story in the magazine *Electrical World.*

"At first people thought the telegraph would be good for girls," who might land jobs as telegraph operators, says Cassell. "But in the 1880s, an attempt was made to legislate who could be a telegraph operator because people worried that girls would contact men through the device," she says.

In the early 1900s, similar worries and proposals for legislation arose about the telephone, she says. The anti-telephone "rhetoric was identical to anti-MySpace rhetoric today," stressing "fears that girls were at risk," she says.

Yet socializing has always been a top human need, as the history of communications technology has shown, says Wittenberg's Smith. When new technologies change how people communicate, people always use them for social interactions — rather

What's Next for the Social Net?

The mega social-networking site MySpace boasts more than 30 million visitors a day. But with the bulk of its users teenagers, Internet industry observers say the MySpace phenomenon may have peaked and that teens are ready to move on to the next big thing.

But social-networking technology — from people searches to video sharing — is here to stay. And Internet entrepreneurs are scrambling to develop new ways to give social-networking sites more staying power and attract a broader — and older — audience.

"Could it be that MySpace peaked" this past April?" mused Scott Karp, a technology and publishing analyst. "When a fad becomes overhyped, teens will eventually retreat," and MySpace daily traffic began falling off somewhat in late spring, Karp said. [1]

Some observers seconded Karp's observation. "MySpace is hot now, but teen audiences are the most fickle market ever invented," wrote Mathew Ingram, an online business writer for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. "MySpace has gone (or is becoming) mainstream, and mainstream is the kiss of death." [2]

Media mogul Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corp. bought MySpace last year for $580 million, has been reticent about how he plans to make money on the free site. But the man who once described newspapers' paid classified advertising as "rivers of gold," confounded the industry recently when he announced that he will offer free classified advertising on MySpace. [3]

Social-networking sites are really about communicating with people you know or specifically want to know, not publication to strangers, according to Dalton Caldwell, founder and CEO of the social-networking site imeem.com. "You don't want to see strangers' home movies," Caldwell says.

Some people in the social-networking business think of the sites as "destinations," cool places to hang out and spend time, says Caldwell. But that's a recipe for a site whose popularity wanes fairly quickly, Caldwell believes. "The site'll be like a night club. It'll be cool for a while, but then it'll fade."

But a site envisioned as a collection of popular, useful, top-of-the-line communication tools won't likely suffer that fate, because "you're plugging into something that people always do." IM — instant messaging — for example, "is not a fad. It hasn't changed since its inception" because it's "a cool tool that people continue to want to use," Caldwell says.

A big draw of social networking will always be connection, especially for the older-than-teenage crowd that entrepreneurs hope to lure in bigger numbers, says Mark Brooks, editor of *Online Personals Watch*. Facebook — a site that caters to college students — has an advantage for the long run in that regard, says Brooks. Providing a connecting point for school pals that will help them avoid losing touch with old friends, Facebook "hits people at their point of pain," Brooks says.

The fact that the site provides a venue to keep in touch with old school mates will eventually "drive Facebook beyond MySpace," Brooks predicts.

To draw older, hopefully more permanent users than MySpace's teens, some entrepreneurs are developing sites where people can join groups discussing topics of interest rather than hanging out and posting personal profiles. Such sites are similar to traditional Internet social venues like Yahoo Groups, whose thousands of discussion groups are focused on individual topics like hobbies or alternative sexual lifestyles.

than just for business or educational use, he says.

The telephone, for example, was first marketed as a tool to speed up workplace transactions, says Smith. When the fledgling phone industry found that people were getting on and talking for a long time, they "were horrified," he says. For example, for efficiency's sake a single party line was usually assigned to several families to share. "But people wanted to get on and yak," clogging up the lines for their neighbors, he says.

Internet socializing, which began almost as soon as computer networks were established in the late 1960s, also took network developers by surprise. By 1973, e-mail — much of it purely social in nature — made up 75 percent of traffic on ARPANET, the computer network designed by the Department of Defense to allow researchers to exchange data and access remote computing capability. [43]

By 1975, ARPANET users had developed the first Internet communities, mailing lists through which people could send messages on topics of interest to a whole list of others who shared their passions. Some lists were work-related, but lists linking science-fiction fans and wine-tasting enthusiasts were among the most popular.

In 1978, computer scientists developed Usenet, a network intended to allow Internet users to exchange technical information about the Unix computer operating system. Again, to the surprise of its developers, Usenet almost immediately became a tool for long-distance socializing. Usenet's "originators underestimated the hunger of people for meaningful communication," wrote Internet historians Michael and Ronda Hauben, pointing out that the possibility of "grass-roots connection of people" around the globe is what attracted users. [44]

Although other online groups joined Usenet, until the early 1990s most users were technical people and academics. In the early 1990s, however, America Online and Netscape began making it easy for non-technical users to move online. AOL, in particular, popularized

Unlike traditional discussion groups, however, the new "social media" groups capitalize on social networking's ability to connect an individual not only to friends but also to friends of friends, says Tom Gerace, founder and CEO of Gather.com, a social-networking site aimed at adults.

Gather's approach is to encourage its users — envisioned as the sort of folks who are regular listeners to National Public Radio, for example — to post thoughts on subjects ranging from politics to recipes. Those postings constitute a new "social media," movie reviews and political rants composed not by professional journalists but by any interested Internet user. Sites like Gather then use social networking's "friends of friends" structure to help people link up to the posting they'll be most interested in, because they interest others in their circle of contacts, says Gerace.

Gather users will also provide "social filtering" of the media they create, providing links and reviews that will bring the best socially created content to the top of the heap, Gerace says. The site currently pays members a modest fee if content they create gets high marks from fellow users. And "eventually some writers will earn a living" by creating top-ranked Gather content, Gerace says.

Content is also king at Buzznet, a social-networking site on which users share writings, photo, music and video celebrating popular culture, especially music. "A classic social network is all about your profile, but on Buzznet our emphasis is 100 percent focused on what you're producing," says co-founder Anthony Batt.

Buzznet "is the upside-down version of MySpace," says Batt. It's a catalog of people. We're about . . . what people are interested in. You connect with an interest, then you meet the people." Buzznet founders plan to build on its success to found other communities linked by different interests, potentially attracting different age groups, says Batt.

But Buzznet is not the replacement for MySpace that its founders expected it to be, says Batt. "People tend to have three stops. They hang out on MySpace, write a bit at LiveJournal" — a blogging and social-networking site — "and then spend time with us."

Online dating services will ultimately succumb to the social-networking boom, predicts Markus Frind, creator and owner of the Canada-based dating site Plentyoffish.com. Unlike most other dating sites, Plentyoffish is free to users. Frind's operation is "half social networking," because, unlike most other dating sites, Plentyoffish doesn't attempt proactive matchmaking. Instead, like MySpace, Plentyoffish simply allows members to post profiles, converse and arrange outside meetings — one-on-one dates or multi-member parties — on their own.

Contrary to what MySpace and Facebook members claim, the social-networking sites "are all about sex," says Frind. "People go there to hook up," and they're succeeding at it, he says. Eventually, that success will pull most people away from online dating services — which charge — to social-networking sites, which are free. "The hot girls are only on the social-networking sites now, not on dating sites. It's socially unacceptable for hot girls to say they're looking for dates," Frind says. "Eventually, all the guys will follow them there."

[1] Scott Karp, "Has the MySpace Downturn Begun?" *Publishing 2.0*, May 25, 2006, http://publishing2.com.

[2] Quoted in *ibid.*

[3] Murdoch was interviewed on "The Charlie Rose Show," on July 20, 2006. Also see "Murdoch predicts demise of classified ads," *Financial Times*, Nov. 24, 2005.

chat rooms, where people can exchange messages in real time. The live nature of chat room discussions raised new fears among parents because users were generally anonymous. Some chat rooms were eventually found to be heavily trafficked by pedophiles. By 1997, AOL had 14,000 chat rooms, which accounted for about a third of the time AOL members spent online. [45]

Later, AOL introduced instant messaging (IM) — real-time e-mail discussions with one person — and buddy lists, which alert users when friends are online and available to receive IMs.

"Community is the Velcro that keeps people there," said AOL President Theodore Leonsis. [46]

Six Degrees

In the 1960s, Yale University psychologist Stanley Milgram tested and apparently verified the theory that any two people on Earth are connected to each other by an average of six intermediate contacts. [47]

Scientific doubt remains about the validity of Milgram's so-called "six-degrees-of-separation" theory, but the idea has intrigued the popular imagination. In the late 1990s, Internet developers recognized that the Internet provides tools to seek and contact others in the farther circles of connection. For example, those who post personal Web pages invite friends to link their personal pages to theirs, then their friends link to their friends, creating a chain of social linkages.

In 1997, the pioneering Web site Sixdegrees.com allowed users to send and post messages viewable by their first, second and third-degree contacts. [48] Founder Andrew Weinreich, a lawyer-turned-entrepreneur, explained social networking's usefulness in business and social terms.

"Say you're coming out of college and you want to be a lawyer in Dallas. You ask, 'Who knows an environmental lawyer in Dallas?' You want advice. We give you a shot at that." Less serious queries also pay off, said Weinreich. "You can get a movie review from Siskel and Ebert, but wouldn't you rather hear it from friends you trust?" [49]

The first really big-name social-networking site, Friendster, was launched in 2002, and the blockbuster site, MySpace, quickly followed, in 2003. While other sites also attract visitors in the millions, MySpace struck gold with a concept that, for the first time, brought teen Internet users together at a single spot.

"Curiosity about other people" drove social networking's initial fast growth, says Brooks, of *Online Personals Watch*. "But to make a site grow you need to hit something more powerful than curiosity," something that attracts key people or "connectors" — the "socialites . . . or loudmouths . . . those who run into hundreds of other people all the time," Brooks says.

MySpace seized upon music as a tool to reach the young "connectors." The site contacted music promoters and got band members to engage with the popular people on the site, said Berkeley's Boyd. The bands then created their own pages on MySpace, giving musicians an opportunity to link to multiple kids' pages. "Eventually, other young people followed the young people that followed the music," she says. [50]

And follow they have. With more than 80 million members, MySpace was growing by about 250,000 members a day in early 2006. [51] Exact rankings among the world's top Web sites shift daily, but MySpace averages the sixth-highest number of daily visitors, alongside English-language sites Yahoo, Microsoft Network, Google and eBay, and several Chinese-language sites. That translates to more than 30 million users visiting MySpace daily. [52]

Following right behind have been advertisers, with everybody who wants to contact young people putting up a MySpace page. Even the Marine Corps began collecting "friends" in early 2006. Some 12,000 people now link their pages to the Corps' page, and at last count 430 people had contacted recruiters through the site. [53]

AP Photo/*The Patriot Ledger*/Greg Derr

Flight instructor Harold Spector, 67, is arrested last April in Marshfield, Mass., where he'd flown in his private plane to meet what he thought was a 15-year-old girl he'd been "talking" to in an Internet chat room. Spector was charged with attempted statutory rape and attempting to entice a minor under age 16 for sex after the "girl" turned out to be two police officers.

Techno Kids

What has really brought MySpace to public attention, however, is not its sheer numbers, but its demographics.

Teens and young adults make up the overwhelming majority of users, triggering fear among parents, law-enforcement agencies and some legislators that the site may offer sexual predators easier access to young victims or encourage adolescents to engage in unhealthy behavior, such as posting sexually suggestive photos of themselves.

"The dangers our children are exposed to by these sites are clear and compelling," said Rep. Fitzpatrick. [54]

These worries aren't new and didn't start with social networking, says MIT's Jenkins. "Children and young people have always been early adopters of technology," he says, noting that the Boy Scouts were early users of radio, and in the 19th century children used toy printing presses to create magazines and newspapers.

But the speed with which new technologies appear on the scene today, combined with teens' propensity to quickly embrace new technologies, makes it especially difficult for parents, lawmakers and technology companies to figure out how to respond, says Blue Coat's Carosella. "The social behaviors that involve the Internet are not going to go away." In fact, "the kids . . . are inventing these behaviors."

"Kids are always one or two steps ahead" of older generations, says California State University's Subrahmanyam. "Chat, IM, social networking have all developed as teen-heavy technology," she says. "That makes sense, because figuring out sex and their own place in the social order . . . makes talking with peers very important."

But while teens have long discussed sex and relationships via instant messaging, adolescent interchanges on sites like MySpace "can now be seen by others," she adds.

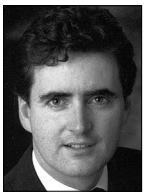
Background Checks

While most of the uproar over potential dangers in online socializing concerns teenagers and children, some fear that online dating sites may also make it easier for sexual predators to reach adult victims.

Continued on p. 642

At Issue:

Should Congress require schools and public libraries to block social-networking Web sites?



REP. MICHAEL FITZPATRICK, R-PA.
SPONSOR, DELETING ONLINE PREDATORS ACT

FROM REMARKS ON HOUSE FLOOR, MAY 9, 2006

My most important job is my role as a father of six children. In a world that moves and changes at a dizzying pace, being a father gets harder all the time. Technology is one of the key concerns I have as a parent, specifically the Internet and the sites my kids visit, register with and use on a daily basis.

One of the most interesting and worrying developments of late has been the growth in what are called "social-networking sites." Sites like MySpace, Friendster and Facebook have literally exploded in popularity in just a few short years.

For adults, these sites are fairly benign. For children, they open the door to many dangers, including online bullying and exposure to child predators that have turned the Internet into a virtual hunting ground for children. The dangers our children are exposed to by these sites are clear and compelling. MySpace, which is self-regulated, has removed an estimated 200,000 objectionable profiles since it started in 2003.

This is why I introduced the Deleting Online Predators Act as part of the Suburban Caucus agenda. Parents have the ability to screen their children's Internet access at home, but this protection ends when their child leaves for school or the library. The Deleting Online Predators Act requires schools and libraries to implement technology to protect children from accessing commercial networking sites like MySpace.com, and chat rooms, which allow children to be preyed upon by individuals seeking to do harm to our children.

Additionally, the legislation would require the Federal Trade Commission [FTC] to design and publish a unique Web site to serve as a clearinghouse and resource for parents, teachers and children for information on the dangers of surfing the Internet. The Web site would include detailed information about commercial networking sites like MySpace. The FTC would also be responsible for issuing consumer alerts to parents, teachers, school officials and others regarding the potential dangers of Internet child predators and others and their ability to contact children through MySpace.com and other social-networking sites.

In addition, the bill would require the Federal Communication Commission to establish an advisory board to review and report commercial social-networking sites like MySpace.com and chat rooms that have been shown to allow sexual predators easy access to personal information of, and contact with, our nation's children.

HENRY JENKINS
DIRECTOR, COMPARATIVE MEDIA STUDIES PROGRAM, MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

FROM INTERVIEW POSTED ONLINE BY THE MIT NEWS OFFICE, ACCESSED JULY 2006

As a society, we are at a moment of transition when the most important social relationships may no longer be restricted to those we conduct face-to-face with people in our own immediate surroundings. We are learning how to interact across multiple communities and negotiate with diverse norms. These networking skills are increasingly important to all aspects of our lives.

Just as youth in a hunting society play with bows and arrows, youth in an information society play with information and social networks. Rather than shutting kids off from social-network tools, we should be teaching them how to exploit their potential and mitigate their risks.

Much of the current policy debate around MySpace assumes that the activities there are at best frivolous and at worst dangerous to the teens who participate. Yet a growing number of teachers around the country are discovering that these technologies have real pedagogical value.

Teachers are beginning to use blogs for knowledge-sharing in schools; they use mailing lists to communicate expectations about homework with students and parents. They are discovering that students take their assignments more seriously and write better if they are producing work that will reach a larger public rather than simply sit on the teacher's desk. Teachers are linking together classrooms around the country and around the world, getting kids from different cultural backgrounds to share aspects of their everyday experience.

Many of these activities would be threatened by the proposed federal legislation, which would restrict access to these sites via public schools or library terminals. In theory, the bill would allow schools to disable these filters for use in educationally specified contexts, yet, in practice, teachers who wanted to exploit the educational benefits of these tools would face increased scrutiny and pressure to discontinue these practices.

Teens who lack access to the Internet at home would be cut off from their extended sphere of social contacts.

Wouldn't we be better off having teens engage with MySpace in the context of supervision from knowledgeable and informed adults? Historically, we taught children what to do when a stranger telephoned them when their parents are away; surely, we should be helping to teach them how to manage the presentation of their selves in digital spaces.

Many Americans Know Online Daters

Nearly one-third of American adults know at least one person who has used an online dating Web site.

Percent (of U.S. adults)	No. of People	Who Know Someone Who Has . . .
31%	63 million	used a dating Web site
26	53 million	dated a person they met on a dating site
15	30 million	been in a long-term relationship or married someone they met online

Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project, "Online Dating," March 5, 2006

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In the past year and a half, legislators in several states, including California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Texas and Virginia, proposed requiring online dating sites to conduct criminal background checks of all prospective members or prominently inform users that they do not conduct such checks. [55]

The bills were suggested by Herb Vest, founder and CEO of the True.com dating service, which checks the criminal and marital backgrounds of its members. "The primary motivation is to protect people from criminal predation online," said Vest. "I can't imagine anyone with a hatful of brains being against that." [56]

Many online daters think dating sites already take such precautions, said Republican Florida state Rep. Kevin Ambler, who sponsored a similar bill in Florida last year after hearing that 20 percent of survey respondents thought background checks were already required on dating sites. "Many online daters have a false sense of security," he said. [57]

But some Internet companies and dating sites say the bills aren't needed or would create a false sense of security. "It would be just as easy to argue that True.com should be required to post labels on each page, saying, 'Warning. True.com's background searches will not identify criminals using fake names,' " said Kristin Kelly, a spokeswoman for the Match.com dating site. [58]

True.com has contracted with Rapsheets.com, a private firm trying to build a national database of criminal convictions, according to the Internet Alliance, an advocacy group whose members include the dating sites Match.com and eHarmony.com, as well as other Internet companies such as eBay, AOL and Yahoo. But mechanisms for tracking criminal convictions are state-based, the group points out, and some states decline to participate in national databases. So it is impossible for Rapsheets to have complete information, they said. [59]

Internet Alliance also argues that new laws aren't needed because unregulated dating services — such as newspaper ads and singles hotlines — have run "smoothly for years without legislative interference," while "providing even less information [than] a typical online profile."

So far, the bills have gone nowhere. The Michigan House passed a bill, but it later died in the state Senate. In Florida, bills were approved in committee last year but did not advance. A California bill that would have fined online dating services $250 for each day they don't conduct background checks was introduced but later pulled from consideration. ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Big Brother

Nowadays, teenagers aren't the only ones hanging out on MySpace.com. Law-enforcement officials now are increasingly staking out the site, looking to head off crimes. Some high-profile arrests in MySpace-related cases have raised concerns about social networking similar to worries that arose in the 1990s about chat rooms.

For example, a 39-year-old Pennsylvania man faces federal charges that he molested a 14-year-old Connecticut girl he met through her MySpace page. The girl had listed her age as 18. In another Connecticut case, a 22-year-old man traveled from New Jersey to visit an 11-year-old girl, whom he molested in her home while her parents slept. [60]

Besides monitoring for sexual predation, law-enforcement officials worry that teenagers may use MySpace to plot violence or vandalism. For example, a 15-year-old New Jersey girl was charged with harassment when school officials found an apparent "hit list" on her MySpace page. In Denver, a 16-year-old boy was arrested after allegedly posting photos of himself holding handguns on MySpace. [61] And in Riverton, Kan., five high-school boys were arrested in April after school officials found a message on one boy's MySpace page apparently threatening a Columbine-style shooting. Law-enforcement officers later found weapons and documents related to a plot in a student's bedroom and in school lockers. [62]

Meanwhile, the NBC program "Dateline" recently highlighted potential online dangers to children from

adults. In a series of programs, "Dateline" photographed men who had arranged to meet what they thought were young teenagers but were actually adult members of an activist group. While the encounters took place in chat rooms, not on social-networking sites, the shows raised further alarms.

In response, Rep. Fitzpatrick introduced his Deleting Online Predators Act. It would expand the anti-pornography Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) by requiring schools and libraries to prohibit access to any commercial social-networking site or chat room through which minors could access sexual material or be subject to sexual advances.

"This is a new and evolving problem" that requires amendments to CIPA, since social networking didn't exist when that law was written, said Michael Conalle, Fitzpatrick's chief of staff. [63]

But the American Library Association said the bill is so broadly written that it would block not only education that would teach kids to go online safely but also "a wide array of other important applications and technologies." [64]

Lordan of the Internet Education Foundation said evidence suggests that more teens are abused in their own homes and neighborhoods than online. "We could end up diverting resources" to attack online predation "when the main need is really elsewhere," he says.

Although the House Energy and Commerce Committee has held subcommittee hearings on Fitzpatrick's bill, and it has been discussed on the House floor, discussions so far have focused heavily on child pornography on the Internet. No action on the legislation has yet been scheduled, and no bills have been introduced in the Senate.

Safety First

State attorneys general, parents, entrepreneurs and social-networking companies recently have launched safety initiatives for online socializing.

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, for example, has asked social-networking companies to implement tougher measures to block teenagers' access to pornography and rid the sites of sexual predators. Voluntary efforts, once the state and businesses agree on what steps should be taken, would "avoid the costs and time required for any sort of legal action," he said. [65]

In April, MySpace hired Hemanshu Migam — Microsoft's former director of consumer security and child safety and a former federal prosecutor of online child-exploitation cases — to manage its safety, privacy and customer-education programs. The company also partnered with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the Advertising Council to post public-service announcements about online safety on TV, MySpace and other Internet sites. [66]

While acknowledging the company's first steps, Blumenthal said he had urged MySpace to adopt other, "more significant, specific measures," such as tougher age-verification efforts and free software for parents to block MySpace from home computers. [67]

Alarms about social networking also are drawing interest from parents' groups and some entrepreneurs. In Utah, for example, the state parent-teacher association is creating materials to teach parents how to make their children safe online. It will also recommend filtering and blocking software to parents in collaboration with Blue Coat, the Internet security company. [68]

Other Internet-technology developers also are offering help. Sales have tripled in the last three years for programs like eBlaster, Content Protect, IM Einstein and Safe Eyes, which allow parents to monitor their kids' e-mails, instant messages and online chats in real time from a separate computer — such as while the parent is at work. [69] Software developer Alex Strand, for instance, has established MySpacewatch.com, where users can sign up to monitor changes — such as new photos, additional listed friends — on a MySpace Web page for free.

"I started it as . . . a way for parents to check out what their kids are doing," said Strand. [70] ■

OUTLOOK

Here to Stay

In the future, online communications and social networking will become even more deeply rooted in our lives, say most analysts.

That makes it imperative to learn as much as possible about how online activities affect people, says Carosella, of Blue Coat Systems. "There's a critical role for mental health and social scientists," he says. "We should be doing studies on why there are so many sexual predators out there. Where did they all come from? Is there a vicious cycle between easy access to pornography online and the emergence of online predators?"

Future generations will make even more use of social networking, predicts Diane Danielson, who created www.DWCFaces.com, a social-networking site for businesswomen. "We will see Generation Y bringing their social networks into the workspace," she says, referring to the 20-25-year-old age group. "They will also remain connected to more people from their high schools and colleges" thanks to the persistent presence on social-networking sites of links to Web sites like Classmates.com. "In a transient society, a social network Web page might be your most consistent address."

Social networking may also transform some political campaigns into more grass-roots affairs, says Zephyr Teachout, a professor of constitutional law at Vermont Law School, who directed Internet organizing for

Howard Dean's 2004 presidential campaign. Dean encouraged people around the country to communicate on their own via social-network software, allowing local and individual momentum to drive many activities. "We discovered that the human need to be political is important" and, if tapped, increases participation, she says. "But to do it you need a candidate willing to devolve power."

When media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. bought MySpace last year for $580 million, some speculated that the conservative Murdoch might use the site to influence the politics of the site's young users, perhaps by pushing Republican-slanted commentary on the site during the 2008 presidential election cycle. Many analysts doubt whether such an effort could succeed, though, since social-networking users have notoriously fled sites when owners have tried to exercise regulatory clout.

But Murdoch says he spent $1.5 billion in the past year to buy MySpace and other online companies to empower people to create their own content. "Technology is shifting power away from the editors, the publishers, the establishment, the media elite. Now it's the people who are taking control," he said. [71]

As Internet technology draws more people to publish their personal information in cyberspace, a new set of ethics is needed for presenting oneself, says Bill Holsinger-Robinson, chief operating officer of Spout.com, a social-networking site focused on film. "I see it as harking back to earlier, simpler times — a town square where people can gather."

When town squares were common, he says, "there was a certain sense of responsibility on how we presented ourselves. We've lost that. Now we have to reinvent it for a new generation." ■

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About the Author

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Statistics show that the Internet and e-mail aid users in maintaining social networks and providing pathways to support and advice in difficult times, according to University of Toronto and Pew researchers.

Finkelhor, David, Kimberly J. Mitchell and Janis Wolak, *Online Victimization: A Report on the Nation's Youth*, Crimes Against Children Research Center, University of New Hampshire, June 2000.

In cooperation with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, University of New Hampshire researchers detail national statistics on online crimes against children and teens, online sexual solicitation of young Internet users and responses to Internet sexual solicitations by young people, their families and law enforcement.

Lenhart, Amanda, and Mary Madden, *Teen Content Creators and Consumers*, Pew Internet and American Life Project, November 2005.

Creating and sharing content through blogs, videos and other sites is an integral part of online social life for today's teens.

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Additional Articles from Current Periodicals

Internet Dating

English, Bella, "Pet Lovers Find Animal Attraction Hard to Resist," *The Houston Chronicle*, Feb. 19, 2006, p. 4.

Dan Cohen's animalattraction.com is a dating site that pairs people up based on their love of animals.

Kloer, Phil, "Site Offers Truth About Personal Ads on Net," *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 7, 2005, p. B3.

Truedater.com allows online daters to post reviews of anyone they have dated from a variety of sites, depicting what that person is really like as opposed to his or her personal ad.

Noveck, Jocelyn, "Internet Dating Comes of Age — Middle Age," *The Miami Herald*, March 25, 2006, p. E4.

People over 50 are increasingly turning to Internet dating sites to find romance.

Internet Safety

Briscoe, Daren, " 'Netbangers,' Beware," *Newsweek*, March 13, 2006, p. 31.

Street gangs are setting up Web pages to communicate with one another and pick online fights with rival gangs.

Helderman, Rosalind S., "Law Directs Schools to Teach About Cyber-Safety," *The Washington Post*, March 30, 2006, p. T1.

A new Virginia law will require the state's public schools to teach students about Internet safety.

Sharos, David, "Internet Safety Fears Spark Education Efforts," *Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 2006, p. 8.

Law-enforcement officials, school administrators and software companies have begun to address social-networking issues, including pedophiles trolling for youngsters on the Web and the sharing of too much personal information by minors in chat rooms.

Wyss, Jim, "Chaperoning On The Net," *The Miami Herald*, Feb. 8, 2006, p. C1.

A background screening company will police a new gaming-meets-dating site that uses fantasy and role-playing.

MySpace.com

Gaither, Chris, and Dawn C. Chmielewski, "MySpace Takes Measures to Make Hip Youth Web Site Predator-Free," *The Houston Chronicle*, April 12, 2006, p. 8.

The social-networking site MySpace.com has hired a former federal prosecutor to patrol the service and launched ads warning kids about Internet predators.

Gunderson, Matt, "Police Delete Minor Users From Website," *The Boston Globe*, Feb. 23, 2006, p. 1.

Police in Pepperell, Mass., have launched a campaign to erase profiles of local children who are underage or misrepresenting their ages on MySpace.

Jesdanun, Anick, "Popularity of MySpace Soars, Sphere of Influence Expands," *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 13, 2006, p. 1.

MySpace, created just over two years ago, quickly eclipsed Friendster as the top social-networking site and now has more than twice the traffic of Google.

Mitchell, Dan, "MySpace No Longer Their Space?" *The New York Times*, June 3, 2006, p. C5.

Internet experts contend that MySpace might lose popularity among teens because of increasing reports that the site is dangerous, cluttered and beset by technical problems.

Teens Online

Lenhart, Jennifer, "Teens' Online Boasting Leads to Arson Arrests," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2006, p. B2.

Two Maryland teenagers who set fires around their neighborhood for several months were caught after boasting about their exploits on MySpace.

McDonald, Soraya Nadia, " 'Facebooking' The Rage on College Campuses," *The Seattle Times*, July 4, 2005, p. C4.

Facebook.com, an online directory created to connect the higher-education world through social networks, is an Internet sensation on college campuses.

Prichard, Oliver, "Web Network 'Friends' Who Can Be Anything But," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dec. 11, 2005, p. A23.

Teens are increasingly congregating on social-networking sites for interaction, self-expression, mischief-making and risk-taking.

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