



Safer social networking

Scott Spanbauer and Michael Haynes explain how to enjoy MySpace and similar websites without putting yourself - or your reputation - in danger

Teenagers have long been the vanguard of popular culture, so it probably shouldn't be much of a surprise that so many adults are only now taking a close look at the social-networking websites that young folks have been flocking to in recent years.

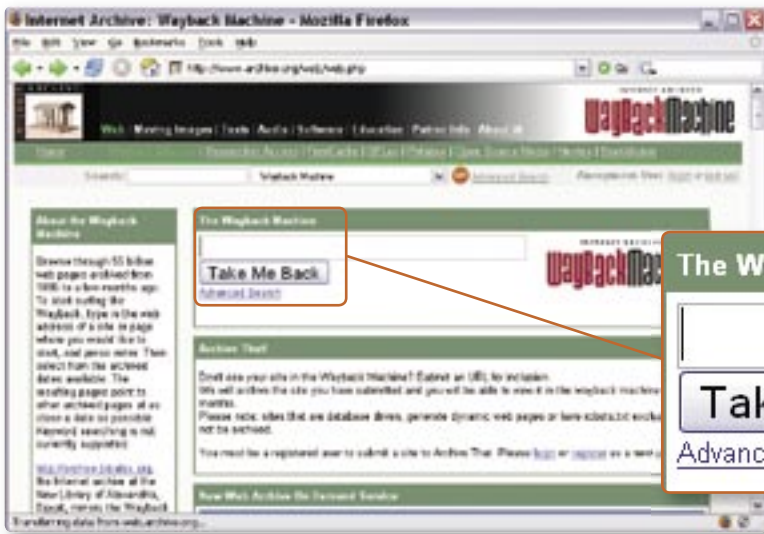
The MySpace (www.myspace.com) personal web page service boasts 90 million accounts, primarily registered by teens; students account for most of the 7.5 million users of Facebook (www.facebook.com).

Social networks are far from the sole province of youngsters, however. Services such as Plaxo (www.plaxo.com), LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) and Ryze (www.ryze.com) have a clear business focus. But whether using the sites for work, fun or a combination of the two, it's vital you maintain strict control over your various online personae.

Turning traditionally private pursuits into public events often comes back to haunt online revellers. Just as companies create

a corporate image that conveys their core purpose and virtues, individuals project an online image through social networking sites, blogs, email, photo and video sharing, and other online activities.

Your image can have an immediate impact on how friends, family, strangers and prospective employers view you. You want to express your individuality, but you also want to get the job. By following the proper steps, you accomplish both.



Personal pages remain in the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine long after they're deleted

tracks people leave today (even as a lark) will remain fresh for decades. Profiles on these social networking sites – even Bebo (www.bebo.com) and Friendster (www.friendster.com) – probably won't show up in a search engine query, but they

will appear when members of those services track you down. Expect current and future employers, paramours and others to be determined enough to find your online contributions. Remove embarrassing posts to make your wild years less likely to come back and haunt you.

GO INCOGNITO

Even a stellar online image deserves privacy. Fortunately, MySpace and most other social-networking sites give you quite a bit of control over who can and can't see and find your posts. To hide your MySpace page from anyone who's not already

YOUR ONLINE DEMEANOUR

First, consider your online image: does your blog, MySpace or Facebook page delve into areas that you may not want to have to explain later on? Sex-, drug-, and booze-related topics, for example, could come

back to haunt their authors. Does your personal email address contain unprofessional or suggestive terms? Thanks to Google's cache and the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (www.archive.org/web/web.php; see picture, above), some of the online

Friends like these

Safe surfing tips for children

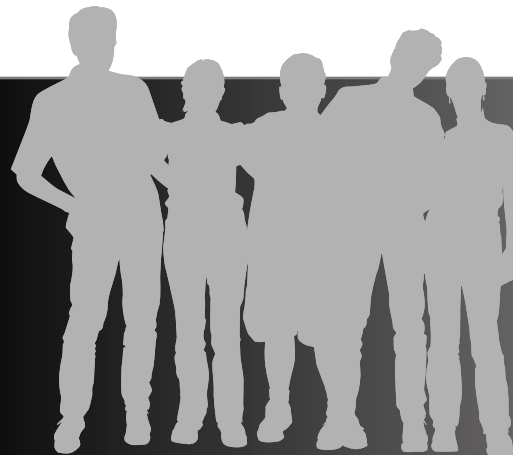
Things were simpler when we were young. Children took road-safety tips from a man with a green cross on his jumpsuit, and Charlie the talking cat warned them not to speak to strangers.

These days, keeping youngsters safe is a lot more daunting. It's no longer just the shadowy figure hanging around the sweet shop that parents have to be concerned about. The internet, an endless treasure trove of information, choice and free speech, is a portal enabling predators to operate undetected.

Concerned parents can ban access to certain websites, but it's often the innocuous-looking ones that pose the biggest problems. Social-networking sites in particular seem vulnerable to exploitation – and they are becoming increasingly popular.

With a devoted fan base of teenagers and young adults, social-networking sites allow registered users to create a web page and decorate it with their likes and preferences, including photos, in a bid to meet like-minded people. The casual format, encouraging users to express themselves, has contributed to the success of these sites, especially with younger audiences.

Let's take a look at one of the biggest success stories in this field. **MySpace.com**, which started as recently as 2004, now ranks as one of the internet's most popular sites – and in the US has actually managed to outstrip Google. It has a worldwide audience of 73 million registered users, with an estimated 250,000 more joining each day. The popularity of this type of site looks set to increase, with big industry names getting in on the act: Microsoft has launched MSN Spaces and Yahoo has an offering called 360.

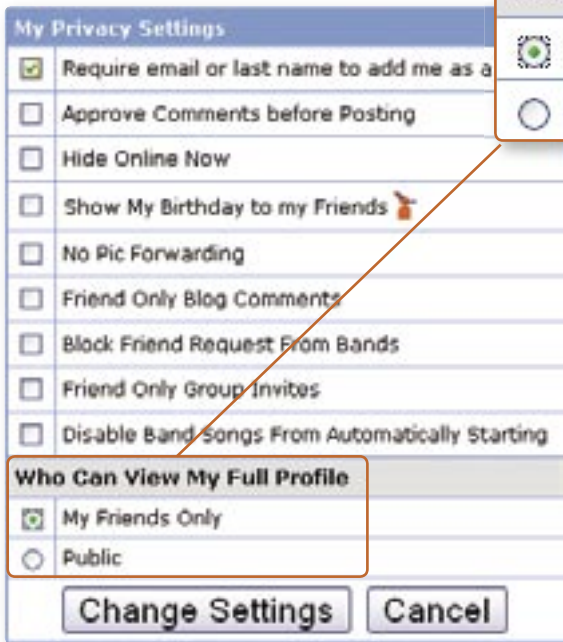


Knowing the risks

Appealing though these sites may be, they're not without risks. You never know who you're dealing with – none of the details submitted at registration are verified. MySpace is restricted to those who are at least 14 years old, but no checks are carried out. This makes using a fictitious identity easy, which has drawn the attention of paedophiles and stalkers. If you are unfamiliar with social-networking sites, it's worth visiting www.thinkuknow.co.uk for advice or to report abuse.

We recommend reading safety tips supplied by the sites themselves. But the best way of protecting teenagers is by ensuring the line of communication between parent and child is good. Emphasise the golden rule: never give out personal details. In particular, kids should steer clear of giving information that could be used to identify their location.

While many enjoy the casual friendships created on these sites, there's no denying safeguards are needed to protect the most vulnerable. Part of the problem with social networking is that the moniker 'friend' is banded about a little too casually. At times like this, it pays to know who your friends are.



a MySpace friend, click Account Settings on your main page, and choose Change Settings next to Privacy Settings. Check 'Require email or last name to add me as a friend' under My Privacy Settings to prevent people who don't know you from trying to add you as a friend, and select My Friends Only under 'Who Can View My Full Profile'. Click the Change Settings button to enable the changes (see picture, above).

Visitors to your MySpace page will see only your photo, display name, and location. Replace these with versions that do not reveal your identity, and you'll be nearly anonymous except to people you approve as MySpace friends (see picture, right).

To prevent others from knowing you even have a MySpace account, make sure your real name doesn't appear in the First Name and Last Name search fields under your profile's Name section, nor in your MySpace User Name/URL (such as 'www.myspace.com/scottspanbauer'). You can't alter the User Name/URL once you've created it; your only option is to cancel the account (an option under Account Settings) and create a new one.

KEEP PROFILES PRIVATE

By default, the only people who will be allowed to view your Facebook profile are members of your school, region or business network (similar settings are available in Friendster).

Keep MySpace strangers at bay by setting your profile so it can be seen only by your friends and real-world acquaintances

Replace all details that could identify you in the real world with fictitious data

As with MySpace, you can easily control who is able to access your Facebook page.

For a summary of who can see what about you, log into your Facebook account and click My Privacy. Choose Edit Settings beneath a profile to indicate what content the network's members can access. You can prevent anyone - except people already accepted as friends - from seeing your profile at all; they'll see only your name and picture. Alternatively, you can allow friends of friends to see it, or you can open it to anyone in the network.

Other options let you control who sees your email and home addresses, phone numbers, interest groups, courses, visitor comments and other profile elements (see picture, page 4).

Enter home addresses, phone numbers and other sensitive information only when necessary. The more identity thieves, stalkers, and other criminals can find out about you online, the easier they will find it to locate you - so avoid listing your real city, age and other vital stats.

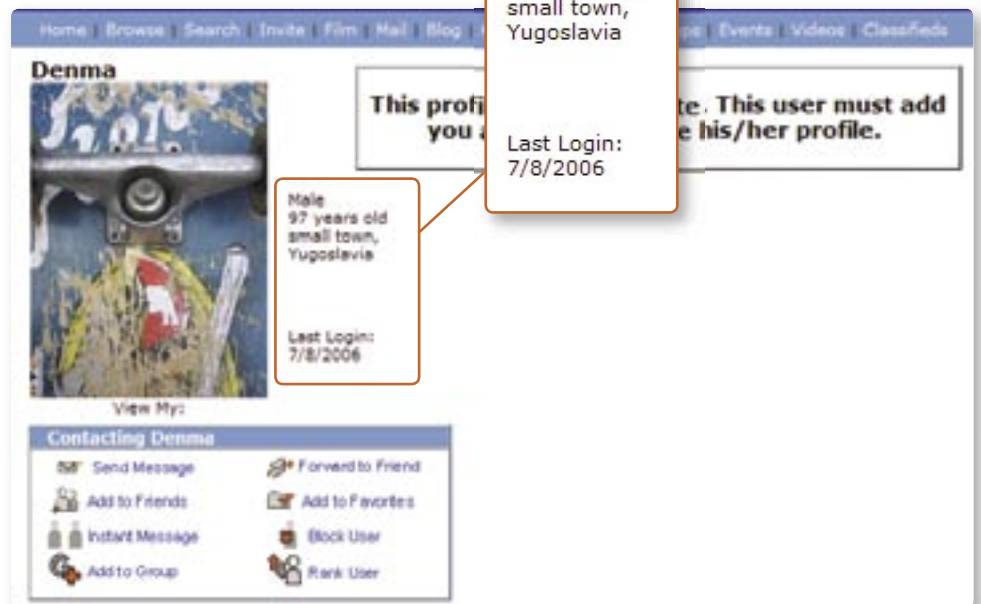
TEACH KIDS NOT TO SHARE

Keeping personal information private is especially crucial for teenagers. Personal references scattered around a youngster's MySpace page

could help a predator lure them into a face-to-face meeting. Fortunately, MySpace kids are creative about obfuscating their online particulars.

MySpace doesn't request or set aside room for members' addresses and phone numbers; nobody, regardless of age, should post such information on a blog or social network. The service does ask members for their location and age, but almost none of my middle-school son's friends report their true location, instead listing their home towns as Hippietown, Uzbekistan, Antarctica, Zimbabwe and other unlikely locales. This doesn't interfere with the social interaction they signed up for.

Officially, MySpace prohibits anyone under the age of 14 from creating an account, and it forbids anyone 18 or older from viewing the profiles of anyone 17 or younger. In addition, MySpace now has a setting that allows 14- and 15-year-olds to block other members from seeing their sites. But there's no way to confirm age online; my son and his friends are mostly 12 or 13 years old, but they often list their ages as 100. And nothing prevents a 40-year-old from creating an account as a 14-year-old. Listing yourself as 14, 40, or 84 doesn't prove anything.



PARENTING, PLEASE

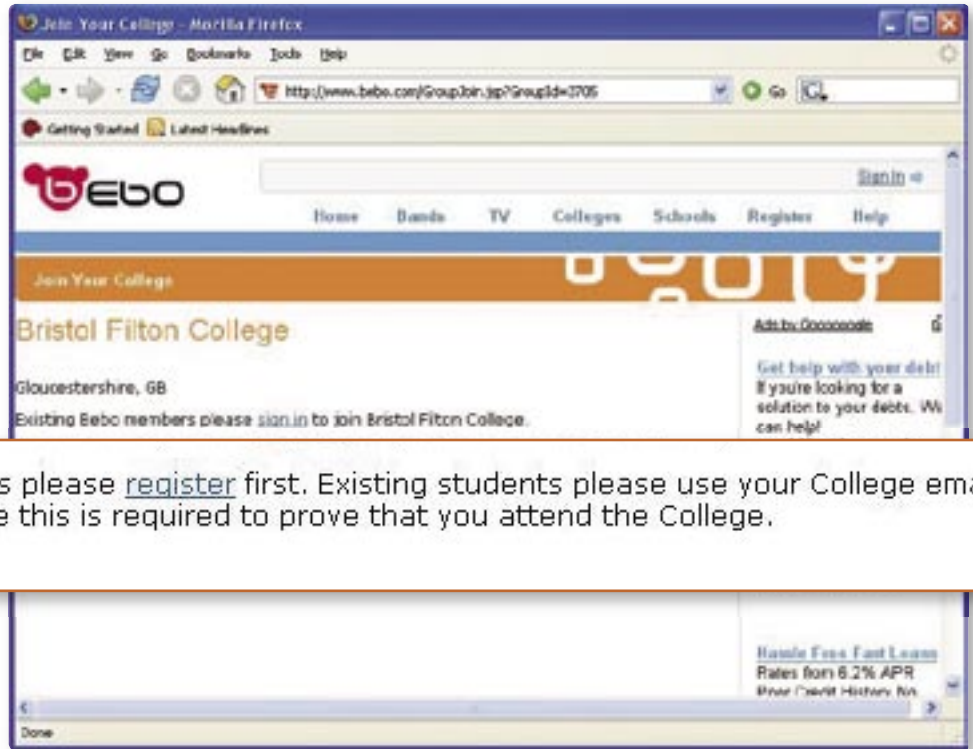
Given the wide-open nature of the medium, what should parents do to provide protection and guidance for their MySpace-loving teens? Start with good communication.

Try discussing your concerns regarding sexuality and violence online. If your children feel comfortable talking to you, getting them to follow your guidance will be easier.

If you end up in a battle with your child over MySpace, you've already lost. You can reject, forbid, and banish all you want, but a teen who is set on using MySpace will do so, regardless of whether you have a computer in the house.

If your child uses a computer at home, keep it out in the open. You may also want to install some decent monitoring and filtering tools. Ultimately, it's up to you to decide what level of autonomy you want to offer your child online.

You could simply cross your fingers and hope that everything works out. Or at the high-surveillance extreme, you could create your own MySpace account and use it to keep



tabs on your child's page and friends (although you won't see any of their emails).

Razorcom's advertising-supported MySpaceWatch service (www.myspacewatch.com) monitors a MySpace profile of your choice for you; the service visits the monitored profile twice a day and sends you a report via email detailing logins, changes and as many as 25 friends. For \$6 (about £3.20) per month, MySpaceWatch Pro monitors up to five profiles and 100 friends four times a day.

Bebo is targeted at sociable teens. Pupils and students have to verify their identities using a school or college email address

Take advantage of Facebook's various privacy settings

This invasive level of monitoring is only justified if you've already tried just about everything else and are convinced your child's MySpace usage constitutes a serious problem. Our son asked us if he could have a MySpace account and we agreed, provided he would allow us to monitor it occasionally. The result of this arrangement is that we know who he's talking to and what kinds of conversations are going on.

We live in a small town and already know most of his MySpace friends offline. This trust-but-verify system has reassured us that our son is using MySpace responsibly; as a result, over time, we've been willing to relax our vigilance and give him more privacy.

At the very least, ask your child to use MySpace's privacy features (described on page 3) to block friendship requests from strangers and to exclude people who aren't friends from viewing his or her MySpace profile.

Browse Don't Believe the Type by the US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (<http://tcs.cybertipline.com>) for tips and information on avoiding online predators.

The FBI publication *A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety* (www.fbi.gov/publications/pguide/pguidee.htm) is another good resource. ☒

