



CYBERCITIZENSHIP:

Important Issues for Citizens of the Online Community

By Dr. Kathy Revelle

Social Networking (SN) is one aspect of today's online world that has truly been embraced by young adults. A great many teens are conducting significant parts of their social lives online, and this online socializing is often invisible to parents and teachers. Although email, instant messaging, chat rooms, etc. are social in their nature, the term Social Networking generally refers to any of the hundred or more SN services online. The most familiar are Facebook and MySpace. Another that is popular with RIS students is Hi5. Friendster, one of the first SN services, still sees much use in Asia.

Part Two: Online Social Networking

How does SN work? The individual registers with a Social Networking service and then creates his or her personal profile, in the hope that others will be interested and will "visit" the page frequently, leaving messages. A person's profile is really his or her personal webpage, and typically includes text, pictures, video and links to other online sites. Although most SN services allow a person to block or limit those who can view his or her profile, many young people prefer to interact with as many online contacts or "friends" as possible. Research in the USA revealed that 96% of teens visit a SN site at least once a week, and over 50% consider themselves "truly active" on one or more SN services.

This is a huge phenomenon! And, in general, I think Social Networking is an exciting new way for people, particularly young people, to connect across geographic and ethnic boundaries. (It surely beats waiting six weeks in 1963 for a letter from my pen-pal in Paris!) There are, however, two key facts that SN users must keep in mind when posting information online: 1) There are predators online who are skilled at enticing individuals into dangerous real-life meetings and, 2) Nothing is completely private or ever permanently deleted once it appears online.

How does an online predator operate? Generally they "groom" their victims over months or years, beginning with casual friendship, and then working to identify and fulfill a young person's special needs, perhaps offering sympathy, understanding, modeling jobs, money, etc. Some of the communication happens in a coded language: many parents wouldn't realize, glancing over a son



or daughter's shoulder at the monitor, that LMIRL 121 meant "Let's meet in real life, one-to-one." At some point, the teen might be asked for something more personal- perhaps messages with increasingly sexual overtones, or revealing pictures that "no one else will see." Instant messaging and digital camera phones allow a teen to comply with such requests without effort or thought. Once the predator has these embarrassing messages or images, a threat to post them online or send them to the victim's parents will convince many teens to meet the online "friend" in person. Sometimes the results are tragic.

Everyone knows they shouldn't reveal personal and contact information online, and that still is good advice. Now, however, research has shown us other ways teens can make themselves less (or more) likely to be targeted by predators. Predators search for young people who already are revealing themselves as risk takers, by their online behaviors. Posting "adult" text or sexy pictures or pictures of you and friends drinking at parties is likely to attract the attention of the wrong person. The predator will see you as someone who is likely to agree, in time, to take the ultimate risk and meet a stranger in person. We must encourage our young adults to consider whether the internet really is a good, safe place to experiment with an edgy "out-there" persona.

What should you or your son or daughter do if you think you might be receiving messages from a predator? First, don't hesitate to exclude from your contacts or "friends" list anyone who makes you uncomfortable; your instincts are probably good about this. Urge your teenagers to tell you or another adult of their suspicions. (That's a difficult one, I know.) If you are very suspicious, report the questionable online contact to your SN service or ISP. The best advice, echoed by all the experts, is: Keep online friends online.

There are other sound reasons to think carefully and apply good judgment before posting text or images online. We have been reading for the past few years that some college admissions officers and employers were making online checks part of their decision process. A 2007 survey of 453 US university and college admissions departments found that more than one-fourth actively research applicants using search engines and social networking sites, and the number is growing. Might the words and images your teenagers posts today keep them out of the colleges or jobs they want in the future?

The next issue of the Newsletter will include an article about Cyberbullying.

