

Congress may clamp down on MySpace

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New legislation from Congress would block access to social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook in schools and libraries, including instant-messaging services.

The bill known as the "The Deleting Online Predators Act" introduced by Rep. Michael G. Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., aims at protecting minors from online child predators.

According to the bill, it "prohibits access to commercial social networking Web sites or chat rooms through which minors" can access obscene or indecent material, be subject to unlawful sexual advances or repeated offensive comments of a sexual nature from adults, or access harmful information.

The bill terms a social-network Web site as one that allows users to create Web pages or profiles about themselves as well as offers communications including a forum, chat room, e-mail or instant messenger, while a chat room is termed a site that allows multiple users to communicate in real time via text.

"Sites like MySpace and Facebook have opened the door to a new online community of social networks between friends, students and colleagues," Fitzpatrick said. "However, this new technology has become a feeding ground for child predators that use these sites as just another way to do our children harm."

Specifically, it would require schools and libraries to implement security

systems to prevent students from being exposed to obscene and objectionable material, according to Fitzpatrick.

It would strengthen existing Web-surfing filters for indecency or obscenity.

Moreover, it also mandates that a Web site be created by the Federal Trade Commission to educate adults about the dangers of such online child predators and at the same time provide information on how social-networking sites are used and what should not be included in a user's profile.

"As the father of six children, I hear about these Web sites on a daily basis," Fitzpatrick said. "However, the majority of these networking sites lack proper controls to protect their younger users. Also, many parents lack the resources to protect their children from online predators. My legislation seeks to change that."

While some schools have already banned access to MySpace, which has some 72 million users, a raging Internet battle has been brewing between children, parents, law enforcement, Internet-freedom proponents and Congress over different issues in the debate, such as the legality of a ban vs. educating youths vs. stricter protections against online child predators.

Still, social-networking sites are cleaning up.

In March MySpace announced it had removed some 200,000 "objectionable" profiles from its network to address fears of Internet security.

The site removed profiles contained either hate speech or risqué content as one way to deal with the problem.

Maintaining a reputation for appropriate content isn't a bad thing either, making sites more attractive to advertisers who are already flocking to sites like MySpace because of their growing user base.

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