

Experts discuss MySpace issues

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MIT and University of California experts recently discussed the role of social networking sites like MySpace, the forces fuelling proposed new restrictions for such youth sites and the effects of limiting participation in new media.

MySpace, with more than 78 million registered accounts, is but one of numerous social networking web sites and chat rooms that would be affected by proposed federal legislation to restrict access to such sites.

The new bill, an amendment of the 1934 Communications Act, would require all schools and libraries that receive federal funds to restrict access to these digital tools and online communities.

Henry Jenkins, co-director of the comparative media studies program, and danah boyd (S.M. 2002), a Ph.D. student at the University of California at Berkeley and a leading researcher on MySpace.com, recently discussed the role of social networking sites for youth, the forces fuelling the new restrictions and the effects of limiting participation in new media.

Jenkins's current research, commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation, seeks to identify the core social skills and cultural competencies young people need in order to become full participants in the cultural, political, economic and social life of the 21st century. His new book, "Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide," will be published this summer.

Funded by the MacArthur Foundation, boyd investigates how youth participation in digital publics, like MySpace, affects identity formation and socialization. Her work explores the nature of informal learning and cultural engagement by youth.

What is MySpace and what is the controversy over it?

Boyd: Structurally, social network sites are a cross between a yearbook and a community web site. MySpace is a social network site where individuals create digital profiles and link to others ("friends") within the system -- similar to sharing home pages.

While MySpace allows 14- and 15-year-old users to restrict who can see their page and contact them, most users opt to make their profiles public. The primary concern is that this openness puts youth at risk, making them particularly vulnerable to predators.

Jenkins: More broadly, teens and adults have developed different notions of privacy: Young people feel relatively comfortable sharing aspects of their lives (for example, their sexual identities). In some cases, teens do not fully understand the risks of making certain information public.

What do "social networking software programs" provide participants?

Boyd: By giving youth access to a public of their peers, MySpace provides a fertile ground for identity development and cultural integration. Youth view MySpace as a place where they can be who they are, joke around with friends and make certain to stay in the loop about everything that is going on around them.

How do MySpace skills fit into adult culture?

Jenkins: Just as youth in a hunting society play with bows and arrows, youth in an information society play with information and social networks. Over the past decade or so, adults have been learning how to interact across multiple communities and negotiate with diverse norms. Social networking services are more and more being deployed as professional tools, extending the sets of contacts that people can tap in their work lives. It is thus not surprising that such tools are also part of the social lives of our teens.

What would be the effect of the proposed legislation on youth?

Boyd: This legislation is targeting MySpace, but it would also block blogging tools, mailing lists, video and podcast sites, photo-sharing sites and educational sites like NeoPets. So it would extend current regulations -- such as the Deleting Online Predators Act -- that require all federally funded schools and libraries to deploy Internet filters. The law is so broadly defined that it would limit access to any commercial site that allows users to create a profile and communicate with strangers.

What about the deterrent effect on predators?

Boyd: Unfortunately, predators lurk wherever youth hang out. Since youth are on MySpace, there are bound to be predators on MySpace. Yet, fewer than .01 percent of all youth abductions nationwide are stranger abductions: Youth are at far greater risk of abuse in their own homes and in the homes of their friends than they ever are in digital or physical publics. Also, police currently patrol MySpace, just as they patrol other areas where youth hang out. Many are thankful to know where youth go online because it helps them do their job.

How might the new legislation relate to the "digital divide"?

Jenkins: The early discussion of the digital divide assumed that the most important concern was ensuring access to information, as if the web were simply a data bank. But the web's power comes through participation within its social networks. What a kid can do at home with unlimited access is very different from what a kid can do in a public library with 10 or 15 minutes of access at a time and with no capacity to store and upload information.

You have previously compared virtual socializing to the unfettered play in the backyards of the 1950s. Have new media changed the nature of play?

Jenkins: What teens are doing online is no better and no worse than what previous generations of teens did when their parents weren't looking. The difference is that as these activities are being digitized, they are also being brought into public view. Parents are experiencing this as a loss of control, but in fact, adults have greater control over these aspects of their children's lives than ever before.

One of the biggest risks of these digital technologies is not the ways that they allow teens to escape adult control but rather the permanent traces left behind of their transgressive conduct.

Boyd: While integrating into cultural life is critical during these years, the actual process is not always smooth or pleasant. Bullying, sexual teasing and other peer-to-peer harassment are rampant among teenagers. MySpace did not create teenage bullying but it has made it more visible to many adults. This visibility can provide a window through which teen mentors can help combat this issue.

Could you offer a political framework for considering MySpace and laws to limit access to it?

Jenkins: Right now, MySpace and the other social network tools are being read as threats to the civic order, as encouraging antisocial behaviors. But we can easily turn this around and see them as the training ground for future citizens and political leaders. Young people are assuming public roles at earlier and earlier ages. They are interacting with larger communities of their peers and beginning to develop their own styles of leadership.

We further exaggerate this participation gap when we restrict the ability of these youth to use social networks via school and library computers.

Source: MIT, by Sarah H. Wright

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