

# Myth-busting the cybersafety debate

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We know that most fears originate from a lack of understanding. We also know that social networking is a mystery to many people outside of Generation Y. So it should not come as a surprise that many people - parents in particular - are fearful of social media.

For many parents, sites such as [Facebook](#) appear to represent an exponentially expanding universe of risk and uncertainty. Their children seemingly live out so much of their lives online, and they don't understand the attraction - and this lack of understanding is perpetuated by the constant climate of moral panic generated by the public debate.

We see regular reports of the 'risks' or negative consequences that can be associated with young people's use of technology, such as when a teenager is bullied online to the point of suicide or a birthday party goes viral - but when Mozelle Thompson, Facebook's head of privacy, addressed the Australian Senate Committee on [Cyber Safety](#), his explanation of the company's track record in enforcing its underage users' policy went largely unreported.

Studies internationally demonstrate that social networking can enhance young people's learning both at school and work, and in informal contexts. It also plays an important part in young people's process of identity formation, and helps them to work out who they are. Most importantly, social networking also supports young people's existing friendships and helps them to develop new ones. Having strong friendship networks - both online and offline - and feeling a part of a vibrant community has been shown to foster resilience in [young people](#)

so they are more able to cope with the stresses of being a teenager.

However, evidence of these positive impacts finds little traction among popular opinion. Young people themselves are rarely consulted about their own views of social media, and mainstream media reports continue to be unbalanced - so parents continue to only hear the negative.

If this cycle continues, we risk producing a society that is deeply divided along generational fault lines. In short, we need to get everyone on the same screen.

Last week the Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing released a report on 'Intergenerational attitudes towards social networking and cyber safety'. The report detailed a pilot study in which young people designed and delivered workshops on social networking and cybersafety to adult participants. The results were eye-opening. They revealed that when young people have the opportunity to educate adults about social media, it goes a long way to reassuring adults that young people are well-equipped to deal with the risks they face in their online lives and busts some of the most common 'myths' that adults perpetuate about cyber safety.

The four social media myths that need to be busted are:

1. Online social networking is a youth craze

Actually, social networking services are for everyone. Research shows that many adults use online social networking services regularly, like linkedin.com, Google Groups, flickr.com and so on. But because they're not using Facebook or MySpace, (the services that are typically classified as social networking and singled out as the spaces that get young people in trouble) adults often miss the fact that they have a lot in common with young people.

## 2. Young people can't - or won't - recognise risk

Formal cybersafety education is doing an excellent job at putting some of the key risks on young people's radars - including cyber bullying, predation and identity theft - and the kind of informal learning and information sharing that goes on between young people helps to equip them with a range of technical skills and know-how that can also quash the digital devils. Young people often not only have a sophisticated awareness of the risks that social networking pose, they are also aware of adult attitudes and concerns about what they're doing online. The main problem, as they see it, is that adults don't understand or value the positive role social networking services play in the lives of young people.

## 3. Adults are the experts on what young people need (especially when it comes to cybersafety)

There are many indications that young people know a great deal about what they need, but when it comes to cybersafety we rarely ask them. In seminars and programs that draw on adult experts to 'educate' parents about how to raise children in a digital age, young people's direct voices are often absent. Maybe that's because we're confronted, as adults, by what they know and say. It reminds us of our own inadequacies or frailties. It also highlights how challenging it can be to translate 'what we know about what they (might) need' into something that is actually engaging, relevant and meaningful. But interestingly, young people not only have good ideas about what they need; they also have a lot of knowledge about what adults need to help them realistically assess and guide their children about online risks.

## 4. Cybersafety education is for kids

71% of parents worry about their child's safety online. To address these concerns, they turn to conventional sources such as cybersafety seminars held at their child's school or government campaigns. These are all worthwhile, but surely the most productive way to understand and respond to the opportunities and risks of social networking is to set up

mechanisms for discussion to take place across generations? If we continue to pathologise young people we will fail to understand their experiences and recognise the clues these hold for adults who are concerned about their welfare. We need to draw on the skills and knowledge of young people to create strategies for digital media literacy for the whole community.

So what is the way forward?

Imagine this: an army of young people in charge of a virtual high school for adults, trained in designing and delivering one-to-one social networking and cyber safety education to concerned parents.

What better way to ensure that parents have an intimate understanding of the kinds of things young people do online; a sense of why young people are so enthusiastic about [social networking](#); a genuine familiarity with the technology; and a set of technical skills for ensuring their children can stay safe online?

Want to sign up? Stay tuned.

**More information:** [www.interactivemediarelease.com/ogilvy/yawcrc](http://www.interactivemediarelease.com/ogilvy/yawcrc)

Provided by University of Western Sydney

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