Teens and Privacy:

FEATURE

TEENS AND PRIVACY

MYTHS AND REALITIES
Privacy is a very subjective concept. In the digital world, the way privacy issues are characterized depends on who is doing the talking—the adults responsible for the care and education of young people, or the young people themselves. Generally speaking, the adult perspective associates the need for privacy with the potential for dangers of external origin. Sexual predators are the chief imagined threats in these scenarios. For young people, privacy is more often about separation from the authority figures who are in a position to judge them or limit their personal choices. Privacy for teens is also about saving face and avoiding embarrassment in front of peers. Because the grown-ups are in charge, most educational policy has focused on the stranger-danger threat. In the meantime, other pressing privacy issues are only beginning to garner some notice.

Technopanic

With the Internet’s seemingly endless capacity to support the sharing of personal information, the “technopanic” response has been hard to quell (Marwick
“...our teaching must incorporate safety training that reflects reality and enables students to develop positive digital footprints to enhance rather than limit future opportunities”

2008). This response focuses on the dramatic and the criminal, emphasizing young people’s naiveté in the face of imminent dangers. For example, when Cox Communications released the results of its “Teen Online and Wireless Safety Survey: Cyberbullying, Sexting, and Parental Controls,” media reports cast a fairly negative spin on the story (Cox 2009). The PR Newswire headline “Cox’s New Survey on Cyber-Safety Finds Many Teens Going Online Wirelessly Without Limits or Controls” was duplicated in Pediatrics Week (2009) and a number of mainstream newspapers. On the other hand, Internet safety expert Larry Magid’s interpretation of the same data resulted in a very different headline for his blog, “Survey Shows Teens More Safety Savvy than Thought” (Magid 2009).

Similarly, here is the headline of the press release for a study conducted by Harris Interactive on behalf of technology security company McAfee: “Survey Reveals That Despite Recent Headlines, Teens Still Share Alarming Amounts of Personal Information with Strangers Online; Cyberbullying Continues to Affect Teens” (McAfee 2010). It links to a nine-page summary document (rather alarmingly) titled “The Secret Online Lives of Teens,” but not to the full report containing the actual survey data. Again, Magid was able to examine (and post) the complete data and concluded thusly: “Study Has Good News About Kids’ Behavior” (Magid 2010). It is hard to avoid a cynical interpretation of these different assessments, that McAfee—in the business of providing Internet security products—stands to benefit from the perpetuation of technopanic.

Technopanic also does some strange things to common sense. The conventional wisdom about online privacy is that students should not post their photos, contact data, or any information that would allow someone to track their movements. Yet public posting is now the way of the world. As newspapers go online, students who used to appear on the printed sports pages and youth pages now appear on the Web counterparts of those pages. Even the website of the Cox-Communications-sponsored Teen Summit on Internet and Wireless Safety includes photographs of the student participants, captioned with their full names and home cities <www.cox.com/takecharge/safe_teens_2009/media.html>.

The Reality
Recent research is helping us sort out the myths from the realities. We now know that sexual predators do not typically troll social network services in search of victims (Wolak et al. 2008). Rather, predators use much more direct methods, such as online chat, e-mail, and instant messaging. Unlike undercover law enforcement agents and television exposé investigators, real teens block suspicious invitations and solicitations from potential predators. When I asked my students about this phenomenon, I received responses like this one: “This guy wouldn’t give up asking to meet me in real life (through a game site) so I blocked him.” End of story.

A report from the Internet Safety Technical Task Force documents that “sexual predation on minors by adults, both online and offline, remains a concern” but that “bullying and harassment, most often by peers, are the most frequent threats that minors face, both online and offline” (2008, 4). Yet even the cyberbullying picture is improving. The data in the aforementioned study by Harris Interactive for McAfee reveals that cyberbullying is actually on the decline. In his analysis, Magid observes:

“Only 11 percent admit to ever engaging in some form of cyberbullying behavior. And even though the press release about the report says ‘Cyberbullying on the rise,’ the report itself shows that the percentage of teens reporting that they have ‘ever been bullied or harassed online’ decreased substantially from 15 percent in 2008 to 8 percent in 2010. Far from an increase, that’s an impressive 47 percent decline in two years” (Magid 2010).
The fact is that teens are not equally at risk online. Those who are most in danger typically already engage in risky behaviors offline and experience difficulties in other parts of their lives. The particular psychosocial and environmental factors surrounding those teens are better predictors of risk than is the use of specific media or technologies such as the Internet and social network services (ISTTF 2008). Most students seem to understand these factors and live their lives accordingly. Here is how one of my students justifies her large number of Facebook friends: “I don’t add people to my ‘friends’ unless I know them. That might sound odd, I have over 500 friends, but I do know or know of them, so it’s not creepy.” The "know of them" phrase is likely to ring alarm bells for some adults, but it is a far cry from the unknown predator danger that has been portrayed in the media.

Some Privacy Issues Should Get More of Our Attention

Once concerns about the more extreme dangers are put into perspective, it becomes possible to address those areas in which young people do need help and guidance. These more likely scenarios have to do with the information we post about ourselves that might cast doubt on our integrity and judgment, particularly when seen out of context by an unintended audience (Moreno et al. 2009). For a teen, this potential audience can include friends of friends (of friends...), college admissions officers, prospective employers, or teachers. I was once an unwitting viewer of a student’s midnight Facebook rant at class project group members who were not doing their share. Somewhere in his mind, I know my student was aware that people like me could read this status update and the accompanying comments, which were just as revealing as his original post. New York Times ethicist Randy Cohen notes that, for kids, “Facebook and the like occupy some weird twilight zone between public and private information, rather like a diary left on the kitchen table. That a photo of drunken antics might thwart a chance at a job or a scholarship is not something all kids seriously consider” (2009, MM17).

Even as many young people suffer from this sort of disconnect, others are taking steps to protect themselves online, not only from the most apparent types of risks but also in terms of managing their online reputations (Lenhart and Madden 2007, Madden and Smith 2010). The challenge lies in monitoring the ever-changing world of privacy settings so that certain information is confined within a network of trusted friends, while also sharing enough of the right kind of information to remain open to new creative opportunities and connections.

To-Do List

The technopanic response misses an essential and incontrovertible truth about today’s Internet: young people are active participants in shaping their online experience. The Online Safety and Technology Working Group (OSTWG) was charged by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration to make recommendations to promote online safety for children, as well as evaluate and make recommendations on industry efforts to prevent and respond to criminal activity involving children and the Internet. The OSTWG titled its report, "Youth Safety on a Living Internet." The choice of the phrase "living Internet" is an apt reflection of how Internet use differs from the passive nature of media experiences like television viewing (2010). Ann Collier, cochair of OSTWG, notes: “This is not just technology or even ‘content’ we’re talking about, as we all know. It’s behavior, or sociality, every bit as much as content” (2010).

Here is how two of my students described (in their own language) their use of two popular social media sites:
Because social media are now so ingrained in teen life, Collier urges parents and schools to focus on lessons in citizenship (which will address bullying in all its forms) and to seriously ramp up media literacy efforts. School librarians are uniquely positioned to play a key role in such efforts. We understand the educational value of honoring the role of social media in communication and collaboration, and possess the knowledge to help students learn to protect their privacy. An important first step is to examine school acceptable use and filtering policies, which often prohibit social tools and ignore the ways our students conduct research, both academic and personal (Digital Youth Research 2008). Does it make sense, for example, to disallow personal e-mail when the library’s expensive databases offer students the option of e-mailing articles to themselves? Should third-party blogs and wikis be blocked when they can be used as powerful learning tools? Should non-curricular Web browsing be forbidden, even though students are engaged in reading content that parallels what is offered on school library magazine and fiction shelves? Now is also the time to consider alternative access points such as mobile devices, online gaming communities, and virtual worlds. These are environments and activities favored by many of our students, and we now understand their enormous potential for promoting learning and civic engagement (for example: Lenhart et al. 2008, Ash 2010).

Next, our teaching must incorporate safety training that reflects reality and enables students to develop positive digital footprints to enhance rather than limit future opportunities. Resources for this kind of training are increasingly abundant. The materials created by ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom for the first Choose Privacy Week <www.privacyrevolution.org> are outstanding examples of such options. Included in the Choose Privacy Week materials are videos, a resource guide, library promotional materials, and a sample handout for communicating library privacy policies to users. Ultimately, open lines of communication between adults and young people are the best tools for combating risks. Collier observes: "Because the Internet is part of [young people’s] lives and they’re living parts of their lives on the Internet, youth need guidance in online as much as offline expression and sociality. That will happen when social media are at school as well as at home" (2010). So, yes, we should talk to students at school about their Facebook privacy settings, their online shopping profiles, and the configurations of their media sharing sites.

It is equally important to design digital citizenship programs that teach ethical and responsible use of digital technologies and address the common risks that are involved rather than focusing on the

Works Cited:

Ash, Katie. 2010. "Teachers Testing Mobile Learning Methods: Best Practices Are Emerging as Educators Begin to Figure out how to Incorporate Mobile Devices into Classroom Learning." Education Week 29, no.26 (March 18), 26.


rare or the hypothetical. As an example, Pensacola (FL) Catholic High School includes a unit in its Computer Applications course that covers the following elements of digital citizenship: etiquette, communication, literacy, access, commerce, rights and responsibilities, law, health and wellness, and security <www.pensacolachs.org/webpages/capplications/index.cfm?subpage=428865>.

Finally, for the truly at-risk students, we need to recognize cyber-misbehavior as a symptom of greater underlying problems. By identifying these students, we can target interventions and differentiate instruction to fit their needs, rather than creating one-size-fits-all restrictions that affect and inhibit all students.

Cyber-citizenship training is the latest frontier for our profession and a critically important role for school librarians to assume. Its success will ensure a better understanding of privacy issues for all stakeholders.

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