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*Issue Date: June 09, 2006*

## Social Networking Web Sites

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***The issue: Are social networking Web sites appropriate for teenagers? Or should their access to such Web sites be restricted?***

- *Critics of social networking Web sites say:* Sexual predators and pedophiles can access social networking Web sites too easily; many of them use such Web sites to entice teenagers to meet them in person, which can lead to sexual assault or worse. Also, teenagers spend too much time on social networking Web sites, just as they spend too much time watching television or playing video games, for example, a trend that can stunt their social growth.
- *Supporters of social networking Web sites say:* Web sites such as MySpace allow teenagers to socialize and make friends with people they ordinarily would not approach. Social networking Web sites can help shy people come out of their shells, and they allow teenagers to experiment with different identities, which benefits their social development.

*In cyberspace, we are learning to live in virtual worlds. We may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the*

*looking glass, other people are there as well.* **Sherry Turkle, sociologist**

A fairly recent phenomenon, social networking Web sites have quickly caught on with millions of teenagers around the world. MySpace, the most popular social networking Web site, has become "pandemic" among U.S. high schoolers, says Alan Warhaftig, a teacher and administrator at Fairfax Magnet Center for the Visual Arts in Los Angeles. "All my eleventh graders, except for three or four, out of 35, have MySpace" profiles, Warhaftig says.



Jeff Adkins/AP Photo

**Zach Ellis (left) and Brenton Thomas look at a MySpace profile at Ellis's home in Knoxville, Tenn. More than half of all Internet users between the ages of 15 and 20 are MySpace members.**

Registration for most social networking Web sites is free. Members are allotted a personal Web page, or "profile," which they can design as they wish. They can add pictures of themselves, post messages for other people to read, and compile lists of their favorite things and interests.

Members also can link their profiles to those of other members. In the world of social networking Web sites, it is not unusual for users to accumulate hundreds, even thousands, of online "friends"--some of whom they may know from school or another social setting, and others whom they may have never actually spoken to or met face-to-face.

Social networking Web sites such as MySpace have proven to be wildly popular with teenagers. "MySpace has changed how [young] people...share and absorb one another," writes James Verini in *Vanity Fair*. "They blog, flirt and diarize, post pictures, videos, personal artwork, songs and poetry, and generously distribute compliments and insults." In other words, teenagers use Web sites such as MySpace to do normal teenage things in an online setting, observers say.

However, there is a dark side to the popularity of social networking Web sites among teenagers, experts caution. Sexual predators have been known to use Web sites such as MySpace to gain access to the contact information of teenagers, according to local and federal law enforcement agents. Making matters worse, many teenage members of such Web sites--particularly girls--post pictures of themselves in revealing outfits or compromising positions, perhaps not realizing that Web sites such as MySpace can be accessed by anyone with a computer and an Internet connection, authorities say.

Reacting to that threat, many schools have banned access to social networking Web sites on school computers. A bill introduced to the House of Representatives in May 2006 would make that rule apply to all schools in the U.S. Several politicians and public figures have spoken out against the dangers of teenagers using social networking Web sites without supervision.

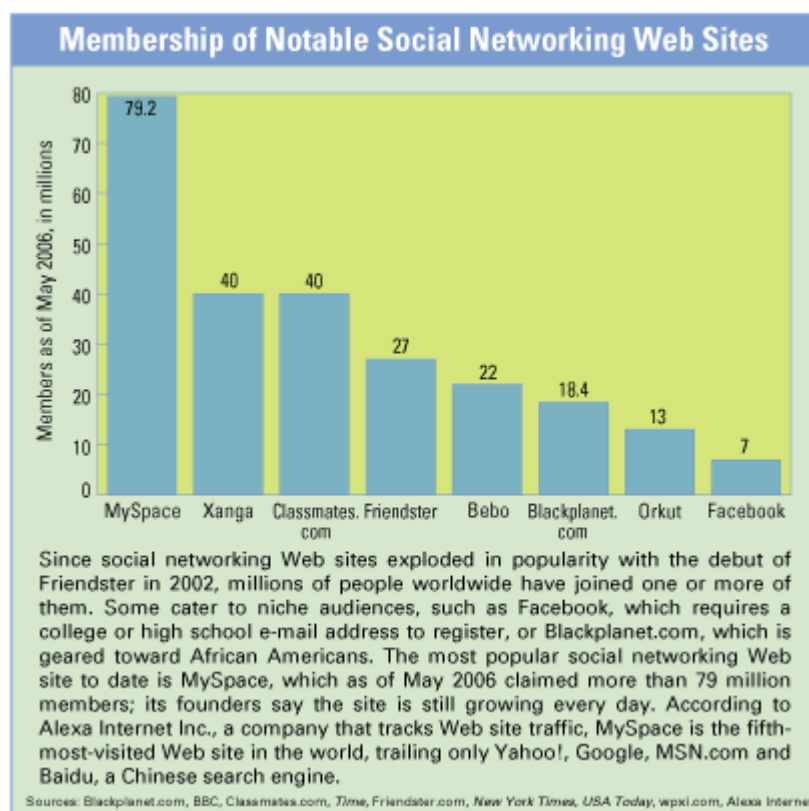
Are teenagers mature enough to handle the potential dangers of social networking Web sites? Or should their access to such sites be limited, or completely restricted?

Critics of social networking Web sites argue that teenagers are too naive and immature to participate in Web sites such as MySpace. Teenagers are too trusting and do not see the potential dangers that such Web sites pose, critics say. Additionally, opponents argue, social networking Web sites can become an addiction for teenagers. Young people often confuse such Web sites with real social interaction, which can have negative effects on their social development, they maintain.

Defenders of social networking Web sites, however, argue that Web sites such as MySpace are uniquely suited to a typical teenager's personal development as it allows teenagers to discover themselves and their place in the world in a safe, online environment. Shy people have been known to use the Web sites to break out of their shells, they maintain. Additionally, because they involve computers, social networking Web sites can help prepare teenagers for an increasingly technology-dependent job market, advocates say.

## The Internet as Social Experience

Since entering the mainstream in the early-to-mid-1990s, the Internet has altered the way people interact with one another. Because it allows for large groups of people separated by long distances to communicate instantaneously with one another, the Internet inevitably became a place where people could "socialize" without ever leaving their houses.



Jeremy Eagle

One of the earliest examples of Internet socialization was found in multi-user domains (MUDs), where Internet users could participate in a type of role-playing game that usually had a science-fiction or medieval theme. First developed in the late 1970s, MUDs allowed participants to enter a text-based fantasy world through their Internet servers, where they often assumed the personas of druids, witches or elves. Players could type commands to one another, developing online relationships that sometimes carried over into the real world. MUDs peaked in popularity during the 1980s, but some still exist. Many of today's best-selling computer games rely on the basic principles of MUDs--role playing and user interaction over the Internet--only adding a graphical component to go along with the text.

Throughout the 1980s, the Internet continued to grow in sophistication and popularity. Many of its users started becoming involved in newsgroups--online discussion boards onto which Internet users could post information or opinions about a given topic. Newsgroups were organized along broad lines; for example, one that began with the prefix "rec" focused on recreational activities, such as video games or television programs. Newsgroups helped people from around the world meet one another in an online setting to discuss shared interests.

Then, in 1988, a Finnish computer programmer named Jarkko Oikarinen developed the first Internet Relay Chat (IRC). IRC allowed Internet users to communicate with one another instantaneously in a chat room setting. Using monikers known as "screen names" to identify themselves, IRC members could form chat rooms that included dozens of fellow Internet users, using their keyboards to "talk" to each other in real time.

Shortly after IRC's development, an Internet service provider called America Online (AOL) appropriated the technology. AOL's chat rooms became an immediate hit; many credit them with sparking the general public's interest in the Internet's potential. By the mid-1990s, with the introduction of third-party Internet chat programs such as ICQ and AOL's own Instant Messenger, millions of people a day were communicating and socializing through the Internet.

In terms of demographics, Internet chatting quickly proved to be most popular with the computer-savvy youth of the 1990s and early 2000s. Teenagers in the U.S. and many other parts of the developed world began spending large amounts of their free time talking to friends over the Internet. In response to that trend, Jonathan Abrams, an entrepreneur from Mountain View, Calif., developed Friendster, which is generally considered to be the first successful social-networking Web site aimed specifically at young people.

Launched in 2002, Friendster quickly attracted millions of members; as of May 2006 it had approximately 27 million. Upon registering for the site--which, like most other social networking Web sites, is free--users gain access to a customizable profile, onto which they can post pictures of themselves, lists of things that interest them, titles of television shows and music they enjoy, and so on. Users can then search for other members based on those interests, ultimately compiling a list of online "friends"--some of whom they may know from outside the Internet, but others whom they may not know.

A similar social networking Web site made its debut in early 2004, when an undergraduate at Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., launched the Facebook. Named for the book of students' headshots commonly distributed on college campuses at the beginning of the school year to promote social interaction, Facebook was originally intended for Harvard students only. Word about the Web site spread quickly, however. Facebook's membership had grown to about 7.5 million as of May 2006.

Facebook functions much the same way as Friendster; but unlike its predecessor, Facebook requires a valid high-school or college electronic-mail address to join. (Originally, the site was limited to college students, but it has since expanded its reach.) Because it is specifically targeted at students, Facebook includes more student-friendly features than Friendster--members can post their class schedules, for instance. Some high schools, however, restrict students from using their school e-mail addresses to register for the site.

## MySpace Generation

By far the most popular social networking Web site to appear thus far is MySpace. Co-founded in 2003 by Tom Anderson, an amateur musician with a film degree from the University of California at Los Angeles, and Chris DeWolfe, a marketing expert, MySpace has become the premier social networking Web site since its January 2004 launch. As of May 2006, it has nearly 80 million members, and it continues to grow each day. MySpace receives more daily traffic than popular Web sites such as the retail outlet Amazon.com, the user-generated encyclopedia Wikipedia and the online auction site eBay. MySpace also often receives at least 20 times as many visitors as competitors such as Friendster.

MySpace offers a greater degree of customization than most other social networking Web sites. Users can, in effect, design their personal homepages however they wish, adding different animations, photographs, backgrounds, songs and even videos that can be played on the Web site alongside their personal information.

Additionally, all MySpace members are given access to their own Web log, onto which they can post their thoughts, opinions or whatever information they feel like sharing with the online world. (Nonmembers can also view MySpace profiles, although their access is limited.) MySpace's main draw is that members can "make friends" with other members, building up lists of friends that often total in the hundreds.

MySpace was originally conceived as a music Web site, an online forum where up-and-coming artists could post songs and information about themselves. Indeed, MySpace's founders estimate that more than 650,000 of the Web site's members are bands and individual musicians seeking to promote their work, whether they are established acts such as the rap group Black Eyed Peas or unsigned acts like the rock band Clap Your Hands Say Yeah.

Because of its massive popularity, MySpace has achieved a level of cultural significance far greater than that of any of its predecessors and competitors. Some MySpace members have become quasi-celebrities on the basis of their profiles and pictures alone. One such member is ForBiddeN, a clothing designer from Orange County, Calif., who has accumulated more than 700,000 "friends." The comedian Dane Cook used MySpace to promote one of his compact discs, which has since become one of the best-selling comedy albums in history.



Tony Lewis/Getty Images

**News Corp., a multinational media conglomerate run by Rupert Murdoch, purchased the popular social networking Web site MySpace in July 2005 for \$580 million.**

MySpace's most loyal audience is young people. Anderson and DeWolfe say that the vast majority of MySpace users are 25 or younger, and over a quarter of its members are under the age of 18. Company researchers say that more than half of all Internet users age 15 through 20 are MySpace members.

Because it provides a largely unfiltered window into the lives of American youth, MySpace is seen as a valuable marketing resource for advertisers, promoters and corporations. *Vanity Fair's* Verini compares the site to "a microscope into the content habits and brand choices of America's capricious youth market"--a demographic that, before MySpace, was viewed as notoriously fickle and difficult to track.

Marketers commonly use MySpace to determine exactly which trends are popular among teenagers and which ones are falling out of favor with them. Many of those marketers have said that, thanks to MySpace, the most difficult part of their jobs is practically done for them. Advertisers also use MySpace to directly market to the coveted teenage demographic; one out of every eight "banner" advertisements on the Internet is found on MySpace.

Experts say that the multinational media conglomerate News Corp. had that marketing potential in mind when it purchased MySpace's parent company, InterMix Media, for \$580 million in July 2005. (Richard Rosenblatt, a former InterMix chief executive officer, says he believes that MySpace is worth far more than that, possibly as much as \$5 billion.) Since that deal was made, News Corp.--which also owns Fox Broadcasting Co. and the film studio 20th Century Fox--has used the Web site to promote Fox movies and television programs to young people.

## **Sites' 'Dark Side' Creates Controversy**

Experts say that it makes sense that networking sites such as MySpace have caught on with teenagers to such an extent. "Teens are narcissistic and exhibitionist," writes Anastasia Goodstein on YPulse, a Web log geared toward media and marketing professionals. Each online profile is a teenager's attempt to define himself or herself, a way to figure out and understand his or her place in the world, Goodstein says. Teenagers "are in the process of learning who they are and they're putting stuff out there for validation from someone other than their parents, and MySpace is a way to do that," she adds.

Unsurprisingly, Goodstein says, many teenagers use networking sites to pursue sexual relationships with people they already know, or sometimes with strangers whom they meet through the site. Some observers of social networking Web sites argue that such sites tacitly encourage that use. They note that many of the banner ads posted throughout MySpace, for instance, are for online dating services. "The fact is that MySpace has always used sex to sell itself and still does," Verini writes.

Many of those observers warn against that use, arguing that when teenagers pursue their collective sexual development in the very public forum provided by networking sites, negative consequences can occur. The typical hormonal surge that occurs in one's teenage years combined with the need for "validation" described by Goodstein leads many high-schoolers--girls especially--to post photographs of themselves in revealing outfits or sexually suggestive poses. Consequently, experts say, MySpace has become a popular destination for sexual predators and pedophiles, who use the site to entice minors into meeting them in person for sexual encounters. Art Spada, the deputy mayor of West Hartford, Conn., says that "for bad folks, [MySpace] is like hitting the lottery. You can't ask for an easier road to meet kids."

In 2005, there were 1,224 reported incidents of "online enticement" of minors by adults, according to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, which also estimates that one in five children has received an unwanted sexual solicitation over the Internet. MySpace has been directly involved in a significant percentage of those incidents, experts say, such as in the case of a 37-year-old man who sexually assaulted a 16-year-old girl from Long Island, N.Y., or a 35-year-old man who molested a 12-year-old girl from California. (Registration to MySpace is technically restricted to those aged 14 and older, but younger users often lie about their age when signing up for the Web site.)

In response to that trend, high schools, middle schools and even elementary schools across the country have held meetings to educate parents about the potential dangers of their children's Internet use. Those meetings are typically run by school administrators or teachers, but they sometimes include local police officers, agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and federal prosecutors. At the meetings, parents are instructed to monitor their children's Internet habits and warn them about the predators who lurk on social networking Web sites such as MySpace.

Taking further precautions, many schools have blocked social networking Web sites from their computers, precluding students from accessing the sites during the school day. Others have forbidden the use of school e-mail addresses to register for Web sites like Facebook. Administrators from a Catholic high school in Sparta, N.J., told their students in November 2005 to terminate any membership they may have with a social networking Web site; students who do not comply risk suspension.

Social networking Web sites have also drawn criticism because they have become havens for online bullying, observers say. Most schools reserve the right to discipline students who threaten fellow students or teachers through online forums such as MySpace. A high school in Connecticut assigned a police officer to watch over its hallways after students began posting violent messages on MySpace; a private high school in Maryland asked one student to leave after he made inappropriate comments on his Web log. [See 2005 Cyberbullying Pervades the Public School Experience (sidebar)]

Although some schools have been criticized for limiting students' freedom of expression, a law signed by President Bush (R) in January 2006 might give such actions legal basis, experts say. That act, the Violence Against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005, outlaws anonymous e-mails or Internet postings that are written "with intent to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass another person."

Citing its so-called dark side, many politicians have spoken out against MySpace. In May 2006, Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick (R, Pa.) sponsored a law called the Deleting Online Predators Act, which would prohibit students from accessing social networking Web sites from school computers. The act would also mandate the creation of a Federal Communications Commission-run advisory board on Internet safety.

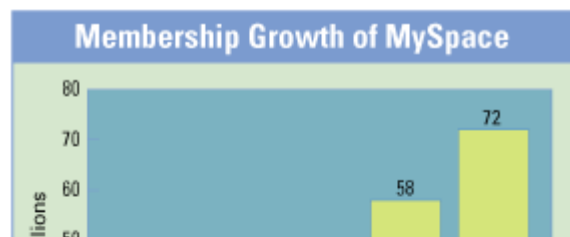
Representatives from MySpace, however, say that such legislation is unnecessary, as the company has voluntarily taken an active role in preventing the misuse of MySpace by child predators. In April 2006, it hired Hemanshu Nigam--a former federal prosecutor of Internet child exploitation cases and a White House adviser on online bullying--to oversee safety issues. It has also deleted more than 250,000 profiles of those under the age of 14; representatives say they delete 5,000 such profiles every day.

The company also has several employees whose job is to search the two million new photos that are posted to the site each day for inappropriate imagery, deleting anything that does not meet MySpace's official no-nudity policy. Despite such measures, however, critics maintain that MySpace--and social networking Web sites in general--are, for many reasons, inappropriate online destinations for teenagers.

## Social Networking Web Sites Not Fit for Teens, Critics Say

Critics of social networking Web sites warn that such sites have become common destinations for sexual predators and pedophiles. Social networking Web sites provide a uniquely convenient forum for sexual predators to interact with teenagers, many of whom are young, naive girls just becoming aware of their sexuality, experts say. Many of those girls post revealing photos of themselves on their profiles, which anyone with Internet access--an estimated 700 million people worldwide--can view. Critics maintain that MySpace and similar Web sites offer convicted child molesters almost unprecedented access to teenagers and even younger children.

To date, MySpace has no policy that explicitly bans sex offenders from posting to its site. Indeed, many critics have argued that developers of social networking Web sites take too much of a laissez-faire approach to the sites, especially when safety is concerned. Such critics say that MySpace, for example, should enforce more strictly its 14-and-over age requirement. Critics further say that social networking Web sites should include more parental control options, which would allow parents to set limits to their children's access to such Web sites.



Critics have also lambasted social networking Web sites for what they say are their negative effects on teenagers. Young people run the risk of becoming addicted to Web sites such as Facebook, critics assert. "Facebook is one giant time vortex--a black hole of chatter--and for many kids it's hard to find an exit," writes Michael Duffy, an

assisting managing editor at *Time*.

Young people spend their after-school hours surfing MySpace and Facebook instead of participating in other, more productive activities, critics say. Alan Goodwin, the principal of Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md., calls social networking Web sites "a huge distraction." He asserts that students who try simultaneously to complete a homework assignment and talk to friends on MySpace or Facebook can stretch a 90-minute homework session into four or five hours.

Critics say that Web sites such as MySpace are just one more example of the way today's youth are constantly overloaded with media, in the form of television, music, magazines, cellular telephones, and now, social networking Web sites. Teenagers' common practice of combining those types of media at the same time--listening to music, watching television and interacting with friends on MySpace, all while trying to read a book for school--can have negative effects on their still-developing brains, experts say.

"If a teenager is trying to have a conversation on an e-mail chat line while doing algebra, she'll suffer a decrease in efficiency, compared to if she just thought about algebra until she was done," says David Meyer, the director of the Brain, Cognition and Action Laboratory at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Simply put, Meyer says, the brain is not built to multitask to the degree that today's teenagers do. "With such complicated tasks [you] will never, ever be able to overcome the inherent limitations in the brain for processing information during multitasking," he says. With social networking Web sites becoming a full-fledged addiction among young people, critics warn, their ability to perform various cognitive tasks related to schoolwork might become that much more compromised.

Additionally, some critics say that the overuse of social networking Web sites has effectively taken the place of real social interaction for many teenagers. Today's teenagers "do less face-to-face talking, less phone talking [and] less playing outside than any other generation, and because of that, the Internet is real to them," says Parry Aftab, the executive director of WiredSafety, a nonprofit, volunteer group that educates parents and teachers about the potential dangers of teenage Internet use. Teenagers who rely on MySpace for their socialization will likely face developmental challenges as they enter their adult years, critics maintain.

## **Negative Effects Exaggerated, Supporters Argue**

Supporters of social networking Web sites say that they can actually aid teenagers' social development since they allow them to experiment with different identities or personalities. "The appropriate job for adolescence is to try things out in a relatively consequence-free zone and see what fits," says Sherry Turkle, a sociologist and psychologist who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge. The relative anonymity of the Internet allows teenagers to do just that. Additionally, social networking Web sites can help shy people come out of their shells by teaching them how to interact with others in a safe, online environment, supporters say.

Defenders also argue that social networking Web sites have value as an outlet for self-expression. Young people can use the Web log features of Web sites such as MySpace, Facebook and Xanga.com to write down their thoughts in an open forum that can be accessed by anyone. "Being able to share with people, I guess, makes it easier to deal with stuff," says Emilie Jackson, a senior at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Va.

Some supporters also assert that, despite critics' hand-wringing, it is healthy for teenagers to use Web sites such as MySpace to express their budding sexuality. "[M]ost teenage girls have sex not because they want it but because they want to be admired," writes Emma Forrest of the British newspaper the *Observer*. "This is a way to experiment with 'sexy' without having to actually have intercourse."

Web sites such as MySpace can also be used to foster a sense of community among people who never would reach out to one another in a non-Internet forum, supporters say. Since the debut of social networking Web sites,



teenagers can use the Internet to get "to know people who go to your school that you wouldn't regularly talk to," says Ashley Yager, a senior at Fairfax Magnet Center for the Visual Arts. Defenders maintain that MySpace and other social networking Web sites can help break down the artificial barriers of class, race and social status that often separate different groups of people at high school, encouraging teenagers to acquire a broader and more diverse set of friends.

Responding to charges that MySpace contributes negatively to the media-saturated bubble in which most teenagers live, some supporters argue that engaging in multiple forms of media simultaneously can actually be beneficial for a developing teenager. Steven Johnson, the author of *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2005), writes:

*Now ask yourself this question: In the offices of the future, which skill set will today's kids draw upon in their day-to-day tasks? Mastering interfaces, searching for information, maintaining virtual social networks and multitasking? Or doing algebra? I think the answer is obvious.*

Supporters further assert that the so-called dark side of social networking Web sites is vastly exaggerated. The number of people who use Web sites such as MySpace responsibly far outweighs the number of people who use them for more sinister purposes, defenders maintain. "If MySpace were a state it would be twice the size of California, but the crime associated with it would be a five-block area of New York City," says Shawn Gold, MySpace's head of marketing.

Because of social networking Web sites, the way teenagers create and maintain relationships in the 2000s is vastly different from past decades, which naturally causes some parents to worry and be confused about such Web sites, defenders assert. But Web sites such as MySpace represent a natural progression for an increasingly technology-savvy youth generation, they argue.

Parents will always express concern about what is unfamiliar to them, says Danah Boyd, a cultural anthropologist at the University of California at Berkeley. In the 1950s, for example, many parents warned against the dangers of a new trend known as rock and roll music. "Now we don't think of rock and roll as even remotely sordid," Boyd says. "Elvis Presley? It is laughable." In a few years, supporters maintain, people will likely not even remember why social networking Web sites aroused such consternation among some parents.

## **Sites Expected to Remain Popular**

As of June 2006, the Deleting Online Predators Act had not yet been voted on, and its future remains uncertain. One thing is certain, however: Social networking Web sites are a phenomenon that is not likely to fade away any time soon. For example, MySpace, the most popular social networking Web site, has announced its intention to expand into different media forms. Within the year, MySpace's founders say, the company will launch a movie studio, a satellite radio station, and perhaps even a wireless company that will compete with major cellular phone providers such as Virgin Mobile.

In December 2005, MySpace's record label made its official debut. Its first release is a teen-oriented compilation album featuring established bands, such as Weezer and Dashboard Confessional, alongside acts that first made their name on MySpace. Unsurprisingly, the record label has a MySpace profile.

Meanwhile, Internet-safety experts advise parents who are concerned with their children's use of the Internet to place the family computer in a centralized location, so they can monitor their children's usage at all times. Also, parents should take the initiative and look at their children's MySpace or Facebook profiles, and confront them about any inappropriate material that might be on those pages, experts assert. "I always tell parents, don't expect that to be a Kumbaya moment," says Tammy Haylock Clem, the director of counseling at Windward Middle School in Mar Vista, Calif. "The kids are going to be angry with you. You are the devil. So be OK with that."

## Discussion Questions & Activities

- 1) Have you registered with a social networking Web site? If so, approximately how much time do you spend, per week, on matters related to that Web site? What were your reasons for joining the site? If you have not registered with a social networking Web site, explain why not.
- 2) Given the potential dangers involved with social networking Web sites, should there be limits put on teenagers' access to them? What kinds of limits?
- 3) Critics of social networking Web sites say that they lead teenagers to confuse Internet socialization with real-life socialization. Explain why you agree or disagree with that assessment?
- 4) Many advertisers are using Web sites such as MySpace to research the latest trends among teenagers. What is your opinion of that?
- 5) Design a social networking Web site. What would you name it? What sorts of features would you include/exclude? Would you include any safety features, such as an option that would allow parents to restrict their children's access to the site?

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## **Contact Information**

*Information on how to contact organizations that are either mentioned in the discussion of social networking Web sites or can provide additional information on the subject is listed below:*

### **WiredSafety**

96 Linwood Plaza, #417  
Fort Lee, N.J. 07024  
Telephone: (201) 463-8663  
Internet: [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org)

### **National Center for Missing and Exploited Children**

699 Prince Street  
Alexandria, Va. 22314  
Telephone: (703) 274-3900  
Internet: [www.missingkids.com](http://www.missingkids.com)

## **Key Words and Points**

*For further information about the ongoing debate over social networking Web sites, search for the following words and terms in electronic databases and other publications:*

MySpace  
News Corp.  
Deleting Online Predators Act  
Facebook  
Hemanshu Nigam

See "How to Cite" under Help for more information on citing this article in a bibliography or footnote.

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