

KEEP OUT!

Teen Strategies for Maintaining Privacy on Social Networks

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INTRODUCTION

In his talk at the Last Hope conference in 2008, the investigator Steve Rambam called the social network Myspace the "investigator's best friend."¹ Through MySpace, he was able to identify some marijuana users at Cal Poly Pomona by the details they so casually broadcast on their profiles. After Rambam outed the so-called "Pomona stonahs," they were arrested. Stories like these make teens seem naïve or reckless about their online selves. The media holds up anecdotes like these as evidence that teens don't care about privacy, or that teens, having grown up online, don't even really have a notion of what privacy is.

But some recent studies have shown that, while teens may have a different view of privacy than older generations do, many teens do make deliberate choices about what to reveal and to whom online. Beyond tinkering with their privacy settings, many teens have come up strategies—conscious or not—to maintain a degree of privacy on social networking sites – or to "hide in plain sight," as ethnographer danah boyd calls it.² They provide fake information, use aliases instead of real names, temporarily deactivate their accounts, or write in an ambiguous way so that only their intended audience can understand.

GROWING UP IN A NETWORKED WORLD

In 1904, psychologist G. Stanley Hall became the first academic to identify adolescence as a unique stage in development in his work "Adolescence."³ He described the teen years as a time of "storm and stress," marked by emotional rollercoasters, rebelliousness, and risk-taking. Hall also noted the increased importance of peer relationships, as the adolescent transitioned away from a dependence on parents to the independence of adulthood.

Today's teens were born in the mid- to late 1990s, when the Internet was becoming entrenched. This "Net Generation" never had to adopt technology as their parents did; it's always been around. Teens have the highest Internet usage of any age group. About 93 percent of teens 12-17 are online.⁴ According to a 2010 study by Roiworld, a gaming site, teens spend an average of 2 hours a day online, and about 80 percent of that time is on social networks.⁵ About 73 percent of online teens use social network sites, compared to 47 percent of online adults.⁶ Facebook is the most popular site among teens, followed by YouTube and Myspace.⁷

Developmentally, teens need space from their parents –emotional and otherwise -- to make the successful transition into adulthood, and their peers are their partners in this. In the past, teens would go to the shopping mall to hang out with friends; today, they often hang out virtually, and

their communication can be near-constant.⁸ Teens have seized upon the Internet as "their" space, a space somewhat out of adult reach,⁹ though this may be changing as more parents join sites like Facebook.

Social network sites have helped redefine the word "friend" to mean not just close ties but weak ties as well, and teens on social network sites embrace the broad idea of "friend." While most teens use the sites to extend and reinforce offline social relationships, 31 percent said they were friends with people they had never met in person.¹⁰

If the teen years are about the increasing importance of friendship, then social network sites put those relational ties out there for all to see.¹¹ Just like in high school, who your online friends are communicates a kind of social rank, though if you have too many friends you are considered a "friend whore."¹² The social drama that happens in school hallways is replicated on sites like Facebook. Teens meet, fall in, fall out, goof around, hook up, and break up, all on a virtual stage, with their friends, other peers, and even adults as their audience.¹³

Teens are trying to figure out who they are and how they fit in the social context, and the online world is a place to try out and present different identities. They can project an idealized self or an intentionally ridiculous self. Or they can reveal their real self anonymously if they feel their real self is something they need to keep hidden—like if they are gay and are uncomfortable about coming out). The permutations are many, but aiming to look cool is primary. In a 2011 Pew study, nearly three-quarters of teen girls surveyed said that their peers used social network sites to make themselves look cooler than they are.¹⁴ And part of looking cool is trying not to look cool. In a 2010 article about Facebook in *The New York Review of Books*, Charles Peterson describes how, in the early days of the site, students rarely displayed an attractive picture of themselves, but rather one meant to convey how little they cared about their self-presentation.¹⁵ Along with participating in a social network sites, then, comes a need to manage one's audience, with myriad decisions about what to broadcast and to whom.

TEENS AND THE PRIVACY CONTINUUM

Privacy has been defined in various ways. In a frequently cited definition, Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis argued that privacy was the "right to be left alone."¹⁶ More recently, Irwin Altman defined privacy as "selective control of access to self."¹⁷ He believed that privacy exists on a continuum, and that people decide, at any given time, how much to be open or closed to others.

The stereotypical teen has a lock on her diary and a "KEEP OUT!" sign on her bedroom door, and what many teens mean by "privacy" is to be away from the prying eyes of their parents. But because teens are still minors until the age of 18, their need for privacy must be balanced against the need to protect teens from potential harm. Some adults worry that teens are leaving themselves vulnerable

to online predators, or that teens won't get the college or job of their choice because of having broadcast their youthful indiscretions online.¹⁸ These risks are not overblown. A Pew study found that 23 percent of teens using social networking sites have felt uncomfortable or scared after an online encounter with a stranger.¹⁹ And 38 percent of college admission officers said what they saw on social networking sites negatively affected their view of an applicant.²⁰

You don't have to look hard to find examples of teens sharing online. On DailyBooth, teens post photos of themselves doing things like using the toilet or modeling clothes. On YouTube, there are more than a few teens vlogging about being pregnant (for instance, ProudTeenMom), trying to lose weight (such as MissThinIsIn), and trying to muscle up (mights). These teens film themselves in their bedrooms and bathrooms. They reveal their bodies—their pregnant bellies, their "muffin tops," and their ripped abs— as if they were just showing them to a good friend. On Altman's continuum of privacy, these teens seem to be on the open end.

No study has shown conclusively that teens care any less about privacy than adults do, and in fact one study found that 79 percent of teens were concerned about privacy.²¹ But teens today do have a nuanced, less black-or-white view of privacy, perhaps due to the pervasiveness of social network sites.²² They don't see a dichotomy between private and public but gradations. For instance, one study found that teens regard Facebook as essentially a private space because it is (or was) largely out of view from the prying eyes of their parents.²³

With regard to privacy, danah boyd says that teens focus on what they can gain from being online, while adults focus on what they can lose.²⁴ Among other things, teens can find new friends, and nearly half of teens using social networking sites do just that.²⁵ If teens are too hidden online, they would cut themselves off from that social opportunity.

In the context of teen friendships, divulging personal details in a profile or status update or video can be seen as a sign of trust among friends or peers.²⁶ It is a way to build connection, signaling "I trust you, you can trust me." Not surprisingly, peer pressure can influence how much information is revealed online.²⁷

But sharing publicly also entails risk, something teens like to toy with. There is a risk that no one will care or respond or that you will be flamed. There are rude comments on the YouTube teens' posts. On one of ProudTeenMom's videos, someone commented: "No protection? I'm sorry, but that's just plain stupid." And on a video by MissThinIsIn, who said she was showing her "muffin top" to motivate herself to lose weight: "Ooooh my god, so annoying. You're one of those girls my friends and I laugh at walking down the hall laughing really loud after telling a painfully ill joke. Ew. Definitely not." Or on mights: "skinny phag" among other name-calling). But there are

friendly, supportive comments, too, and all teens have built an audience. ProudTeenMom has 929 subscribers, mighs, 898, and MissThinIsIn (who hadn't been online in a year), 63.

On social networking sites, sharing is socially reinforced. On Facebook, the more you post, comment, tag, like, etc., the more you become part of the social stream. The Top News view of the News Feed is designed to pull in the stories that are most commented upon.²⁸ The algorithm, then, rewards those who, like the YouTube teens, put themselves out there.

DRAWING THE LINE: TEEN'S PRIVACY-PROTECTING STRATEGIES

While teens see the line between public and private as fuzzy, many are making deliberate choices about where to draw the line, even if they move that line later. A 2007 Pew study found that two-thirds of teens with a profile on a social networking site had restricted their profile in some way so it wasn't visible to everyone.²⁹ Only 5 percent of teens with profiles made their full name, photos, and the town where they live publicly available.

Privacy settings of social network can be the first line of privacy defense. A 2010 study of first-year college students by danah boyd and Eszter Hargittai indicated that 98 percent had adjusted their privacy settings on Facebook at least once, and almost half had adjusted them four or more times.³⁰ The study didn't look at whether the settings achieved the level of privacy users wanted, however.

Some teens use fake information in their social network profiles to either consciously or unconsciously put distance between their inner circle and onlookers. In a 2007 Pew study, nearly half the teens with public profiles provided fake information, either to protect themselves or to be funny or goofy.³¹ This practice was more common among younger teens (68 percent) than older teens (48 percent). For several teens in a study by Sonia Livingstone, the profile seem to serve as more of a "place-marker" of their position in a social network, and jokes among friends in that network signified closeness.³² One 13-year-old boy reported that on his profile he was a 36-year-old married man living in Africa, which all his friends, of course, knew wasn't the case. Anecdotally, some middle or high school kids list themselves as married or as siblings on Facebook as, again, an inside joke.³³ Like intimate disclosure, in-jokes works as a kind of social bonding, and excludes those "who don't get it," especially adults. Pretending about themselves online, whether by changing one's name, age, appearance, or gender, is also a way for teens to experiment with their identity.³⁴

Facebook requires people to use real names when signing up, and it routinely does "fake name purges" to weed out those who have sneaked through.³⁵ Other social networking sites, such as Myspace, YouTube, or Twitter, don't require real names. A study by Zeynep Tufekci showed that nearly 95 percent of college students surveyed use a real name on Facebook, while 62 percent use a real name on Myspace.³⁶

Using an alias in a social network site can be like putting up a privacy wall. Only the people who know the alias--likely close friends--can find the person. On YouTube, Patricia Lange found that some youth, besides restricting their identity information through aliases, adopted a disguise in their videos, as in the case of a male who created a character named Vlad the Impaler.³⁷ Although these teens wanted to find an audience for their videos, they wanted to keep their identity private to avoid stalkers or other safety concerns. Adopting an alias or disguise would also seem to allow the videomaker to explore identity by doing things that his or her "real self" couldn't.

On the other end of the spectrum, some teens put common or cryptic tags on their videos to deliberately restrict their audience to their friends.³⁸ With YouTube's millions of videos, using common or cryptic tags means the videos will likely be lost in the endless pages of search results. Some youth use privacy settings in YouTube by setting videos to private-only, but this technique is considered cumbersome because it requires friends to have a YouTube account to view them.

In a similar way, danah boyd has found that teens manage to carry out private communication with their friends on a social networking site through social coding -- what she calls "social steganography."³⁹ She cites an example of a teen who communicated to her Facebook friends how desperate she felt about a breakup by posting lyrics to the Monty Python song, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life." Her mom, a Facebook friend, thought the lyrics were happy, while her friends knew the song appears right before the characters are killed. Using coded language is not unique to social network sites. Teens have developed an entire coded language in text messaging. But this example points to the way teens are adapting to the need to navigate the overlapping social spheres created by sites like Facebook.

Some youth (and adults) straddle social spheres by creating multiple profiles on social network sites, one for their friends and one for their parents.⁴⁰ Some popular YouTube videomakers also maintain two accounts -- one for fans, and another for friends only.⁴¹

"Whitewalling" and the "super-logoff" are other techniques used by some teens to maintain their privacy on social network sites.⁴² In whitewalling, users delete posts off their wall after they've been read so there's virtually no trace of activity. In the super-logoff, users deactivate their Facebook account every time they leave the site so their account is not searchable. These techniques might seem extreme, but they also show that for some the privacy protections offered by social networking sites just aren't enough.

CONCLUSION

Teens need space from their parents to mature and develop their own identify in a social context. But what happens when parents begin invading that context? In 2010 Facebook saw a 328 percent increase among the 35-54 set, and now those middle-agers make up a much bigger percentage of

users on the site than teens do.⁴³ And many of those parents—as many as 70 percent-- are friending their kids.⁴⁴ Besides the potential of posting embarrassing things on their kids’ walls, parents constrain their teens’ communication with their peers. It’s like the equivalent of hanging out in a kids’ bedroom when their friends are over. Some kids are “getting back” by posting their parents’ social networking blunders on sites like [Oh, Crap. My Parents Joined Facebook](#). In 2010, some 19 percent of teens said they had either left Facebook or were visiting it less than they did a year ago. While most lost interest because they found it “boring,” many also said they because their parents joined or there were too many old people.⁴⁵

This flagging interest in Facebook may reflect a typical cycle for teens: When something becomes mainstream, it’s like the kiss of death. It’s no longer cool, and teens move on. But it certainly won’t be the last time teens will find themselves having to navigate the same online social spheres as their parents. On Facebook there are ways to manage sets of friends through friends lists and privacy settings. But people complain that these features and settings are needlessly complicated. In 2010, *The New York Times* reported that Facebook privacy policy was 5,830 words, and its Privacy FAQ page was 45,000 words.⁴⁶ It’s hard to imagine teens wanting to pore over this dense, technical material, though teens perhaps need privacy settings the most. A significant number – about one in three – still leave their social networking profiles public for anyone to see. It’s important for them to understand the implications of that. While parents play a key role in teaching teens about online privacy, the solution is not for parents to clamp down on computer or phone use. Social networking sites bear much responsibility; they decide what privacy options there are and how to communicate those to users. Teens are accustomed to managing their online audiences, but they need to be able to do it easily. In March 2011, Facebook announced plans to simplify its privacy policy.⁴⁷ Let’s hope that these changes blaze the trail for better and simpler ways to manage online privacy.

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³ Robin Marantz Henig, “What Is It About 20-Somethings?” *The New York Times*, August 18, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/22/magazine/22Adulthood-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1.

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⁵ Jennifer Van Grove, "Teens Experiencing Facebook Fatigue [STUDY]," *Mashable* [blog], June 30, 2010, <http://mashable.com/2010/06/30/teens-social-networks-study/>.

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⁷ Van Grove, "Teens Experiencing Facebook Fatigue."

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¹² danah boyd, "Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites: The Role of Networked Publics in Teenage Social Life," *The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning: Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (2007): 119-142.

¹³ Ito et al, "Living and Learning with New Media."

¹⁴ Kristin Purcell, "Trends in Teen Communication and Social Media Use," Pew Research Center, February 9, 2011, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2011/Feb/PIP-Girl-Scout-Webinar.aspx>.

¹⁵ Charles Peterson, "The World of Facebook," *The New York Review of Books*, February 25, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/feb/25/in-the-world-of-facebook/>.

¹⁶ Samuel D. Warren and Louis Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *Harvard Law Review* IV, no. 5 (December 15, 1890), http://groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/classes/6.805/articles/privacy/Privacy_brand_warr2.html.

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