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Blogging blunders: Revealing too much could limit future opportunities, experts say

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Illustration Wilfred McNeil/The Clarion-Ledger

INTERNET ACTIVITIES

There are 141 million people on the Internet. Here's a glimpse of what they're doing.

- 91 percent send or read e-mail.
 - 39 percent read someone else's blog or online journal.
 - 28 percent search for someone they might know or meet.
 - 16 percent use social networking sites.
 - 8 percent create blogs or online journals.
- Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project

About once a week, Holly Porter logs onto the Web and updates her blog,

For some, blogging has replaced leather-bound, locked diaries with a public listing of life's details.

Porter doesn't see it that way.

The 15-year-old sophomore at Clinton High School has a simple rule for Internet postings: "Don't sit there and tell your life story and secrets on the Internet because anyone can get to them."

Like others, she's seen the details of Web postings cause problems in personal relationships, and she has been lectured about not posting information that could make her vulnerable to a predator. However, Web blogging and social networking sites increasingly are opening students to judgment from high school officials, college coaches and potential employers.

Arguably, information found on the Web could lead to school suspensions, missed scholarships and lost job opportunities.

The potential for trouble is widespread. The Pew Internet and American Life Project said 141 million Americans are online; 8 percent blog; 39 percent read others' blogs; and 16 percent use social networking Web sites, including about 55 percent of all online teens.

A 2006 National Association of Colleges and Employers survey reported that 11.1 percent of employers said they would review social networking sites. More than 60 percent of those said it could influence their hiring decisions.

"They're just checking up to see if the students are what they thought they were," said Luther Epting, director of the Career Center at Mississippi State University. He said he hasn't heard of an employer making a decision based on the sites, but "I could not imagine why they would be (checking them) if they weren't."

Several SEC coaches have acknowledged checking social networking sites to see what type of image players are projecting.

Web postings are protected free speech, but it isn't the act of speaking that causes problems, said Rebecca Jeschke, a spokeswoman for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a California electronic consumer rights group. It's what's being shown on the sites.

A recent example involves a group of five cheerleaders at a suburban Dallas school district. The girls, including the principal's daughter, were suspended after pictures of them posing with a fake penis while wearing their uniforms surfaced on MySpace.com. Other photos reportedly show them drinking alcoholic beverages.

Jeschke said the Electronic Frontier Foundation supports students' free speech on the Web, but "we're not encouraging anyone to do something illegal, take a picture of it and post it online. That's just unwise on all sorts of levels.

"As one of our lawyers put it, you have a right not to incriminate yourself, but you have to exercise that right," she said.

Telling too much on the Web isn't limited to students. Jessica Cutler, a Capitol Hill staffer who blogged about her relations with six men, found herself unemployed after a gossip columnist exposed the blog. Cutler's former male suitor, Robert Steinbuch, said he was humiliated.

He's suing. She's written a book about her exploits and opened a new Web site.

Seeing the growing popularity of social networking sites and blogging, Callaway High School teacher Regena King began

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warning her students about telling too much two years ago.

"There are always ways for them to go back and connect things," King told her businesses classes about future employers. "If your face is on there, they can see that. They can do enough research to find out who you are."

What remains unclear is how many employers will factor in an Internet search. Jason Morris, president of Background Information services, a Cleveland, Ohio-based pre-employment screening company, said you can't verify all the information on the Internet so his company doesn't use it for background checks.

He said using the information to deny someone a job could lead to a lawsuit because companies have to say why they turned someone down.

However, as Bill Kahnweiler, a human resources professor at Georgia State University points out, reasons for not hiring are often vague, such as finding a "stronger candidate."

"When you don't get accepted to a school or job, there's really no way of knowing why you didn't get accepted," Kahnweiler said.

Holly's mother, Lynn, recognizes the importance of social networking sites in teens' lives and keeps an eye on her daughter's and her friends' sites. She's always prepared to question troublesome Internet behavior.

"The way I look at it, if it's on the Internet, it's public information. If someone in New York can get on Facebook or Xanga or MySpace and look at my daughter's information, I ought to be able to look at it as well."

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