

Discussion: MySpace and Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA)

The following interview with [Henry Jenkins](#) (co-director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT) and [danah boyd](#) (PhD student at the School of Information, University of California-Berkeley) was conducted via email by Sarah Wright of the MIT News Office. An abbreviated version was published by the [MIT News Office](#) on 24 May 2006. We are providing a full transcript of our interview online because we believe that it provides valuable information for parents, legislators and press who are concerned about the dangers of MySpace.

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Q: What is MySpace? Why is it important? How big is it (and its cousins such as Facebook)?

danah: [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) are social network sites where individuals create profiles and link to others (“friends”) within the system. The profile serves as an individual’s digital representation (similar to homepages) of their tastes, fashion, and identity. In crafting this profile, individuals upload photos, indicate interests, list favorite musicians and describe themselves textually and through associated media. The social network feature allows participants to link themselves to others within the system, revealing their affiliations and peer group. These sites also allow friends to comment on each other’s profiles. Structurally, social network sites are a cross between a yearbook and a community website.

These sites also provide numerous communication tools. Both have a messaging system similar to email; MySpace also has a bulletin board where people can post messages that all friends can read and a blogging service where people can post entries for either friends or the public at large. When youth login, their first task is typically to check messages in order to see who has written them. While email is still used to communicate with adults and authorities, MySpace is the primary asynchronous communication tool for teens. After checking personal messages, youth check friend additions, bulletin board posts, event announcements and new blog posts by friends. They visit their friends’ pages to see new photos or check out each other’s comments. The vast majority of social network site use amongst youth does not involve surfing to strangers’ profiles, but engaging more locally with known friends and acquaintances.

MySpace has over 78 million registered accounts while Facebook has approximately 8 million. While over 85% of college students participate on Facebook if it exists on their campus, MySpace is a cultural requirement for American high school students. Or, as one teenager said, “If you’re not on MySpace, you don’t exist.” Not all MySpace users are teenagers, but most American teenagers have accounts on MySpace.

These sites play a key role in youth culture because they give youth a space to hang out amongst friends and peers, share cultural artifacts (like links to funny websites, comments about TV shows) and work out an image of how they see themselves. They also serve as digital publics, substituting for the types of publics that most adults took for granted growing up, but are now inaccessible for many young people – neighborhood basketball courts, malls, parks, etc. Youth are trying to map out a public youth territory for themselves, removed from adult culture. They are doing so online because their mobility and control over physical space is heavily curtailed and monitored.

Q: What is the controversy over MySpace? Is it that site in particular or as a genre of web-based-social-networks?

danah: Like previous digital publics (blogs, discussion boards, chatrooms, newsgroups), MySpace is very open – anyone can join, participate and communicate with others. While MySpace allows 14 and 15 year old users to restrict who can see their page and contact them, most users opt to make their profiles public.

The primary concern is that this openness puts youth at risk, making them particularly vulnerable to predators and pedophiles.

Henry: More broadly, there are concerns about what aspects of their lives teens reveal through their online profiles. Adults are confronting images of underage drinking or sex, discussions of drug use, and signs of bullying and other abusive behavior. In some cases, teens and adults have developed different notions of privacy: young people feel more comfortable sharing aspects of their lives (for example, their sexual identities) that previous generations would have kept secret. In some cases, teens do not fully understand the risks of making certain information public. In many cases, schools are being forced to respond to real world problems which only came to their attention because this information was so publicly accessible on the web. Schools are uncertain what level of responsibility they should have over what their students do online – some are worried about what they are doing on library computers and others seek to extend their supervision into what teens are doing on their own time and off school grounds. Much of the controversy has come not as a result of anything new that MySpace and the other social software sites contribute to teen culture but simply from the fact that adults can no longer hide their eyes to aspects of youth culture in America that have been there all along. All of this is coming to head with the proposal of new federal legislation which would require all schools and libraries which receive federal funds to restrict access to these digital tools and online communities.

Q: What is the direction of your current research on new media, and how does it relate to the controversy?

danah: For my doctoral dissertation, I am investigating why and how youth are engaging in digital publics like MySpace, how this affects identity development and how youth socialization has changed over the last century. This work is being funded by the MacArthur Foundation to help understand the nature of informal learning. Understanding why moral panics emerge when youth socialize is central to my research.

Henry: I am currently finishing up a white paper, commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation, which seeks to identify the core social skills and cultural competencies young people need in order to become full participants in the cultural, political, economic, and social life of the 21st century. In doing this research, we are reviewing the current state of educational research surrounding participatory culture and examining how teachers are currently deploying these technologies through schools. We want in the long term to develop new curricular materials which help parents and teachers build a more constructive relationship with new media. I also have a new book coming out this summer, [*Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*](#), which provides some frameworks for thinking about the new forms of participatory culture which are emerging in the digital era.

Q: What do 'social networking software programs' provide participants? What's their down side?

danah: By giving youth access to a public of their peers, MySpace provides a fertile ground for identity development and cultural integration. As youth transition from childhood, they seek out public environments to make sense of culture, social status and how they fit into the world. Interacting with strangers helps them understand who they are and communities of interest allow them to explore ideas and values. Although youth are able to socialize privately with one another in the homes of friends, most are not allowed to spend time hanging out in public, unaccompanied by parents or adults. They view MySpace as a place where they can be who they are, joke around with friends and make certain to stay in the loop about everything that is going on around them.

While integrating into cultural life is a critical process that takes place during these years, the actual process is not always smooth or pleasant. Bullying, sexual teasing, and other peer-to-peer harassment are rampant amongst teenagers, as these are frequently the tools through which youth learn to make meaning of popularity, social status, roles, and cultural norms. MySpace did not create teenage bullying but it has made it more visible to many adults, although it is not clear that the embarrassment online is any more damaging to the young victims than offline. Regardless of medium, the humiliation occurs when the entire school or social community knows of the attack; MySpace and other online mediums may help spread rumors faster,

but they have always spread in the halls of schools pretty quickly. No one of any age enjoys being the target of public tormenting, but new media is not to blame for peer-to-peer harassment simply because it makes it more visible to outsiders. In fact, in many ways, this visibility provides a window through which teen mentors can help combat this issue.

Q: What skills do students/children learn in working in social networks? How does these contribute (or not) to their development?

Henry: As a society, we are at a moment of transition when the most important social relationships may no longer be restricted to those we conduct face to face with people in our own immediate surroundings but may also include a large number of relationships which are conducted over vast geographic distances. Over the past decade or so, we have been learning how to live in communities which are grassroots but not necessarily geographically local. We are learning how to interact across multiple communities and negotiate with diverse norms. These networking skills are increasingly important to all aspects of our lives. Social networking services are more and more being deployed as professional tools, extending the sets of contacts that people can tap in their work lives. It is thus not surprising that such tools are also part of the social lives of our teens. Just as youth in a hunting society play with bows and arrows, youth in an information society play with information and social networks. Our schools so far do a rather poor job of helping teens acquire the skills they need in order to participate within that information society. For starters, most adult jobs today involve a high degree of collaboration, yet we still focus our schools on training autonomous learners. Rather than shutting kids off from social network tools, we should be teaching them how to exploit their potentials and mitigate their risks.

Q: What educational use might/does MySpace or other social network software have?

Henry: Much of the current policy debate around MySpace assumes that the activities there are at best frivolous and at worst dangerous to the teens who participate. Yet, a growing number of teachers around the country are discovering that these technologies have real pedagogical value. Teachers are beginning to use blogs for knowledge sharing in schools; they use mailing lists to communicate expectations about homework with students and parents. They are discovering that students take their assignments more seriously and write better if they are producing work which will reach a larger public rather than simply sit on the teacher's desk. Teachers are linking together classrooms around the country and around the world, getting kids from different cultural backgrounds to share aspects of their everyday experience with each other and thus learn to communicate across differences. Social networking sites generate a great amount of statistical data about their users which can be used as raw materials for projects in social studies or math classes. Student-made videos are used for class projects, which get shared through free public sites like YouTube; students, in turn, get feedback on their work from broader audiences and begin to develop connections with other young artists which can push them to the next level. Classes are taping podcasts of lectures at other educational institutions, making the best speakers in the world available to students at the most remote locations. Students are doing their own research and contributing to sites like Wikipedia. Teachers are discovering that the design of web pages or personal profiles may function like autobiographical essays, encouraging adolescents to reflect more deeply on their own lives and identities and to exert more control over their self presentation. Many of these activities would be threatened by the proposed federal legislation which would restrict access to these sites via public schools or library terminals.

Q: What is the essence of the proposed legislation? If passed, how would it affect students? Teachers? Librarians? Parents?

danah: Recent federal legislation, [Deleting Online Predators Act](#) (DOPA) would require schools and libraries that receive federal aid “to protect minors from commercial social networking websites and chat rooms.” The proposed law would extend current regulations that require all federally funded schools and libraries to deploy internet filters. The law is so broadly defined that it would limit access to any commercial site that allows users to create a profile and communicate with strangers. This legislation is

targeting MySpace, but it would also block numerous other sites, including blogging tools, mailing lists, video and podcast sites, photo sharing sites, and educational sites like [NeoPets](#).

Henry: In theory, the bill would allow schools to disable these filters for use in educationally specified contexts, yet in practice, most schools will simply lock down their computers and walk away. Teachers who wanted to exploit the educational benefits of these tools would face increased scrutiny and pressure to discontinue these practices. And students would lack the ability to explore these resources through independent research or social activities. Teens who lack access to the Internet at home would be cut off from their extended sphere of social contacts.

danah: Most major technology companies are moving in the direction of social software. They are using social features to help users find information, get recommendations, and share ideas. This would all be restricted. Even if its application were restricted solely to MySpace, this legislation assumes that nothing positive can be gained through the socialization that occurs there. For example, high school students currently contact college students through MySpace to learn about their schools and decide whether or not to apply.

Henry: Suppose, for the sake of argument, that MySpace critics are correct and that MySpace is, in fact, exposing large numbers of teens to high-risk situations, then shouldn't the role of educational institutions be to help those teens understand those risks and develop strategies for dealing with them? Wouldn't we be better off having teens engage with MySpace in the context of supervision from knowledgeable and informed adults? Historically, we taught children what to do when a stranger telephoned them when their parents are away; surely, we should be helping to teach them how to manage the presentation of their selves in digital spaces. The proposed federal legislation does nothing to help kids confront the challenges of interacting with online social communities; rather, it allows teachers and librarians to abdicate their responsibility to educate young people about what is becoming a significant aspect of their everyday lives. Our responsibilities as educators should be to bring reason to bear on situations which are wrought with ignorance and fear, not to hide our eyes from troubling aspects of teen culture.

danah: Police currently patrol MySpace, just as they patrol other areas where youth hang out. Many are thankful to know where youth go online because it helps them do their job. Too often, predators know youth haunts better than police and decentralized systems make it difficult for police to do their job. Blocking known sites will encourage teens to go further underground and seek out places to socialize that adults are unaware of. This puts youth at increased risk and means that neither educators nor law enforcement will be around to help.

Q: The proposed bill appears to offer protection to minors from online predators, by limiting their mutual access. Is predation a real danger with MySpace? Are there other issues people should be aware of in weighing this legislation?

danah: The media coverage of predators on MySpace implies that 1) all youth are at risk of being stalked and molested because of MySpace; 2) prohibiting youth from participating on MySpace will stop predators from attacking kids. Both are misleading; neither is true.

Unfortunately, predators lurk wherever youth hang out. Since youth are on MySpace, there are bound to be predators on MySpace. Yet, predators do not use online information to abduct children; children face a much higher risk of abduction or molestation from people they already know – members of their own family or friends of the family. Statistically speaking, kids are more at risk at a church picnic or a boy scout outing than they are when they go on MySpace. Less than .01% of all youth abductions nationwide are stranger abductions and as far as we know, no stranger abduction has occurred because of social network services. The goal of a predator is to get a child to consent to sexual activities. Predators contact teens (online and offline) to start a conversation. Just as most teens know to say no to strange men who approach them on the street, most know to ignore strange men who approach them online. When teenagers receive solicitations from adults on MySpace, most report deleting them without question. Those who report

responding often talk about looking for attention or seeking a risk. Of those who begin conversations, few report meeting these strangers.

The media often reference a [Crimes Against Children report](#) that states one in five children receive a sexual solicitation online. A careful reading of this report shows that 76% of the unwanted solicitations came from fellow children. This includes unwanted date requests and sexual taunts from fellow teens. Of the adult solicitations, 96% are from people 18-25; wanted and unwanted solicitations are both included. In other words, if an 18 year old asks out a 17 year old and both consent, this would still be seen as a sexual solicitation. Only 10% of the solicitations included a request for a physical encounter; most sexual solicitations are for cybersex. While the report shows that a large percentage of youth are faced with uncomfortable or offensive experiences online, there is no discussion of how many are faced with uncomfortable or offensive experiences at school, in the local shopping mall or through other mediated channels like telephone.

Although the media has covered the potential risk extensively, few actual cases have emerged. While youth are at minimal risk, predators are regularly being lured out by law enforcement patrolling the site. Most notably, a deputy in the Department of Homeland Security was arrested for seeking sex with a minor.

The fear of predators has regularly been touted as a reason to restrict youth from both physical and digital publics. Yet, as Barry Glassner notes in [The Culture of Fear](#), predators help distract us from more statistically significant molesters. Youth are at far greater risk of abuse in their homes and in the homes of their friends than they ever are in digital or physical publics.

Q: You have written before on anti-electronic/anti-new media attitudes. Where does this proposed bill fit into those?

Henry: History shows us a recurring pattern surrounding the adaptation of any new communications technology. Young people are often early adopters: they are more open to new ideas and experiences; they are looking for ways to leave their mark on the world and they are seeking places where they can socially interact with minimal adult interference. Parents and teachers are often frightened by these new kinds of communication technologies which were not part of the world of their childhood: they don't really understand what their young people are doing with them and they don't know how to protect or supervise their children while they are engaged in these activities. The situation is thus ripe for moral panic.

A single high profile incident – some kind of tragedy or crime – can spark backlash. Political leaders, seeking headlines, and journalists, seeking readers, exploit those anxieties and feed those fears. Soon, there is a call to take action "even if it is wrong," a call to action which races well ahead of any serious research or thoughtful reflection on the matters at hand. The new legislation is being embraced by politicians in both parties eager to woo cultural conservatives and suburban voters as they enter what everyone knows is going to be a hotly contested election.

Over time, as these technologies become better integrated into everyday life, as the generation which grew up with these technologies takes on adult responsibilities, things calm down again. People develop a more balanced perspective which sees both the benefits and risks associated with these activities. Rather than restrict access, we educate our young people in the safe, ethical, and creative use of these technologies.

Right now, MySpace is at the most disruptive point in this cycle: people are reacting in ignorance and fear and in doing so, they increase the risks and discard the benefits of these emerging cultural practices.

Q: Most people know there is a digital divide - are the issues raised by this legislation related to the widening or narrowing of the gap or to other things?

Henry: Over the past decade, there has been intense public concern about the digital divide. Many of us have worked hard to insure that every kid has access to the Internet via schools and public libraries, if not through their own homes. And these efforts have been largely successful, outside of Indian reservations and some other rural pockets, in insuring at least minimal levels of access. Now, the problem shifts from concerns about technical access to concerns about participation in the key social and cultural experiences which are defining the emerging generation's relationship to these technologies. What a kid can do at home with unlimited access is very different from what a kid can do in a public library with ten or fifteen minutes of access at a time and with no capacity to store and upload information to the web. We further handicap these children by placing filters on the Internet which restrict their access to information which is readily available to their more affluent classmates. And now this legislation would restrict their ability to participate in social networks or to belong to online communities. The result will be to further isolate children from poorer economic backgrounds, to cut kids at risk from support systems which exist within their peer culture, and to limit the social and cultural experiences of kids who are already behind in acquiring important networking skills that will shape their professional futures. All of this will compound what we are now calling the participation gap. The early discussion of the digital divide assumed that the most important concern was insuring access to information as if the web were simply a data bank. Its power comes through participation within its social networks. The authors of the law are reading MySpace and other social software exclusively in terms of their risks; they are not focusing on the opportunities they offer for education and personal growth. In protecting children from those risks, they would cut them off from those educational benefits.

Q: You have said elsewhere (and several years ago) that virtual gaming experiences of today are analogous to the unfettered play in the backyards of the 1950s -- very core & essential experiences. Have social networking like MySpace or games or other new media technology become core experiences now?

Henry: As I suggested above, most parents understand their children's experiences in the context of their memories of their own early years. For the baby boom generation, those defining experiences involved playing in backyards and vacant lots within suburban neighborhoods, socializing with their friends at the local teen hangout, and participating within a social realm which was constrained by the people who went to your local school. All of that is changing. Contemporary children and youth enjoy far less physical mobility, have less time outside of adult control, and have fewer physical places to hang out with their friends.

Much of this activity is being brought online. What teens are doing online is no better and no worse than what previous generations of teens did when their parents weren't looking. The difference is that as these activities are being digitized, they are also being brought into public view. Video games bring the fantasy lives of young boys into the family room and parents are shocked by what they are seeing. Social networks give adults a way to access their teens' social and romantic lives and they are startled by their desire to break free from restraints or act older than their age. Parents are experiencing this as a loss of control but in fact, adults have greater control over these aspects of their children's lives than ever before.

Indeed, one of the biggest risks of these digital technologies is not the ways that they allow teens to escape adult control but rather the permanent traces left behind of their transgressive conduct. Teens used to worry about what teachers or administrators might put in their permanent records since this would impact how they were treated in the future. Yet, we are increasingly discovering that everything we do online becomes part of our public and permanent record, easily recoverable by anyone who knows how to Google, and that there is no longer any statute of limitations on our youthful indiscretions.

danah: Because of mobile phones, current college students report greater ongoing communication with their parents than in previous generations. As [Misa Matsuda has argued](#), networked technologies are allowing today's youth to maintain "full-time intimate communities." While the socialization that takes place in digital publics is equivalent to that which occurs in physical publics, new media is allowing youth to be more deeply connected to their peers and their family members, providing a powerful open channel for communication and sharing.

Q: The proposed bill is a political response to a social/technological development - could you offer a political framework for considering MySpace and laws to limit access to it?

Henry: Right now, MySpace and the other social network tools are being read as threats to the civic order, as encouraging anti-social behaviors. But we can easily turn this around and see them as the training ground for future citizens and political leaders. Young people are assuming public roles at earlier and earlier ages. They are interacting with larger communities of their peers and beginning to develop their own styles of leadership. Across a range of issues, young people are using social network software to identify and rally like-minded individualism, forming the basis for new forms of digital activism. Current research shows that teens who participate in massively multiplayer games develop a much stronger ability to work in teams, a greater understanding of how and when to take appropriate risks, an ability to rapidly process complex bodies of information, and so forth. At the same time, these teens are facing an array of ethical challenges which are badly understood by the adults around them. They have nowhere to turn for advice on how to confront some of the choices they make as participants within these communities. Part of the work we will be doing for the MacArthur Foundation involves the development of an ethics casebook which will help parents, teachers, and students work through some of these issues and make sensible decisions about how they conduct their online lives. We see this kind of pedagogical intervention as far more valuable than locking down all public computers and then sending kids out to deal with these issues on their own.

Q: What suggestions do you have for parents or other adults eager to learn more about MySpace and to understand what's going on with it, kids and political reactions?

Henry: Parents face serious challenges in helping their children negotiate through these new online environments. They receive very little advice about how to build a constructive relationship with media within their families or how to help their offspring make ethical choices as participants in these online worlds. As a culture, we have deeply conflicted assumptions about adolescence which functions as a period of transition: Most of us recognize that teens need to take on a greater degree of autonomy as they prepare for adult lives, even as they still need some degree of adult supervision to help them make sane and safe decisions; we simply disagree about the relative balance of freedom and autonomy that teens should receive. We respect the fact that the decisions families make about media reflect some of their most deeply held values; different families have different concerns and make different decisions. For that reason, we think decisions about youth access to digital technologies should be made in the context of individual families and not form the basis of one-size-fits-all federal legislation. Recognizing that different parents will approach these issues in different ways, we would still offer the following as our governing philosophy for dealing with MySpace and other social software.

- 1.** Communication with your daughter or son is key. Build a trusting relationship through dialogue. It is important to talk with them about your concerns; it is even more important to listen to what they have to say about their online experiences and why these sites are such an important part of their interactions with their peers. You need to recognize that some unfamiliar experiences look scarier from the outside than they are. Take time to understand what you are seeing and what it means to participants.
- 2.** Create an account to understand how the site works, but not to stalk your kids. They need room to explore, but if you are familiar with the media and technology that they consume, you can provide valuable guidance and suggestions. Surveillance, while possible, damages a trusting parent/child relationship.
- 3.** Ask your kids how they choose to represent themselves and why. Use MySpace as a resource to start a conversation about contemporary fashion, ideals, and media images.
- 4.** Talk about private/ public issues with your kids. Help them to understand the consequences of making certain information publicly accessible. Get them to think through all of the possible audiences who might come into contact with their online information. Teens often imagine MySpace as a youth-only world. It isn't and they need to consider what the consequences would be if their grandparents, their teachers, admissions officers or a future employer read what they said about themselves. Helping your children learn how to negotiate such public environments is a great educational opportunity.

5. Talk through what kids should do if they receive unwanted attention online or if they find themselves the victims of cyberbullying. A growing number of sites provide useful information about how to confront such problems, including [Net Family News](#) , [NetSmartz](#) and [SafeTeens](#). The “[Safety Tips](#)” section of [MySpace](#) also provides information for both parents and teens, including MySpace policies.

Henry and danah: *We welcome further questions from parents. Our feeling is that there should be more public discussion of the opportunities and risks represented by MySpace and other social networks. Please send your questions to myspaceissues@mit.edu and we will do our best to respond.*

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[Henry Jenkins](#) is a co-director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies program. His current research, commissioned by the MacArthur Foundation, seeks to identify the core social skills and cultural competencies young people need in order to become full participants in the cultural, political, economic and social life of the 21st century. His new book, [Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide](#), will be published this summer.

[danah boyd](#) is a Ph.D. student at the University of California at Berkeley in the School of Information. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on how youth negotiate identity formation through digital publics like MySpace. Her work is part of a broader project on [Kids' Informal Learning with Digital Media](#), funded by the MacArthur Foundation. Prior to Berkeley, danah received an AB in computer science from Brown University and an MS in sociable media from the MIT Media Lab. She is also a researcher at Yahoo! and blogs regularly at [Apophenia](#).