

Employers Use Social Networks to Check Out Applicants

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Most job applicants have a general checklist before a job interview—updating a résumé, ironing a professional outfit, rehearsing an explanation for those two years spent bumming around after college. However, if tidying up the Facebook profile isn't on that list, maybe it should be.

According to a new study conducted by Harris Interactive for CareerBuilder.com, 45 percent of employers questioned are using social networks to screen job candidates—more than double from a year earlier, when a similar survey found that just 22 percent of supervisors were researching potential hires on social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn.

The study, which questioned 2,667 managers and human resource workers, found that 35 percent of employers decided not to offer a job to a candidate based on the content uncovered on a social networking site. (The survey has no margin of sampling error because it was not drawn from a representative nationwide sample but rather from volunteer participants.)

The report showed that Facebook was the most popular online destination for employers to do their online sleuthing, followed by LinkedIn and MySpace. In addition, 7 percent followed job candidates on Twitter.

More than half of the employers who participated in the survey said that provocative photos were the biggest factor contributing to a decision not to hire a potential employee, while 44 percent of employers pinpointed references to drinking and drug use as red flags.

Other warning signs included bad-mouthing of previous employers and colleagues and poor online communication skills.

While most of these may seem like obvious stumbling blocks, what constitutes alarming behavior to a particular employer? Would photographs of a trip to the beach be considered inappropriate? What about a racy Halloween costume? As Facebook continues to grow as an essential personal and business networking tool for most of the Web, these issues are only going to get thornier.

To be on the safe side, it's probably wise to use the new privacy settings offered by Facebook to keep everything but the most innocuous content away from the public eye.

Invading Our Own Privacy

David Schimke

David Schimke is editor-in-chief of *Utne Reader*. His articles and essays have appeared in many newspapers and journals. His essay, "Rack 'Em Up," a profile of a young pool hustler, was recognized in *The Best American Sports Writing* (1999). This essay appeared in the May–June 2007 issue of *Utne Reader*.

CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

Tell-all blogs, party photos on Twitter and Facebook, cookies and trackers online, GPS systems on our phones that can tell people where we are at any given moment—are we giving away too much information? As members of the digital generation come of age, they bring with them new questions regarding online privacy. Employers are using information gathered online to make hiring decisions. Online tracking devices tell marketing companies what we like to buy, where we like to eat, and with whom we like to socialize—all with the goal of steering the right advertising our way. And most online users give away information without thinking very much about it, which raises this question: are we giving our privacy away?

WORDS IN CONTEXT

- grizzled** (1) gray-haired, old (adj.)
- caricature** (1) an exaggerated picture or image of a person (n.)
- blithely** (3) exceedingly casual and carefree (adv.)
- paradigm** (4) a new model (n.)
- proclivities** (5) practices or inclinations (n.)
- paradoxically** (6) seemingly contradictory (adv.)

- 1 It's a good guess that the last thing the newly hired editor of an alternative newspaper would want a **grizzled** group of journalists to know is that the person he'd most like to meet is Howard Stern. Yet hours after Kevin Hoffman was tapped to take the helm at *City Pages*, staffers at the Minneapolis weekly, who had yet to meet the 30-year-old in person, were reading all about their new leader's love of Stern, ultimate fighting, and *The Real World* on his MySpace page and sketching a less than favorable **caricature**.

2 That same week in late January, Jessica Blinkerd, a 22-year-old
 California woman charged with drunken driving and vehicular man-
 slaughter, received a tougher-than-expected sentence, 64 months in
 prison. Despite having professed deep remorse in court, Blinkerd had
 posted pictures at MySpace of herself out on the town after the accident,
 drinking with friends and sporting a shirt advertising a brand of tequila.
 “Why would probation get your attention?” the judge asked.

3 Both cases, one comical, the other life-altering, illustrate a commer-
 cially driven cultural trend whose consequences may not be known until
 well after debates over the merits of wiretapping, the Patriot Act, and digi-
 tal spying are resolved in Congress. People of all ages, but especially those
 between 18 and 34, have become so comfortable with online commerce,
 instant correspondence, and daily confession that personal privacy is
 being redefined and, some argue, **blithely** forfeited.

4 “Young people have already embraced the frenzied commercial en-
 vironment of the digital marketplace,” says Jeff Chester, founder and
 executive director of the Center for Digital Democracy. “The prevailing
paradigm is a seamless integration of content, communication, data col-
 lection, and targeted marketing.”

5 The technological assault on our anonymity is gaining speed: Sur-
 veillance cameras and now cell phones track physical movement; com-
 puter “cookies” transmit buying habits, political affiliations, and sexual
proclivities. And now, according to *Science News* (Jan. 13, 2007),
 because computer users have “characteristic patterns of how they time
 their keystrokes [and] browse websites,” researchers are learning how to
 use “typeprints, clickprints, and writeprints, respectively, as digital forms
 of fingerprints.”

6 *New York* magazine (Feb. 12, 2007) points out that people of all ages
 are susceptible to these intrusive technologies, but it’s twentysomethings
 who are, **paradoxically**, the most savvy about how they can be watched
 and the least likely to self-censor. “In essence, every young person in
 America has become, in the literal sense, a public figure,” writes Emily
 Nussbaum, who posits that online differences represent the first true gen-
 eration gap in nearly 50 years. “And so they have adopted the skills that
 celebrities learn in order not to go crazy: enjoying the attention instead of
 fighting it.”

7 It’s tempting to write off those darn kids as narcissistic or obsessed
 with fame, as Lakshmi Chaudhry does in the *Nation* (Jan. 29, 2007).
 After all, as she points out, “Celebrity has become a commodity in itself,
 detached from and more valuable than wealth or achievement.” What’s
 received little attention, though, is the ways corporations are stacking the
 digital deck.

8 “Young people are now heavily engaged in identity exploration
 and development well into their 20s, and the Internet has become their

primary tool,” says Kathryn Montgomery, professor of communications at American University and author of *Generation Digital* (MIT Press, 2007). “Companies build brands by purposely cultivating this process, creating spaces where they’re encouraging people to pour their hearts out. It’s like a diary—but there’s no key.”

9 In February of 2007, ClickZ.com reported that Fox Interactive Media, a division of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp., which owns MySpace, had hired a high-tech ad firm to mine user profiles, blog posts, and bulletins to “allow for highly refined audience segmentation and contextual microtargeting . . . which might put it in more direct competition with the likes of Yahoo, AOL, and MSN.”

10 “I don’t think kids understand the long-term consequences of our surveillance culture. I’m not sure any of us do,” Montgomery says. “But it’s the responsibility of educators and policy makers to make sure we’re educating people about the value of privacy and what it really means to give it up.”

11 In that spirit, according to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Jan. 12, 2007), two professors at Drake University’s law school, worried that their students’ casual approach to digital correspondence could hinder their careers, started a class stressing online discretion. The lesson, according to one student, is simple: “If you are not comfortable with shouting your comments from a street corner, you probably shouldn’t convey them via electronic print.” ♦

CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. Do you have a page on Facebook, MySpace, or another social networking site? If so, which one did you choose to become a member of, and why? What information do you post, and who can see it? Alternatively, if you do not have a personal page, describe why you prefer not to participate in social networking sites.
2. What unique issues and challenges do young adults growing up with the Internet face that their parents and grandparents did not? How has “growing up digital” affected how you live? Explain.

CRAFT AND CONTENT

1. Evaluate the author’s use of examples to support the point of his essay. Can you think of any areas that could be supported with more information or another point of view? Explain.
2. Summarize Schimke’s article in a single paragraph. Remember to include the most important points of his article and the point he is trying to make on the subject of online privacy.