The Lack of Ethical Standards of Online Social Networking
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The Internet is becoming an increasingly popular forum for communication and self-expression in today’s society. Its users span all generations, seemingly beginning at the age at which one masters the hand-eye coordination required to use a computer mouse. Internet use varies from “surfing the web”, buying and selling merchandise, and playing games, to downloading music and watching television shows and movies. The Internet is also a source for social networking. This latest trend is becoming a cause for concern, however, as many Internet users do not apply the societal expectations of behavior to their online postings of photos and videos, written communication, or self-representation.

Online social networking is becoming increasingly popular. Researchers note that the use of the Internet for communication purposes supercedes music and film downloading (quoted by Shklovski, Kiesler, and Kraut, 251). According to a tracking survey conducted from April 8, 2008 to May 11, 2008 by Pew Internet and American Life Project, 73% of adults use the Internet (Fallow, 5). A study by the same group found that nearly the same percentage held true for twelve to seventeen-year-old American youth during the fall of 2000 (quoted by Greenfield, et. al, 186).

The use of social networking websites and online chat rooms is staggering. The widely popular Facebook.com began in 2004 as a way to connect students at Harvard University (Stone). The website now boasts “more than 200 million active users” who collectively upload over “850 million photos ... and 8 million videos to the site each month” (Facebook.com). The leading US competitor for Facebook.com is MySpace.com, which reached just 125 million users worldwide in December 2008 (Arrington). Additionally, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that “71% of 15- to 17-year-old Internet users participate in chat rooms” in 2001 (quoted by Greenfield, et. al, 187).

Before examining a lack of ethics, it is important to first develop a full understanding of social interactions and networking and then apply these to the realms of the Internet. According to one French analysis, social networking can be described as “a social system constructed by a collection of actors, relations among these actors (e.g., friendship, knowledge exchange), and possible attributes (e.g., age, sex) for each actor” (Assimakopoulos and Yan, 474). Social networking in a physical sense may include attendance at church or school functions, book club meetings, carpooling, and playing or supporting games in a local sports league. Recently, social networking has transitioned from being centered largely in the physical community to the virtual world: instead of mailing letters and pictures or expending time and money to meet
others face-to-face, online communication has become a much more efficient media. Indeed, “social interaction includes both the exchange of information among individuals and groups online and the influences of online interaction on offline communication” (Katz and Rice, 5). Online social networking allows for much quicker communication: individuals have the opportunity to send e-mails to local and long-distance friends, share pictures and videos online, send real-time instant messages, and create one’s own personal website or profile page. This type of communication often includes the use of popular websites such as Facebook.com and MySpace.com, as well as instant messaging programs and public forums.

Online social networking is both a contemporary and widespread phenomenon. Indeed, “research on the social consequences of the Internet is still in its relative infancy and what we know – and what we think we know – about the effects of online interaction is undergoing a constant state of revision and qualification” (McKenna and Seidman, 279). Accordingly, the ethics of behavior pertaining to online social networking are largely undeveloped.

One of the most popular – and, consequently, misused – aspects of online social networking is the sharing of photographs and videos. Before the phenomenon of personalized web pages, blog sites, and profiles, people shared a relatively low number of pictures in person or by sending them in an e-mail. Now, however, Internet users commonly document all aspects of social life. Due to the contemporary nature of online social networking, people often lack an ethical consideration of what behaviors should be displayed on the Internet. Many high school and college age students are not opposed to being “tagged” in pictures that portray behaviors they seek to hide from parents, church leaders, teachers, or coaches. The Internet is full of photos and footage exposing underage drinking, provocative clothing and behaviors, and questionable or illegal activity. As the head of the sports leadership institute at Adelphi University states, “I don’t know when partying and behavior got connected to cameras. But kids are taking pictures of everything they are doing” (O’Toole). Through picture and video postings, Internet users appear to endorse actions that had been previously seen as socially unacceptable.

As with any new fad that lacks clear standards, however, society steps in when a community strongly believes that certain actions overstep social boundaries. The public is quickly discovering the consequences of a disregard for ethical concerns. ThreeSixty, an online journal supported by the University of St. Thomas, reported in 2006 that “Eden Prairie High School suspended 13 students from extracurricular activities for posting photos of themselves consuming illegal substances on the popular social-networking site Facebook” (Bi).

Additionally, many Internet users do not censor their written conversations when communicating through online media such as e-mail, chat rooms, or so-
cial networking websites. The informal nature of e-mail leads many people to discuss things “they would never put in a letter” (DePree and Jude, 45). Without a doubt, the same observation can be applied to online social networking as well. An all-too-fitting example is the site JuicyCampus.com, which calls itself “the place to spill the juice about all the crazy stuff going on at your [college] campus. It’s totally anonymous – no registration, login, or email verification required” (JuicyCampus.com). Not surprisingly, colleges are beginning to monitor their students’ actions online. Students are being reprimanded not only for their photo or video postings, but for their speech as well. Two athletes at Louisiana State University were let go “after making disparaging comments on Facebook, and a Colorado football player and cross country runner were issued harassment tickets by campus police after sending a racially threatening Facebook message to a Hispanic cross country runner” (Oppenhuizen). These instances all indicate a lack of ethical consideration for the impact of one’s actions in social networking on the Internet.

Not only does the Internet provide an environment that is far less disciplined than the actual world, it also allows for the use of anonymity and modified or entirely different identities. “In anonymous online chat groups you can play charades, wear a mask, and pretend to be of a different age, gender, or appearance” (Wiszniewski and Coyne, 191). Furthermore, there is a new ease and fluidity with which people transform identities (Wiszniewski and Coyne, 191). One view of the Internet, the “reduced social cues model”, provides that “the reduced available social cues in the computer-mediated communication produce an impoverished communication experience, resulting in a deindividuating effect on the individuals involved, and thus inducing behavior that is more self-centered and less socially regulated than usual” (McKenna and Seidman, 280). Although the study authors note that this model does not accurately predict or apply to all online behavior (McKenna and Seidman, 280), the idea that many individuals do not consider the ethics of their online behavior certainly appears to hold true.

Adolescents often find the exploration of the social parameters that define acceptable online behavior quite appealing:

“The ability to be relatively anonymous in one’s online interactions… can engender a sense of freedom from the constraints and expectations placed on a person by those who know him or her. It also reduces the risks and costs of incurring social sanctions for what is said and done in the online environment” (McKenna and Seidman, 283).

On the other hand, in comparison to those who are not truthful when communicating about themselves online, individuals who feel that they express themselves accurately online tend to form more intimate relationships with those whom they meet online (McKenna and Seidman, 284). While self-exploration may allow one to become more outgoing and socially energetic, it is important
to examine the ethical concerns such behavior invites. Internet users should be mindful of the extent to which they truthfully express themselves, and the risks involved in being completely honest online. Moreover, individuals would do well to take into account the ways in which individual expressions of self – including text, video, and photographs - may be used by others. Those who socialize online should be aware that although one party may be entirely honest online, he or she cannot expect that a new online friend is using the same degree of sincerity. Finally, there is no definition of how far is “too far” in regards to exploring a new identity or pretending to be someone else on the Internet. The actions of a few people, however, indicate the wide range of problems that may arise from a disregard for the implications of unethical online portrayal.

One small-town Missouri mother strained the social boundaries of online pretense in a story that ended tragically and gained national attention. According to the police report, Lori Drew “constructed a profile of ‘good looking’ male on ‘my space’” so that she could discover what her daughter’s friend was saying about her own child online (Pokin). Drew posed as a sixteen-year-old boy named Josh, who appeared to be interested in thirteen-year-old Megan Meier (Pokin). The new friendship, however, soon took a turn for the worse, and Megan discovered demeaning bulletins online that came from classmates (Pokin). Lori Drew’s unethical misrepresentation of an online “friend” affected not only the way in which Megan’s friends valued her, but her own self-worth. Drew’s actions are believed to be largely responsible for Megan’s suicide.

Although the case of Megan Meier’s death is certainly extreme, it points to a sincere need for some sort of ethical standards for online social networking. While some exploration in an online identity is generally acceptable, it becomes a problem when it knowingly and intentionally leads another to believe misconstrued or false information. Another issue is encountered in cases of sexual predation, which has become much more prevalent with the recent introduction of social networking through the Internet. In March of 1998, just over ten years ago, 41-year-old Francis Kufrovich became the first American to be “sentenced for Internet pedophilia” (Quinn, 137-138). Today, the number of sexual predators who use the Internet to seek minors willing to meet and have sex is astounding. In just three days, 50 men arrived at a house in Southern California prepared to be sexually intimate with a twelve or thirteen-year-old child (Hansen). The men, who were age 19 to 65 and included a high school teacher, rabbi, and an employee of the Department of Homeland Security, had actually conversed with police decoys instead of children (Hansen). Though this example provides an argument that there are benefits of creating illusory and false personas on the Internet, the fact that such methods are needed to capture criminals surely highlights a lack of ethical standards.

With such extensive consequences of many aspects of online social networking – photos, videos, written communication, and intentional misrepresen-
tation of self – it is hard to introduce new ethical standards that will adequately address problems without being too restrictive of the freedoms that make the Internet so unique and popular. Instead, Internet users should simply apply the same societal parameters that exist in the non-virtual world. A good place to begin is by evaluating the possible outcomes of online activity and setting specific restrictions on behavior. Given the knowledge of the possible repercussions of documenting illegal or unethical behaviors, one should consider the effects before posting such actions online. Many Internet users might critique this suggestion – and rightly so – by noting the relatively small number of cases in which people are held responsible for their actions in proportion to the total number of instances in which individuals make their photos, videos, and comments available online, even within the confines of a private forum or profile. However, a more cautious perspective on the issue would surely argue that it is better to be safe than sorry. If a reasonable person might expect harm from online behaviors, those actions should be avoided. Furthermore, if an individual would not feel comfortable having his or her actions exposed to others in person – that is to say, if the thought of an individual’s questionable activities being discovered by one’s mother, professor, or coworker is uncomfortable – he or she should not consider it acceptable (or a good idea, at that) to make such information available online.

Clearly, there is an immediate need for the application of those ethical guidelines present in the physical world to be imposed upon the realms of online social networking. Currently, there is very little recognition of the fact that use of the Internet for communication presents many of the same risks one might find if their actions were present outside of the virtual world. The current misuse of the Internet for photo and video postings of socially unacceptable behaviors, uncensored speech, and misleading self-representation exemplify the concern for a revision of behavior in regards to online social networking.

WORKS CITED


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