

Safety on Communal Websites

Adapted from Texas Woman's University Website

<http://www.twu.edu/o-sl/counseling/SelfHelp066.html>

Students are taking advantage of technology to communicate in new and different ways. At the same time, it is important to understand how people may take advantage of you using the technology. Thinking through where and how information about you is made available to others can help you maintain the level of privacy you wish to have and increase your level of safety and security. Communal websites (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, Xenga, etc.) offer the attraction of being able to communicate with an ever-growing circle of friends and acquaintances. At the same time, they offer more opportunities for others to have and use information about you in a way you had not predicted or wished.

Here are a few things to consider when registering on a communal information site:

- Default security settings provided by these sites are relatively low because the sites assume that you want as many people to have as much information about you available as possible. If all you do is register for the site and provide the information they request, it is easy for third parties to find you and to know about you, based on the information you provide. If you choose to use one of these sites, it is important that you investigate the types of security settings that are available and to understand how you can control access to your information.
- What happens here stays here...forever! You must assume that information you post on your website will always and forever be available to someone. Even if you put up information that, an hour later you choose to remove, you must assume that, in that hour, someone has viewed that information, copied it, and posted or stored it elsewhere. It is probably better, in most cases, to be cautious about what you post about yourself and others. "Cute" or "angry"

motivations for placing material on pages had led many to regret their decisions later, after they had time to think about and suffer the consequences of the ramifications of their actions.

- It is critical for you to understand that your friends may not have the same rules or concerns you have about who may obtain information about you available to them. More and more, students are finding that their friends have posted pictures and personal information about them on their pages which the student would never choose to put on his or her own page. For example, university police departments on several campuses have already used pictures posted by students on communal websites to identify and arrest students involved in illegal activities. Digital cameras and mobile phones with cameras make it easy to record, upload and display events almost instantly.
- While communal websites portray themselves to its users as safe and secure, the reality is that they base these claims on the assumption that everyone using the site is honest and following the rules they have created. This makes them feel like they are being responsible. However, there are hundreds of cases of users creating accounts by lying about who they are. For example, some students think it's "funny" or "cute" to use the information they have about others to create profiles for them, without the knowledge of that person. These profiles often contain false and damaging information for the unsuspecting student.
- An assumption is often made that information posted on personal websites is accurate and truthful. If you look for someone with particular attributes, you are running the risk that this person has developed an on-line "persona" that makes them feel better, but isn't accurate or truthful. While it is certainly true that this happens in face-to-face communications as well, the internet makes it harder to have as many verbal and non-verbal cues available to help you make those decisions.
- Third parties are getting smarter about how to use information contained in these pages. Police departments and university administrators routinely use

these pages to detect "problems" among students. These include illegal behavior, threats to others or self, violations of student codes of conduct, etc. In addition, potential employers are now routinely searching these sites as another way to gather information about the character of potential employees. There have already been documented cases of applicants being refused employment because of the websites they maintained, which show them in a less-than-flattering light to employers.

If you are concerned about someone behaving inappropriately towards you, counsellors at the University Counselling Service are available to assist you with coping and problem solving. They can be reached by dialling 9514 1177 or by emailing them at student.services@uts.edu.au .