



MySpace

Unraveled

**A Parent's Guide
to Teen Social Networking
from the Directors of BlogSafety.com**

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CHAPTER 1

Online Socializing Basics

WELCOME TO WEB 2.0—the everywhere, all-the-time, multimedia, multidevice, downloadable *and* uploadable, user-driven Internet. Although many of us may not be aware of all the Web’s capabilities these days, rest assured that our teens are. Not only have they figured out Web 2.0, but they’re also among its most experienced producers, videographers, DJs, VJs, publishers, podcasters, and mobloggers (mobile bloggers).

Of course, teenagers aren’t necessarily aware of all the Web knowledge they possess. They don’t really think about whether they’re creating multimedia and socializing online or offline. They just produce and socialize, using tools that happen to involve the Internet, such as instant messaging, blogs, chat, texting on phones, and social networking.

What Is Social Networking?

Social networking wasn't coined by teens; they don't use the term to describe their online activities. Young people just socialize. They update their profiles, post comments, blog, add friends (like buddies on a buddy list), and chat on what have become known by us adults as social-networking sites.

As we adults struggle to find the language that describes this phenomenon, teens are speeding ahead, making it up as they go, including the language and the tools and their uses. To them, these sites are just another tool for socializing. Sometimes, teens call these sites *online communities*, but for most of them, the line between online and offline is decidedly blurred.

Trying to define social networking is very much like trying to pin down a moving target, because it's evolving so quickly. In its earliest phase, social networking was either blogging (having an online journal or being an amateur commentator) or socializing (finding friends and connecting with them).

A *blog* (short for *Web log*) is simply a Web page anyone can create without any technical know-how. Blogs were and still are easy to do because companies have created tools that are very much like word-processing applications. By simply typing words onscreen and dragging photos from their hard drives to the page, bloggers ushered in the era of desktop publishing for the Web: All of a sudden, anyone could post a Web page, and teenagers did so with a vengeance.

A parallel development was the pure social networking (more about connecting than personal punditry) that started in the '90s but really took off in 2003 with Friendster.com (**FIGURE 1.1**).

Meanwhile, blogging kept getting more interactive and adding more features, with young people fueling this process. They have made it as much about casual communication and socializing as it is about publishing and journaling. The teen version of blogging is now better described as social networking. Adult pundits, researchers, hobbyists, and many teens to this day continue to do the old kind of blogging: blogging with reader feedback (and now photos).



FIGURE 1.1 Friendster was one of the original social-networking sites.

Creative Networking

MySpace was the turning point for social networking. Unlike Friendster, which arrived on the scene at about the same time, it allowed users to combine the media-rich self-expression that blogging was beginning to offer with multiple socializing tools (IM, email, comments, buddy lists, discussion boards, and chat). Suddenly, there was something seemingly made to order for teens. You could call it creative networking or social producing—maybe even collective self-expression.

Friendster, to be fair, has since added a bunch of self-expression features, but it was MySpace's embrace of both publishing and socializing tools—when it mattered, when teens were looking for something even more social than blogs—that made it a traffic-growth record-breaker (**FIGURE 1.2**).

By mid-2005, within two years of MySpace's debut as a social-networking site, *Business Week* reported that MySpace was getting more page views than Google, and by early 2006, MySpace was welcoming around 200,000 new members a day. Overnight, it seemed, the site's population was bigger than the world's most-populated cities.

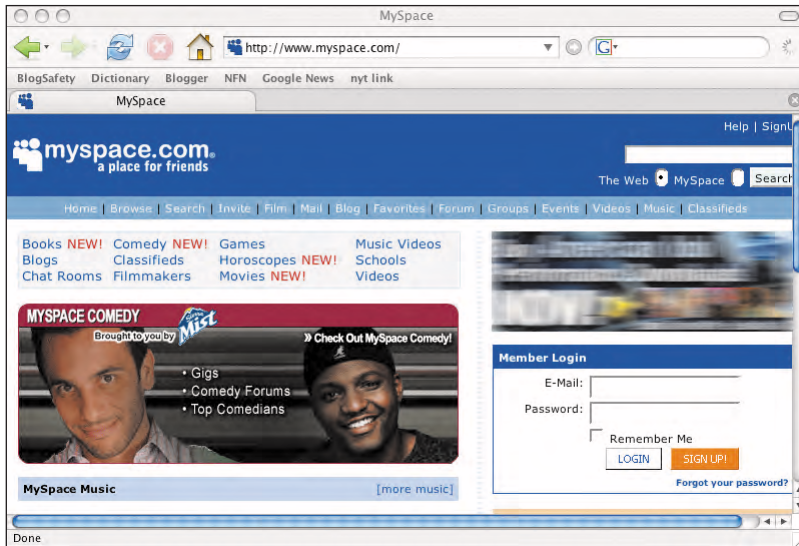


FIGURE 1.2 MySpace ushered in social producing and creative networking.

The New York Times and *The Wall Street Journal* have described MySpace as a combination of an alternate-reality game, a nightclub with lots of beautiful people and wannabes, MTV, and a teenager’s bedroom—a place where, as the *Times* put it, “grownups are an alien species” (“Do You MySpace?” by Alex Williams, August 28, 2005).

In other words, teens took the site’s name literally: It was *their* space. Grownups—especially parents—were not even on the radar screen of the average MySpace user. Despite growing evidence that parents were checking out their kids’ MySpace activities, young people were in denial.

Part of what made MySpace so fun for them was the very fact that parents weren’t there; it was *teen* space, very much like their own rooms with the door closed or a party when parents are out of town. Yes, it was public, but “private” in a way—something like when kids go off to college. And MySpace held another contradiction that teens like: “safe” (anonymous) but with just enough riskiness to make it cool, and individual but also delightfully collective.

Young people today have more awareness of the public aspect of social networking, of course. But back to its appeal. . .

MySpace—in fact, the whole Web now—is basically whatever anybody wants it to be. And this is the key to understanding teens and Web 2.0: MySpace, social networking, and Web 2.0 in general are different experiences for everyone who uses them. Why? Because teenagers use MySpace for different things.

Profiles: The New ‘Chat’

Some teens spend all their MySpace time checking comments on their profiles and commenting on their friends’ profiles, noting how their photos are ranked, and where they’re ranked on their friends’ “Top Friends” lists. In these cases, MySpace is purely social.

KEY PARENTING POINT

We parents can understand the social Web much better by talking with our own kids about how they use it, rather than relying on reading news stories about it.

Designing and Decorating Spaces

Other teens are into visual self-expression. How you decorate your space says a lot about you. Some teens change background music, graphics, fonts, photos, and links often; it’s a lot easier than redecorating one’s bedroom, and a lot more people see it.

Creating a profile is also a way to experiment with identity—something teenagers do a lot and something psychologists say they’re supposed to be doing. For some MySpace users, though, profile customization isn’t just about visuals; it’s also a way of showing off their technical sophistication. MySpace lets people add to their spaces software code they’ve written or downloaded from other sites, such as PimpMySpace.org and MySpaceCode.com. With this special code, people can add effects like

glittery text, animations, clip art, and *avatars* (animated representations of themselves).

A Public Journal

For some MySpace users, the space is all about blogging or being a writer—updating their online journals every day, every week, or whenever the spirit moves them. It’s like an online diary, which is a bit of an oxymoron, because this “diary” is far from private. Some users try to gain at least a little control over who reads their entries, however, by registering as 14- or 15-year-olds, in which case they have the option of letting only people on their friends lists see what they write (though MySpace is expected to change this policy soon, so that anyone can go private). Some parents and law-enforcement people aren’t crazy about that.

Interest Communities

MySpace has all sorts of communities.

There are very personal ones, like the people on a user’s friends list, and absurdly giant personal communities, like the people on the friends list of someone who’s planning to win a virtual popularity contest.

There are also macro interest communities, such as the Music, Film, Books, and Games groups. Of these, the largest by far is Music, the original MySpace community. For a lot of MySpacers, that community is what the site is all about.

Then there are groups one can join to talk about things like hobbies, sports, politics, and parenting (yes, there are parenting groups on MySpace!).

Even entire high schools have created their own communities, run by a student moderator who has been designated by participants.

As with all technologies, there are an upside and a downside to online communities. Teens can learn a lot in groups about things like national politics. For example, we have a 17-year-old Nevada friend who participates in a group moderated by a young person in Washington, D.C. But negative or destructive interests can also be reinforced in an online community; see Chapters 5 and 6 for more on the risks of social networking and how it can be done safely.

Teens' blogs and social-networking spaces are just online extensions or representations of themselves and their lives, with an intriguing, unsettling dose of good ol' Internet anonymity thrown in to keep things interesting.

A Parents'-Eye View

MySpace profiles can be pretty jarring to parents when they check out the site for the first time.

The profiles may have a disheveled look, in the way that kids and their rooms sometimes look to adults. Then there are the photos, some of which seem over the top to parents thinking about who else is viewing them. You may have seen this effect in local TV news stories, in what sometimes seems like a ratings grab: the shocked looks on parents' faces when a reporter takes them to a page of search results displaying profiles of teens from the high school their children attend.

What parents are seeing, in effect, is what adolescents have been doing and saying for eons in more private spaces like the local malt shop, college keg parties, the mall, or behind the bleachers at a football game on a Friday night.

What's very different here is that all the "Ps"—peers, parents, predators, police, and policymakers—are thrown into the same space, which makes for a volatile potion! It's definitely shaking up adults.

What we need to keep in mind is that these kinds of teen self-expression have been going on for generations and that the content is not always "real." It's an act in a lot of cases. Remember? We experimented with who we were when we were at parties too. We're not saying everybody on MySpace is acting out, showing off, or experimenting with personas. Not even all the teenagers are, of course.

Teens Are Figuring It Out

OK, so experimenting with who they are is typical teenage fare.

"But it's *public*," you may say.

Exactly. That's what teen social networkers have been in denial about: that we parents can actually *watch* them at this giant party.

Adults aren't the only ones who have been affected by all the media coverage of MySpace, however. Teens are becoming very aware that this isn't a truly private space where they can let their hair down away from adult scrutiny.

This growing awareness is both good and bad from a parent's perspective. The really good news is that kids are getting smarter. They know that what they post on MySpace and other social-networking sites can be exploited by peers and strangers, and that they can lose control of what they upload. Comments, photos, and videos can be copied and pasted in other Web sites, shared on file-sharing networks, and passed around in IMs and emails.

KEY PARENTING POINT

If you suspect that your kids don't know, by all means ask them if they're careful about what they say and upload on MySpace, and whether they've been harassed by peers or strangers and how they handled it.

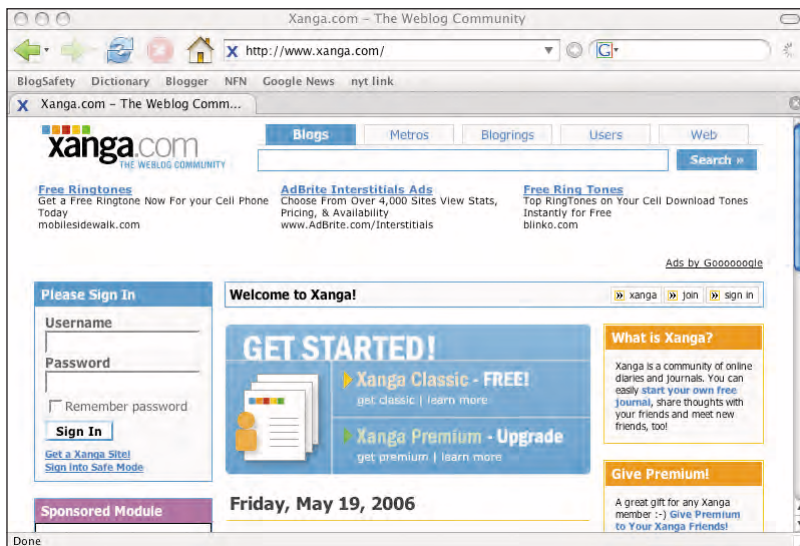


FIGURE 1.3 Xanga is No. 2 in popularity among 12- to 17-year-olds, according to the latest figures from online research firm eMarketer.

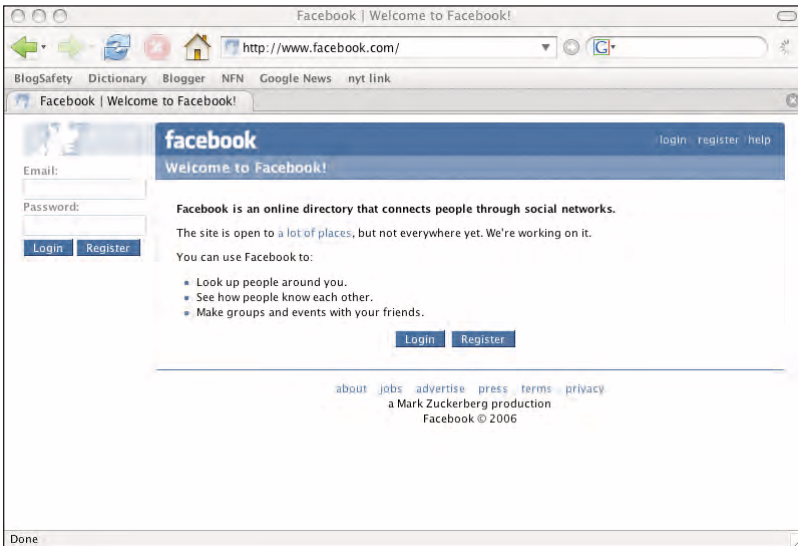


FIGURE 1.4 Facebook, in eMarketer’s Top 6 social-networking sites, is represented on every four-year college and university campus in the United States.

The bad news about this growing awareness of adult scrutiny is that young MySpace users may just move on. Although it might seem strange to consider this bad news, keep in mind that there are zillions of other social-networking sites where kids can go (**FIGURES 1.3** and **1.4**). And many of these sites are less accountable, at least to shareholders. In fact, some of them, like myYearbook.com, are teeny private companies started by high-school students on their spring break (**FIGURE 1.5**). All these options make it all the more difficult for parents to keep track of their teens’ online activities. And the number of these sites is only increasing.

Multiplying Like Rabbits

The sites we hear about in the news and Nielsen/NetRatings’ Top 10 barely scratch the surface of community sites where kids can register for free from home or anywhere there’s an Internet connection.

Wikipedia.org, the collaborative online encyclopedia, links to nearly 5 dozen in its list of “notable social-networking sites.”

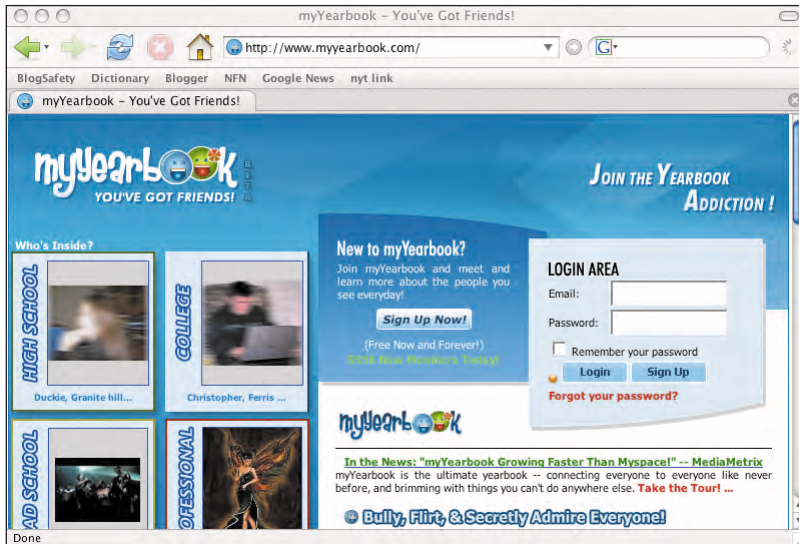


FIGURE 1.5 The site myYearbook, No. 4 on the comScore Media Metrix list in December '05, was started by high-school students on their spring break.

KEY PARENTING POINT

It might be informative to check out some of these other social networks to see how people use them and then ask your children whether they use more than one. An 18-year-old American au pair in The Netherlands whom we've interviewed told us she maintains pages on MySpace, LiveJournal, and Xanga because different friends use these sites, and she wants to be able to stay in touch with all of them.

There are narrow-interest sites revolving around specific music genres; geographically oriented sites (from metro areas to whole countries); counter-culture sites; teen-only sites; social-elite, invitation-only sites; college-oriented sites; brand-related sites hosted by marketers. . . the list goes on.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation said in May 2006 that it had a list of some 200 social-networking sites (though it's not sharing its list with the public). We believe that the FBI's number is conservative, because Web users soon will be able to create their own social-networking sites if they want to, just as they can now create their own Web pages, blogs, podcasts, and vlogs (video blogs).

Social networking is also happening all over the world. Swedish, Korean, Portuguese, Chinese, Estonian, and Indian parents have a lot of the same questions and concerns we have, except that they concern Lunarstorm.se, Cyworld.com, Orkut.com, QQ.com, Connect.ee, and Hi5.com, to name just a few top sites in other countries (**FIGURES 1.6 through 1.9**).



FIGURE 1.6 More than 90 percent of Sweden’s high-school students are members of Lunarstorm, according to the *International Herald Tribune*.



FIGURE 1.7 Orkut is a hugely popular Google site in Brazil; 11 million of its 15 million users socialize there.



FIGURE 1.8 Connect.ee is a popular social-networking site in Estonia.



FIGURE 1.9 Hi5 is a San Francisco-based social-networking site that’s a favorite among young Net users in India.

Teen social networking is, in effect, beyond control except maybe in individual homes.

Even at home, we can say “no more MySpace,” but you can see that there are burgeoning alternatives and work-arounds in and beyond the home. Laws and filters can try to block them in specific spaces, such as federally funded schools and libraries. But with wireless broadband

Internet connections now or soon available anywhere via phones, game players, video music players, PDAs, and laptops, the reach of these automated parental controls is diminishing rather than expanding.

We online-safety advocates have been saying for more than a decade that there is no substitute for engaged parenting. Well, we are saying it louder now. But that engagement, as you'll discover throughout this book is less about control than it is about communication.

Not Their Parents' Web

We need to understand that the Web, as our teenagers use it, is not just a productivity tool or a more convenient way to find information—not even a way to share photos with distant relatives. It's not a tool as we adults see it. It's an extension of teenagers themselves.

Fast Company magazine recently interviewed Evan Rifkin, co-founder of TagWorld.com, a rapidly up-and-coming "social networking plus media hosting" site. Rifkin said in that interview, published in the June 2006 issue, "People want to live their lives online." This is, in fact, what's happening with our kids, for whom the distinction between online and offline is blurring rapidly, as we mentioned earlier.

Because of its flexibility and all the different forms of interaction and self-expression MySpace allows, young people are able to move their lives online too. Just as water finds outlets and cracks that we never knew about, teenagers found MySpace.