

Faceless no more: Social networking comes with a price

As Canadians rush to embrace websites such as Facebook and MySpace, some fail to consider how their lives will be exposed

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MATT HARTLEY
FROM SATURDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
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Jennifer Porter is a little freaked out.

The 17-year-old is hunkered over a sheaf of papers scattered across a spotty Tim Hortons table in Ajax, Ont., one hand flipping pages, the other twirling an oversized blue earring. She brushes an errant lock of sandy blonde hair away from her face, looks up and giggles nervously. "That's kind of creepy," she says.

Indeed.

What she's looking at is quite the biography — everything from her cellphone number, home address and a map to her work (she's a lifeguard). All of it has been furnished by the man sitting in front of her — a man she's never met.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Scott Ford of Toronto (top) was unaware how much personal information about him was easily accessible on the Internet. He doesn't think that Facebook and other social networks are doing enough to protect their users. Jennifer Porter (below) works on her computer at Queen's. She was shocked that a stranger could learn so many details about her life by simply browsing her Facebook profile. (*GEOFF ROBINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL and HARRISON SMITH/FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL*)

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If you knew Ms. Porter, you'd probably be surprised at her lack of common sense.

She is leaving her home in the Toronto suburb for Queen's university in Kingston, Ont. in a few days to study biomechanical engineering. She's already packed her Nirvana CDs and her tenor sax, and no doubt her earthy good looks will have the boys stealing second glances in the library. She's articulate and quick-witted (if perhaps a tad innocent); in an era of *Gossip Girl* and *The Hills*, Ms. Porter reads Sylvia Plath and John Irving.

Globe Audio



She probably never missed curfew and was the neighbourhood's favourite babysitter.

Globe reporter Matt Hartley will take readers' questions about the pitfalls of putting your identity online, and how best to behave in a world where you are on display, from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. ET Tuesday. Join the Conversation at that time or leave a question in advance.

And yet there she sits with myriad details of her life before her, furnished by me, a *Globe and Mail* reporter, who found Ms. Porter's profile on Facebook and then reconstructed her life using nothing but freely available websites, such as Google Maps and Canada411.com.

Aside from knowing where she lives, where she works and where she will soon rest her head, our investigation also turned up her home and cellphone numbers, when she's turning 18 and that her boyfriend has already left to go back to the University of Western Ontario in London, Ont.

Oh, and pictures, too. Pictures of Ms. Porter from her recent trip to the Rogers Cup tennis tournament, a few of her with her boyfriend at the July 7 John Mayer concert in Toronto and others of her and her friends relaxing in a hot tub.

She's shocked that someone she has never met could learn this much about her just from the information she posted on Facebook.

"It's funny because when you called, I was having dinner with my boyfriend. He asked who it was and I said I had no clue but he got my cellphone number off Facebook," she said.

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- **A 24-year-old Calgary woman posts her cellphone number, e-mail address, and the name of the Kelowna motel where she and three of her friends will spend a June weekend partying. In addition to nicknaming the event the "Erotic Party," the women joke about finding "some hot men to buy us dinner and drinks."**
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Canadians are embracing social media sites at a breakneck pace. According to the most recent data from comScore Inc., nearly 17 million Canadians have a Facebook profile, 4.5 million are on MySpace, 14.5 million visit YouTube every month, 3.6 million upload photos to the sharing site Flickr.com. Social networkers use these resources to help shape their identity, essentially branding themselves and broadcasting their public image around the world.

But the exposure comes with a price.

While our digital footprint expands, privacy erodes. More and more, social networkers who are not obsessively careful face the prospect of identity theft, inadvertently marring their own reputation or even inviting the threat of physical harm. As the dangers broaden so too do the reactions: provincial and federal governments are taking the lead in educating users and probing whether social networks are really doing all they can to protect privacy.

While all of these social networking sites offer varying degrees of security and privacy protection — such as restricting who can view certain parts or the entirety of their profile — many users leave the drapes wide open. Whether it's by ignorance or simply a willingness to trust their private details to the public, they leave their photos, their blog postings and their personal information freely available for anyone to discover.

During a two month-long investigation, *The Globe and Mail* tracked more than a dozen Canadians through their open social networking profiles, and used freely available web tools to build detailed profiles of each individual user.

Most of the information is minutiae, details that, taken alone, don't amount to much. Yet when compiled in one or two places, a casual observer can develop a rudimentary image of a subject in just a few clicks.

For example, there's the 23-year-old Oakville woman who posted her home phone number on an open Facebook profile. Plug the number into Canada411.com for a reverse address search, and you'll find her home address, which you can then search on Google Maps and see she lives on a quiet suburban street near the Queen Elizabeth Way. More personal, she's "addicted" to the MTV show *The Hills* loves Dr. Pepper and sometimes wears contact lenses. The "events" section of her profile offers a rolling itinerary of her social life for the next month.

And yes, sometimes the information is more than minutiae.

A Toronto teen posts comments about her favourite sexual positions; a 24-year-old Saskatchewan man posts details for a huge house party he plans to hold while his parents are out of town; an 18 year old Scarborough woman lists the address to her family's apartment.

So why did we do it?

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- **A 19-year-old Edmonton woman keeps a sexually explicit Nexopia profile where she writes about her baby girl, her father, and her brother. Although it does not list her full name, the account has photos of her with her daughter. Some of the things she likes to do include talking to her mother, shaving off someone's eyebrow when he or she falls asleep, and "trying" to talk on the phone while under the influence of magic mushrooms.**
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Although some experts argue that young adults and the so-called "Me" generation somehow see the world differently than their parents, just as many are convinced today's teens and young adults are fundamentally the same as previous generations.

"The reality is that young people are using this technology to do the same stuff that they've always done and that they've been doing offline for a long time," said Anastasia Goodstein, author of *Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens are Really Doing Online*. "It has a lot to do with the culture at large, I don't think it's necessarily this generation."

Reality television shows that vault so-called ordinary people to unprecedented levels of stardom overnight reward the over-sharing of personal details, she said. They have fostered a culture that accepts and condones this kind of behaviour, she said.

"We live in a culture that is saturated with reality television and this notion of everyday people looking in a camera and speaking to these invisible audiences that are out there and are sharing their personal feelings about their roommate or becoming the next top chef," she said. "That level of openness is what has been put out there by the media and the popular culture, and I think that in many ways, young people are reflecting that back ... whether it's on MySpace or YouTube."

And many, it seems, have learned from the Paris Hilton school of winning celebrity status.

"This is a generation that has grown up watching people make very public mistakes ... and what they see is that [Ms. Hilton] only benefited from that and became a bigger brand."

Although Ms. Hilton used her sex-tape scandal as a springboard to greater fame, young people aren't thinking about the consequences and don't recognize the damage they may be doing to their reputation, she said.

It wasn't that long ago that the first thing an employer would do to vet potential hires was run their names through Google to see the extent of their online footprint. Now, most employers don't even bother with Google, they go straight for MySpace and Facebook to gauge the personality and professionalism of potential candidates.

Candice Kelsey, the author of *Generation MySpace: Helping Your Teen Survive Online Adolescence*, runs a private Christian high school with her husband near Los Angeles, Calif. Recently, they planned to hire a young woman for a coaching position, but after they viewed racy pictures and sexually explicit information on the candidate's MySpace page, they had second thoughts.

Another consequence of a media-saturated culture is that young people are learning that their identity is akin to a brand, one that they must cultivate and perpetuate online if they want to be popular and successful, Ms. Kelsey said. Their choice of role models in this attention-seeking culture are the Lindsay Lohans, Pamela Andersons and Kim Kardashians of the world.

"We live in a culture that glorifies what will grab the attention of the masses, and that tends to be things that are a little edgy and prurient," she said. "Kids are now raised on this reality TV where the goal is to get attention at all costs, even if it means humiliating yourself."

Many young people feel like they don't get enough attention from their families, their peers and their friends, and so they turn to social networks where they have the spotlight and can portray themselves in whichever manner they chose.

"MySpace and Facebook are the perfect venues to market yourself because they have an array of multimedia tools for young people to create an image of themselves and then the ability to play with that image, to test it out and change it if they need to," she said. "The greatest thing about being on these social networks is that every day you can change who you are."

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- **A 20-year-old Edmonton man is one of several who create public event listing for their birthday, and post any one, or all, of a home address, cellphone number, driving directions and other relevant information. A 16-year-old girl from Peneticton, B.C., for instance, suggested a black-light party where people draw on each other in the dark. And a 21-year-old Vancouver woman held her birthday at the Vancouver Aquarium and posted a schedule of events that she and her friends would attend. (2:15 p.m.: Sea Otter Talk.)**
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The online culture of social networks places new pressures on young people that are merely extensions of the everyday pressures they face. Young men define their masculinity by how many pretty girls they can add to their list of friends; girls are under pressure to get attention from the boys.

These pressures, Ms. Kelsey said, encourage girls to push the envelope with what they will post on their profile and what they will say. Whereas before the Internet, girls would experiment with their sexuality in more subtle ways, today it's happening online.

"For girls, once they experiment with their sexuality online with pictures and by texting photos and things like that, it's very hard to then not become the person that you're playing at being," Ms. Kelsey said. "I've seen so many girls who test it out — they put up a couple of pictures of themselves, maybe kissing their girlfriend or in their bras and panties — and before you know it that's who they become. It becomes their identity and that's how they get this attention and they feel they can't get away from that."

Sometimes, the revelations allow dangerous people a way in.

On July 8, Toronto Police arrested a 33-year-old Tsang Cho Ling and charged him with two counts of criminal harassment and mischief. Police say Mr. Ling had been following a 14-year-old girl that he had first spotted on the subway. Police say he followed her on several occasions.

Using a social networking site, Mr. Ling was able to determine the girl's name and who her friends were. After hacking into one of her friend's profiles, Mr. Ling contacted the girl and managed to get pictures of her. When he learned she played sports, he began showing up at her games.

Police officers eventually posed as the girl online and arranged a meeting with Mr. Ling where he was arrested.

"Police are concerned there may be other victims," read the official press release.

- **To celebrate the end of school, a fourth-year University of Toronto student, who has a private Facebook profile, posted in a public events section a map to his Collingwood, Ont. cottage and left his cellphone as the contact information.**
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It should not be that easy to uncover personal information, says Scott Ford. Presented in late August with a digital profile generated from information contained on his Facebook page and his account with the school friends re-connection site Where Are You Now? (WAYN.com), Mr. Ford was visibly unnerved.

"This is bizarre," he said. "I've always been the kind of person to talk a lot, and when I'm speechless that's because I'm worried. I'm way beyond surprised. I'm scared."

Mr. Ford doesn't think that Facebook and other social networks are doing enough to protect their users. He signed up for a Facebook account a few years ago as a way of building his booking and promotions company, Awsum Ink (<http://awsumink.com>). But after failing to read the security certificates and the privacy warnings contained on the site, he is now worried that someone is making him a victim of identity theft.

"I know I checked boxes I shouldn't have checked, and I that I didn't check boxes I should have checked," he said. "But I don't think Facebook is there to help me out. They didn't tell me enough. It's way too easy to get an account on Facebook and not read the terms of service. I made that mistake once."

Facebook and MySpace have extensive privacy policies and encourage users to be selective about who they grant access to their profiles. Social networks allow users to decide who can have access to their profiles and can choose to allow only their friends or only people from specific "networks," which range from cities to high schools and universities or to the workplace.

However, many users simply don't read the privacy policies when they sign up.

Privacy advocates have called upon government watchdogs to take a closer look at social networking sites. Indeed, the office of Canada's federal privacy commissioner Jennifer Stoddart is currently conducting an investigation into sites such as Facebook and whether they conform to the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA). Law students interning at the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic have listed 22 separate breaches of privacy law.

"Much of the information shared on Facebook could be sensitive, including marital status, age, hobbies and photographs. Given the advent of cyberstalking and cyberharassment, the sharing of this information without express consent is especially problematic. Cyber stalkers could potentially target by age, hobbies or preferences," states the complaint.

For its part, Facebook says it views itself as a technology company first and a social networking service second, and that it is actively involved in an arms race to provide better security for its users, according to Mozelle Thompson, a policy consultant and former U.S. federal trade commissioner who has sat on Facebook's advisory board since March 2006.

"What we've found is that nobody really wants to be anonymous; they just want to determine who gets to see what information and under what circumstances. So what you're seeing here with Internet 2.0 and user-generated things generally is people taking control of information about them and trying to decide who gets to see what information.

"It's not only just reactive, but it's pro-active, saying, 'not only do i want people to know this about me, i actually want to publicize certain information about myself.' " Mr. Thompson said individuals should be free to decide what information they want to put online and how much risk they can tolerate, likening an open Facebook profile to having a phone number listed in the White Pages.

While Facebook has faced serious criticism for its privacy policies in the past, Mr. Thompson said the site's privacy policy is read by a greater percentage of its users than most other Internet sites.

"You're lucky if you have 0.001 per cent of people actually clicking on privacy policies," he said. "But at Facebook, I've seen numbers somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of users actually go in and change their privacy settings. They actually get it."

"The key is, what happens to the other people?"

Facebook's security team is led by Max Kelly, a former FBI agent and as the company has grown, it has placed a greater emphasis on the security of its users.

"Facebook always believed privacy was at the core of what they were offering people — that it's not viewed as an add-on," Mr. Thompson said. "Part of being in Facebook are the features that actually give users control of information. Privacy and security are an intimate part of that experience."

Although not as popular with Canadians as its rival, MySpace remains the world's largest social network with more than 120 million users worldwide, including one out of every four Americans.

Whenever someone signs up for a MySpace account, the first "friend" who is added to their contact list is Tom Anderson, the site's president and one of its founders. MySpace uses Tom as its resident security and safety guru. He sends blog posts about online privacy and security to members and tries to raise users' awareness of safety issues through "teachable moments" on the site.

As the social networking site with the most U.S. members, MySpace often acts as a lightning rod for social networking controversy in the U.S. Whenever a teenager posts details about a weekend party on the site, only to watch in horror as 500 people show up and trash their parents home, MySpace usually finds itself on the receiving end of some bad PR.

A spokeswoman for MySpace's security operations said the site doesn't believe there is a single solution to the challenges of Internet security and that the company meets with technology partners and law enforcement officials across the U.S. to discuss ways of improving its security architecture.

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- **In addition to detailing what seems like his entire life on Facebook — including his diehard passion for the CFL's Toronto Argonauts — a 20-year-old Ajax, Ont., man writes that his job at the Real Canadian Superstore is "pretty great in the summer and pretty terrible at christmas [sic]." The day he leaves will be "the happiest day EVER."**
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Still, many young users simply don't think about the consequences of posting personal information, said Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner Ann Cavoukian. It's up to parents and teachers to educate young people about the need to be protective about the kind of information they reveal online, and not rely solely on the social networks, she said.

"It's not sufficient to expect the company to take full responsibility and protect your privacy to the extent you want," she said. "Privacy is all about choice. You get to choose what information you want to impart. But part of that choice is that you have to act responsibly and make a choice about what information you want protected."

Levi Johnston is a perfect example, she said. Mr. Johnston is the 18-year-old father-to-be who is engaged to 17-year-old Bristol Palin, the pregnant daughter of Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin. After Mr. Johnston was revealed to be the father of Bristol Palin's baby, the media had a field day vetting his MySpace page, where he described himself as a "fuckin redneck" who doesn't want kids.

"Those are the kind of things that seem really cool at the time when you post it, but the day after or the year after you're going to regret it," Ms. Cavoukian said. "Whatever you post on the Internet will be there forever."

As a result, an entire industry of companies specializing in cleaning up the mess that people create for themselves has sprung up. There are now dozens of online companies that will scour the Internet to clean up and monitor your online reputation.

It's a service that is increasingly being employed by parents of recent university grads, to clean up their children's online reputation before they head out into the world in search of a job, said Ms. Cavoukian. According to her research, 77 per cent of employers check the social networking profiles of young applicants before proceeding to the interview stage. As many as one third of applicants will be rejected before they even get to an interview, based purely on what exists about them online.

Social networks such as Facebook and MySpace have made great strides towards beefing up privacy protection in their online communities she said. Shortly after Facebook opened its service to anyone over the age of 13 in 2006, some of the company's top executives asked for a sit down meeting with Ms. Cavoukian and her office to discuss privacy practices.

Unlike Canada, the U.S. doesn't have independent privacy commissioners whose responsibility is to enforce privacy legislation, so often these U.S. firms seek out Canadian advice on privacy matters, she said.

But despite what some pessimists might argue, Ms. Cavoukian doesn't believe that privacy is dead.

"It's not that privacy is dead, it's that it's changing," she said. "It's being transformed in this new online world of ubiquitous data availability. The reason privacy is not dead and will never die is because privacy forms the basis of all of our freedoms and our liberty. People forget that ... if you look at it historically, the first thing that happens when a free and democratic society morphs into a totalitarian state is the loss of privacy."

For Ms. Porter, seeing so much personal information collected and documented by a stranger was enough to convince her to throw up some more locks on her Facebook account.

Before the interview, the only people who could see her profile were Facebook users who were members of either her high school or university network, which, although limited, is a group which encompasses thousands of users she's never met. She said she's happy with her security settings.

Still, there are some things she won't be posting.

"I'm obviously not going to put down my address and where I'm going to be every five minutes," she said. "Or my class schedule. That's the kind of thing that would bother me. If I had my course schedule on there ... because people already know what university I go to."

But she still might get her boyfriend to take a look at her profile's privacy settings one more time.

Just in case.


With files from Matthew Trevisan and David Hutton

On Monday, look for Part 2 of the series in Report on Business: Matt Hartley looks at how social networks have affected consumer privacy and reports on the federal privacy commissioner's plans to safeguard consumer information.

And on Tuesday, we'll run Part 3 — David Hutton reports on the efforts that one Canadian-based social network is making to root out underage users, who, studies show, can be far more revealing than older social networkers.

Also on Tuesday Join the Conversation at 1 p.m. ET with Matt Hartley to discuss privacy in the age of social networks.

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