

Online Privacy:  
Make Youth Awareness and Education a Priority

March 2009

## Online Privacy: Make Youth Awareness and Education a Priority

For young people today, going online to connect and interact with others is a natural and integral part of daily life. As they log on to e-mail, blog, chat, or participate in online social networks, young people no longer see the Internet as simply a tool, but rather as an extension of their social lives and public identities.

While most cyber experiences are extremely positive, many young people appear to go on “auto-pilot” when they are online, not thinking twice about broadcasting intimate details about themselves on various websites. Regrettably, this has resulted in abuses and unanticipated consequences ranging from cyberbullying, identity theft, and stalking, to school expulsions and future job prospects being ruined by indiscretions posted online.

While many young people are aware of the possibility of physical threats arising from Internet activities, such as those posed by cyber predators, few fully understand the range of additional risks associated with posting too much personal information online. Most are not conscious that information can remain in cyberspace virtually forever, and can be viewed, copied and downloaded by millions of people. As a result, the personal details they share today can be used to embarrass, hurt, or stigmatize them at a later date. Similarly, their online activities can be used covertly for marketing or commercial purposes.

The Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario (IPC) is mandated to build public awareness about Ontario’s access to information and privacy laws. Since 2006, when social networking sites first began making headlines as a technological and social phenomenon, the IPC has made it a priority to educate the public, stakeholders, operators of websites, and especially young people about their shared responsibility to protect personal information online.

The focus of our message to young people has been that they need to be proactive and to think before they post. Nothing is ever deleted from the Internet. So we’ve encouraged them to consider that the “7 Ps” (Parents, Police, Predators, Professors, Prospective Employers, Peers, and Pals) can view their postings online and to think about whether they are comfortable with the information they are sharing. We teach them that privacy is about freedom of choice and that they can control how much personal information they post online and who is granted access to it.

We’ve used a variety of channels to reach out to youth. These include school programs, media, conferences, and partnerships with organizations that work closely

with young people. We've also participated in helping to form an innovative peer-to-peer network to build awareness among youth.

At the same time, we've also worked closely with key stakeholders, like Facebook and MySpace executives, who have the capacity to make privacy-enhancing options available to users and to spread the word about using those options to make choices about how much personal information to share online and with whom.

The IPC is part of a global community of Privacy Commissioners and Data Protection Authorities that are drawing attention to the pressing need to engage young people in managing the risks associated with their online activities. With our international counterparts, we've been gathering momentum behind this issue, from all parts of the world.

As we look ahead to further opportunities to enhance awareness about the privacy challenges that youth face on the Internet, it is useful to reflect back on our achievements to date, and to explore how the various channels used have contributed to supporting our educational goals.

## I Engaging Social Networking Websites

### **Facebook**

In 2005, as Facebook was preparing to open its website to the general public, senior executives approached the IPC seeking our input on their privacy measures. We recognized immediately that collaborating with Facebook was a great opportunity to improve the range of privacy controls available to users and to increase awareness about exercising those options.

Since Facebook was still relatively new to the Internet, our first step was to develop a better understanding of the perspective of Facebook's core users – students and youth. In August 2006, the IPC convened a focus group of 18 university students from Ryerson University, Queen's University, the University of British Columbia, George Brown College, the University of Toronto, and York University, to discuss online social networking.

The group's feedback was illuminating. Almost all of the students were active users of Facebook and strongly favoured it. Most were completely unaware of any potential privacy issues, had not read the website's privacy policies, and did not know anything about the privacy filters available for their use. It was clear that more education in this area was urgently required.

Since then, Facebook and other social networking websites have exploded in popularity and are obviously here to stay. More than ever, it is critical to build awareness among young people about the importance of exercising good judgment when using social networking websites. To address this need, the IPC produced several resources aimed specifically at Facebook users:

- In October 2006, the IPC and Facebook released a joint brochure, *When Online Gets Out of Line: Privacy – Make an Informed Online Choice*, which encourages university, college, and high school students to carefully consider their privacy options before posting their personal information online.
- In May 2007, the IPC released *How to Protect Your Privacy on Facebook*, a tip sheet that outlines detailed steps on how to set privacy settings on Facebook to the optimal level of protection. The tip sheet was updated in 2009.
- In October 2007, the IPC produced another tip sheet, *Reference Check: Is Your Boss Watching? Privacy and Your Facebook Profile*, which warns Facebook users that information they post on their profile can be searched by current and prospective employers.
- In July 2008, Dr. Ann Cavoukian, Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, and Chris Kelly, Chief Privacy Officer of Facebook, produced a DVD, *Be a Player: Take Control of Your Privacy on Facebook*, which provides step-by-step instructions on how to use the privacy settings on Facebook.

The IPC's excellent working relationship with Facebook has allowed us to influence the site's privacy practices as they evolve over time. In December 2007, for example, the IPC wrote to Facebook to express strong concerns about its new *Beacon* ad service program. *Beacon*, which ultimately stirred great controversy among Facebook users, tracks subscribers' activities on external partner websites and publishes this information on news feeds that can be viewed by the subscriber's social network. The tracking continues even when users have logged off of Facebook and declined to have their activities published on news feeds.

As a result of the IPC's intervention and the criticism of other privacy advocates and users, Facebook eventually decided to offer its users the choice to opt out of *Beacon* altogether.

The IPC strongly believes that building collaborative relationships with website operators such as Facebook puts us in a better position to influence how privacy safeguards are shaped and delivered and to inform users about their privacy choices.

## II Education and Outreach

### Teacher's Guides

The IPC has been working to educate students about open government and privacy within the school system for several years, evolving a variety of resources that support deeper awareness and understanding. Our elementary and secondary school program, *What Students Need to Know about Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy*, is designed for students in grades 5, 10, 11 and 12. It provides guidance to teachers on delivering classes and activities that focus on the concepts of freedom of information and personal privacy.

In 2008, we updated the grade 10 teacher's guide to include a module about on-line social networking. The module focuses on the potential privacy implications of posting personal information to a social networking site, and helps students understand the options they have to limit who has access to information about them.

### iCommish

In October 2007, Dr. Ann Cavoukian participated in *The Revealed "I": A Conference on Privacy and Identity*, hosted by prominent privacy researchers at the University of Ottawa. The conference brought together research talent and experts from academic, public, private, and not-for-profit sectors to discuss the impact of information and authentication technologies on identity.

For the purposes of the conference, the Commissioner, along with the privacy commissioners of Alberta and British Columbia, was asked to create a Facebook profile and live a "second life" on Facebook over the summer of 2007. The commissioners were then asked to discuss the results of their group experiment at the conference on a panel called "iCommish." Dr. Cavoukian offered her tips for keeping Facebook profiles as private as possible, and expressed concerns, shared by the other commissioners, that personal information posted on Facebook could be easily accessed and used for purposes other than social networking (i.e., harassment, stalking, law enforcement, employer checks, etc.). The panel generated interesting and lively discussion that highlighted the risks associated with social networking sites, but also identified the value of Facebook as a means of expressing identities online.

### School Outreach

As part of its outreach activities, the IPC visits elementary and secondary schools to speak directly to students about the privacy risks inherent in online activities. The focus is on helping students to understand their responsibility to protect their own online privacy, and on helping them understand the options available to help them do this. In our experience, these face-to-face meetings are highly effective.

We've visited a number of schools, including Havergal College, The York School and Earl Grey Senior Public School in Toronto. Sometimes the focus is quite specific. For example, in December 2006, the Commissioner was invited to speak to students and parents at Toronto's Bishop Strachan School, which was experiencing troubling incidents of cyberbullying in social networking sites and e-mail. Following the presentation to the students, the Commissioner met separately with parents, most of whom were unfamiliar with cyberbullying and other risks that online technologies present.

### **Media Interviews**

The media has an important role to play in raising public awareness of issues associated with social networking sites. The IPC regularly makes itself available for media interviews, providing tips about online privacy protection and highlighting its extensive information resources.

### **Youth Privacy Online: Take Control, Make It Your Choice!**

Conferences provide good opportunities to build awareness about online privacy issues and explore possible solutions.

In September 2008, the IPC hosted a conference in Toronto entitled *Youth Privacy Online: Take Control, Make It Your Choice!* The conference focused on the privacy risks that young people are exposed to when they use online communication tools, and looked at various methods of safeguarding personal information online.

Speakers included recognized leaders in the fields of research, education, parent advocacy, and technology. Opening remarks were made by Dr. Ann Cavoukian, Information and Privacy Commissioner of Ontario, the Honourable Kathleen Wynne, Ontario Minister of Education, and Parry Aftab, well-known Internet safety advocate and lawyer. Presentations were also made by several Canadian researchers, representatives from the education sector, and technology representatives from Facebook, Microsoft, and Research in Motion. A rousing keynote address was delivered by Barbara Coloroso, internationally renowned parent advocate and author. She gave the audience entertaining and insightful advice about teaching children to think critically and ethically when faced with challenging situations.

Conference participants came away with a clearer understanding of the role that online social networking plays in the lives of young people, helping them learn, collaborate, and empower themselves. They also learned that youth may have a unique perspective on online privacy that permits open sharing of personal information within defined networks. While participants shared a sense that technology solutions will continue to evolve, providing better safeguards for personal information online, it was clear to all that these solutions will never take the place of sound judgement and effective parental guidance.

The conference proved to be a valuable learning opportunity for both speakers and participants, and sparked considerable media interest. It was an important step in focusing on the unique issues faced by young people in the online world.

### **Teenangels**

Peer-to-peer models for spreading the message about privacy to young people hold tremendous potential. Youth often see their peers as more credible sources of information, and may be more motivated to learn from them than from other authority figures.

That's why, in 2008, the IPC helped form the first Toronto Chapter of Teenangels. Founded by Parry Aftab, well-known cyber lawyer and Executive Director of WiredSafety.org, Teenangels is a charitable program that trains 13- to 18-year-old volunteers to educate other teens, younger kids, parents, and teachers about online safety, privacy and security.

In the course of their training, members of Teenangels participated in the IPC's conference *Youth Privacy Online: Take Control, Make It Your Choice!* and helped deliver workshops on online privacy and cyberbullying to students.

### **Bacchus Canada**

In trying to reach out to young people, the IPC recognizes the value in working together with organizations that have a similar interests in youth and youth issues. In September 2008, Bacchus Canada asked Commissioner Cavoukian to tape a public message for its student awareness campaign on online social networking.

Bacchus Canada, a division of The Student Life Education Company, is a non-profit organization that seeks to promote healthy decisions about alcohol and other health issues among post-secondary students.

Dr. Cavoukian's video message, which has been posted on Bacchus Canada's Facebook page, urges viewers to be proactive about protecting their privacy online, and to educate themselves about the privacy controls available on social networking websites.

### III National and International Initiatives

#### **Resolutions on Children's Online Privacy**

On June 4, 2008, the IPC joined its counterparts across Canada in endorsing a *Resolution on Children's Online Privacy*. The Resolution, among other things, calls upon Canada's privacy commissioners to work collaboratively on developing and promoting education-based activities, pressing industry to adopt strong privacy standards and urging operators of websites to implement better privacy practices.

On October 17, 2008, at the 30th International Conference of Data Protection and Privacy Commissioners in Strasbourg, France, the IPC and other data protection authorities from around the world endorsed a similar *Resolution on Children's Online Privacy*. Like the Canadian version, the Resolution strongly urges data protection authorities to support collaborative, education-based approaches and to encourage operators of websites to adopt privacy-protective policies and measures.

The IPC is committed to the principles set out in the Resolutions, and is pleased that, through its extensive outreach activities, the IPC is already on track to meet or exceed the stated goals. The IPC looks forward to working collaboratively with other data protection authorities to advance knowledge and education in the area of youth online privacy.

#### **Report and Guidance on Privacy in Social Network Services**

The privacy and security issues associated with online communities are a matter of global concern. As a member of the International Working Group on Data Protection in Telecommunications, the IPC helped to inform the development of the *Report and Guidance on Privacy in Social Network Services* ("Rome Memorandum"), which was released on March 4, 2008. The Working Group was initiated by Data Protection Commissioners from different countries in order to improve privacy and data protection in telecommunications and media.

The Rome Memorandum includes a comprehensive list of the known privacy risks associated with the use of social networking sites and guidance on privacy-protective measures for regulators, providers and users of social networking sites. It is an important resource for the public and stakeholders on best practices for safeguarding personal information on social networking sites.



## IV Conclusion

The IPC has been extremely active in building awareness of online privacy issues among young people, especially as they related to online social networks. Using a variety of channels and media, our focus has been on helping youth understand risks and empowering them to make conscious choices about when, how, and with whom they share personal information.

Youth, like other demographic groups, can benefit tremendously from the Internet and all it has to offer. But they must do so with their eyes wide open, using their judgement to stay in control of their personal information and, ultimately, of their reputations.

The IPC looks forward to further opportunities to help make young people more privacy-savvy when they engage in online activities, and to encourage key stakeholders to make more privacy-enhancing options available online.