

News release

October 12, 2006

Think about your Privacy when selecting a social networking site: Commissioner Cavoukian

TORONTO – Posting your personal information on a social networking website without considering your privacy options is like crossing the street without looking both ways, says Ontario Information and Privacy Commissioner Ann Cavoukian. Neither is advisable.

The Commissioner and social networking website *Facebook* today 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 hitting “send.”

“Social networking sites are becoming a significant technological and social phenomenon,” said the Commissioner. “These websites help to connect people with various interests and are becoming increasingly popular with university and college students. They can offer basic information about people and also provide blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of these websites. Most offer students minimal protection.”

The Commissioner, who recently met with a group of students from six different universities to discuss how they use such social networks, is urging students from high school to university to take five minutes and read the brochure.

“When you choose to connect with your friends through a social networking website, remember that you are ultimately responsible for determining what information you share with others,” said the Commissioner. “Make sure you select a website that allows you to make real choices about how and to whom you reveal the information you post. By default, many social networking websites allow all registered users to access all the information that is posted on the website.”

“Information posted on a website with weak privacy controls may become accessible to any person online – not just your friends, but anyone from professors, prospective employers, to predators” she stressed. “Even websites with strong privacy options may be legally required to make your personal information available to certain authorized persons, such as university administrators or law enforcement agencies. Be aware of the options available to keep your sensitive information private.”

The brochure includes some specific advice, including:

“Before you begin to register or create a profile, look for the privacy statements and policies offered by your social networking service. Get to know what your privacy choices are. Keep



in mind that anything you post online may be online forever, or shared without your knowledge. Ask these questions:

- Does the service offer the choice to block availability of certain sensitive information?
- Can you limit your profile to being viewed only with your permission by those who are not “confirmed friends?”
- Are the pictures and information on your profile or in your blog appropriate?
- Are you comfortable sharing all of the information on your profile with people you have never met?

“The university students I talked with all thought that online social networking was a great way to communicate with old friends and meet new ones,” said the Commissioner. James, one of the students who met with the Commissioner, stated unequivocally, “Facebook is the most comprehensive online networking tool available for students. It acts as a dynamic expression of an individual’s natural social activities and allows for enough personal expression to attract and gain continued use.” The Commissioner responded with, “What we are trying to do with this brochure is to encourage students to make **informed** choices. Going on ‘automatic pilot’ when online is a bad idea. It is important that you take the time to make informed decisions about the site you use, the information you post, and those with whom you choose to share your information.”

The brochure is available online at www.ipc.on.ca and to everyone registered at facebook.com. The Information and Privacy Commissioner is appointed by and reports to the Ontario Legislative Assembly, and is independent of the government of the day. The Commissioner's mandate includes overseeing the access and privacy provisions of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the *Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, as well as the *Personal Health Information Protection Act*, and helping to educate the public about access and privacy issues.

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