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Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet hearing on
H.R. 5319, The Deleting On-line Predators Act of 2006
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Chairman Upton and honorable members of the Subcommittee, it is a privilege for the Pew Internet & American Life Project to be asked to testify at this important hearing. The Project is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center created to examine the social impact of the internet with grants from the Pew Charitable Trusts. We at the Pew Internet Project do not take positions on policy questions or endorse industry sectors, organizations, or individuals. Still, we try to do primary research about the impact of people's internet use that would be helpful to policy makers and other stakeholders as they consider ideas to improve technology or mitigate its harms.

There is pervasive use of the internet among teenagers

We have been doing research for seven years about how teenagers use the internet and how families are addressing challenges related to new technologies. Our national surveys show that internet use is pervasive among teens and that families are spending time trying to work through all the issues that brings into their homes.

Fully 87% of Americans of middle- and high-school age – those between the ages of 12 and 17 – go online. Of those that do not currently go online, about half have had some previous internet experience, which means that, in all, 93% of American youth have used the internet at some point.

Their parents use the internet in large numbers as well – 87% of parents with teens between the ages of 12 and 17 use the internet, compared with 73% of all American adults who go online. It is clear that many parents extend themselves financially to buy computers and internet access in the belief that mastery of high-tech skills is a prerequisite for their children's future success.

Weighing the pluses and minuses, parents think the internet is a benefit to their children

Indeed, while parents believe that the internet can bring both positive opportunities and potential threats into their homes, their overall judgment is

that the internet is a good thing for their children: 67% of parents with online teens report this, and their optimism has grown markedly since we first asked the question in the year 2000.

This hearing is particularly focused on the role social networking websites such as MySpace.com and Facebook.com play in teenagers' lives. But it is important to point out that social interaction takes place in a wide variety of contexts online and has been an integral part – if not *the most compelling part* – of internet experience since the first email was transmitted in 1971.

Online social networks are popular among teenagers

Our working definition of online social networks is broad. They are “web spaces where individuals can post information about themselves, usually by creating a profile or website, and where they can connect with others in the same network.” This definition encompasses online dating sites, some instant messaging tools, collaborative software spaces, as well as popular social networking web sites like Xanga and Live Journal, which are built mainly around connecting friends via their blogs, and places like MySpace, Facebook, Tagged.com, and MyYearbook.

Social networking sites are not the same as chatrooms, though some of these sites do have discussion forums where live chat can take place. The vast majority of communication in online social networks takes place asynchronously and within the network of “friends” that the user has established.

Other research has recently documented the popularity of social networking sites among teens. A March 2006 survey of 1,160 online teenagers between the ages of 13 and 17 found that 61% of teens have personal profiles on sites like MySpace, Friendster or Xanga, and about half of them have posted pictures of themselves somewhere online.¹

Teenagers' use of these networks appears to dwarf that of adults. A Pew Internet Project survey conducted in September 2005 found that just 16% of young adult internet users between the ages of 18-29 had used an online social or professional networking site. Older users are even less likely to use the sites.

¹ See the press release from Cox Communications and link to full results here: http://www.cox.com/takecharge/survey_results.asp

Social network sites are popular because they enable new expression and activities that appeal to teenagers

There are two primary functions of social networking sites that are especially appealing to teens:

- First, the sites enable users to create and share content with others -- generally, this is content that is expressive of users' identities.
- Second, the sites enable users to communicate with others using a wide array of messaging, blogging and posting tools.

New online tools help teens explore their identities

Our surveys of teens show that 57% of online teens have created some kind of content for the internet. This includes blogging, creating websites, posting photos, written material, videos, songs, or other artwork. Teens also remix content they find online into something new and share that online with others. Much of this content when posted on social networking or other websites is expressive of their view of the world – a view that can be playful, angry, riveting, revolting, angst-ridden, hilarious, or full of idealism. In other words, this is a terrain where teens display their moods and act out their vision of themselves – sometimes doing it in ways that ignore or downplay risks to their privacy and safety

Psychologist Erik Erikson argues that much of the “work” of being an adolescent involves youths’ testing of their identities as they establish their place in the world. The online environment offers many opportunities to do this type of developmental “work.” It’s easy to create material and change it when the mood strikes. Most importantly, it enables feedback from peers – the group about which teens are most keenly interested.

The internet and social networking sites are the latest iteration in a long line of technologies that have changed the way teenagers communicate and socialize. As historian Beth L. Bailey notes in her book, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, the invention of the automobile, which brought youth radically new levels of mobility and privacy in the early 20th Century, is often credited as the technological catalyst that spurred a new and controversial social practice among young men and women called “dating.”²

² Bailey discusses the shift from the old practice of “calling” whereby a male suitor would arrive at the house of a young woman “expecting to be received in her family’s parlor, to talk, to meet her mother, perhaps to have some refreshments or to listen to her play the piano” to the new practice of “dating”

Staying in touch with peers is a big draw

The second element of online social networks that contributes to their popularity is that they provide another channel for teens to communicate with others, especially with those who are connected through a visible web. The act of developing friendships and romantic relationships is also the “work” of teenagers, and the internet and its communications applications allow them to do this.

Our data show that 89% of teens are email users and 75% are instant message users. During recent focus groups, we heard from teens that both of these methods of communication were being supplanted in many teens’ lives by the communications tools embedded in social networking websites -- such as “bulletins,” messaging, and commenting.

Teens, especially younger youth and girls, are developing new awareness about the risks of some disclosures on social network sites

While social network sites are attractive for all the content and communication they enable, there has been considerable public attention focused on the dark side of all this public disclosure by teenagers. What may seem like harmless disclosures of information can sometimes compromise teens’ privacy and, in the worst cases, allow them to be tracked and targeted.

Our most recent work suggests that growing numbers of teens are aware of these problems and are taking steps to address them. We have just completed a series of focus groups with middle and high school students and it was striking to note that safety on social networking sites has become a major concern of many if not most teens we interviewed, particularly younger teens and girls.

Time and again, these teens detailed their concerns about online predators and the steps they took to keep themselves safe. Sometimes they feel it is sufficient to hit the delete key in response to unwanted messages or requests from strangers. Other times, the teens in our groups said they would post false ages on their sites. Often, they would say they were younger than they actually were because privacy protections at some social network sites are stronger for younger users. Finally, these teens told us that they are more aware now of the dangers of posting information in their profiles that might help lurkers find them.

whereby the young woman would expect to be “taken ‘out’ somewhere and entertained.” See p. 13 for this reference and p.19 for a discussion of the automobile’s influence in this transition.

Even as they detailed their fears and concerns about the perceived dangers of these sites, they also talked about how important these sites were to them – not just as place to learn about and share new music, video, or photos, but also as a place that helps them develop and maintain friendships that they rely on for support.

Parents and children agree there is a generational divide in many households

Looking more closely at safety issues, parents and children also agree about some of the fundamental truths that characterize the online generational divide. Both parents and their children agree that parents are generally less tech savvy than their children. In addition:

- 81% of parents and 79% of teens agree that children are not as careful as they should be about the information they give out online
- 62% of parents with online teens and 62% of online teens agree that children do things online that they wouldn't want their parents to know about.

Many parents try to take steps to safeguard their children

Still, 54% of parents report having some type of filtering or monitoring software installed on a computer in the home. Two thirds of parents also take non-technical steps to protect their children online, by checking up on their web use, setting rules and time limits and placing the computer in a public place in the home.

In the end, the picture we get is that teens and their parents are aware of the double-edged nature of technology, and they welcome access to tools and techniques that help them make informed choices about what they do online.

Thanks again for the opportunity to speak to the committee today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.