

TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Sunday, Mar. 19, 2006

A Dad's Encounter with The Vortex of Facebook

By MICHAEL DUFFY

A mom I know asked her 15-year-old daughter recently about her math homework. The teenager, not exactly sure what was due when, replied that she'd "Facebook" someone for the assignment. Why not use the telephone? the mom wanted to know. Her daughter rolled her eyes at that one.

Where I live, just outside Washington, Facebook.com is both noun and verb, the unchallenged colossus of adolescent communication that works like the telephone, the back fence, the class bulletin board (and, at times, the locker room), all rolled into one virtual mosh pit. In other towns, MySpace.com plays the same starring role. In both cases, they have legions of parents pulling out their hair.

Here's why: those online social networks have become, almost overnight, booming teen magnets exerting an almost irresistible pull on kids' time and attention. Though both sites are only two years old, MySpace is the No. 2 most-trafficked spot on the Internet; Facebook is No. 7, right behind Google. MySpace is open to anyone with an e-mail address; Facebook requires members to be affiliated with a college or a high school, which is why it's the preferred virtual reality in my household.

Created by a Harvard student, Facebook started out as a digital version of those little photo guides of incoming college freshmen and quickly expanded to include the student bodies of more than 2,100 colleges. Last fall, high schools were invited to join, and now Facebook has 7 million members. Like all secret societies, it has its own language, passageways and handshakes. You can "poke" a friend--sort of like a wink or a wave--without saying much more. You can check the "pulse" to see what movies, books and music are topping the charts at your school. You can post pictures of yourself and your friends, and there's a nifty feature that allows kids to create specialized subgroups of Facebookers who share hobbies, obsessions great and small or inside jokes. And then there's "the wall," which may be Facebook's most distinctive feature. It's the place on every member's site where friends can post messages, have conversations and just generally keep up. The wall makes sense in one respect: it's easy and fun to spot an incoming message. But in another it's curious: you can peruse the postings of everyone else at your school. Which means the wall is one of those giveaway clues about Generation M: teenagers think their lives are private just so long as their parents aren't tuning in.

As a social-networking tool, these sites have become almost indispensable. But they have their darker passages too. When students began posting pictures of themselves at parties holding a beer and leaving messages that were hurtful, defamatory or demeaning, schools began considering ways to regulate the speech on the site. Some high schools have officially banned Facebook as well as MySpace activity during the school day and discouraged kids from spending time on those sites after hours. Colleges can't begin to enforce such bans, but many have groups studying how to control bad behavior or have issued guidelines. And they have discovered a powerful incentive for improving digital deportment, informing students that a variety of employers admit they check applicants' Facebook pages for clues to their personalities before making job offers. "Most of the people who use Facebook," says the company's marketing director, Melanie Deitch, "realize that anything you post there is public information."

A few cases of online friendships that turned violent or even homicidal have pressured social-network sites to provide better security for their members. Facebook recently overhauled its privacy settings to give members tighter controls over who sees what.

But to me the bigger worry with those sites isn't so much the privacy or security issues, though those are real enough. It's the sheer amount of screen-sucking time they consume in lives that are already overscheduled. Being a teenager is one enormous exercise in time management. Watching my kids try to juggle school, homework, sports, music lessons and sleep, I sometimes think my life is easier than theirs. That's partly because I have some tools they lack, but it's also because I think I know an abyss when I see one. Facebook is one giant time vortex--a black hole of chatter--and for many kids it's hard to find an exit. Under its influence, 90 minutes of homework ends up taking four to five hours, says Dr. Alan Goodwin, principal of Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md. Those sites are "a huge distraction."

At our house, we haven't banned Facebook entirely. Instead, we've had a lot of conversations about what is appropriate speech and then checked to make sure those conversations stuck. And we've tried to restrict Internet access during homework hours. I say "tried" because I'm sure my 15-year-old knows several ways around all the password protections I set up in recent months. (In trying to erect one barricade a few weeks ago, I accidentally deleted half his homework for a semester. That was a fun day.)

Facebook reports its members spend an average of 18 minutes on the site each day. I asked my son last week if that number sounded right to him. You know what he did? He just rolled his eyes at me.
With reporting by With reporting by Lissa August/Washington

Copyright © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved.

Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited. [Privacy Policy](#)