

The dangers of social networks

Social network sites are a phenomenon, with more and more people posting personal information on them everyday. Pamela Lawn examines the pit-falls of sharing your details on-line

Lectures are over. You get back to your flat and, almost out of habit, check your emails. Your eye is lured onto the 'Bebo messages' or 'Facebook comments'. Before you know it, an hour has passed and you have completely forgotten what you went on the computer to do in the first place!

Social networks are undoubtedly the craze of the moment and don't look set to disappear any time soon. They give you the chance to express yourself in many different ways. You may spend all your hours finding new artists on Myspace or use Facebook as a stage to host your political views. You may even just like to keep in touch with your friends by chatting on Bebo.

James Tulloch, a 22 year old student from Aberdeen, uses both Bebo and Facebook and checks his profiles as regularly as his emails. 'I like to keep my profile up to date so that people I have lost touch with have some idea of what I'm doing'. That is, in his opinion, why social networking sites are so popular. People are given the means to both share and consume information between friends.

It is therefore not surprising that your profile page can give away a lot about the kind of person you are. Mike Wong, a 19 year old student from Stirling, likes having his favourite music posted on his profile page. That way, others who have similar taste can look at what he is listening to.

I use Myspace to find undiscovered bands and like posting music and film clips of artists that I admire onto my

page'.

Most students are quite happy to have a detailed profile featuring their hobbies, friends and any up-and-coming dates they have in their diaries. Clare Stuart, a 20 year old student from Stirling, enjoys sharing photos on her profile and keeping her flashbox updated with her favourite music video.

Whatever we use our social networks for, one thing for sure is that we are all willingly giving away more information. This can lead to many problems such as theft and unemployment.

A worry on the minds of internet safety experts is the dangers of posting party invites onto social network sites.

In April 2007, Rachael Bell hit the headlines when her MySpace organised party led to £20,000 worth of damage to her parent's house. Having personal details available for everyone to see is any thief's dream scenario so it is clear to see why these party invitations are causing such a worry. If you are having a huge party and your house is full, you may not realise if one stranger has managed to sneak in and is upstairs rummaging through your stuff.

As well as leaving yourself open to theft, personal information can be used by identity thieves to open loans and credit cards in your name. Only a small amount of information is needed for these criminals. Even if your page is set to private, you can be subject to hacking.



Garlik, an online identity consultant, released a study, which worryingly concluded that 33% of internet users post personal details on social networking sites. This shows that people are not yet doing enough to protect themselves from theft.

It is also worth keeping in mind that your potential employer may well be looking at your profile. A 2006 survey by ExecuNet found that 77% of recruiters run online searches on their applicants. Based on their results, 33% chose against employing certain candidates. Clare finds it worrying that

almost anybody can look at your personal page but does think that a certain element of responsibility is down to the user.

Anne Collier, the Co-director of Connectsafely.org, agreed that young people need to be more wary of social network sites.

'The basic rule of thumb is to treat people online as you would offline'. It is also good to be 'wary of what we upload in terms of images and videos'. You don't want to put anything up that will come back to haunt you.'

Anne feels it is vital to follow this

advice because what you post and what is posted about you online could affect your future employment prospects.

If you are thinking about joining a social network, the advice being given is to refrain from adding anything that would reflect badly on you or invade others' privacy.

So if avoiding putting personal information on sites like Facebook means saving your laptop, I-pod or even your identity from being stolen, it may well be the favoured option. I know which one I'd prefer!

COMMENT

Why I don't support South East weighting

This academic year I have been coerced into signing two petitions, the first I half-heartedly signed was an ultimately doomed attempt to ban Coca Cola on campus, the second I positively flew to sign was a petition condemning the violence against monks in Burma.

The third petition levied before me has angered me greatly. Kent Student Union have taken it upon themselves to campaign for a South East weighting on top up fees. Ostensibly it sounds brilliant, more money for all, what could possibly be wrong with that?

However, what KSU and presumably other student unions in the South East have been failing to tell the masses of students clamouring to sign their petition is that ultimately all this 'free money' has to be paid back. So they are effectively campaigning to increase our debt burdens. The rate of interest charged on our student loans recently doubled to match the rate of inflation, it now stands at 4.8%, who did the union tell about this? Not a soul. Furthermore with the old Etonian

David Cameron looking like a strong bet for election in 2009, we could end up paying commercial interest rates of up to 10% on our loans.

The KSU Education Sabbatical Tom Christian reminded me of the plight of the poor student, in a failed attempt to get me to sign the petition. However any idea that the South East weighting will either encourage poorer students to attend university or dissuade them from dropping out, once their debt mountains have begun to peak, is incredibly misguided and ill-informed. A poor student will not be fooled into receiving an initially greater sum of money only to, as a result, suffer sky high levels of debt. Instead the poorer student deserves to receive more financial support from the Union, the University and most importantly the Government. Who have progressively and incessantly ignored the plight of young people and according to right wing think tank Reform "are in the process of mortgaging the future of a generation."

Students are at their most financially vulnerable when they graduate, desperately seeking that first rung on the housing market and that cushy graduate job. The extra burden of the South East weighting will only add to our debt levels on graduation and as many of us will return to our less affluent hometowns or countries, the supposed greater potential to earn back our debt seems to be just a pleasantly fact obscuring mirage purported by student unions and the Government.

The main reason for having a London weighting on the student loan was that capital city students have to pay an extortionate amount for their accommodation. In Kent and other areas in the South East, rents are typically much cheaper. I would have to pay at least double what I currently pay per month, to live in my current Canterbury abode, if it were suddenly uprooted and transported to London. Moreover the cost of living in the South East is broadly comparable to the UK's other big student cities. Therefore wouldn't it be equitable to also



have a weighting for places like Edinburgh and Bristol? Quite frankly it sounds ridiculous.

Student unions in the past have rallied against racism, apartheid and campaigned vociferously for women's and gay rights, currently our union is going to Downing Street in an attempt to saddle us with even more debt. This point-

less and potentially damaging protest needs to be stopped. Instead student unions should be campaigning for and providing a greater level of financial support for all students, particularly the poor, and they should be doing this now.

Comment by Charlie Bayliss