

6 January 2009

By: Tudor Vieru, Science Editor



Social media websites pose the risk of real-life problems for users with low privacy settings on their profiles
MySpace

MySpace Offers Insight into Teens' Behavior

Drinking habits and love lives are opened for discussion

Over the past few years, social media, comprising websites where people can create a profile and share pictures, video clips and personal information - including MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and the likes - has really taken off worldwide, with millions of people logging in to their accounts on a daily basis.

But other than facilitating communications between them, these sites also offer insights into their personal lives, as many users, especially teens, also list information such as their drinking habits, love life preferences and drug abuse.

The funny thing is that most of these teenagers, when asked about the content they display on their social network, say that they had no idea that the information they thought they only shared with friends was viewable by everyone. Most of these sites have privacy settings, but they are seldom used.

"You seemed to be quite open about sexual issues or other behaviors such as drinking or smoking. Are you sure that's a good idea? You might consider revising your page to better protect your privacy," reads a message sent to many MySpace users by a busybody named "Dr. Meg."

Dr. Megan Moreno, who, in reality, is a pediatrician and adolescent medicine specialist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was conducting a study on lower-income kids who listed private data on their MySpace pages.

Within three months of receiving messages from Dr. Meg, some 42 percent of those contacted either set their profiles to private - meaning that they could only be viewed by those accepted as friends - or removed any reference to inadequate behavior from their profile descriptions.

Only 29 percent of MySpace users who were not contacted by Moreno did the same thing within this time frame, proving the researchers right. The results of their finds are detailed in the January issue of the journal Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine.

The paper concludes that teenagers who list this kind of information on the web and have their profiles set to "public," meaning that anyone can view them, are at higher risks of being harassed, either online or in real life. Moreno says that increased adult supervision of their profiles could lead to them being less explicit of the actions teens take while going out or partying.