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To Share or Not to Share

Online Privacy and Publicity Among Canadian Youth

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Canadians rely more than ever on technology to stay connected, but the near-universal embracement of social media by youth has sparked an interest in their online privacy. Participants in MediaSmarts youth focus groups in 2012 said that they valued their privacy highly, despite being enthusiastic participants in platforms and activities that adults see as being about nothing but sharing and broadcasting. With a survey of more than 5,000 Canadian students in Grades 4 through 11, light can now be shed on this apparent contradiction: young people may not care that much about what we think of as privacy, but they care very much about *control* – control over who can see what they post, who can know where they are

and, especially, how other people share information about them.

One thing that can safely be said about young people's online experience is that it is *social*. This study confirmed that many of the top websites among students either are social networks such as Facebook and Twitter or contain features for sharing content. But socializing is not necessarily the same thing as sharing. People don't, after all, share everything about themselves with people they meet offline. Instead, people learn early on to be selective, avoiding items that might give a bad impression or provoke conflict and offering up only those specifics they believe will make others think well of them.



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Rather than being unconcerned about privacy, youth are as careful in what they share with their friends and peers as with their families. In fact, more students have asked someone else to delete something in hopes of hiding it from their friends than from their parents (21% and 16%, respectively).

Protecting their privacy

Things are no different online: many students said that they take active steps to manage their online image, such as deleting something they had posted themselves (an activity reported by 77% of Grade 11 students) and asking someone else to delete something about them (reported by 66% of Grade 11 students).

It's interesting to look at who these students were trying to hide things from: while it's easy to assume youth are hiding their online activities from parents or other authority figures, in fact they are as likely to delete content to hide it from their friends (22%) as from their families (21%), while far fewer had hidden content from teachers (7%) and current or potential employers (9%).¹

Sharing personal information online with family and friends

For younger students, social networks are largely about family: 80% of Grade 4 students said their families should be able to see what they post on social media, while just 61% said the same about their friends.

As they get older, however, the balance shifts. The tipping point, where friends and dating partners become more accepted audiences than family, is Grade 9; by Grade 11, almost all students (95%) say their friends should be able to see their posts. This is in keeping with developmental theories that suggest

that children begin to seek space to individuate and separate from family as they enter their teen years.

Even at that age, though, family members remain an important audience, with 56% of Grade 11 students saying their parents should be able to see what they post. More than one-third of students feel that anyone who knows them should have access to their online content, suggesting that they prefer to rely on controlling individual items rather than limiting access to their profiles.

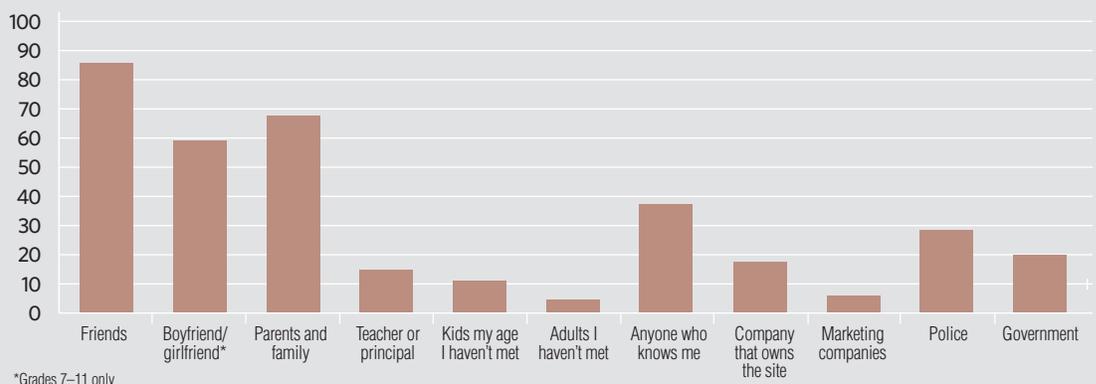
The students' use of privacy settings supports this as well. Nine out of 10 reported having used the privacy settings on their social networks, but while half of students had used privacy settings to block strangers, the group most often blocked after that is friends (31% of students had used privacy settings to block a friend). These are not *former* friends or dating partners being blocked – just 20% of students had blocked former friends and 10% had blocked exes. This suggests that students are not only using the privacy settings to block other users entirely, but also making individual items visible only to some of their contacts.

Taking control of their image

When it comes to managing how we are seen online, not all forms of media are equal. Photographs are a particularly sensitive topic for students: almost all

Students were as likely to want to hide content from their friends as from their families.

Do you think the following people SHOULD be allowed to read what you post on a social networking page like Facebook? (Percent answering "yes")





Given that the most popular strategies rely on social negotiation, it shows the importance of promoting positive social norms among youth about respect for others' privacy.

students said they would do something to get rid of a picture of them that they did not like (only 3% of students said they would do nothing in this situation).

The two most popular strategies for dealing with an unwanted photo were to ask the person who had posted it to take it down (80% of students said they would do this), followed by untagging the photo (49%). Telling parents (35%) and reporting it to the social network provider (17%) were the next most popular responses, followed by telling a teacher or principal (14%), breaking off the friendship (11%) and going into the person's account and taking it down (11%).

While girls and boys reported the same top two strategies for controlling images, these strategies were more popular among girls than boys. This suggests that boys are more likely than girls to prefer approaches that don't involve direct communication and social negotiation. Given that the most popular strategies rely on social negotiation, it also shows the importance of promoting positive social norms among youth about respect for others' privacy.

Many sharing features, such as tagging, are double-edged: while having a photo tagged with your name notifies all of your friends that you are in the photo, it also notifies you that the photo has been posted. As well as expecting that friends would take

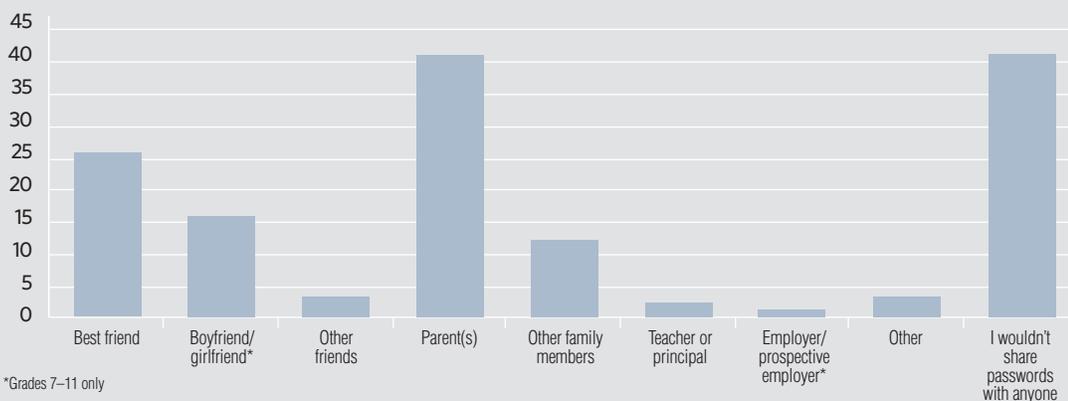
down a photo if asked, students also expected their friends to ask them *before* posting a photo, whether it was a bad or embarrassing one (nine out of 10 students said they expected to be informed) or a good one (half of students expected to be asked). As students aged, however, they were more likely to take action after a photo had been posted rather than counting on friends to check with them before posting: by Grade 11, only 27% of students expected their friends to ask them before posting a bad or embarrassing photo.

Opening access to their accounts

Other technical means of managing privacy, such as passwords, have a social dimension as well. A password is the key to all of a person's personal content and data, but a majority of students (59%) nevertheless said they would share the password to their social networking account, email account or cellphone.

Girls were also more likely to share passwords with their parents than boys (45% compared with 36%). However, students in general felt that parents should be allowed to read what they post on their social networking pages: not surprisingly, the youngest students feel this most strongly (84% of Grade 5 students agreed with this), but even in Grade 11, 56% still want to be visible to parents and family members.

Would you share your password to your social networking account, your email account or your cellphone with these people? (Percent answering "yes")



Girls are generally more willing to share with their parents than boys.



For younger students, social networks are largely about family.

Defining online privacy and publicity in their terms

Canadian youth do care very much about privacy, and are willing to learn and use both social and technical tools for managing it. As they expressed in focus groups and the *Young Canadians in a Wired World* survey, these students employ a number of strategies to manage their online presence, including being selective about what they post, managing who can see what about them with privacy settings and being careful about who they share passwords with – strategies that affect how they interact with friends and family. Their decisions and strategies will inform social norms about online behaviour as they evolve.

While they were quite knowledgeable about *content* management, the students in this study were less knowledgeable about *data* privacy. Education about data privacy, however, could help inform their decisions about how they interact with others through social media and the Internet generally, as well as prevent privacy invasions. Parents, teachers and peers can play a role in keeping each other informed about online privacy, broadening the conversation beyond safety concerns and fostering positive social norms – at school, at home and in the community – about the value of personal information and the importance of treating other people's with respect. ◀

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¹ This may in part be because students have little contact with their teachers or employers online.

Girls are generally more willing to share with their parents than boys: 72% of girls said that their parents or other family members should be allowed to read what they posted on their social networking pages, compared with 65% of boys. Girls were also more likely to share passwords with their parents than boys (45% compared with 36%).

Given that girls were also more likely to use privacy settings to block strangers from seeing their posts (55% compared with 45% of boys), this may be related to the greater number of household rules for girls and the greater perception among girls that the Internet is unsafe.

Giving away their personal data

Students showed little awareness of the data collection practices of the programs and platforms they use: while three-quarters would like more control over what companies do with the photos and information they post, 39% of students think that “companies are not interested in what I say and do online.”

This may be because the education they have received has focused largely on controlling what they publish rather than *how* their data is collected: 82% of students have learned how to use privacy settings (which are used to control who sees what you publish), while only one-third have had someone explain a site's privacy policy (which lists the personal information the site collects, how they use it and to whom they disclose it). Perhaps as a result of this, 68% of students mistakenly believe that a site with a privacy policy will not share users' personal information with others.

Parents were the main reported source of privacy education for students. More than four in 10 (41%) said they had learned about how to use privacy settings from their parents, compared with 27% who learned from peers and just 15% learning from teachers. This may explain the focus of students' education on controlling access to *content* rather than data.

Available at MediaSmarts,
<http://mediasmarts.ca/ycww>