

## Responding to Social Networking Risks

THE use of social networking sites is almost ubiquitous amongst Generation Y, and growing rapidly among the rest of the population. Among the wide variety of different social networking sites, Facebook is currently the most popular, with a global participation rate of more than 400 million users, more than 7 million of whom are in Australia (Facebook.com). This popularity has recently attracted a lot of media attention. As is often the case with relatively new media, much of this attention has focused on the extreme examples of misuse of social networking sites, particularly Facebook.

This follows a pattern of what are sometimes called 'media panics' in response to particular instances of inappropriate use of social networking sites. Fuelled in recent weeks by reports about the posting of pornographic material on memorial sites dedicated to dead Queenslanders Elliott Fletcher and Trinity Bates (Queensland Times, 27/2/10), there have been numerous media reports

on other incidents involving Facebook, including a report about a teacher committing suicide after her ex-boyfriend posted naked pictures of her on her Facebook page (Herald Sun, 25/2/10); a report about Western Australian high school students calling for their teachers to be 'massacred by chainsaws' (Australian, 19/2/10); and a report about young children signing up to Facebook and unwittingly sharing personal information (Canberra Times, 28/2/10).

The main themes in these reports include protection of young children from the risks of exposing themselves to online predators and cyber-bullying. The media panics that follow from widespread reporting on specific incidents tend to provoke knee-jerk responses, such as calling for 'old media' responses to what are essentially new media issues. Such responses do not take into account the fact that restricting content is difficult in a context of user-generated content. Indeed, it is questionable whether blanket restrictions are even desirable, as they would severely restrict one of the main benefits of social networking sites, which is open sharing of user generated material (The Chronicle, 27/2/10). The main focus should therefore be on education to promote safe and responsible use of social networking sites.

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