

NEWS & ANALYSIS

ANTI-SOCIAL

by Max Martin

THIS is the generation of instant messaging and two-minute noodles. Impatient teenagers are always plugged in to their computers and cell phones. Their reality is virtual and most of their friends can be found online.

"It's the coolest way to keep in touch," says Charlotte William, a college student in Bangalore whose Facebook was got flooded with birthday greetings on Saturday. Her FB page is an almost-instantly updated open book of her life.

Such minute-by-minute updates are an integral part of any teenager's life but the older generation is cautious. Not just old-fashioned people but even the tech-savvy are raising several issues with this uncontrolled explosion of social networking. India is the seventh largest social networking market in the world, with millions of users and many issues like privacy, etiquette, commercial, and political interests.

Even though people have control over the information they post online, unauthorised access — usage and republication — is a major cause of concern, says Nikhil Pahwa, who publishes MediaNama, a mobile business news site based in Delhi. "You put up information about friends and family without realising the enormous consequences of it being in the public domain," says Pahwa.

"I see a lot of people exchanging personal messages and phone numbers on their walls. A lot of people are rather nonchalant about it," says Christian Wolff, a German development researcher, living in Hyderabad, who finds it amazing how Indians are not as concerned about their privacy as they should be.

Bangalore-based lawyer Sarim Naved says the internet gives people a misplaced sense of anonymity, which makes them shed their inhibitions — and etiquette. Should you allow a friend to post pictures of you from that crazy party last night? What if a family member sees them? We still live by traditional values and customs and footloose pictures may not be appreciated.

And while you may think that your privacy settings are in place to never allow such an unfortunate incident take place, privacy settings give a false sense of security. "Many people cannot figure out how to put filters on," says Yamini Atnavilas, a teacher of gender studies in Hyderabad. She also says that social networking is a mixed bag: "Studies show that women use social networks differently from men. They have helped build women's social capital, providing an outlet for connection and expression."

ARTI Munkur, who was involved in the national 'Pink Chad-di' campaign against the pub-attacking Sri Ram Sene, agrees. "Social networks capture only the imagination of the upper middle class — and fail to evoke any other kind of response," says this activist lawyer. While the social media is powerful — and can be used for many purposes — it is limited in scope.

Also, these sites are turning into what Wolff calls 'all-devouring marketing machines'. Facebook, for instance, is always in the midst of some controversy over its automatic personalisation or using technology to accommodate differences between individuals, so that disturbing personalised advertisements gets easier.

Most of us do not realise that every little bit of information we post online is under the scrutiny of corporate entities that analyse and track browsing, spending, networking, and even music preferences.

"They make money with the data you post online for free," says Anirav Aravind, an IT consultant and commentator who started the online campaign for justice for Binayak Sen. "Even worse is when these service providers pass on this personal information to the

government as Yahoo did in China leading to the imprisonment of a journalist," says Aravind. Also getting increasingly active in the online circuit are crooks, says Shantanu Ghosh, who handles the India product operations of Symantec, a leading network and computer security firm. These crooks, he says, launch virus attacks, put up false events to attract people, and spoof networking sites to extract personal data.

"This attack was observed before the Cricket World Cup 2011. Attackers had created a page offering ticket deals for the World Cup final in Mumbai, requiring users to log into their social networking accounts. Those who fell for this trick would have ended up revealing their

confidential login information to these attackers." Ghosh advises: "You should treat anything you see online with skepticism — especially if it involves clicking a link or installing an application." Also make sure you check and understand privacy policies and settings. This is even more important because existing laws on cyber crime are not strong enough. Also, the question whether new laws will be effective remains. "It really depends on the law. If it goes into too much detail then it will be rendered irrelevant because of advancements in technology," says Sunil Abraham, who heads Centre for Internet and Society, a Bangalore-based research group. "A good law usually focuses on principles. What we need in India is a privacy regulator that can dynamically interpret the principles in law to quickly react to developments on the internet."

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The multi-billion-dollar baby of Mark Zuckerberg (played by Jesse Eisenberg, left, in *The Social Network*) has spawned a host of privacy issues in India that teenagers find hard to cope with and their parents and schools are clueless about.

Case that triggered the debate

Be careful of what you write on social networking sites, especially if it's on your school principal's wall.

A 13-year-old student in Mumbai learnt this the hard way last week when he expelled for posting an abusive message on his principal's Facebook wall.

Vandana Tandon, principal of MP Shah School (in suburban Vile Parle), had a wall posting by an eighth-standard student that allegedly said 'f*** off'. The boy's parents were called to the school and after a verbal dressing down, the school suspended him for more than a month.

But the boy's parents however claimed that it was not suspension but expulsion as they were asked to collect their son's transfer certificate. The boy's parents initially were

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FB voyeurism and traumatised teens

Psychiatrist Amit Sen, who has his own practice at Children First, Vasant Vihar, explains why sites such as Facebook are doing more harm than good.

While these are a good way of connecting with friends, these are artificial social spaces — they aren't the same as being in a room full of people. The norms that apply to face-to-face interaction are missing in conversations carried out via the social media. This becomes a free-for-all space, and children often lose sight of social boundaries.

For teenagers, who have relatively extreme thoughts and expressions, unlike adults who have learnt to modulate their thoughts, conversations on social networks can become dangerous and damage reputations. Teens often try to create the greatest possible impact on their peer group or the opposite sex with what they post online. Facebook comes up very frequently during my work with children. Privacy and boundaries are being violated almost aggressively, and there is no doubt that some children are turning voyeurs online. Many also talk about how they have been traumatised by what has been written about them. Clearly, having parents and teachers monitor children on such sites isn't enough. There are, after all, generational boundaries that exist between them. I know of a case of a teenage girl who had her parents on her Facebook

friends list but adjusted her privacy settings so that they couldn't see the photos she posted. She forgot to block her aunt from access to the photos, who in turn told her parents about the pictures she had posted. The parents were left shocked by the explicit content in the photos. It is indeed worrisome when children become friends with people they have never met. I know of another case of a child who was bullied at school and turned to Facebook for an alternate peer group. He made lots of friends in Mumbai, and is now coaxing his parents to move there. He met some of them on a recent trip, but has never seen the majority of them. Many of them are much older — and may have mala fide intentions. What happens if the family succumbs to the child's demands and moves there, and he finds that he can't adjust with those he considers his friends? There is no wishing away the social media. What we need is social network education to be incorporated in life skills education for children, so that they understand better how to regulate their behaviour online.

COMMENTARY

by Amit Sen

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NETWORK

(Social media is driving teens to a reality they can't handle)

IT DOESN'T ONLY HAPPEN TO TEENS

They may be 'friends' or 'followers', but they monitor every keystroke you make, your online pals may not have your best interests in mind. What you post in cyberspace can have serious consequences on your life, as these celebrities have found out.

GOVERNOR OR TERMINATOR?



California's residents were left horrified in 2009 when the then governor, Terminator star Arnold Schwarzenegger, posted a Twitter-linked video showing

him wielding a two-foot knife. He was thanking the state's citizens for bearing with budget cuts initiated by him. He had to quell the controversy that followed by explaining: "Not that I have fun with making the cuts — they sadden me — but ... that doesn't mean that you cannot wave a knife around ... to get the message across."



ZUCKERBERG'S MONSTER

The man who started it all, Facebook CEO and the world's youngest billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, got to see the dark side of his baby recently when he was spammed with Facebook messages by a man of Indian origin. Pradeep Manukonda, the spammer, was also spotted outside Zuckerberg's home and Palo Alto (California) office. Feeling the heat from the stalker, Zuckerberg, who has been under fire for privacy concerns on Facebook, had to approach court for the safety of his loved ones. The judge ordered Manukonda to remain 300 feet away from Zuckerberg, his sister Randi and girlfriend Priscilla Chan.

OMAR IS NOT GOING NUTS!

If you follow the recent tweets of Jammu & Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah, you'd know he is being trolled (targeted by abusive individuals online).



Sending out a strong message to those who send angry, abusive tweets to him, he tweeted on February 25, quoting comic strip Dilbert: "If you spend all of your time arguing with people who are nuts, you'll be exhausted and the nuts will still be nuts."

TWEETING AWAY HIS PLUM JOB

Former minister of state for external affairs Shashi Tharoor tweeted his way slowly out of the ministry before hitting his wicket over a cricket controversy. He first put his foot in the mouth with his tweets on "cattle class" travel. Lalit Modi's tweets about Tharoor and his association with the Kochi franchise finished his innings in the cabinet.



INGLORIOUS IMAGES

Chronic attention-seeker and B-list star Mallika Sherawat turned up at the Los Angeles premiere of Quentin Tarantino's Brad-Pitt-starrer *Inglourious Basterds* in — what else? — a provocative dress. Controversy erupted when she posted her photos on Twitter. She was forced to show more cloth than skin in her next public appearance.



ALTERNATIVE SOCIAL SPACE

Those in the 15-24 age group are leading parallel lives online, as these statistics on India's social media space compiled by the US government's Open Source Center suggest

60%

The proportion of India's 83 million internet users who are active on social media sites. It's a big change from the time when Indians used the Net mainly for job searches.

15-34

The age group of users in the country. The social media researcher, Preeti Anand, has found that most users are male, and are on the sites primarily to get into relationships.

70%

The proportion of social media users in India who access a social networking site daily, says a study by The Nielsen Company. That's significant usage in the Indian context

7-9 pm

The time band when most young people in the 15-24 age group go online, says a VizSense report. That's the time when they would normally socialise with their families at home.

14.38

The average time, in minutes, that young people spend per visit to a social networking site, reports Experian, a business intelligence service. The activity clearly is a big hook.

64

The number of complaints lodged with the police around the country between January and October 2010 for objectionable content posted on Facebook, Orkut and MySpace.