In March 2006, the Cornell University associate registrar called me and asked, “What are you going to do about Facebook?” I laughed, somewhat impolitely, at the thought that I could do anything at all about a dot-com, but later I came to understand what she wanted. Tales of embarrassing exposure, both for students and for higher education institutions, were causing genuine concern among administrators, who wanted to inform students of the pitfalls that they might experience in using this new, explosive Internet application. A few weeks later, on a typically dreary, rainy Saturday in central New York, I wrote “Thoughts on Facebook.”

Fast-forward to early 2008: the press is filled with articles about social networking in general and Facebook in particular. Facebook owners have agreed to a multi-million-dollar Microsoft deal that implicitly values the site at $15 billion. MySpace, currently the largest site of its kind, is working with Google to create an open-source alternative as a means of fending off its ambitious competitor. The goal, in keeping with Google’s overall mission to organize the world’s knowledge, is to provide links between and among all of these sites in a seamless web of social networking connectivity. With Facebook recently allowing web crawlers like Google to capture front-pages of users’ profiles on a default open setting, this development is as predictable as it is inevitable: social networking goes global. Beacon—Facebook’s new advertising program, which uses its “News Feed” feature to share members’ activities on third-party sites—went from an opt-out to an opt-in program within a matter of days due to a user uprising over privacy. If nothing else, these reactions by users should end the notions, first, that there is no privacy on the Internet and, second, that youth have no interest in it. What remains fascinating is our ability to observe the re-creation of cultural norms whose existence in the physical world is largely assumed, repressed, or forgotten.

What challenges remain with this killer app? I suggest three: (1) user education, especially for adolescents and their parents; (2) new features connecting higher education’s missions to the popular site; and (3) legal and policy considerations on a global scale. Sensationalized and sad stories of teen-age suicides precipitated by cruel exchanges on social networking sites have raised the profile of information literacy and user education at early ages. Primary school is not too early, for both students and parents. For teen-agers, the emergence of “helicopter” parents has no doubt driven adolescents deeper into technological zones that are generally out of their parents’ hovering view. Unless an individual is particularly at risk, invading a teen-ager’s space is not the solution. But learning more about those spaces—how they operate, who is on them, and most important, how to talk about their social dynamics—is recommended. Parents can do that effectively only if they educate themselves about both the technology and the sociology of the Internet. And demonizing the technology, as is suggested even by such august public organs as Frontline, with its feature “Growing Up Online,” helps no one—not the youth who will undoubtedly use the technology, not their parents who supervise them, and not their teachers who need to understand the role that this technology plays in their development.

On this subject I have an illustrative, if not humbling, story. At the EDUCAUSE Learning Institute (ELI) annual meeting in January 2007, I invited a student of mine at Cornell to present a learning session about Facebook. With much poise, Nikki projected her Facebook front-page on the screen as attendees filled the room. I noted, with some curiosity, that Nikki’s profile photograph was of her in an elegant evening gown standing closely beside another young woman, similarly attired. Both, holding Champagne flutes, were smiling and happy in a toast. Facebook front-pages include a photograph and fields to be completed by the user. One of these fields is “relationship,” which Nikki had filled in with “Engaged to S.L.,” apparently the name of the other woman in the photograph (the full name was in the text, but I have abbreviated it for this publication). Nikki went on to assist the audience in logging on to Facebook, creating profiles, and demonstrating some of its features. Later, at lunch, I raised my glass to Nikki and said, “Congratulations on your engagement!” Nikki looked a bit befuddled, hunched toward me, and with a hushed voice so as not to cause me embarrassment, said: “You didn’t believe that, did you? I thought you knew I’m straight!” Reputation was not her paramount concern; rather, she did not want to show too much of her disappointment that I did not understand the fluidity of the virtual—and yet very real—social and psychological world she inhabited.

Higher education plug-ins to social networking sites present a second challenge. Here it is not the technology but rather the control and use of the technology that is at issue. With more institutions moving to-
ward commercial sites for student e-mail, calendaring, and document applications, it should not be too long before higher education collaborates with Facebook to link applications for course enrollment, grade checks, and other online student services. InCommon offers security and privacy authentication; technological links, combined with considered contract relations, should close the deal. Let’s “face” it: Facebook has built the site, and students use it; we in higher education should come to recognize that this universal commercial site is here to stay. We should use it for advertising and for communications—and that readily establishes the basis of tortuous liability. These claims may portend more public privacy laws, since among developed nations the United States has ridiculously low standards. Accommodation to stricter international regulations may encourage stronger and more consistent privacy laws in the United States or, if that bar is too high, at least the hope of harmonized privacy policies on the sites with global constituencies. That optimistic perspective should be tempered by the ever-present reality that commercial sites tie “free” services to marketing and advertising business models. Privacy and free social norms and psychological meanings, its advertising and market models, and its legal and policy queries on a global scale. A corporate, commercialized Internet has more money, flexibility, and motivation to innovate than do most business aspects of higher education and is the driving force behind the outsourcing of campus IT services and products. That move toward outsourcing might not be a bad thing. As entrepreneurs continue to push the proverbial envelope of acceptability in gossip and other salacious sites, such as Juicycampus.com, legislators may rethink the Communications Decency Act’s section 230, which provides Internet service providers and sites with immunity from common torts such as defamation. Designed to stimulate the development of the Internet, this immunity is increasingly coming under scrutiny as victims of cyberbullying, libel, and defamation seek to understand the role that technology plays in terms of the scope and scale of damages. ISPs, as passive conduits, are not likely to be implicated, but site owners may acquire more liability under less protective legal regimes. Higher education needs to get out of those kinds of businesses altogether.

Nevertheless, those of us in higher education should be thoughtful about the degree to which outsourcing restricts our control over our products and services in higher education. IT professionals—vice presidents and chief information officers especially—have a responsibility to raise critical questions and perhaps even to teach or coach their administrations about the long-term, and possibly unintended, deleterious consequences of decisions that seem so obvious from a business and financial perspective today. Surrounded by commercialism and its almost irresistible temptations, we must be careful not to sell our souls.

Finally, global legal and policy concerns represent a third challenge. Civil privacy claims stand out as the first issue. Technology does not create the underlying problem of tongues that wag too loosely, but it does amplify that problem in a way speech concerns will always be in tension with commercial interests that seek information about users and their preferences. Of greater consequence is the problem of higher education’s reliance on these sites. What will happen when an advertiser decides to pull its account because it objects to the content generated by a constituent of higher education, which has become dependent on that site for delivery of services?

Social networking continues to be a “cool new tool,” and we should stay connected to its emerging technologies, its

Illustration by Randy Lyhus, © 2008

Note


Tracy Mitrano is the Director of Information Technology Policy and Computer Policy and Law Programs at Cornell University.