Should children have access to Facebook?

"Why is it that a legislator feels the necessity to legally protect the rights of adults in relation to privacy and social networking but not of children and young people?"

Marc Armitage

Following a spate of stories showing prospective employers demanding job interviewees hand over their Facebook passwords, the US state of Maryland has become the first to pass a Bill that would make this practice illegal.[1] But there's a problem. The media has been full of similar stories of school pupils being banned from having social media pages or likewise facing demands for their passwords from school authorities but the Bill mentions this not.

We are not talking of a simple telling off here either as some of the punishments inflicted by schools for non compliance might appear a tad draconian. For example, a Catholic high school in the Philippines recently banned a 16 year girl from graduating because of disapproval of a photo which appeared on her Facebook page showing her wearing a bikini and smoking a cigarette[2] and an orthodox Jewish school in Brooklyn also threatened (and enacted) fines of $100 or potential expulsion if students did not delete their on-line profiles.[3]

Both these examples are of schools with a strict religious affiliation and using 'modesty' to legitimatise their stance so perhaps this should come as too much of a surprise but there are plenty of examples of secular schools taking similar action too so it's not all down to a defined sense of what is and what is not decent. Either way, school pupils all over the world are finding their access to social media restricted and their privacy in this respect questioned.

What's the difference here, I wonder: why is it that a legislator feels the necessity to legally protect the rights of adults in relation to privacy and social networking but not of children and young people?

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[1] http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/technology/2012/04/maryland-bill-bans-employers-from-facebook-passwords/

[2] http://www.zdnet.com/blog/facebook/catholic-school-bans-girl-over-facebook-photo-mother-sues/11006

[3] http://www.theblaze.com/stories/orthodox-school-gives-students-ultimatum-delete-facebook-profile-pay-100-fine-or-face-expulsion/

It may be because from the school perspective those that have implemented some kind of ban seem to feel firmly in the right and are justified in their actions. Aside from the modesty defence, for example, child protection and a desire to eliminate cyber-bullying has been another of the common reasons given for restrictions or an outright ban - and how can we fail to see the logic in that? But whereas no one can deny that bullying is serious issue for some children or that cyber-bullying presents practicalities that can be difficult to challenge, the question of bullying by electronic means needs to be placed into context with the whole issue of bullying. There is also recognition that the solution to cyber-bulling may lay in the very media in which it is being practiced.[4]

It is also a little uncomfortable to acknowledge the fact that a fear of cyber-bullying seems to take on a different dimension when related to bullying of teachers by pupils or sometimes by their parents.[5]

This is the point at which teacher organisations and trade unions become involved and these are powerful bodies that quite rightly do not shy away from loudly calling for action in defensive of what they feel is a protection issue of their members. In this context teachers are on record as saying they often fear the Facebook backlash more than they fear their school inspections.[6] A brief trawl of online stories relating to social media and cyber-bullying seems to produce many more child/parents-on-teacher stories than child-on-child which presents the possibility that that an outright ban or close monitoring of pupil Facebook pages is about protection of the teacher at the expense of the pupil.

To be far this issue bites both ways as a group of teachers from my own home city found when derogatory comments made about pupils and parents on their personal Facebook pages became public and led their dismissal.[7] Teacher unions have also expressed concerns over the role of social network sites in improper contact between teachers and pupils[8]

Despite this there seems to be genuine confusion over the approach that schools should take towards social media and this is resulting in a haphazard and inconsistent approach. Take for instance the case of Angelica Cruikshank, whose school authorities, contrary to the examples above, fell firmly on the side of her pupils in her approach to preventing social media use.[9] "You seem unaware," the school authorities wrote following her suspension, "of student privacy concerns and used extremely poor judgment in taking the steps you took to address these concerns."

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[4]   http://www.publicservice.co.uk/feature_story.asp?id=18176

[5]   http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/frontpage/2012/0409/1224314551225.html

[6]   http://www.educationnews.org/technology/telegraph-uk-teachers-fear-facebook-more-than-inspectors/

[7]   http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-humber-16316133

[8]   http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2012/jan/23/teacher-misconduct-cases-facebook

[9]   http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2118399/Teacher-Angelica-Cruikshank-banned-students-school-trip-badmouthed-Facebook.html

Perhaps the source of this confusion is more practical: could it be that advances in electronic media, like so many other social and technological issues of the past, have simply overtaken the personal knowledge and experience of teachers? That certainly seems to be the case with one middle school principle who warned the parents of his school on the dangers of electronic media and communications saying, "There is absolutely no reason for any middle school student to be a part of a social networking site!" He did this without a touch of irony … via the schools email contacts list.[10] Or maybe this is just another case of a knee-jerk, reach for the pen and list of 'Things-To-Be-Banned' issue adding social media sites to the ban on skirts, trousers, training shoes, bracelets, non-approved hairstyles, hard footballs and regional dialects that frequently seem to face disapproval in schools; a 'Do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do-because-its-for-your-own-good' kind of approach.

Actually, I don't think any of these examples get to the bottom of this. I don't think this is a straightforward case of 'Hey, teacher, leave those kids alone' … it's more of a 'Hey, teacher, before you adopt the knee jerk reaction of an outright ban for dubious educational and social reasons would you please take a considered approach to what it is you are asking for and please question if your approach is proportionate in this day of wider social media' kind of issue. I think the bottom line reason is another of those simple fears 'of' not 'for' our children. It's a, 'Just-what-on-Earth-are-they-getting-up-when-out-of-our-close-supervision' fear. In the school context it's a power issue and one in which schools have it and students do not.

The minimum age for having a profile on Facebook is thirteen but anyone who thinks that a significant number below that age are not already regular users[11] is taking the ostrich-head-in-the-sand approach to children's social lives. Nor, should we forget, is Facebook the only example of a social media site that children make regular use of. Access to social media in its wider sense is as essential a part of modern life for children and teenagers in 2012 as having a pair of clackers was in the 1970s[12] and whatever the justification we use for restricting access to it the result is the same: an invasion of privacy and a breakdown in trust that would simply not be acceptable in the adult world - a point that seems to have missed the mainstream media.

Bottom line? In the main, I don't think school authorities are deliberately interfering in the private lives of their pupils for no good reason - I think it's more to do with schools not considering the possibility that their pupils actually have one in the first place.

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REFLECTIONS on ...

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[10] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/30/principal-asks-parents-to_n_558225.html

[11] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17853498

[12] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLHftISLNHE

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