



# YOU ARE WHAT YOU POST

Now that any student can create digital content, we must help them understand what that means. **by Bobbie Eisenstock**

Ask any parent what concerns them about kids being online; chances are strong that bullies, predators, and pornography top the list. To minimize the risks, many parents confine Internet access to a central location in the home, block certain websites, and install kid-friendly browsers and tracking software. More importantly, they instruct kids to keep personal information private, to practice netiquette, and to not talk to strangers.

While these safeguards can go a long way to keeping kids safe in cyberspace, many parents and teachers overlook what may end up plaguing the first generation coming of age online: their cyber trail.



## DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS

Technology has transformed digital kids from media consumers into media creators. With every message they send, photo they post, video they upload, or song they remix and share, they leave a digital imprint of their virtual life. Cyber trails are the new character reference, reflecting student achievements or red-flagging objectionable behavior. An online personal profile riddled with provocative photos; lewd humor; or incriminating comments about drinking, drugs, and sexual escapades can have unintended consequences with school administrators, teachers, coaches, employers, and college recruiters—not to mention parents.

Kids growing up online today are doing what youth have always done—trying on different personas as they search for their identity—but with one big difference: They are constructing their identity in a very public space, accessible by anyone at any time. Wired kids may be Net savvy, but they don't necessarily understand the online rules of engagement. The majority believes three myths about the Internet that inadvertently can harm their online reputations:

**Myth #1:** Setting an online profile to “private” allows control over who can see it.

**Myth #2:** Deleting an e-mail, instant message (IM), video, photo, or profile comment erases it permanently from the Internet.

**Myth #3:** Downloading, remixing, or copying content to use for a personal web page or to share with friends is legal.

Cyberspace is a public space with the illusion of being private, impermanent, and freely available for personal use. But the majority of young people have not yet learned the lesson that it isn't and that there are guidelines that need to be followed. That's why kids get angry with adults for reading their "private" profiles. They get upset with classmates who post embarrassing photos they deleted or forward mean text messages meant to be private. They express surprise when teachers fail them for copy-and-paste plagiarism. They are dumbfounded when told they can be punished for downloading content without permission or payment. And they are clueless about how their actions now may make them victims of data-mining tactics or identity thieves in the future.

Virtual actions can have real-life consequences. Teens have been expelled from school for cyberthreats, denied acceptance to college for improper online behavior, and arrested for posting explicit photos of underage friends. What kids confide in their online journals about their parents and friends can inadvertently embarrass or hurt them. Disclosing a parent's confidential business transaction or drug abuse or boasting about a mother supplying alcohol for an underage party has caused parents trouble.



### WHAT YOU CAN DO

How can we help young people understand the pitfalls of participating in cyberculture? Digital kids need media-literacy strategies to think critically about what they read, hear, and see, as well as what they create, share, and post.

Most kids are so far ahead on the digital learning curve that adults think the virtual gap affects their ability to offer effective guidance. But even tech-challenged adults can help kids learn how to protect their reputations. Begin by making kids aware that living in a wired world means that they have two identities: an online one and an offline one. Explain that cyberspace is public and once they post something they cannot take it back. Help kids make choices online that support the values they're expected to practice offline by getting them into the habit of questioning the content they create before they post it.



### FIVE KEY QUESTIONS

Here are five important discussion starters to help kids think about before unleashing their online creativity.

#### 1. *Why did I create and post my message?*

Kids create content for different reasons. It may be to have a casual conversation, make plans, share and comment on photos, post an original digital creation, or contact a parent or teacher. Sometimes what they say or how they look might attract unintended attention. Help them check for risqué screen names, explicit photos, inappropriate exchanges, and digital dirt.

#### 2. *Which technology did I use to express myself?*

Kids know that each type of technology has unique communication rules. Their mode of choice depends on the purpose of the message. To talk about a personal issue, they'll text or private message rather than post on a public blog. What kids may not realize is that whenever they access technology, they agree to certain terms and conditions. Help them become familiar with the rules for acceptable behavior for the online services they use. When they create content using music, video, clipart, or other artifacts, advise them to check for possible copyright infringement.

#### 3. *What does the content I create say about me?*

What kids do online reflects their values and beliefs. Make them aware that what they post suggests the type of person they are. If something is questionable, ask them if they intended to represent themselves in this way or make public things that should be kept private. Help them think about what they should include or leave out and how they might communicate differently. Remind them that whatever they delete may be gone from their web page or inbox, but it's not erased from cyberspace.

#### 4. *How might different people interpret my message?*

Messages are not always understood in the way they're meant, and it's not easy to correct misunderstandings in cyberspace. Plus, kids often say things online they would not say in person. Remind them to respect people's privacy and not hurt anyone's feelings. Suggest that they ask friends if they want their photos posted or information shared. Make sure kids regularly review "friends" on social-networking sites and remove ones they don't know personally. Kids also need to think about how they'll feel when content

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they create is unintentionally viewed by a friend, relative, teacher, college recruiter, or employer who will have his or her own interpretation.

**5. How do the choices I make affect my family and me?**

Kids need to know that everything about them in cyberspace is part of their Net reputation. Most kids who unwittingly post too much personal information or inappropriate photos willingly correct their poor judgment when they realize what could happen. Teach them to be proactive about protecting their online identity and to consider the impact of what they share before they post it. Remind them that whatever they post is a mouse-click away from being seen, copied (and even altered in an unflattering way), forwarded, downloaded, or stored, and it could resurface in the future.

Digital kids consider themselves savvy about the dangers of cyberspace, yet many disregard how their choices may come back to haunt them. Teachers and parents need to caution kids to always be mindful that they are consuming and creating content in a public space without walls and within view of invisible visitors. Sooner or later, their virtual reputation may be harmful in real life. Tell kids to beware: You are what you post. ■■

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**RELATED RESOURCES**

**Cable in the Classroom: Point Smart. Click Safe.**  
[www.ciconline.org/pointsmartclicksafe](http://www.ciconline.org/pointsmartclicksafe)

**Cablevision: Power to Learn: Internet Smarts**  
[www.powertolearn.com/internet\\_smarts](http://www.powertolearn.com/internet_smarts)

**ConnectSafely**  
[www.connectsafely.org](http://www.connectsafely.org)

**National Institute on Media and the Family: MediaWise**  
[www.mediafamily.com](http://www.mediafamily.com)

**NetFamilyNews**  
[netfamilynews.org](http://netfamilynews.org)

**OnGuardOnline**  
[onguardonline.gov](http://onguardonline.gov)



# MEDIA LITERACY FOR CONTENT CREATORS: A TEACHER'S GUIDE

**M**edia-literacy education has primarily focused on teaching students to critically analyze advertising, news, and entertainment media. In order for media-literacy practices to be meaningful now that kids have become content consumers and creators in the Web 2.0 world, skills and strategies need to encompass ways in which digital youth create, share, and consume media.

Kids need to ask all the questions they've been taught to ask as media consumers, plus a whole new set of questions as content creators. Help students think critically about the content they create by getting into the habit of questioning the message before they send, share, or post it in cyberspace.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MY MESSAGE?**

- Why did I create and post the message?
- Who did I want to reach? Do I want a response?
- What kind of attention might my message attract? Is it the kind of attention I want?

**WHICH TECHNOLOGY DID I USE TO EXPRESS MYSELF?**

- Why did I choose this form of communication—be it IM, e-mail, text message, social networking, or video or photo sharing—over other forms?
- What creative techniques did I use? If I used popular songs, video clips, clip art, cartoons, logos, artwork, or other cultural artifacts, do I need to obtain copyright permission?
- What terms or conditions do I agree to when I use this technology tool?

**WHAT DOES THE MESSAGE SAY ABOUT MY VALUES, BELIEFS, AND BEHAVIOR?**

- What type of person does it suggest I am? Is this what I intended?
- Does the message tell things about me that I should keep private?
- What did I include or leave out and why? What could I communicate differently?

**HOW MIGHT DIFFERENT PEOPLE INTERPRET MY MESSAGE?**

- Does the person or group I sent the message to understand it the way I meant?
- Do I show respect for people's privacy? Do I hurt anyone's feelings?
- How might someone I did not intend to see my message interpret it, including my parents and other family members, friends and classmates, teachers and coaches, college recruiters, future employers, or strangers? How do I feel about what they think?

**HOW DO THE CHOICES I MAKE AFFECT ME?**

- What is my Net reputation? Is this how I want to represent my cyberidentity?
- How might what I post affect me or my family and friends in the future?
- How much control do I have over my online content? If I delete something, is it gone forever? Who owns what I create? Who might profit from it? Did I break any laws creating, posting, or sending content?

*This guide was adapted from media-literacy frameworks developed by the Center for Media Literacy and the Alliance for a Media Literate America.*