



Children's Charities' Coalition on Internet Safety

Margaret Moran MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA

13th March, 2008

Dear Margaret,

Re: The inappropriate use of personal information published on the internet

As you know, the children's charities always advise children and young people to be careful about what they publish about themselves on the internet, for example as a part of their personal profile on a social networking site. One of the several reasons why we started doing this was because we believed a number of employers and educational bodies had started trawling around the internet looking for information about persons who may have applied to them for a job or for a place on a particular course.

We think such practices on the part of employers and educational bodies are quite wrong. For one thing an Admissions Tutor or a recruiter could never be completely sure that what they found on the internet was a genuine site put up by the person concerned. It could be a malicious or spoof profile. Alternatively, in the case of a photograph, the picture might have been taken, edited, tagged and posted by a third-party without either the knowledge or the permission of the person shown. However, even if the profile or the picture had genuinely been posted by the young person themselves, very often it might be extremely hard, if not impossible, for the putative Admissions Tutors or a recruiter to know the full context of what it was they were looking at.

A personal profile might contain, for example, pictures or text about some sort of fundraising stunt undertaken for charity, where there is often a premium put on novelty or, frankly, weirdness. Thus, apart from being poor practice because it could lead decision-makers to make decisions which have been influenced by irrelevant or erroneous information, deep down we think this is just mean. It penalises a child or young person, possibly for life, for being young and foolish in the way the young often are.

When young people put up their personal profiles they are not thinking about job applications or University applications. Typically they are simply talking to their mates. Employers or Admissions Tutors who delve into these places are being highly and inappropriately

intrusive. It's a bit like looking at someone's diary. A world where even a 14 year old has to think twice before posting an adolescent poem suddenly looks very unappealing and increases the pressure on children and young people to conform to a set of tightly focused adult norms in a way which is more than a little worrying on a number of fronts and levels.

The children's charities' view on the publication of personal information by children and young people was originally rooted partly in our wider, historic experience of online child protection but it was also based quite specifically on a growing amount of anecdotal evidence that employers and educational bodies were starting to use such information in the manner discussed above. Much harder evidence is now beginning to accumulate.

In November, 2007, the Office of the Information Commissioner reported that, based on research it had carried out, "Some 71% of 2,000 14 to 21-year-olds said they would not want colleges or employers to do a web search on them before they had removed some material." Yet over half of the same respondents acknowledged they had made most their information public (as opposed to making it private or available only on a restricted basis e.g. to friends or family). Deputy Information Commissioner David Smith said "The cost to a person's future can be very high if something undesirable is found by the increasing number of education institutions and employers using the internet as a tool to vet potential students or employees."

In January, 2008, it was reported that Dr Richard Barnes, a senior tutor at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, used social networking sites saying, in his College magazine, that he did so at least in part "...to check up (discreetly) on applicants for a college position." This remark was later dismissed as being a "throwaway line" but nonetheless, as evidenced by David Smith's comments and the OIC research, it feeds into a wider concern that this practice may be more widespread than has been publicly acknowledged hitherto.

In an article in "The Times" (4/2/08) it was reported that one international consultancy checks social networking site profiles as a matter of "routine". The same article ("Keeping a cool profile on MySpace could just cost you your next post") also referred to a survey by a company called "Viadeo" which appeared to show that one in five employers admitted that they used the internet to check on candidates. Almost two-thirds said they "found information there (which) influenced a recruitment decision" and a quarter said they had "changed their mind and decided not to hire someone because of what was online". A recruitment executive is reported as saying it is "inevitable" that recruiters will refer to personal profiles published on the internet.

Where a would-be employer or an educational body uses publicly available information in a proactive way as a means of positively identifying potential candidates whom it then contacts or refers on, it seems to us few would object. We nonetheless have a residual concern that even used in this more constructive way, it may still be discriminatory in relation to those young people, groups or individuals who do not yet have ready access to the internet, or lack the skills to exploit it, and we would not want a consideration of that aspect to be overlooked.

However, it is surely an entirely different matter for an employer or an educational body to allow themselves to be influenced by information in the public or any other domain where that fact remains undeclared and undisclosed, and where no attempt has been made to verify the accuracy of the information or, where appropriate, the context in which the information or a particular image, or both, were generated.

Against this background we are writing to ask if you would raise this issue with the Government and in the wider public arena. We would be happy to continue to work with you on it. You might want to consider a Private Member's or a 10-Minute Rule Bill. We believe the practice should be outlawed or, at the very least, major employers such as the Government and the wider public service should make clear that it is an unacceptable practice within their own organizations and therefore ought not to be used, certainly not covertly and perhaps not at all.

Thank you for your interest. We intend also to write in similar terms to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development to ask them to give some consideration to this topic.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Carr", is written on a light blue rectangular background.

John Carr
Secretary