Tell-All Generation Learns to Keep Things Offline

By MARGARET IHNATKO

Nineteen-year-old Maggie Liu, from Tufts University, logged onto Facebook recently and saw a friend asking other friends to get together for drinks. Ms. Liu, who posted her surroundings at least once a day on her Facebook account at 17 and chronicled her college life in detail, from rooftop drinks with friends to dancing at a wedding, said she declined to attend.

“I don’t think they would look out for me,” she said. “I have to look out for me.”

Ms. Liu, a sophomore, is one of millions of Facebook users who are being forced to learn the hard way that creating a personal online presence is not necessarily like telling tales around the playground.

In the digital age, said teenagers were naturally protective of their privacy as they navigate the networks. Last week, Facebook scrambled to fix a security breach that allowed users to see each other’s Facebook pages. Two weeks ago, Senator John Rockefeller IV, Democrat of West Virginia, asked Facebook to join him at a hearing to discuss privacy.

Federal Trade Commission to review the privacy policies of social networks to make sure that network sites do not make information private. “If I go back and look, there are things four years ago I would not say today,” he said. “I am much more self-censoring. I’ll try to be honest and forthright, but I don’t want people to know what my movie rentals are,” he said. “If I am sharing something, I want people to know seriously,” she said.

But many members of the tell-all generation are learning, for the first time, to tailor their information. They are more diligent than older adults, however, in trying to protect themselves. In a Pew study released last month, found that more than half the young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 were more apt to monitor privacy settings than older adults are, and they more often delete comments or remove their names from photos so they cannot be identified.

That mistrust is translating into action. In the Pew study, to be released shortly, 81 percent said they wanted a law that gave people the right to know everything a Web site knows about you, and 78 percent said there should be a law that requires Web sites to delete stored information. And 62 percent said they want people to have the right to demand that a Web site correct all the information it has about them.

While participation in social networks is still strong, a majority of young people have become more concerned about privacy, according to the Pew study.

Ms. Liu, who posted 72 updates last month on her Facebook page, said she asked to be removed from a Facebook circle, was left on it for a while and then removed again.

“I’m not going to trust Facebook, or have any trust in any social-network site,” she said.

Mistrust of the intentions of social sites appears to be pervasive. In its telephone survey released last month by the Pew study, 78 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds said they were more concerned about privacy than they were five years ago — mirroring the number of people their parent's age or older with that worry.

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