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## Danger stalks socialites

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Since its baptism into pop culture, the internet has been a multi-purpose tool for all ages. One such use has been socializing, though the results have not always proved positive.

Websites like Facebook and MySpace have become increasingly popular with secondary and post-secondary students as a way to communicate with friends from all corners of the Earth. However, in today's society of instant communication and readily available information, the privacy these sites afford is often overlooked.

Ann Cavoukian, commissioner of Information and Privacy for Ontario (IPC), recently released a statement cautioning about the danger of these sites:

"These websites help to connect people with various interests and are becoming increasingly popular with university and college students. They can offer basic information about people and also provide blogs, chat rooms and discussion forums. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of these websites. Most offer students minimal protection."

Many students are unaware of the dangers and have never read the privacy statements of sites like Facebook and MySpace. Cavoukian urges students to consider what she refers to as "The Three P's" - professors, potential employers and predators " - before posting private information on the internet. "The biggest concern with social networking sites like MySpace is that students aren't aware of the privacy risks."

The internet is host to all types of predators and unknown dangers and students often believe that they are wise enough to avoid the potential threats these sites pose. But this is not always the case.

In fact, students in one study conducted by the IPC group admitted to having posted information such as their address, phone number and daily schedule. It is startling to realize just how many people aren't careful with what they open to cyberspace.

Predators aren't the only ones lurking on the net. Recently, self-profiling sites have become popular with employers when it comes to potential employees " - especially those that hire students. In a recent interview, Cavoukian cited that a whopping 77 per cent of employers examine social networking websites when it comes time to hire and check up on current employees. One scenario, referenced by Cavoukian, was a woman who was fired from her job when her employers learned, through her blog, that she was doing drugs.

The commissioner warns that if students are going to be using Facebook and the like, they need to consider several things. First of all, is it a "closed platform" site? Are you part of a private group that, like Facebook, requires authentication such as a school e-mail address?

Secondly, are you able to validate other members of the group and able to control who sees your personal information and who doesn't?

Finally, consider whether or not the information you are posting could return to haunt you later down the road.

"I'm issuing a challenge to students," says Cavoukian. "Before you social network again, review privacy settings and know who has access to your life."

The internet is a wonderful, multifaceted tool, but like any other piece of technology has the potential to become a double-edged sword. Consider what you are posting, who will be able to access it and whether you really want the world to know everything about you.