

[<<Back](#)

## Bloggers Learn Price of Telling Too Much

Posted: July 8, 2005 at 1:03 p.m.

CHICAGO (AP) -- Blogs are everywhere -- increasingly, the place where young people go to bare their souls, to vent, to gossip. And often they do so with unabashed fervor and little self-editing, posting their innermost thoughts for any number of Web surfers to see.

There is a freedom in it, as 23-year-old Allison Martin attests: "Since the people who read my blog are friends or acquaintances of mine, my philosophy is to be totally honest -- whether it's about how uncomfortable my panty hose are or my opinions about First Amendment law," says Martin, who lives in suburban Chicago and has been blogging for four years.

Some are, however, finding that putting one's life online can have a price. A few bloggers, for instance, have been fired for writing about work on personal online journals. And Maya Marcel-Keyes, daughter of conservative politician Alan Keyes, discovered the trickiness of providing personal details online when her discussions on her blog about being a lesbian became an issue during her father's recent run for a U.S. Senate seat in Illinois (he made anti-gay statements during the campaign).

Experts say such incidents belong to a growing trend in which frank outpourings online are causing personal and public dramas, often taking on a life they wouldn't have if the Web had not come along and turned individuals into publishers.

Some also speculate that more scandalous blog entries -- especially those about partying and dating exploits -- will have ramifications down the road.

"I would bet that in the 2016 election, somebody's Facebook entry will come back to bite them," Steve Jones, head of the communications department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, says, referring to thefacebook.com, a networking site for college students and alumni that is something of a cross between a yearbook and a blog.

More traditional blog sites -- which allow easy creation of a Web site with text, photos and often music -- include Xanga, LiveJournal and MySpace. And they've gotten more popular in recent years, especially among the younger set.

Surveys completed in recent months by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that nearly a fifth of teens who have access to the Web have their own blogs. And 38 percent of teens say they read other people's blogs.

By comparison, about a tenth of adults have their own blogs and a quarter say they read other people's online journals.

Amanda Lenhart, a researcher at Pew who tracks young people's Internet habits, says she's increasingly hearing stories about the perils of posting the equivalent of a diary online.

She heard from one man whose niece was a college student looking for a job. Out of curiosity, he typed his niece's name into a search engine and quickly found her blog, with a title that began "The Drunken Musings of ...."

"He wrote to her and said, 'You may want to think about taking this down,'" said Lenhart, chuckling.

Other times, the ease of posting unedited thoughts on the Web can be uglier, in part because of the speed with which the postings spread and multiply.

That's what happened at a middle school in Michigan last fall, when principals started receiving complaints from parents about some students' blog postings on Xanga. School officials couldn't do much about it. But when the students found out they were being monitored, a few posted threatening comments aimed at an assistant principal -- and that led to some student suspensions.

"It was just a spiraling of downward emotions," says the school's principal. She spoke on the condition that she and her school not be identified, out of fear that being named would cause another Web frenzy.

"Kids just feed into to that and then more kids see it and so on," she says. "It's a negative power -- but it's still a power."

Lenhart, the Pew researcher, likens blogs to the introduction of the telephone and the effect it had on teen's ability to communicate in the last century. She agrees that the Web has "increased the scope" of young people's communication even more.

"But at the root of it, we're talking about behaviors middle-schoolers have engaged in through the millennia," Lenhart says. "The march of technology forward is hard, and it has consequences that we don't always see."

She says parents would be wise to familiarize themselves with online blogging sites and to pose questions to their children such as, "What is appropriate?" and "What is fair?" to post.

It's also important to discuss the dangers of giving out personal information online.

One Pew survey released this spring found that 79 percent of teens agreed that people their age aren't careful enough when giving out information about themselves online. And increasingly, Lenhart says, this applies to blogs.

Caitlin Hoistion, a 15-year-old in Neptune, N.J., says she knows people who go as far as posting their cell phone numbers on their blogs -- something she doesn't do. She also often shows her postings to her mom, which has helped her mom give her some space and privacy online.

"That's not to say if I thought something dangerous was going on, I wouldn't ever spy on her," says her mother, Melissa Hoistion. "But she has given me no need to do so."

Many college students say they're learning to take precautions on their own.

John Malloy, a 19-year-old student at Centre College in Danville, Ky., has put a "friends lock" on his LiveJournal site so only people with a password he supplies can view it.

"A lot of times, my blog is among the first places I turn when I am angry or frustrated, and I am often quite unfair in my assessment of my situation in these posts," Malloy says. "Do I wish I hadn't posted? Of course. But I haven't actually gone as far to take posts down."

Instead he makes them "private" so only he can read them.

"I like to keep them to look back on," he says.

Meanwhile, Joseph Milliron, a 23-year-old college student in California, says he's become more cautious about posting photos online because people sometimes "borrow" them for their own sites.

It's just one trend that's made Milliron rethink what he includes in his blog.

"I know this very conspiracy theorist -- but I wouldn't put it past a clever criminal to warehouse different databases and wait 20 years when all the Internet youth's indiscretions

can be used for surreptitious purposes," says the senior at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, who's been blogging for about three years.

Martin, the 23-year-old blogger in suburban Chicago, agrees that blogs can "provide just one more avenue for a person to embarrass him or herself."

"They also make it easier for people to tell everyone what a jerk you are," says Martin, who'll be heading to graduate school in Virginia this fall.

Still, she thinks blogging is worth it -- to stay in touch with friends and to air her more creative work, including essays.

"I suppose in that way," she says, "I think of blogs as 'open mic nights' online."

Martha Irvine is a national writer specializing in coverage of people in their 20s and younger. She can be reached at [mirvine\(at\)ap.org](mailto:mirvine(at)ap.org)

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