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People should have the 'right to wipe' youthful online indiscretions

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There was a time before Facebook and social media and text messaging. But for the current and subsequent generations they're already here, whether or not they're aware of them. Inevitably this can lead to ill thought-out or regrettable public posts. It's said that "the internet is forever", but a campaign that has garnered ministerial backing aims to give those reaching adulthood a second chance.

Not unlike the right to be forgotten applied to Google's search results, the campaign from iRights calls for a means for those turning 18 to be able to scrub their foolish, childish ways from the internet now they have become adults, in order to spare them from later embarrassment or even career-damaging discoveries.

After all, such discoveries have already occurred. The youngest member of the House of Commons, 20-year-old SNP politician Mhairi Black, has been criticised for her NSFW teenage tweets, posted only a few years ago. And in a high-profile case in April 2013, Paris Brown, a 17-year old girl selected by Kent Police to become their new youth police and crime commissioner, was obliged to resign over the violent, racist and homophobic content of tweets she'd posted between the ages of 14 and 16 – some years before she was hired by the Kent force.

Author



Greg Singh

Lecturer in Media and Communications;
and Programme Director: Digital Media,
University of Stirling

Her resignation sparked debate on whether or not it was right that someone of her age should be publicly admonished, humiliated and forced out of a job for something thoughtlessly blurted out in 140 characters or less at the age of 14.

The web moves fast, but has a long memory

There has been a change in the way UK employers recruit – social media vetting of employees is becoming more common as the way employees or would-be employees conduct themselves on social media is increasingly of interest to employers. Social media polices have become a standard part of terms and conditions of employment.

The term digital media scholars use to describe self-censorship on social media is “impression management”, something that has been well studied. In fact interesting research from the University of Antwerp suggests an increasing awareness among adolescents and young adults of the visibility and permanence of years of their less-thoughtful status updates and over-shared information. Many of those surveyed also expressed a need to avoid the watchful eyes of their parents, in a world where the privacy of teenagers’ emotions, and the sense in which that privacy exists, is under assault from all sides.

Striving for privacy where none exists

Young people often set up multiple profiles (in contravention of most social networking sites’ rules) for different audiences. Facebook is something their parents (“old people”) also use – while younger people use a range of others including Instagram, Snapchat and Vine.

This is equally the case in real-life contexts too. Studies in social psychology suggest that just as we present different versions of ourselves in various face-to-face contexts, so we modify behaviour and public image for social media. It’s not just about hiding certain information. Sometimes the fact the web allows anonymous or asynchronous communication feeds people uncharacteristic urges, either to over-share or to be aggressive or rude – what psychologists such as John Suler call the online disinhibition effect.

If we genuinely thought people should “accept us as we are, take it or leave it”, then strict privacy settings wouldn’t be so popular (or desirable) as they are. There is a collision between reasonable social pressures aimed at keeping children safe online, and the need for children and young adults to be able to express themselves freely among their peers.

Growing pains

To complicate matters, this is all happening at a crucial time as their adult identity develops. While university-age adults tend to give employment prospects priority and often regret their published thought-crimes years later, it’s far from their teenage minds when they’re posting.

So the iRights campaign seems to push all of the correct ethical buttons, and UK ministerial support for this additional right to be forgotten (and indeed the right of the poster to forget) is remarkably progressive. But the question of how legislation can be brought to bear on multinational and almost

entirely foreign-based companies such as Facebook to tackle how that information is stored and with whom it's shared is another matter.

Information that makes up social media profiles and status updates, even all that which is visible to the user themselves, is not the whole story. There are many other datasets derived from social media activity that operate behind the scenes. Ultimately it may come down to improving teenagers and young adults' digital literacy and impressing upon them the importance of a private life, in order to temper the urge to leave detailed online records of their lives, their nights out, or their next bucket challenge.

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