

What Does Your Digital Footprint Say About You?

If the recent news has been any indicator, we are becoming an increasingly digitized and virtualized culture, with one glaring and fatal flaw: our inability to realize just how vulnerable our real lives are to the impact of our digital footprint.



Look at Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick, whose life has been turned upside down by the discovery of text messages he sent to a romantic partner (who just so happened not to be his wife). Or consider Arlington mayor Carmen Kontur-Gronquist, "...who was voted out of office last month after she left unrestricted lingerie-clad images of herself up on her MySpace page," according to New York Times writer Susan Dominus. (When asked why she posted such personal photos of herself on such a popular public website, she replied, "It's my space," indicating a naiveté regarding the internet that is at once quaint and frighteningly out of touch for someone in a public office.)

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/21/nyregion/21bigcity.html>)

If there is one modern catchphrase that all of us should take to heart in this matter, it's this: The internet is forever.

Unfortunately, that's something that a lot of us – especially anyone over 20 – doesn't quite internalize. That's what happened to mayor Kilpatrick, who apparently thought that deleting his messages from his PDA was enough to erase them from digital reality altogether. The same goes for former New York governor Eliot Spitzer, who simply failed to understand the ease with which his shady financial dealings (all of which are mediated via internet connections between the point of purchase, their accounting houses, financial institutions and any number of other places these days) could be traced, cross-referenced and exposed.

Today's generation is at the most risk. It's not unusual for teens and young adults to post pictures on their MySpace pages, YouTube videos or blog postings that show them passed out drunk, doing illegal drugs, engaging in questionable actions and so on. Many fail to realize the impact that these public displays of poor judgment will have on future employers, college admissions boards and even potential mates. And simply deleting or removing the images and posts provides no protection. Sites like the Internet Archive (<http://www.archive.org/>) (also known as the Wayback Machine) and search engines continually cache copies of older pages, preserving those embarrassing or incriminating images for posterity.

In a world of near-ubiquitous internet access, near-permanent digital content and near-complete archives of cyberspace history, the concept of digital hygiene is increasingly important.

Here are a few things to remember:

1. As I mentioned, the internet is forever. If you upload it, publish it, share it or post it, chances are it will be there until the last server falls. Deleting copies on your end gets you nowhere. A corollary to this rule is that if it can hurt you or embarrass you, count on someone finding it at the worst possible time. Rule of thumb: Never post anything you wouldn't want your grandmother, your boss or your worst enemy to see.

2. Anyone can find anything. Given enough time, access and interest, a motivated searcher can find anything that is or ever has been publicly or legally available (and hackers can find everything else). Assume that anything – including email, text-messages, purchases, financial transactions, personal data, images and so on – is public, searchable and findable no matter how well you feel you've covered your tracks or how anonymous you think are.

3. Practice regular self-search. Google yourself and see what comes up. Go through the Internet Archive and see for yourself just how much of your previous cyber-life is still available for public search. Make a note to keep tabs on what's available about you, and how you plan to address it if it comes up.

As a last resort, you can sometimes get damaging content removed from some search engines or databases. But don't count on this to save your bacon if you've been naughty. You'll never get every copy removed from every source. Your best course of action is to simply behave yourself and stop assuming that because you're one of millions of internet users that you'll somehow get lost in the crowd. The internet may be a busy place, but it's also a very public, open place. And if you're wandering around naked with a beer bong strapped to your head, someone's going to notice.

<http://www.slowdownfast.com/what-does-your-digital-footprint-say-about-you/>