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One Tweet Over the Line

By **THE EDITORS**

(Photo: Peter DaSilva for The New York Times) A Facebook display on a Blackberry using SocialScope, which combines Facebook, Twitter and other social networks into one app.

There seems no part of public, private or commercial life that hasn't been made more accessible through social networking tools like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Hospitals are posting videos of surgeries on YouTube and doctors are sending tweets from operating rooms to educate the public and market their services. Those are just the latest examples of media-driven communication in places that used to be relatively private.

Is there such a thing as overuse of social networking tools? In the online world, is the notion of a public/private divide simply not applicable?

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Not Meant for Public Consumption

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When I was a junior in college, I spent a semester studying abroad. We were a small group of students, far from home and not well integrated into the life of our host country, so a typical Friday would involve settling in at one of our various seedy flats and drinking.

One particular Friday evening, which started with lime-free tequila shots and moved to swigging cheap vodka from the bottle, my hair caught fire. (I think — though I am hazy on the details — that I may have set it on fire myself.) In any case, my hair lit up quite nicely, which might have alarmed me while sober, but on that particular evening, it seemed like the sort of thing that happens from time to time.

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Fortunately, my friend Paul was better able than I was to imagine a bad outcome from leaving my hair alight. He leapt to his feet, staggered to the couch where I was sitting, and extinguished my head. My haziness notwithstanding, I have an indelible image of Paul leaning over me, his face lit by the flame, as he blew out my hair like a birthday cake.

Good times.

It's a safe bet that one or more pictures of those proceedings would be on Facebook, had I not

been born so deep in the last century that we had no Facebook.

Society has always carved out space for young people to misbehave. We used to do this by making a distinction between behavior we couldn't see, because it was hidden, and behavior we could see, because it was public. That bargain is now broken, because social life increasingly includes a gray area that is publicly available, but not for public consumption.

Given this change, we need to find new ways to cut young people some slack. Privacy used to be enforced by inconvenience; you couldn't just spy on anyone you wanted. Increasingly, though, privacy will have to be enforced by us grownups simply choosing not to look, since it's none of our business.

This discipline isn't just to protect them, it's to protect us. If you're considering a job applicant, and he has some louche photos on the Web, he has a problem. But if one applicant in 10 has similar pictures online, then *you've* got a problem, because you'll be at a competitive disadvantage for talent, relative to firms that don't spy.

People my age tut-tut at kids, telling them that *we* wouldn't have put those photos up when we were young, but we're lying. We'd have done it in a heartbeat, but no one ever offered us the chance. Now that kids have these capabilities, it falls to us to keep our prurient interest in their personal lives in check. Just as Bill Clinton destroyed the idea that marijuana use was a disqualifier to serious work, the increasing volume of personal life online will come to mean that, even though there's a picture from when your head was on fire that one time, you can still get a job.

Social Conventions, Online and Offline
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People are used to dividing the world into broadcast media (television, newspapers) and point-to-point communication (the telephone, face-to-face communication). Because the Web has many aspects of broadcast media, people often talk about the information we put on social media sites as "public," as though posting on Facebook is like appearing on national television. In reality, most of what we do online falls in the second category.

Context is all. We might share details about our love life with friends at a bar that we wouldn't share over Thanksgiving dinner.
We employ an wide variety of techniques and social conventions to control who we communicate with in the offline world. We might share details about our love life with friends at a bar that we wouldn't share over Thanksgiving dinner. Conversely, we might tell our families about medical or financial decisions we wouldn't discuss at a bar. And we lower our voices when we want to make sure the people at the next table don't overhear us.

The early Internet was very different. Users faced a stark choice between posting information on a public Web site or sending it in a private email, with little in between. The new generation of social media tools is helping to bridge the gap. Twitter lets me make my tweets public or limit access to people I've specifically approved. Facebook allows me to decide whether my profile

will be visible to others with a princeton.edu email address, whether friends-of-friends will be able to see my photos, and even whether my profile will show up at all when someone searches for my name.

Of course, there's still a lot of room for improvement. Many users find these tools inconvenient or hard to use, and some are careless about posting information that could become embarrassing in the future. But we shouldn't be too impatient; the offline world has a centuries-long head start in developing privacy-preserving tools and social conventions.

Too Much Microinformation

Susan Mernit *is a former AOL vice president and a consultant who blogs at susanmernit.com. She occasionally overshares at twitter/susanmernit.*

Is there such a thing as the overuse of social networking tools? Absolutely! The acquaintance who twittered one hour after her baby was born and the woman who twittered during her gynecological exam during a recent earthquake give a whole new meaning to crossing the public-private divide.

Tools like Friendfeed, the Facebook status updates, and Twitter offer never ending opportunities to update both your inner circle and the 2,000-odd friends who made the mistake of thinking you might be interesting every time you find an interesting link, go on a trip, or have a major life change. But most who sign on as followers aren't looking for the blow by blow on your fight with your boyfriend, your constantly shifting relationship status (it's complicated) or even the fact you think some other Web denizens are idiots.

One of the truths of social media that is hard to face is that microinformation can be both embarrassing and boring, leading to a terminal case of twittering too hard and to the need to get over yourself. Wondering if you've crossed the line? If you have to ask, you probably have.

Constant Contact Is Bad for Your Health

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The emerging phenomenon of social-networking technologies like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube creates lots of inherent, unavoidable, potentially problematic tradeoffs. While these new media foster more personal communication, they also encourage excessive, addictive, counterproductive multitasking.

Constant access to email, cellphones, Twitter, and so forth entices people to intersperse their use of such tools with other important tasks that demand attention and concentration — like reading and
composing complex documents, holding meaningful conversations, or thinking and planning life's activities. For lots of people, these tools have no boundaries.

Excessive multitasking can lead to chronic stress, with potential damage to the cardiovascular, immune, and nervous systems.
They're being used everywhere — at corporate meetings, during driving, and while cooking dinner. At the same time, recent research has shown that such multitasking is often extremely inefficient and can actually be dangerous to your health.

Frequent "flitting" back and forth between various complex tasks may increase the total amount of time taken to complete all of them by 100 percent or more, and many more errors are likely to occur along the way.

Excessive multitasking can lead to chronic stress, with potential damage to the cardiovascular, immune, and nervous systems. Fatal accidents are more likely too. Nobody, not even the inveterate multitasker, is completely invulnerable to these effects. There is also an increased chance that people, especially the young, may not develop the ability to concentrate on important tasks for long periods of time, or may lose that ability for lack of practice. Had Einstein multitasked incessantly, most likely he would never have invented the Theory of Relativity.

The bottom line is: We have to learn when and where multitasked social networking media actually help us carry out our daily tasks rather than interfering with them. Because these media are ubiquitous, tempting and potentially addictive, we must strive to manage them better than we do now.