



PRIVACY

Unit Overview

The Privacy Unit is designed to encourage young people to reflect on the opportunities and risks associated with the capacity to share information with vast audiences on the Internet. A strong emphasis is placed on the responsibility to consider potential effects on oneself and on others of disclosure and concealment of information online.

Key Questions

- What are the boundaries of sharing information about oneself and others online?
- What are the potential benefits of being able to share information online? What are the potential harms—to yourself and to others?
- In what circumstances can concealment of personal information—and anonymity—be beneficial versus harmful?

Traditional notions of privacy are being challenged by new media environments in which youth heavily engage. Online social networks, forums, and blogs provide rich opportunities to network, communicate, and share information with vast audiences.

There are both promises and risks for young people associated with these opportunities. By creating a profile and sharing at least some personal information online, a young person can participate in small, private online communities or large, public networks. Youth who lack offline supports may turn to online forums and communities. In these contexts, participants can post anonymously in order to protect their identities as they share sensitive information, obtain needed support, or give support to others.

At the same time, disclosing information online can be harmful to youth if they fail to consider the ways in which the information they share about themselves and others could be used. danah boyd describes four properties of online environments that suggest the need for caution. These properties include the persistence, searchability, and replicability of information posted online, and the presence of invisible



audiences.¹ Given these properties, the everyday decisions young people make regarding what to disclose, to whom, and how, become urgently important. Youth need to be in the habit of reflecting on the potential consequences, for themselves and for others, of such decisions.

Ethical Thinking Skills

Ethical thinking skills highlighted in this unit:

- **Perspective-taking**, in order to understand the views of individuals who disclose or choose not to disclose in online contexts, and to consider the potential impact on others of disclosing information online.
- Considering one's **roles and responsibilities** when seeking and sharing information about themselves and others online.

New Media Literacies

New media literacies highlighted in this unit:

- **Networking**—the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information; in other words, networking creates opportunities to share with others.
- **Judgment**—the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources, including friends and peers.
- **Negotiation**—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms—is important. A young person who can discern the norms of information sharing in different online communities can make more mindful decisions about the potential implications of sharing a given photo with her Facebook network or posting a personal story on her blog.

Unit Lessons

The Privacy Unit contains the following lessons:

- **Being Anonymous**—This lesson is made up of three activities that focus on the power of non-disclosure of identity and the broader social and political potentials that individual and collective anonymity hold. Students explore situations in which they choose to disclose or hide personal information, and discuss the guiding principles behind these decisions in online and offline contexts. Students then consider questions of anonymity in a broader historical and

¹ boyd, danah. (2007). Why youth (heart) social networking sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life. In D. Buckingham, (Ed.), *Youth, identity and digital media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.



social context through an examination of the Federalist Papers, a series of anonymous essays that proved critical to the adoption of the American Constitution. Working together, they discuss the normative and ethical dimensions of being anonymous in different scenarios. Students then watch and discuss two short news clips about a group calling itself “Anonymous,” which hides its identity both online and in the “real world.” Designed by Steve Schultze and Erin Reilly (Project NML).

- **Facebook for All**—This lesson is designed to encourage youth to explore their own conceptions of privacy and those of others, particularly older adults. Participants create a mock social network profile (on paper only) for an important adult in their lives; in so doing, they are asked to consider how their own mental models of privacy online may align or misalign with those of others. The lesson encourages sharing the mock profile with the adult as a basis for discussion of the similarities and differences in their respective beliefs about online privacy. Designed by John M. Francis (GoodPlay).
- **Trillion-Dollar Footprint**—In this lesson, participants role-play as producers for a reality TV program, “Who Wants To Be a Trillionaire?” Tasked with choosing the last contestant for the program, the producers are given the fictionalized results of extensive Google searches about two applicants, including information dating back five or more years from their social network profiles, blog posts, newspaper articles, etc. Based on this information, participants are asked to consider the credibility of each applicant and his/her suitability for the program. After this exercise, participants are prompted to consider how they interpreted the information they found (especially discrepancies about a candidate); their beliefs about how to handle the privacy of others and the ethics of “Googling”; the role of co-creation of identity in privacy management; and their strategies for managing their own “digital footprints.” Designed by Sam Gilbert (GoodPlay).