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COLUMN ONE

Testing the Bounds of MySpace

A writer learns a lot from an experiment with the popular social networking site -- especially about her 13-year-old daughter.

By Catherine Saillant, Times Staff Writer
April 8, 2006

I've covered murders, grisly accidents, airplanes falling out of the sky and, occasionally, dirty politics.

But in nearly two decades of journalism, nothing has made my insides churn like seeing what my 13-year-old daughter and her friends are up to on MySpace.com.

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Here's a bulletin I recently found posted to her site:

"OMG! Add this hott guy! He will whore the first 20 people added to his friends list.... Add him! You can do it in his van!"

Loosely translated, the teenage girl was "pimping" a teenage boy, shown smooching his guitar, as a potential new friend — or more — for my daughter. If Taylor added him to her MySpace "friends" list, the tousled-hair teen would be able to look at her website and send messages to her.

The soliciting girl made the pitch to

all 245 of her own "friends" with a simple keystroke.

In the MySpace world, this is called a "whore code." It's a mild — very mild — example of the coarse language and often profane messages that are plastered all over the social networking site like graffiti on bathroom walls.

It was this coarseness and an abject lack of manners (not to mention extremely poor grammar) that bothered me the most as I entered the second month of a deal that I had worked out with my often headstrong daughter.

Though MySpace tells users that they must be at least 14 years old to join, all it takes is a casual search to see that the requirement is routinely violated. All of the kids at her junior high had MySpace accounts, Taylor pleaded. Why couldn't she?

After consulting with a circle of friends and relatives, I relented. I'd let Taylor have a MySpace site, I told her, but only if she agreed to follow some rules.

The first was that her site would have to be set to "private." That meant that only those she had preapproved as "friends" could see her page.

Next, she could not add as a friend anyone she did not personally know.

We also agreed that no foul language or inappropriate materials could be used.

And, most important, she had to give me complete access to her site, including a password that let me view hidden e-mails.

Taylor was so excited that she immediately agreed to everything and signed the contract that we had drawn up.

In the high of the moment, I felt good too. I had found a way to allow my daughter an activity that she seemed to love while protecting her from online predators — my biggest worry.



Mutual discovery
(Stephen Osman / LAT)
March 23, 2006
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But in the days and weeks to come, our honeymoon glow would turn to alarm on my part and an increasing boldness on hers. And I would find it harder and harder to balance my parental instincts with technologies that seemed to me to be rewriting the rules of adolescence.

This all started in late December when my cellphone rang as I was walking into a grocery store. It was the mother of one of Taylor's friends, explaining that she needed Taylor's help to shut down her own daughter's MySpace account.

Taylor, then 12, had helped the daughter set up a site without the mother's permission, and only Taylor knew the password necessary to delete it.

All of this was news to me. With an embarrassed apology, I promised to set things straight.

I didn't know much about MySpace.com then. I've since had to do my homework.

MySpace, I learned, was created by a couple of Santa Monica tech-heads, and over its two-year life, it has become the biggest website that allows people to find dates, keep in touch and socialize. If you sign onto the site, now owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., you get free personal "space" to post profile information and photographs, write blogs, link music and send e-mails to other members. MySpace claims 68 million members, up more than 20 million in just the three months since I began visiting it.

Some of its fans are young adults. Many are kids like Taylor.

Our relationship had become stormy of late. Taylor resisted spending time with the family and seemed more concerned with her social life than anything else.

I wasn't surprised that she found MySpace fascinating. As a little girl, she constantly questioned me about the world around her and was not satisfied with simple answers.

She wanted to know not just how things work but why they were that way. Why are those people poor, Mommy, and why isn't everything free? If my answer didn't square with her sense of justice, there would be a whole new round of whys. She was always curious.

I could see that MySpace was a challenging and fun new universe for her to explore — only this time, she wasn't seeking my guidance.

When I confronted her about the mother's call, Taylor sheepishly admitted that she had become something of a MySpace guru for her circle of friends. She helped them set up accounts and even designed their pages if they asked.

Yes, she had her own page, Taylor said. She showed it to me.

Looking back, I realize that my reaction had little to do with the primping photographs of young girls, creepy "bulletins" and occasional foul language that I found on her site.

It was more the shock of discovering a different Taylor, a cool-teen version of the girl who used to cuddle up on the couch and watch cooking shows with me. My daughter was too young for such an uncensored world, I decided.

I immediately shut her site down.

I had to ask her to do it for me.

This is how she responded:

"I'm really mad because it feels like you're saying I can't talk to my friends anymore. On MySpace, I get to talk to my friends and see people I don't see a lot. You get to keep in touch with everyone and it's fun. You took away my fun!"

Several things happened that made me change my mind.

My 49-year-old sister, Christine, joined MySpace and told me she was having fun using it. She urged me to set up my own account so we would have a free, easy way to exchange e-mails and photographs.

I thought about the technical skills Taylor had acquired in creating pages for herself and for her friends. And I started noticing a lot of news stories about MySpace, usually



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focused on its dangers.

What if I allowed Taylor to maintain a page while keeping a close eye on it? I'd join too, to become familiar with the site's benefits and drawbacks.

So I typed out the contract and Taylor enthusiastically signed it. She created an account for me and assigned me a URL, http://www.myspace.com/im_a_cool_mom, that reflected the giddiness of our truce.

Taylor was thrilled by this turn of events: *"Yeah! ... I can't believe you're letting me do it. I guess it's OK that I have to sign this thing. I don't want you supervising me. I think I can do it on my own. But I'm glad you let me have my own page. It's a generous thing for you to do."*

Taylor was generous too.

She helped me find a pretty orange background and showed me how to link to a Joni Mitchell music file that would play "Big Yellow Taxi" when a visitor landed on my Web page.

Meanwhile, while I was content to leave my page alone once she set it up, Taylor constantly tried out different looks on hers, as naturally as if she were changing clothes.

Almost daily she linked different music files (from a MySpace-sanctioned cache) to her site. From my daughter, I learned that Beyonce is hot and that Britney Spears definitely is not.

I also watched with surprise — and pride — as her flying fingers from memory tapped out HTML, the specialized language of Web page design, to add color and unique script to photo captions.

Using my digital camera, she took dozens of photographs of herself and her friends, posting the best to her site. Over time, I noticed how she became less interested in glamour poses, experimenting instead with shadows, light, composition and unexpected angles. She often shot photographs for her buddies' MySpace Web pages.

I was impressed and found that I was bonding with my daughter in a way that had become difficult of late.

I'd ask questions about how to perform various functions, and she'd help me out. Our technical talks usually segued into discussions of her social and academic problems and worries.

The novelty of MySpace was interesting to me. I didn't have a lot of friends, but I enjoyed chatting with the few I did.

As for predators, six weeks into our experiment, Taylor had not received messages from anyone other than friends or schoolmates.

At one point a couple of teenage boys from local schools sent e-mails asking if they could come to her house after school. When she didn't respond, one of the boys sent an angry e-mail using swear words to demand an answer. With my prompting, she deleted both as friends.

Foul language was a constant, and it annoyed me. Catholic schoolgirl upbringing aside, at 45 I'm not naive or a prude. Still, the mass mailings Taylor received each day were for me a barometer of how easily and often young teens are exposed to crude images, thoughts and words.

Some of it was the type of notes my own generation passed around when the teacher wasn't looking. An ominous story, followed by the warning of misfortune: "If you don't repost this within 10 minutes, you will have bad luck for 7 years and no one will love you EVER IN YOUR LIFE!!!"

But other posts were truly disturbing, such as the cautionary, and detailed, tale of a young girl who was raped by her father, died from a sexually transmitted disease and now haunts those who read her story.

Surveys are also popular and contain such telling questions as "Have you ever taken drugs?" "Are you a virgin?" and "Abortion — for or against?"

Talk about a permanent record!

I reminded Taylor that she shouldn't leave any identifying information in her writings, even if she was writing to a friend.

Once, I caught her using a swear word in a message and grounded her from MySpace for two weeks.

Another time, I asked her to delete song lyrics and other material that I considered offensive from her page. (She said she just liked the beat, but I didn't like the references to getting drunk, rape and "blowin' up the neighborhood.")

But for the most part she was being responsible. "Maybe this is going to work," I thought.

In late February, about two months after we made our pact, I logged onto Taylor's account one morning to look it over. As I scrolled down, some new photographs caught my eye.

I froze.

For some reason, Taylor had posted shots of herself and two other girls giving a one-fingered salute.

I couldn't believe that she would post the photos knowing that I was looking over her shoulder. What was she thinking?

This is what she was thinking, Taylor said:

"I was like, 'Should I do this? I don't know.' But I thought you wouldn't care because I didn't say anything on them. They were just pictures. And [the two other girls] already had them up on their pages."

I printed out the offending photos and confronted Taylor with them. I showed her the contract and asked her to read it. Then I told her I was shutting down her account because she had broken the rules.

She didn't take it well. She cried and pleaded for one more chance. I braced myself for the onslaught and said no.

She pleaded some more. I struggled to stay calm and resolute. After a few minutes of arguing, Taylor gave up. Her anguished reaction, before stomping into her bedroom and slamming her door, went something like this:

"You've ruined my life!"

Later, we talked about what happened. Taylor knew she had blown it and was as angry at herself as she was at me. I encouraged her to join the yearbook staff at her junior high school to practice her newfound design and photography skills.

If she showed more maturity, I told her, she could reopen her MySpace account when she turned 14 next March. That minimum age requirement was making a lot of sense to me.

Taylor listened and accepted her fate. She had just one question.

"Can I get my cellphone a little earlier?"

Sharing MySpace did not magically transform my relationship with Taylor. She still circles me like an alpha dog, and we still fight like cats.

But it did, for a brief time, provide me with a reassuring glimpse of the curious and smart girl I know so well. It reminded me that once we get past the storms of adolescence, that person will still be there.

With her usual bluntness, Taylor said her lesson was simpler:

"You're still a cool mom — but not THAT cool."

Or perhaps even that powerful.

In the 24 hours before her MySpace account went dormant, Taylor received one last helpful e-mail from a friend:

"U know u can just make another one but have a different name," wrote the girl. "That's what I did."

Catherine Saillant and her daughter, Taylor, discuss their MySpace experience at 2:30 p.m. today on Weekend America, KPCC-FM (89.3).

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