Child Safety and the Internet

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 03, 2006

Twenty years ago I was 16 and starting college. One of the first things I did at college was to find the Internet, and it was great.

Chat rooms were newsgroups and to Instant Message someone you had to know a modicum of Unix.

My favorite newsgroup was sci.chem. The group was populated with Chemistry professors, Chemistry students, and industry professionals across world. Conversations ranged from hard core Chemistry to philosophical questions such as "If a chemical is synthesized but is indistinguishable from the natural version, does it matter? Should it be labeled differently in products?"

I developed mini-friendships with people I never met, never saw, and never talked to. I played online games with people I didn't know; I only knew their alter egos and avatars. One of my favorite characters to play was Gabrielle, a Rodent Of Unusual Size who lived in a Fire Swamp (think /Princess Bride/).

I knew people who met over the Internet, got married. Some had kids; some divorced.

Was it dangerous? I mean, if I could profess to be a large rat were the people claiming to be teenage girls or college boys really 50-year-old men? Not really. Back then it wasn't all that dangerous because to have Internet access you pretty much had to be a student, professor, government employee, work for a computer company, or live in a different country. I double majored in Computer Science just to keep my Internet access. It was a big deal.

But, it's all changed. Now anyone and their dog Spot can have Internet access. My dog has a web page. I had my 3-year-old's website up before I left the hospital. My dad uses the Internet regularly and sends his columns into the local paper without leaving home. My mom learned how to play Internet poker. My 70-year-old mother-in-law is an expert at printing out pictures of grandbabies and sending email to her sisters. Anyone can use the Internet now. It's not just for nerds anymore. Most of you reading this probably don't even know what Unix is.

Since the Internet has reached the general population, it is filled with the general population.

So, should you ban the 'net in your house? I don't think so. I still
love the 'net. I love it that when I'm talking with my husband or
sister and one of us has an odd question like "What was Ronald Reagan's
first movie?" or "Who were the first 20 presidents of this country?" or
"Do polar bears have carnassial teeth?" that I can walk over to my
computer, type in a few words, and there's the answer. It's a lot
easier than searching out encyclopedias or walking to the library. Oh,
and one of the best things about the 'net comes in handy when reading my
father's letters. My father is an erudite man with a large vocabulary
who has caused me to repeatedly use Webster's Online.

Should children be kept out of chat rooms and have their email
screened? Well, I imagine that depends on the kid. If my biological
children keep developing as they are, I don't think my husband or I will
monitor them too closely. They'll know early on that if they can
pretend to be a large rat that there's no reason to believe that other
person isn't also pretending. We had a teenage foreign exchange student
for a while, and I didn't feel a need to monitor her 'net usage. She
was a smart cookie and she understood what was going on.

I also had a teenage foster child in my home. She was so desperate for
companionship, love, and attention that I did not trust her on the Internet.

So, how did I try to protect the teenager who couldn't protect herself?

* All of the family's computers are in the living room. This is
the room we spend the most time in. She could not be on the computer
without us being able to glance over at her screen.

* I tried a net nanny program for a while. I didn't even install
it on all our computers. I hated it. It blocked too many sites that I
found useful to me. Net nanny programs work well for some people, so
they're an option.

* I noticed the teenager saved all her information in cookies and
the like. What did that mean to me? I could log into any of her
accounts and read her email and change settings. I distinctly remember
putting any email for "hotornot.com" on a blacklist so she would never
get it.

* The teenager set up a myspace account, so I did also. I forced
myself to play around on that site for a while to learn what it was
about. This caused me to regularly check what she had on her site.

* I had to learn some infernal acronyms. Fortunately for me, most
of the ones from 20 years ago are still valid. However, there are a lot
more of them now too.

* Learn, learn, learn. I had to keep one step ahead of a kid
determined to get herself hurt.

Here's some websites to visit to help you learn, learn, learn.

* *http://www.NetLingo.com* - This website defines a bunch of acronyms.

* *http://www.FamilyWatchdog.us* and
*http://www.NationalAlertRegistry.com *has lists of registered sex
offenders. Which ones are living near you?

* *http://www.GetNetWise.org* - Learn about various aspects of the
Internet, including child protection

* *http://WiredSafety.org* - This is a volunteer run charity that
helps protect children from the Internet

* *http://www.MySpace.com* - Does your child have a website or
blog? It might be here.

* *http://www.google.com* - Type in your kid's name and search. If
that doesn't reveal anything, type in the names of your kid's friends,
one by one. You can also add city or state to the search if your child
has a common name.

* *http://www.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/Child_Safety/* -
This is a list of child safety Internet sites.

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