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Putting personal information on social networking websites can have humiliating consequences

The internet is like Las Vegas. It's filled with razzle-dazzle, glitz and fun, opportunity and – if you play your cards right – wealth. But it's also filled with dangerous traps for young players.

Take 41 year old Tracy. Recently she went on a date. We know it went well because she used the social networking website Facebook to invite the gentlemen to repeat the experience. She provided excruciatingly explicit details of the dalliance, including references to something called a "love cave".

Clearly just coming to grips with technology, Tracy posted this very private message in a very public place – on her "wall" - where all her friends and family could see it. Beneath it was a flurry of comments left by friends as she begged for them to help remove it.

"Go to the right corner of the message and click hide!" a helpful friend wrote. "By the way congratulations."

One of Tracy's more caring friends also took a screen capture for posterity's sake. Thousands (if not millions) of people have now seen it and it will continue to circulate on websites and emails for years to come.

What happens in cyberspace stays in cyberspace.

Welcome to the information revolution, where private humiliation is a global sport.

The latest comScore survey showed more than 70 per cent of Australian Internet users visited a social networking site in June – up 29 per cent on the previous year. That's almost nine million people. Facebook alone had more than six million visitors. Twitter had about 800,000 (although most seem to be either spammers or the ABC, both of which have embraced the micro-blogging service as if it were a machine of war).

A lot of us are taking the gamble and putting our personal information online without considering the consequences.

When you post photos on these websites you surrender your copyright of the images to the site. They could be used for anything.

If your life suddenly becomes news – if you die in a car crash or you're murdered, for instance – your social networking page is now the first destination for hungry media. And it is so much easier than sitting there patiently waiting while your sobbing mother chooses one of your ball photos to hand over.

(Perhaps you should keep an "in the event of my death" photo handy on your MySpace so we don't choose that one of you dresses like a wench at the Vicars and Tarts Ball.)

Have you checked what a quick Google search or sift through your social networking site reveals about you?

A survey by America's biggest online job site release this week showed 45 per cent of US employers used social networking sites to check on job candidates, with 11 per cent actually using it to screen applicants. Suddenly that picture of a handgun resting on your infant son in his crib with the caption "cool B-day present Dad", doesn't seem such a good idea.

Hiring is one thing, firing is another, A woman called Lindsay lost her job from this status update: "OMG I HATE MY JOB!! My boss is a total pervy w..ker always making me do s..t just to p..s me of!! W..KER".

Brain, her boss, replied: "Hi Lindsay, I guess you forgot about adding me on here? Firstly, don't flatter yourself. Secondly, you've worked here for five months and didn't work out that I'm gay? Thirdly, that 's..t stuff' is called your job."

He goes on to sack her, right there online.

She, who lives by the Facebook, dies by the Facebook.

Lindsay's shame is now preserved online in perpetuity on a website called Lamebook .com – where you can also find the picture of the baby with the handgun.

The internet can get you sued, as one Chicago woman discovered this week when she was hit with a writ for \$US50,00 by her landlord for a critical "tweet" on Twitter. According to the Chicago-Sun Times. She wrote: "Who said sleeping in a mouldy apartment was bad for you? Horizon Realty thinks it's OK." Horizon sued, claiming they were "maliciously and wrongly" defamed.

When you moan online you aren't just moaning to your friends. Big companies have the software (called bots) and resources (called money and

lawyers) to search the Internet for their company's name and defend themselves against even the most innocuous allegations.

Cyberspace is a very unforgiving place to express an opinion.

Cyber-bulling is rife.

Curtin University Professor of Behavioural Research and Social Marketing Rob Donovan said commenting on photos and, in particular, in online forums can get spectacularly nasty.

While some people post things simply for the attention and revel in it, Professor Donovan says people whose self-confidence comes from external recognition can be badly affected by it.

In cases such as Tracy's he warns that, unlike newspapers where one day's humiliation is the next day's chip wrapping, being the butt of a popular and rapidly circulation Internet joke can be a recurring nightmare. "What could be really psychologically debilitating is the knowledge that is out there, and it will keep on traveling and people can re-access it," Professor Donovan said.

He suggests Tracy follows the advice of life's more resilient souls: "It doesn't matter to those who matter – and those who don't matter, don't matter."

You could also keep yourself out of trouble in the first place: Think before you post.

Oh, and keep yourself nice.