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Untangling the Web's Shifting Strands

Mandy Salomon

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I MENTIONED to my mum that I was going to write about Facebook. "Darling, do you use it?" Yes. "Well please be careful! You don't know who you might be talking to."

It seems a child is never too old to be cautioned about the big bad cyber world, and if not from their parents, then the paternal arm of government.

Despite the failure of the Howard government's net filter scheme, and Senator Helen Coonan's second, superior attempt, both famously cracked by 16-year-old Tom Wood, the Rudd Government is embarking on a similar quest, starting with a six-week trial. It has invited the internet service providers to enlist, but the good news is that all of us can participate.

Judging from comments in the blogosphere, geeks are lining up to be the first to prove how easily the system will be hacked. If redirecting proxies is not your thing, you could join the stop-watch subcommittee, whose job will be to monitor the drag of the content-filtering system on your computer's speed. Another task is to try to trick the system by putting in keywords that might be on the black list: "jugs", "hot", and "doggy", for example.

A top-down content-filtering system is doomed to fail. The internet was built to route around blockages.

"Cyber bullying, educating children on how to protect themselves and their privacy are the first problems I'd fix," Tom Woods told the media last year. He was enlisted by the Rudd Government to draft part of its cyber safety policy.

I'm with Tom - forget the software, and let's get on with education.

Harvard "mediatrician", pediatrician Michael Rich, who looks at the use and abuse of media as a health issue for children, puts the onus back on parents. During his visit to Melbourne last week he quipped: "the word 'parent' needs to become a verb". The trouble is parents can only reasonably give guidance when they have the confidence and knowledge

to do so. Tom Woods thinks: "They really need to develop a youth-involved forum to discuss some of these problems and ideas for fixing them."

And this is the nub of it: kids already know so much more than we do; the generation we wish to protect can sniff a "random" (a stranger) a mile off.

Which brings me back to Facebook. When I joined up and was getting acquainted with the privacy settings - which are still not good enough; why else do I get ads for oestrogen patches on my site? - I found that the photo album I'd posted of my niece's 18th birthday party was open for all to see.

"That's really dumb, Mum. Here, I'll show you," said my own 16-year-old. That's as far as his geniality extended. Two attempts by me to be accepted into his exclusive coterie of more than 250 friends via the "friend request" option were denied.

Since I've become more familiar with Facebook, I don't miss access to my son's world at all. There's only so many poses of babes with Bacardi Breezers held suggestively to their lip-glossed pouts that one really needs to see. I use my site as a professional tool, to connect with special interest groups and events. Scanning the activities of your network is no more time-consuming than a phone call to a mate, but instead of catching up with one friend, you have a peripheral vision of many. Their lives flicker around you, giving you the choice to zoom in and engage with them if you wish.

I have friends who refuse to use Facebook, not because of other users' predatory behaviour, but because they perceive the corporate structure and terms of service to be predatory. I contend that the best way to parent our children through the spider web is to navigate ourselves through it too. Facebook is as good a learning curve as you will find.

msalomon@swin.edu.au

https://register.facebook.com/editaccount.php?ref=mb

Mandy Salomon researches web cultures at Swinburne University.