

Dangers on the Net

Making friends online has its dark side, so **MELISSA LEE** asked experts for advice on what if...

Somebody impersonates me on Friendster, Facebook or MySpace?

Nanyang Technological University media law lecturer Mark Cenite says that the regulations on such networking sites state that you cannot impersonate someone else.

So just e-mail the site and tell them about the imposter, and the fake will be shut down.

Some countries like the United States have stiff laws that regulate against online impersonation, but Singapore does not have many such laws.

Here, unless the impersonator commits offences such as fraud, cheating and theft through pretending to be you, it is unlikely that the person will face any criminal charges.

Someone uses the information I've posted online to stalk me?

Intellectual property lawyer Samuel Seow says that if information obtained through cyber stalking is used to physically endanger a person, he or she can ask for restraining and personal protection orders under the law.

However, he says that apart from that, there is not much "recourse under the laws of Singapore against cyberstalking". So people should be careful about revealing personal information on the Net, he warns.

I decide to erase my account

and all my postings on networking sites. Will I still leave an electronic trail?

Think twice about posting information that you might later regret revealing, because it seems that on some sites, you will leave a trail.

Cisco, a company which deals with computer networking equipment, points out that it "depends on the provider – different ones have different privacy policies".

Facebook, for example, says that "removed information may persist in backup copies for a reasonable period of time but will not be generally available to members".

It adds, however, that "where you make use of the communication features of the service to share information with other individuals (such as sending a personal message to another Facebook user) you generally cannot remove such communications".

Friendster's terms of service; on the other hand, say that information posted on its site grants the company a licence to "use, copy, perform, display, and distribute such content" – even after account deletion.

I don't wish unwanted people (for example, job recruiters, strangers) to view the information I post on social networking sites?

Most sites like Livejournal, Xanga, Facebook and Friendster have privacy settings where you

can restrict the amount of information that others can access.

However, there are loopholes aplenty. Facebook, for instance, is supposed to be restricted to college and high school students, but can easily be accessed by others.

A New York Times article in June last year reported that a United States employer used an intern's college e-mail account to access Facebook and look up a potential applicant.

The employer found the applicant's listed interests – "smokin' blunts (cigars hollowed out and stuffed with marijuana), shooting people and obsessive sex" – and although the list was probably just a spot of posturing, he decided against giving him the job.

I receive an unpleasant online proposition?

Dr Adrian Wang, consultant psychiatrist at Gleneagles Medical Centre, says the best way is to "completely ignore the lewd messages, and don't respond to them.

"And if you have an ongoing conversation with someone and you start to get uncomfortable with it, you are not obligated to continue the conversation".

He suggests talking to friends or someone older, like a teacher, as listening to their experiences will help you cope with the situation.

However, he adds that you might want to see a counsellor "if it gets to the point where you're afraid to even log on".