

Simson Garfinkel

Student privacy vs. the Internet

THERE ARE AT LEAST 25 STUDENTS and staff members who respond to the name Beth at Northeastern University. There are four students named Orna at Harvard. And there are eight doctors who have the first name Thomas at Beth Israel Hospital.

I know this because these institutions, like many others, have posted a searchable student and staff directory on the Internet.

The directories are quick and handy, but they raise concerns about what sort of information should be provided to the global information community? How should that information be made available?

The issue of on-line student directories is more than just a tempest in an academic teapot: It's a question that's going to be faced sooner or later by every business, organization and government. It's an issue that pits personal privacy against the Internet's ability to cut costs and strengthen communities by making this information easily accessible.

Here are some of the questions on the table:

■ Should people be able to view the entire database, or should they only be able to look up somebody they already know?

Many schools distribute phone books for their students and employees, but almost always these books are stamped for internal use only. Schools are worried about more than just junk mail: Con artists and stalkers use these lists to target victims.

Most schools in the Boston area allow you to search the student directory on their Web site, but won't show you page after page of student names sorted in alphabetical order.

"I can't think of any legitimate reason for them to have that, other than flooding us with junk mail," says Frank DiPace, director of distributed systems at Boston University.

But at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., the entire student phone book, with names, addresses and phone numbers, is up for grabs. Beth Ritchie Martin, a senior there, says the school also sells the directory to anybody who wants it.

"That's why students get a lot of junk mail. People use the directory as a mailing list."

David Yeh, Cornell's assistant vice president for student and academic services, says the university is completely within its rights to make the information available. Besides, he says, any students who want to can have their names removed.

But Cornell hasn't done the greatest job getting the word out, which shows why the idea of just letting somebody opt out of a directory doesn't always work in practice. Called at home, Besty Ingall, another Cornell student, says she had no idea that her name and phone number were on the school's Web server for anybody to see.

"There could be some problems with that, if somebody is looking for somebody to harass. I could see that could be a problem for me."

■ What information should be listed?

The MIT Web site displays the name, e-mail address, telephone number and address, department, and graduation year for most of the school's students. The school's printed phone book includes more information: student's permanent address and phone number.

But these decisions aren't cast in stone. At the beginning of each semester, students must fill out a form that tells the school what information they wish to appear in the on-line student directory and what information can appear in print. They can update the form electronically from the school's computer system.

Suzana Lisanti, MIT's facilitator for the Campus Wide Information System, says having the database available on the Internet is an important part of MIT's mission.

"We're part of an international community," she says. "I think that it's important for people to be able to find each other, to verify that somebody is at an institution, or to be able to reach them for scientific, intellectual professional needs."

Student phone numbers are on the system, she adds, so professors can reach their students after hours.

■ Should insiders get more information than outsiders?

What you can find out electronically about a student at Boston University depends from where you are looking. Search a student's name inside the university's computer network, and you might get the student's name,

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Plugged in columnist Hiawatha Bray is on vacation. His column will return next week.

On-line directories raise student privacy question

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phone number, or whatever information the student wants made public. But try to look up a student from outside the university, and all you'll get is an e-mail address.

■ Should there be limits on the number of names you can look up? The directory at MIT has a governor on it, so that you can't look up more than a set number of names within a given time period. You can't search the name Smith at BU: If there are too many matches on a search, the computer won't display the results. But the computers at Northeastern University and at Beth Israel Hospital will happily show you all of the names that

match your search, even if there are dozens of them. That can be just as damaging as publishing the entire directory.

There aren't any right answers to these questions. But institutions must come to understand that just because you *can* put something on line doesn't mean you *should*.

Phil Agre, a professor of communications at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has put together an interesting collection of arguments against privacy and their rebuttals. They can be found at <http://communication.ucsd.edu/pagre/arguments.html>

Technology writer Simson Garfinkel can be reached at plugged-in@simson.net

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Location: <http://web.mit.edu/owis/www/mttdir/index.html>

Directory | Emergency/Service | About | Usage | Changes

MIT Faculty, Staff, and Student Directory

(For phone numbers of MIT departments, labs, or research groups, contact the MIT operators at 617-253-1000)

Enter your directory query here:

Here are some of the kinds of queries allowed, with examples:

- username, e.g. eclapton
- lastname, e.g. clapton
- firstname lastname, e.g. eric clapton
- lastname firstname, e.g. clapton eric
- wildcards, e.g. cl*ton eric or clapton eri?

Any of the above queries would find this record if it actually existed:

name: Clapton, Eric
email: eclapton@MIT.EDU
phone: (617) 253-7669
address: 240-381
department: Dist. Comp. & Network
title: Analyst Programmer
url: <http://web.mit.edu/eclapton/www/>

If you have problems with the above search use this CSO interface:
Enter your query here:

Directory | Emergency/Service | About | Usage | Changes

MIT Home Page

Last modified: Wed: 20071011 08:18:08
by The WWWMaster (web-master@mit.edu)

The MIT Web site displays information on students, but each semester students can submit exactly what they wish to appear in the on-line directory.