

Putting our lives online

VINCENT NICHOLS, Catholic Archbishop of England and Wales, recently warned that social networking sites were undermining 'community life', leading to 'transient' friendships where 'quantity was much more important than quantity'. But in the land of saints and scholars, we were too busy updating our Facebook pages to pay much heed. Since January, Irish members have doubled to a staggering 900,000, nearly 25% of the population, reaching a bigger audience than any national newspaper and most Irish TV shows.

Last month, 18-year-old English teenager Keeley Houghton was imprisoned for three months for threatening on Facebook, to kill another 18-year-old, Emily Moore. Hardly a day passes without another story of cyberbullying or inappropriate usage leading to disciplinary measures and sackings.

The Church itself doesn't appear to be singing from a universal hymn sheet on the subject. Last year Cardinal Sean Brady, while acknowledging the dangers, said social networking had the potential to provide a 'limitless contribution to the common good' and suggested if 'Rosary Priest' Fr Peyton were alive today he would have been big into texting and Twitter.

For many commentators, the problem isn't so much that social networking facilitates bullies — after all, bullying existed long before the internet and, indeed, Houghton's bullying of Moore, began four years prior, in the real world. Rather, for many, the issue is one of personal privacy: you assume you are sharing private details with a group of personally selected friends but the reality is quite different.

Facebook may be fun, a handy way of staying in touch on a daily basis or tracking down long lost friends but it is no charity, it is a multi-billion dollar global business and your private information is their commercial motherlode. Facebook provides a forum for millions worldwide to upload photographs, personal details and lists of 'favourites', allowing the company to construct a vast database of highly detailed pro-

The Irish love updating their Bebo and Facebook sites, but are we revealing too much of ourselves, asks Joe McNamee

localised ads popping up on their homepage. (Paddy the Plasterer, anyone?) And every time you complete one of those cute little quizzes such as "How well do you know me?", you may be giving permission to a third party to access all your personal information.

Niall Larkin is a co-founder of Relevant Media, an Irish company in the process of tying up the loose ends on an application designed to simplify privacy on Facebook. It is potentially worth millions and could revolutionise social networking.

"Right now, it's very difficult to control your privacy on Facebook and most people are very surprised at how easily stuff can leak out," says Larkin. "You have to go through an awful lot of different settings to ensure privacy and can easily miss something.

"Privacy distinguished Facebook from Myspace as a selling point in the early days," says Larkin. "The original premise was that you could only be revealed to others on your own campus. But as the



and in a way is almost allowing us to have more friends. In the past, you hung around with your set group of friends whom you met at weekends — now you can juggle more friendships, we can multi-task more relationships."

By 'relationships', Mulley is referring to networking as opposed to socialising.

"I am talking relationships at the most basic level. Before, if you met someone briefly at a business conference, you would take a card with a phone number or an email address. Now, with Facebook, it's almost like adding someone to your address book but you get a lot more. You build on the relationship. It's a communications thing, the way I used email was as a business tool, a way of keeping in contact, now it's very much Facebook."

But what about the more familiar and tangible benefits of real human contact?

"I think Facebook actually enhances your ability to manage friendships and relationships," says Mulley. "Look at the amount of real world events promoted

through Facebook, company barbecues, artistic events, performances, concerts. A huge amount of people use it for keeping in contact with people in an ambient way, of keeping tabs on birthdays and parties. It's there and I choose whether to partake in what's happening. I can choose whether to get involved."

But Mulley also acknowledges the privacy issues.

"An older generation coming in are alarmed at the amount of exposure," says Mulley, "where everything was private, now you have people broadcasting their lives to the world. My own view is, it doesn't matter too much, if you are happy enough with what you decide to put up."

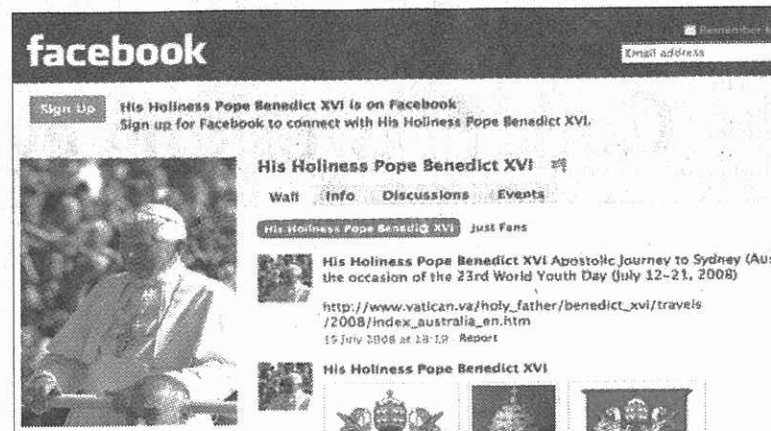
Mulley believes the privacy debate reflects national mindsets.

"The biggest thing is the cultural difference between America and Europe. In the US, the notion of privacy is very different.

When the Google streetcar went around the US taking pictures of every street, nobody protested but, in Europe, people have been up in arms."

Indeed, Switzerland has just followed Greece in making it illegal for Google to take images of their respective countries for Google Streetview. "We have the data protection act in Europe; they really don't have that in the US — and that is where Facebook information is stored. People are worried they will be surrendering privacy. The Bush administration implemented the secret wiretapping of US telephone calls — it wouldn't be a surprise to find they had been doing a similar thing with Facebook information."

Before eyes start rolling heavenward, dismissing another wacky conspiracy theory, it is worth pointing out that Facebook's primary funder and one of three board members along with Zuckerberg is Paypal founder Peter Thiel, an avowed Neocon activist and libertarian. In 2007, Facebook received \$27.5m from Greylock Venture Capital — one of Greylock's senior partners, Howard Cox, is also on the board of In-Q-Tel, the venture-capital wing of the CIA. After 9/11, In-Q-Tel vowed to identify and



Everyone from Pope Benedict to a 'Paddy the Plasterer' is using social network sites. But sharing personal data with a global audience can prove dangerous.



ends on an application designed to simplify privacy on Facebook.
Picture: Maura Hickey

partner with "companies developing cutting-edge technologies to help deliver these solutions to the CIA and the broader US Intelligence Community to further their missions". Mulley also points out the potential for fraud.

"A clever person can aggregate all your personal Facebook data and find out a lot about you," says Mulley. "A few years ago, there was a thing online, working out your personal 'pornstar name', usually, it the name of your first pet followed by your mother's maiden name. If you are going to do a password reset, those two questions are very often posed as a security measure. I think it was a complete coincidence but ..."

But for Dr Keith Holmes, Chair of the Faculty of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry at The College of Psychiatry of Ireland, younger users remain most vulnerable.

"A youngster's judgement can be so suspect when it comes to privacy," says Holmes. "I have seen youngsters diagnosed with, say, something like Attention Deficit Disorder who have gone home and put up on their Facebook page 'guess what, doc says I have ADD!'."

"With privacy-sensitive issues, the scope of what can happen has changed hugely. Ten years ago, you might have told someone you shouldn't tell and they might have told someone else but now online you can literally be telling hundreds of people, especially as some of these kids have huge networks.

"They don't have the real life experience to differentiate. It becomes a virtual world, they're playing out a life that's still one step detached from reality without any clear connection with cause and consequence as they sit in their room," Dr Holmes said.

"Cyberbullying is very much tied up in that. You don't see the effects of what you're doing; you're sitting there pressing some keys and thinking this is funny. But the effects can be devastating and also downstream and longlasting for some youngsters.

"I wouldn't want this to be taken as an anti-Facebook rant because it can be very beneficial but some vulnerable youngsters can get very caught up in it.