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BUAD 307
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PRELIMINARY ASSIGNMENT
OPTION #1

**THE IDENTITY WIPER:
SECONDARY MARKET RESEARCH**

PROPOSAL: The Identity Wiper would consist of software that would change personal information—such as the names of a child and family member, birthdays, city of residence, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses—to bogus values in order to prevent children from giving out information that might be abused by online predators or others who might abuse this information.

Online Use By Children and Teenagers

Children and teenagers continue to use and interact through the Internet at increasing rates and frequency. This trend has been facilitated by such factors as the growth—both in sophistication and size—of online communities such as MySpace, increasing access to high speed Internet, and greater skills in Internet use. Based on non-attributed research, the *Financial Times* (Taylor, 2006) reports that 54% of teenagers confirm having communicated with a stranger online, some one in seven having actually met a stranger in person who was first encountered online. online, and 47% having received “pornographic e-mail.” MySpace so far has 116 million registered users, not all of whom are children or teenagers, and it is estimated that 250 million people worldwide use at least one online social networking site (Bowley, 2006).

The *Financial Times* reports that 55% of American children and teenagers between the ages of twelve and seventeen use social networking sites such as MySpace. Citing Pew Research data, the *Times* states that 37% of twelve and thirteen year olds have created online profiles, with the figure rising to 63% for fourteen to seventeen year olds and 70% for teen-aged girls ages fifteen through seventeen. 48% of teens are reported to visit these sites daily, with 22% indicating multiple daily visits. A *Wall Street Journal* article reports that 20% of Internet users in the age range of twelve to seventeen have blogs.

Although sites such as MySpace and Facebook have introduced certain protection systems, monitoring online activity is often difficult because many individuals—whether children, teenagers, or adults—often maintain more than one online “identity” and a presence on more than one site (Bowley 2006). Sites such as MySpace require individuals to be fourteen or older to join, with those in the fourteen to fifteen age category receiving a more restricted membership where their profiles can be seen only by those with access to their e-mail addresses or full first and last names. However, these safeguards depend mostly on self-report measures by users. Attorneys general for several U.S. states are considering litigation to require these services to verify ages against publicly available databases. Complicating such measures, however, is the fact sites that find U.S. measures too restrictive may be able to locate in other jurisdictions. Although there is no indication that this site is intended to circumvent protections or encourage inappropriate behavior, the South Korean site Cyworld is seeking to expand internationally, especially in the United States (van Duyn, 2006).

Online Predators

Although it is clear that online predators represent a very serious threat to children and teenagers communicating through the Internet, estimates of the number of individuals involved and current trends differ. According to John Suthers, Attorney General of Connecticut, there are currently some 60,000 online predators world wide. There is some question as to whether this problem is growing, remaining stable, or declining in size. *USA Today* cites a recent study by Crimes Against Children of the University of New Hampshire indicating that in 2005, 13% of ten to seventeen year olds “had received an unwanted request to engage in sexual activity or conversations in the previous year from either adults or other children.” This number was down from 19% in 2000. This, however, represents only one measure of the problem and does not address the extent of activities that go beyond first time contact. The number may also reflect a possible growing sophistication of predators who are often masters of building up relationships over time so that, at a critical point, they are often not viewed as “strangers.” Although being crudely propositioned by another individual is likely to be a traumatic event for children, teenagers, and even many adults, these approaches would seem likely to be more easily recognized and rejected—whether implicitly or explicitly—at the time they occur. Complicating matters somewhat, the study found that some 43% of solicitations originated from other individuals under the age of 18.

Internet activity—legitimate and not—is a world wide phenomenon today. Even if online predators are a declining phenomenon today in the United States, the incidence of such individuals is likely to rise in other parts of the world as Internet access and usage expand. Internet predators are reported to be an increasing problem in Australia (Dearne 2006).

Parenting Activity and Existing Solutions

Goodstein (2007) cites a 2005 Pew report indicating that 59 of mothers and 49% of fathers use filtering software. Although software programs and other services by themselves may not provide an adequate alternative to parental involvement (Taylor, 2007), a large number of existing programs and services are available (Table 1). Although these vary in scope and approach, functions tend to fall into two broad categories: (1) Blocking of sites and/or activities and (2) monitoring of online behavior, with reports being made available to the parent. Because restriction of a child or teenager's Internet access or monitoring of his or her online activity is regarded by many as troublesome, there are significant variations in how far programs will go. Zephyr, a service provided by MySpace—possibly as a way to forestall more dramatic measures—allows parents to see when a teenager is online and whether any changes are made to his or her profile, but not to access the actual profile or monitor the content of the activity.

It is widely recognized that many programs can be easily circumvented, especially by the tech-savvy teenagers who may know more about the technology than does the parent. The newest version of Internet Explorer, for

example, enables content filtering based on the Content Rating Association guidelines (Taylor 2006).

Many firms now report using filtering programs to prevent their employees from accessing inappropriate sites during the workday. Some of the more advanced programs used by network administrators appear to offer considerable flexibility. One application, for example, allowed a firm to limit the bandwidth allowed for use at any one time by sites such as YouTube, preserving computer resources while not necessarily imposing an outright ban on the use of a specific site. It is also possible to grant access to certain shopping and predominantly personal use sites only during lunch hours or other permitted time intervals. Other applications—which often raise greater concerns about invasion of privacy—can be used to track the online activities of users of company computers.

CyberPatrol offers a feature that is somewhat similar to the proposed idea. This software program is reportedly able to “prevent” the browser from revealing certain “sensitive” information such as credit card information, addresses, and phone numbers (Taylor 2006). No articles were found that evaluate this feature and its effectiveness.

Disney.com has announced measures that will give parents greater control of their children’s activities on this site. This approach seems useful in targeting the youngest Internet users as they enter, but in view of the wider array of sites used by older children and teenagers, and the desire to take advantage of the flexible and interconnected nature of the Internet, the compatibility with the needs of these older segments seems more limited.

Predators are not necessarily the only source of concern among parents and public policy makers. Many individuals strongly value their privacy and may find the disclosure of personal information objectionable more on the basis of principle than on the basis of any risk of substantive harm. An article in *Advertising Age* describes a view advocated by the Electronic Privacy & Information Center that, due to the permanence of Internet records and the ease of information distribution, no information about a minor child should be collected into a lasting database. Parental concern even about sending children information can be a concern. It is recommended that online firms seek to renew permission to send information to children at least once every six months and that the permission requested—e.g., to send one message about a given program per week or month—be made very specific.

Privacy Issues and Impact of Monitoring

There is clearly some resentment among teenagers of “intrusive” activity by their parents. Some teenagers—and even college students—have experienced considerable embarrassment and discomfort as parents have sometimes “stumbled” upon their community sites. In some ways, the high tech tools now available provide an opportunity to disseminate thoughts that were once shared in person, through notes passed, or in one’s private diary. A paradox exists in the sense that although there is a desire for certain material to be publicly available, allowing parents to find such information by using conventional tools such as search engines available to the general public, parents constitute a group not invited.

Table 1
SOME EXISTING INTERNET MONITORING/USAGE RESTRICTION PROGRAMS*

Program and Price (if available)	Capabilities
Monitoring Programs/Services	
SafeEyes (\$49.95)	Reports of instant messaging chats, e-mails, and web use through e-mail reports
eBlaster (\$99.95)	Copies of Chats and e-mails sent with e-mail; e-mail alerts provided
ContentProtect (\$39.99)	Reports of instant message, tracking of web activity; e-mail or pager alerts
IM Einstein (\$40)	Recording of instant messages and chats; e-mail, phone, or pager reports
CyberSieve (\$39.99)	Logs of web use available online; notice of “forbidden” activities.
Zephyr (N/A)—component of MySpace	Only allows parents to check log-on status and profile changes from remote computers
Filtering Software/Services	
Internet Explorer 7.0 (N/A)	Content blocking based on Content Rating Association guidelines.
CyberPatrol	Blocking of specific or all chat and instant messaging sites and activity; blocking of undesirable search engines and other sites; protection against revelation of personal sensitive information
CYBERsitter	Unspecified filtering and other capabilities
SafeKeeper Plus	“Suite” programs to control Internet activity; ability to monitor activity; tracking of suspected predators
WebWatcherKids (\$99.00)	“Real time” filtering content; access to monitoring of key strokes by child from everywhere
BeNetSafe	Automatic monitoring of child Internet activity with reporting of “reckless” activity

*Adapted from Goodstein (2007), Shellenbarger (2006), Taylor (2006).

Discussion

This research suggests that a large number of products currently exist to help protect children against inappropriate Internet contacts and disclosure of personal information. Many of these product features are complimentary, and some products contain more than one—e.g., a filter restricting site access and a tool for parental notification of behaviors of concern. One existing product offers a feature that is specifically intended to prevent the disclosure of sensitive information, while the others seem focused on either a limitation on the targets with which communication be made or reporting once critical incidents have already occurred.

Although the current research uncovered concerns—among children, teenagers, as well as parents—about the intrusive nature of some of the measures offered, the articles did not give a clear indication of the level of satisfaction with current systems. This issue, then, will need to be assessed through primary research. Prices of services offered, where reported, seemed to be in the same \$30-\$100 range that has been anticipated for a product of the type proposed. The price did not come up as an issue in the articles read, and thus willingness to pay must be examined in primary research.

General concerns about the intrusiveness of online “snooping” came up in many articles. The articles did not offer any insight into how these might be balanced against protection from online threats. It was also evident from articles that many measures may be readily circumvented, especially by tech-savvy teenagers. This suggests that there may be a strong need for cooperation

and mutual support among parents and children for the objectives of the program. These are issues that should be addressed through primary research.

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