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Cybersafety that's out of the box

Annie Facchinetti

Around 12 per cent of the almost 10.7 million Facebook users in Australia in 2011 were registered as being between the ages of 13 and 18 (Socialbakers in Swoop Digital, 2012). This represents over a million active users who are still at secondary and in some cases primary school. With the all-pervasive reach of other popular sites such as Twitter and YouTube, social media is almost unavoidable for the younger generation. Of course, this is not inherently a bad thing; the technology has the potential to facilitate collaboration and interaction in ways that would have taken prohibitive amounts of time and money in the past. Schools do, however, have a duty of care towards their students, and it is therefore becoming increasingly important to find ways to effectively manage the risks associated with online access.

Netbox Blue is an Australian company that takes this challenge seriously. For the last eight years, they have been providing solutions for schools across independent, state and Catholic sectors, with a focus on developing products that are responsive to evolving technology. "Netbox Blue has a long history of delivering internet management solutions to schools. We were often asked to help deal with the ongoing issues of social media management and it was this feedback which led to the creation of our SafeChat technology which allows schools to embrace social media while still enforcing their Acceptable Use Policy, 24 hours a day, seven days a week," explains Ross Hanson, General Manager Australia and New Zealand.

SafeChat is an integral part of Netbox Blue's CloudControl Social product. When deployed on school-issued devices, CloudControl Social uses pattern-matching technology to monitor social media communications both inside and outside school, and identifies and manages items that are potentially harmful. It can alert, block or report on incidents that may be of concern in a number of categories, including predatory messages, aggression, racism and eating disorders. Inappropriate communication can also be monitored in BYOD environments.

Impressed by Netbox Blue's technology the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment recently negotiated a Standing Offer Arrangement that will give the state's public schools access to purchasing its solutions.

Flagstone State Community College is one school that has already implemented CloudControl Social. According to the school's principal Jude Fox, "Netbox Blue has given us security in knowing that we are able to monitor our students' external usage of social media sites on EQ laptops. We have been able to act protectively when students have been identified by Netbox Blue for searching at-risk topics such as suicide or drug usage."

One of the strengths of CloudControl Social is its capacity to respond to students' behaviour in real time. For example, if a student makes a Facebook post that is flagged as exhibiting bullying behaviour, the post will be blocked and a message will pop-up on the culprit's screen explaining why the communication is unacceptable. This feedback supports students to learn about appropriate online behaviours. Simultaneously, a notification is sent to the school so follow-up action can be undertaken if required.

Perhaps even more significant, however, is CloudControl Social's ability to monitor inbound communication, regardless of the source. This has proved valuable at Queensland's Suncoast Christian College, where messages of a predatory nature sent to a student via Facebook from an adult outside the school were blocked. The alert sent to the college allowed for the incident to be reported while the student remained protected. "The Netbox Blue solution enabled our school to support families by extending the cyber-protection provided at school to homes and wherever the school laptops are connected to the internet," observed the school's Deputy Principal and Director of Teaching and Learning, Greg Mattiske.

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Target audience

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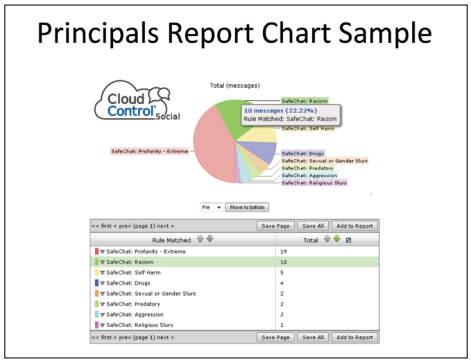
The complexity of the pattern matching technology has also helped college staff identify and intervene in a situation where a student was at risk of self-harm.

"Social Media is fast and has global reach, hence issues can escalate rapidly," explains Netbox Blue's Ross Hanson. "What is most important here is that early intervention is critical in dealing with these issues before they spiral out of control.

"While a lot of work is being done in the area of educating children to the risks of social media, managing and monitoring these risks is the key to properly implementing a school's Acceptable Use Policy."

The cloud-based nature of the application allows web traffic to be reviewed, even if it is Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encrypted, and also makes it particularly easy to install. "Rather than being designed for enterprise [the products] are designed for schools from the inside," says Hanson. This includes maintaining a healthy respect for the ingenuity of students in finding ways around less sophisticated protections.

While personal devices not using the school network are beyond the reach of SafeChat technology, Hanson points out that incidents are liable to be picked up at some stage. "If there is a problem, there is a high likelihood that a student on a school device or on a school network will eventually read the comment/post.



As we monitor both incoming and outgoing streams of messages we will detect the message on the incoming. This ensures that by embracing social media and CloudControl the school can identify the 'silent victims' who may otherwise go undetected, and provide early intervention and support for these students."

Kew High School in Melbourne is another school that has successfully implemented CloudControl Social. The school has found the reports provided each day particularly useful. According to Assistant Principal Ian Greenwood the SafeChat report is one of the first emails he opens each day. "From the report I always follow up on at least one student," he says. Both Kew High School and Flagstone Community College have also found the detail available in the reports beneficial. Flagstone's Head of Information Technology and Business Kerenza Ortlipp reflects, "We've found these reports to be very flexible and they can be easily changed to suit our College… another fantastic feature of the web management console is our ability to drill down and gain additional information before acting on a report."

The companion product to CloudControl Social is CloudControl Web, a cloud-based filtering system with more than 500 million pre-categorised URLs. Like Netbox Blue's Social product, CloudControl Web provides schools with detailed reports about web usage. While the web controls are comprehensive, teachers also have the ability to temporarily override the rules if access to a specific site is required during class. Kew High School has integrated CloudControl Web into the eSmart program, a cybersafety initiative from The Allanah and Madeline Foundation, and is finding it an effective support for building responsible online behaviours in students.

Further reading

Socialbakers, 2011. "User age distribution on Facebook in Australia" on Swoop Digital. Available at http://www.swoopdigital.com.au/social-media/facebook-australian-statistics/. Accessed July 12, 2013.

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