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**Press release**

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**4.5 million young Brits' futures could be compromised by their  
electronic footprint**

*- Survey reveals extent of online content that could damage the prospects of  
young people and leave many more vulnerable to identity fraud -*

As many as four and a half million\* young people (71%) would not want a college, university or potential employer to conduct an internet search on them unless they could first remove content from social networking sites, according to new research by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). But almost six in 10 have never considered that what they put online now might be permanent and could be accessed years into the future.

The research findings are unveiled as the ICO launches a new website at [www.ico.gov.uk/youngpeople](http://www.ico.gov.uk/youngpeople) to help young people understand their information rights. The first section contains tips and advice on safe social networking.

As well as not thinking ahead before posting information on the web, the survey of Britons aged 14-21\*\* also revealed that youngsters' online behaviour is a gift to potential fraudsters. Two thirds (eight in 10 girls aged 16-17) accept people they don't know as 'friends' on social networking sites and over half leave parts of their profile public specifically to attract new people. More than seven in 10 are not concerned that their personal profile can be viewed by strangers and 7% don't think privacy settings are important and actively want everyone to see their full profile.

As for the data that young people make available, 60% post their date of birth, a quarter post their job title and almost one in 10 give their home address. Couple this basic information with details that might be used to create

passwords e.g. sibling's name (posted by 23%) pet's name (posted by a quarter of girls) and even mother's maiden name (posted by 2%) and fraudsters have the information they need to obtain products and services in a young person's name or access existing bank or online accounts.

David Smith, Deputy Commissioner for the ICO, said: "Many young people are posting content online without thinking about the electronic footprint they leave behind. The cost to a person's future can be very high if something undesirable is found by the increasing number of education institutions and employers using the internet as a tool to vet potential students or employees.

The research also found that a third of young people have never read privacy policies on social networking sites and don't understand how they can manage their personal information. But when asked how they feel about websites potentially using their details to target advertising at them or to pass on to other websites or brands, a huge 95% are concerned about this, with 54% caring 'a lot' about how their personal information is used.

David Smith continues: "This shows that when young people are made aware that their details could be being passed between parties – legitimate or unscrupulous – they are worried. We have to help teenagers wise up to every aspect of the internet age they're living in – it may be fun but unfortunately it is not the safe space many think it is."

#### **Protecting your identity online – ICO top tips**

- **A blog is for life...** remember you risk leaving a permanent electronic footprint. If you don't think you'll want it to exist somewhere in 10 years time, don't post it
- **Privacy is precious** – choose sites that give you plenty of control over who can find your profile and how much information they can see. Read privacy policies and understand how sites will use your details
- **Personal safety first** – don't allow people to work out your 'real life' location e.g. your place and hours of work. Your personal safety offline could be affected by what you tell people online
- **Password protected** – change your passwords regularly, don't use obvious words like your pet's name and don't use the same passwords on social networking sites as you do for things like internet banking
- **Address aware** – use a separate email address for social networking

- and one that doesn't give your year of birth or ideally, your full name
- **Reputation is everything** – what seems funny to you and your friends now might be not be to your teachers, university admissions tutor or prospective employer – or to you in years to come

## Ends

For more information contact the ICO press office on 020 7025 7580 or email [icopressoffice@trimediahc.com](mailto:icopressoffice@trimediahc.com)

To access the full topline report of the survey conducted by Dubit, please click [here](#).

## Notes to Editors

### ***Some quotes from young people when told that the information they put online could still be there in five, 10 or 20 years:***

- *"I think it is quite daunting as it could hinder my career choice" (female, 19, West Mids)*
- *"I had a blog a couple of years ago and want to delete it – but I can't, and I had personal details on it! (female, 16 Yorks)*
- *"Potential employers could 'google' you and it could give embarrassing information etc" (male, 16, NW)*
- *It sort of scares me to think that what I've written at my age now (17) may come back to haunt me in later years. I did not know this (female, 17, NW)*
- *"Initial thoughts - who cares? Subsequent thoughts - omg!!!" (Female, 14, Scotland)*
- *Really annoying, a search on google brings up stuff I put online when I was really young and I can't get rid of it. (Male, 16, SE)*

1. \* Based on UK population aged 14-21 in 2006 of 6,415,800 and 71% of survey respondents indicating that either there is 'some' or 'a lot' of online content on social networking sites, chatrooms or blogs they would not want found by a person in authority. From Office of National Statistics: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/StatBase/Expodata/Spreadsheets/D9657.xls>
2. \*\*Survey of 2,000 14-21 year olds conducted by Dubit in October 2007.
3. The ICO promotes public access to official information and protects personal information. The ICO is an independent body with specific responsibilities set out in the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Environmental Information Regulations 2004 and Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003.