What is a digital footprint and why would you want one?

By Jenny Luca

When I was 14, I was seriously bullied by a group of girls from the school I attended. They made my life a misery for a period of time, but I knew it would pass. I remember my father offering to pick me up from school rather than having me hounded on my walk home. I declined the offer, telling my Dad, "it was just my turn". Soon they'd tire of me, and move on to the next unwilling recipient of their cruelty. And they did just that. That was 30 years ago (makes me feel old just writing that!) and at that time, the damage they inflicted hurt, but it didn't leave a lasting negative imprint. In fact, the experience helped shape me into who I am today; it helped me to understand that I had an inner strength that could carry me through tough times.

Fast forward to 2010, and I doubt the same experience would be played out like it was in 1980. In today's world of socially-connected Internet-based networks, a bullying experience like that would quite likely be played out in a digital space like Facebook. There, you would see the harassment and negative slurs shared with friends, and friends of friends, and before you knew it, your reputation would be in question with a vast number of people, many of whom you would barely know. If your bullies are particularly nasty, they might post unflattering pictures of you, or even go to the trouble of digitally altering pictures to present you in the worst possible light. The point to be made here is this: the extent of the harm is magnified by the web. Information spreads fast and wide, and the digital traces left behind from an encounter like this are difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate.

In 1980, a footprint was something left in the sand that the next incoming wave would wash away. In 2010, there's a new kind of footprint, your digital one, and it's a lot harder to wash away. For that very reason, we have to begin to understand that whether we like it or not, traces of our lives are appearing on the web. If we're smart, we'll begin to understand that there are ways and means of shaping the digital traces we leave behind. If we're really smart, then those of us involved in educating our next generation will help them to understand that they can do this too, and they just might find that in doing so, it will make all the difference.

Have you Googled yourself lately? Try it. You might be surprised to find what's there. If you have a common name, then sifting through the results to find something specific to you might be difficult if you haven't been particularly active on the web. Put quotation marks around your name to narrow the results down to instances where your first and last name appear together. If you have a less common name, you may just find results there that you didn't even know were in the public domain. I first Googled myself in 2007, expecting to find nothing. Because I was presenting at an ASLA Conference in October of that year, information about me was available. I have to admit to being shocked at first. I didn't think I'd given express permission to have that information made available. Then I had to re-evaluate. I'd willingly chosen to offer my services to present. The conference organisers have a right to publicise their conference. Once I got over the initial shock of realising that if someone wanted to find me, they knew I'd be at the Adelaide Convention Centre at 1.00pm on October 4, I started to think that maybe this information could work in my favour. It doesn't look too bad to have people realise that you are a teacher willing to share your knowledge with others. It was the beginning of a positive digital footprint I was creating for myself.

Fast forward to now, and the first 43 results from the first five pages of Google (50 results in total) are direct references to me. In fact, there are 21,300 results for "jenny luca" on Google, but I'm certainly not trawling through all of them! What I do know, is that the large majority of those results reflect my professional life. They reference my blog posts, awards I've won, comments I've left on other blogs, people who've mentioned me in their writings on the web. They chronicle who I am as a teacher and what I think. They are the long tail of my digital footprint, and I, for one, am happy to have that information out there.

I think it takes some time for people to become comfortable with the idea of information about you being readily available on the Internet, and I'm not entirely sure that I think it's a generational thing. Students I teach are genuinely surprised when I ask them to Google their name and they discover information about themselves there. I see many of them express the same initial discomfort I did when I first uncovered my digital footprint. Quite often the information that is there appears because our school publishes a newsletter that is web based. When they see their sporting results, or participation in the school play highlighted, I often hear cries of, "But I didn't tell them to put that there!". When I discuss this with them, and point out that what is there is most often presenting them in a good light, and suggest that this might be the kind of digital footprint they'd want to be leaving, most of them are in agreement. It's around that time that the students with the common names are bemoaning the fact that there's a plethora of 'Emma Smith's' out there, and they can't find anything good that's referencing them!

And therein lies the rub. What is the message we should be translating to the students we teach today? Is it important to maintain privacy and not release anything about them on the web? Or do we assist them with their understanding of how the web works? Do we empower them by helping them to realise a digital footprint/profile can be an important tool that can work in their favour, particularly as they reach the cusp of adulthood and leave our care for tertiary life or the world of work?

We need to understand that there are challenges facing us in a digital age. The copy and paste nature of the web means that you are not always in charge of what you put there. People can crop pictures out of websites, they can

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digitally alter images, you, and your words can be misrepresented. You may think you have control, but others can take control away from you. The audience is greater than ever before and it is very difficult to remove content from the web. Sometimes it's near on impossible. If there is damaging information you can request the webmaster of a site to remove it, but there is no guarantee this will happen. There are request forms to be found on Google where you can ask them to remove content, but there are parameters they follow, and what is damaging to you personally may not fit within those parameters. Litigation is expensive and takes time. Sometimes the best way to lessen the impact of damaging detail on the internet is to create new content, good

content, that can be found by search engines to create a long tail of good stuff – good stuff that buries the damaging material. Surely these are lessons our students need to hear too? If their reputation has been sullied with a picture taken at an inappropriate moment and then transmitted via the web to an audience of thousands, then that should not become the thing that defines them. They can repair damage done, but they need to know how they do just that.

Jonathan Zittrain, a professor at Harvard Law School, teaches Internet Law. He has discussed the idea that society will move to a point whereby we will have the opportunity to eradicate our web history and have the ability to start over. He calls it 'Reputation Bankruptcy', and it may very well be the measure needed in the future to ensure people do not have to carry a damaging digital footprint with them wherever they go. Take Stacey Snyder's example as a case in point. Stacey was a pre-service teacher in the United States who had been directing her students to her myspace page during the course of her time in a school. She had been warned by her supervising teacher that this wasn't appropriate, but continued to do so. She came unstuck when she posted a picture of herself drinking from a cup and wearing a pirate hat. This seemingly innocuous picture was tagged with the byline, 'drunken pirate'. It was that tag that became her undoing. She was reported to her university and it was decided that she was promoting underage drinking amongst youth, and was subsequently denied her teaching certificate. She took the matter to court, but lost the case. in 2008. A federal district judge rejected the claim, saying that because Snyder was a public employee whose photo didn't relate to matters of public concern, her 'Drunken Pirate' post was not protected speech.

Rather than be deterred by this example, we need to take heed of the mistakes Stacey made. There are valuable lessons here for staff and students alike, messages about how you conduct yourself in online spaces and how you must think before you tag photos with your name or what may seem a funny byline. I often say to the students I teach today how I envy the fact that they have information at their fingertips, but I don't envy them having to think before they allow a friend at a party take a photo of them at an inappropriate moment.

To truly understand this, we need more teachers to move into digital spaces and begin the process of establishing positive digital profiles for themselves. We need more people with the skill set necessary to help our students realise the potential of one's personal brand. Think about it. Who are the role models for the students we teach? How many of your staff have a digital profile or can help their students understand why it's important? Seth Godin, a marketing expert who writes a very popular blog and has authored many books, says:
"Everything you do now ends up in your permanent record. The best plan is to overload Google with a long tail of good stuff and to always act as if you're on Candid Camera, because you are". While that may seem a bit over the top for many of us not yet comfortable with the internet and how it works, it represents the future for the students we are teaching today. If we're at all interested in preparing our charges for their future, then we better get up to speed.

So what do we need to do to make sure the long tail of our search results reflects us in the best possible light? Add content to the web, that's what. There are plenty of ways you can go about doing this. Set up a Google profile, add comments to blog posts, join some social networking sites such as 'Classroom 2.0' or 'The Educator's PLN'and engage in the discussions happening there. You can join Twitter and follow people who are talking about education and sharing new ideas. Add your two cents worth to the conversations happening in 140 characters. If you feel you've got more to contribute, set up your own blog and share with others your thoughts about education. Set up a YouTube account and post a video. Share your PowerPoint presentations on Slideshare, create a Podcast and add it to iTunes, create a Wikispacein your name and store resources there, use a social bookmarking site like deliciousor diigo, create a Flickr account and share your photos publicly with a Creative Commons attribution by licence. There are a myriad of ways to elevate your digital profile, but you do need to be prepared to invest the time to create it. Time well spent, in my opinion. Not only will you be helping to ensure you are Googled well, but you will be learning valuable digital literacy skills that you can impart to the students you teach.

And that brings us to what is truly important – translating this message to our students, helping them to realise that they can become creators and share the great work they do with others and, at the same time,

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build for themselves a digital footprint that will ensure they are Googled well. What will the next digital divide be? The divide that exists between those who know the benefits of creating and sharing their work online, and those whose only web presence is a public Facebook page with content that doesn't truly reflect the calibre of a person? Surely all of our students today deserve to be guided by teachers who can model digital literacy understandings that will be truly relevant to their working lives?

One of the first steps I encourage our students to take is to set up a Google Alert for their name. It works like this. If Google finds a new web page or blog post mentioning my name, I receive a daily email alerting me to it. Google is, in effect, working for me; the company is tracking my digital footprint so that I can see what people are saying without having to hunt it down. (By the way, this works equally well for search terms about research topics. A handy tip for the toolkit!) Another thing to do is to set up a Google profile. You can proactively generate a page that is likely to show up in a Google Search, with content you have uploaded and links to online activities you may be involved in e.g., a blog, a wiki page, a school website, a Flickr or YouTube account, etc. It's this kind of proactive working of the web that needs to be taught to our students; we cannot assume they will come to us with these understandings. I'm sure most of us would agree that we would like our students to leave us armed with knowledge they need to assist them when they go for job interviews. A recent Microsoft study (US data) suggested that 75% of employers are Googling applicants before decisions are reached about their employment. In today's world, there's a high chance they *will* be Googled. Let's ensure their results work in their favour.

Already, there are students in our schools who are leveraging the web to their advantage. Lucinda Walravens is a creative spirit at my school, and is one such example. For Climate Change Awareness Week, Lucinda and her sister Bethany created a video that they uploaded to YouTube. This wasn't a school-based assignment, it was fuelled by their interest in the issue and their ability to self-direct their own learning. Lucinda emailed me after school hours and asked if I could help push the video out to my networks to see if it could get a bigger viewing audience. I wrote a blog post about it, and encouraged members of my Twitter network to take a look. Not long after this, evidence of these measures were appearing in Lucinda's Google search results.

As a parent, I have been encouraging my daughter to post content to the web to grow her digital footprint. She recently completed an English assignment that was inspired by 'A story of mixed emoticons', performed by the poet, Rives, at TED 2008. She has her own YouTube account and uploaded the video she had created there. By publicly sharing her creative work, she had immediately increased the potential audience for her work. No longer was it for just an audience of one, her teacher. A video sharing site like YouTube gives you the ability to capture an audience of many. I was reading Rives' blog not long after, and noticed that he provided an email address where you could contact him. So contact him I did. In July, I received an email from Rives. He was directing me to his latest post, where he had featured Cassidy's own emoticon story. Here's what was in his post (Cassidy's video was embedded at the top of the post):

"Hi Rives, I'm a teacher from Melbourne, Australia. We have being doing a thematic study of Romance and Relationships and have used your 'Story of mixed emoticons' in our classes to help with this. The students had to produce a creative task using technology in response to the theme. My daughter attends the school and her response was inspired by your mixed emoticons story. Just thought you might like to know that you are inspiring people all over the world, –J

[J is referring to the emoticon piece that I performed at TED 2008. Incidentally, my piece always ends with a hot & sexy music cue ("Laid" by the band James) which TED didn't have the rights to so...they left it out. The result is much flatter than I like and it also seems to make the deliberately ambiguous ending even more ambiguous: does the emoticon couple get together? I say they do; J's daughter, in her charming, flattering version, seems to take the other side of the dollar. Which in Australia is a coin.]"

As a result of this, Cassidy's video has had over 650 views to date. She is able to understand the value of reaching out and sharing her work publicly, and I am able to use this as a great teachable moment with my students. (If you'd like to see the post, visit Rives' blog and look for the entry dated 29th June 2010). I'm pretty sure Seth Godin would endorse the work of Lucinda and Cassidy, and would think they were living up to an oft mentioned quote of his: 'How dare you squander even one more day not taking advantage of the greatest shifts of our generation? How dare you settle for less when the world has made it so easy for you to be remarkable?'

My question is this: How dare we, as teachers, squander even one more day ignoring the greatest shift of our generation? How dare we deny our students an understanding of how they go about creating the positive digital footprint they all need?

What is the role of the teacher-librarian in all of this? If we take the plunge and set about understanding the digital landscape of today, then this represents opportunity. At a recent Centre for Strategic Education presentation, Professor Erica McWilliam talked of librarians existing in a hybrid space right now. She discussed how there is an invading species present in our world today; it's called the internet. Librarians are the first to wrangle with the new technologies and figure out how to colonise this new territory. If we become the hybrid teacher-librarian, we have a real opportunity to become the experts in our schools – experts who understand the knowledge economy and how to mine it so that it works for our staff and students, and not against them.

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What some would see as opportunity, others would view as a threat. There is no doubt we are in a time of rapid change, as we move from the information age to the networked age. Each era of change has seen technological advancement, be it the Gutenberg Press, the rise of the industrialised age, or the introduction of the personal computer. Each era sees resistance to change and moral panics arising as people grapple with changes that affect how they go about their lives. We need to ensure that all librarians understand that this is the future of our profession, and if we resist the change, then we are likely to see the decline or demise of Library Science and libraries as physical buildings, as predicted by What's Next and the Future Exploration Network's Extinction Timelime. These forecasts predict the demise of the library by the year 2019. If our profession can rise to the challenge and embrace change, we are in a position to continue to be the valued knowledge workers we always have been.

At a micro level, individual schools today need to be thinking of the skill set of their teaching staff, and whether or not they have the people who can help our students understand these very important life skills. They need to be encouraging and supporting staff who make the effort to understand how the web works and who can model the way forward. They need to actively encourage these teachers to lead networked, transparent lives, and give them time in their day to do this. This person could be the teacher-librarian. If it is, then I am sure we will see the skills accrued become our strongest advocate. We will cement our positions in schools, and ensure that our students have a digital footprint they are proud of, and are adequately prepared to live their lives safely, wisely, and productively in the networked age.

Jenny Luca is Head of Information Services at Toorak College.