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In the past few weeks, news stories across the country have begun with sentences like this, *“A 23-year old man was arrested after a woman told police he made contact with her 12-year old daughter and had sex with her...the man made contact with the girl on MySpace.”* (The Des Moines Register)

These just aren't newspaper leads or statistics. These are our children, who deserve better protection than MySpace has been giving them.

At least 50,000 convicted sex offenders (CSOs) were discovered on MySpace as of June 2008. So, what were these 50,000 predators doing on MySpace? Why didn't MySpace notify potential victims or their parents when it learned sexual predators were contacting children on its network? Why is MySpace destroying chat log and contact records between sexual offenders and minors? Why did it require pressure from Attorneys General for MySpace to remove profiles of convicted sex offenders?

These are just some of the questions that a Task Force on Internet Safety, might be expected to answer. But, the Task Force never studied the 50,000 CSOs found on MySpace. As a Task Force member, I believe this research omission casts the (non-consensus) findings of the Final Report into serious doubt. Concerned parents, Attorneys General, and others will wonder how a Task Force with a research group, all supposedly devoted to focusing on social network site safety, could fail to review or even request such pertinent data.

In May 2007, under pressure from Attorneys General who were prosecuting an epidemic of crimes originating in cyberspace, MySpace begrudgingly acknowledged the existence of “a few thousand” convicted sex offenders on its service. Within days of its first admission, MySpace disclosed the actual number to be 7,000 profiles. Less than two months later, in response to subpoena, the number quadrupled to more than 29,000. As of June 2008, the number climbed dramatically to 50,000 -- and, this only includes those registering using their real names.

According to MySpace, one of the “Big Six Basics for Online Security” is to proactively identify and remove profiles of registered sex offenders. If true, how could MySpace's initial estimate of ‘a few thousand’ be so wrong? The fact is, MySpace had no idea how many registered sex offenders had infested its site – and still doesn't. Here's why.

The 50,000 figure – while disturbing – is in no way an accurate estimate of how many sexual predators are trolling for victims online, masquerading under false identities.

While purging known sexual offenders from the site is a good first step, nothing prevents these predators from simply signing up again under an alias and picking up where they left off. In contrast with its main competitor, the popular social network Facebook, MySpace has no process by which the identity of a user is authenticated. Email addresses, ages, genders, and locations – as well as countless other details – can be forged without consequence.

Is it wise to count on the honesty of criminals in order to catch them?

To paraphrase Kentucky Attorney General, Jack Conway, we've only identified "the dumb ones" registering with their real names. When asked whether MySpace "had a sense of how many users were registered with their real names" during an open meeting of the Internet Safety Technical Task Force (ISTTF), the Company's Chief Security Officer, Hemanshu Nigam, responded, "No."

Removing known offenders from the site does not even begin to address the issue of users with illegitimate profiles.

It is MySpace's publicly stated position that it is popular because people want to be known there just as in the real world. *We could not agree more with this assessment, as well as with Mr. Nigam's statement that the laws and practices established in the physical world be extended into the digital domain.*

In the real world, when a convicted sexual predator moves into a community, every resident must be notified. We believe the community notification statutes (such as Megan's Law) should be expanded to include social networks like MySpace where adults and minors interact unsupervised.

Yet, MySpace has made no effort to alert minors (or parents of minors) who were previously contacted by one or more of the 50,000 known predators.

What responsible citizen who bore witness to a sexual predator contacting a child – in-person, on MySpace or elsewhere – would not feel compelled to notify the minor, the parent, or appropriate authority? Is there not a moral obligation to do so – as in cases of a child threatening suicide?

According to Mr. Nigam, "We think it's really important to collaborate and partner with those that are also thinking about the safety and security of the community." So it is difficult to discern MySpace's rationale for withholding such information, as the mere contact with a minor could be a potential violation of parole and federal/state laws. Does MySpace believe the privacy of convicted sex offenders is more important than the safety of our communities?

As predators become more adept at finding vulnerable teens online, we must be more vigilant in protecting the innocent from becoming another preventable statistic.

While MySpace's PR machine publicly portrays the site as doing all it can for the safety of children, the company – in actuality – is destroying predator contact records which contain critical insights as to how sex offenders use the Internet, their behaviors, what searches they conduct, and other extremely valuable data for making social sites safer. Given the importance of these facts, the destruction of such records without submitting them for analysis is nothing short of an outrage.