The Persistence of Memory:
Free Speech and Career Prospects

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In my previous two columns, I've been discussing free speech from a corporate perspective. Today I look at self-expression and employment prospects.

As most readers of this column know, I teach at a small (wonderful, exciting, innovative, beautiful – OK OK, I'll stop now) college in Vermont. My undergraduate students are mostly 18- to 22-year-olds and many of them have personal Web pages, blogs or entries in social networking sites such as MySpace <http://www.myspace.com> and FaceBook <http://www.facebook.com>.

Anyone can register for an account in these sites and check to see if job applicants have pages there. Considering what some people have been posting on these public services, their job prospects may not be very high. Some students have posted nude pictures of themselves; others have posted pictures of themselves or their friends drinking alcohol illegally (due to age restrictions); some people have been arrested as a result. <http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2006/aug/12/facebook_indiscretions_plague_users/> Campus security forces are turning to the social-networking sites as an investigatory tool; for example, after Penn State University students violated school safety rules by rushing onto a sports field after a big game, the campus police found a photo of the melee on a FaceBook entry – and the poster had even identified friends in the picture. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12209620/site/newsweek/>

These young people are blithely ignoring the possible consequences of their actions. Norwich University Assistant Professor Danielle Zeedick recently wrote a thoughtful piece in _Secure Computing Magazine_ <http://scmagazine.com/us/news/article/643128/social-networking-sites-dangerous-part-the-college-experience/> about the problem in which she pointed out that employers may be scanning social-networking sites for evidence of good character. Students interested in government work are particularly at risk if they make fools of themselves or put their integrity into question.

I point out to my students that anything they post to the USENET is archived <http://groups.google.com/> and accessible for years to come. Most Web pages have cached versions on Google that persist days to weeks and 85 billion Web pages are archived on the Wayback Machine <http://www.archive.org/index.php>. I found a copy of my own home page there dating back to March 3, 2003! E-mail is beyond our control; anyone can (illegally) post a private communication to a USENET group, a blog, or some other public place where a search engine will link the writer to thoughtless words or images. Trying to clean up one's act to get a job may be impossible.

I'm sure that many readers of this column are parents of high school and college-age students, have young friends or are generally concerned about the welfare of young people. Do spread the
word through youth groups, teachers and family about the importance of thinking carefully before posting anything in the vast, searchable, public and unexpectedly permanent world of the Web.

Incidentally, the title of today’s column refers to a famous painting by Salvador Dali. <http://www.artsforge.com/agallery/pmem.html>

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