

Provocation on Cyber Safety

**By Michele Masucci
Temple University**

Associate Professor, Geography
and Urban Studies
Director, Information Technology
and Society Research Group

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My work examines information and communication technology (ICTs) use among vulnerable populations. A major challenge that I face in regards to this task is the gap created by my personal experience in using ICTs as an academic focused on ICT and the substantially different experiences of technology users with whom I interact. This conundrum has led me to consider the need for conceptualizing digital inclusions in addition to examining digital divide concerns. My particular interests are to do this through considering the geographies of daily life that take shape through use of ICTs.

It is not easy to define the digital divide. Some consider the digital divide a manifestation of social inequality expressed in material terms, such as the lack of access

to digital information, computer hardware, and Internet service. Others view the digital divide to be a state of being that relates to one's access to social capital and knowledge of modes and points of access to the Internet as a primary conduit for participating in e-society. One point of common agreement is that digital technologies are changing faster than most of us can manage.

My interest in digital inclusion theory and praxis has led me to consider some confusing juxtapositions related to societal and parental concerns with youth cyber safety. I will use one example to illustrate how the two themes intersect in Philadelphia.

Last year ITSRG collaborated with the School District of Philadelphia to conduct a series of focus groups among parents interested in using web interactive tools developed by the district to enable families to access their student's records. None of the focus group parents were aware of the new web tools, and the majority stated that they would need assistance from their children to use the system. Perhaps even more surprising was the redirection of focus group discussions to emphasize concerns over a new truancy policy implemented by the district.

Parents expressed a great deal of mistrust in how attendance record keeping had been handled, pointing out that many of the students who had been labeled (and processed) as truant had been inadvertent victims of a data base system whose records were often outdated. The problem led to students being incorrectly identified as truant by the district, with severe penalties for students and parents.

Parents directly linked this issue to subsequent discussions about how difficult the district's website is to use. The paradox from a safety and security standpoint are profound: (a) parents would need to involve students to access student records, placing in the position of mitigating their parents' access to their grades and test scores; (b) parents do not trust the record keeping of the system and therefore anticipate a perpetuation of a lack of empowerment and representation with regard to advocating for their children as new technologies are adopted by the district; and (c) the use of information is directly related to the treatment of students with

regard to compliance on policies and procedures. It was not possible in our discussions to consider the benefits of accessing student records online.

During this workshop I will investigate the relationship between digital inclusion and cyber safety. I suggest that academics need to move the issue of cyber safety into the discursive context of ethics, practices, lessons learned, and integration with fair information practices. In the case of concerns related to public education, such an interaction might focus on improving parent ICT skills, improving electronic access to important information resources for the district and developing a standard for best practices with regard to student conduct on the Internet. In approaching these tasks, the notion of safety would need to be understood in the context of the lives of families in the district – where real-world safety is often a daily concern and parents look for answers about how to improve conditions on the ground without giving up individual freedom in the process.