

## Teacher's Guide: Life Online

Recommended Grade Level: 6-12

Suggested Time: One class period, plus more time to complete an additional assignment

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### Activity Objectives

- Understand that the way we communicate with one another can affect what we communicate as well as how our messages are interpreted and acted upon
- Learn to recognize and avoid some of the risks associated with online communication
- Develop one's own guidelines for future online interactions

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### Materials

- Computers that have Internet access
- Materials for completing presentations (see Screen 8). These can include access to software applications for creating videos, podcasts, or a PowerPoint presentation, and/or materials for creating posters.

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### Overview

Digital technology has had a tremendous impact on our lives. Although the Internet and cell phones have been in wide use for only a couple of decades, most of us can hardly remember a time before they existed or imagine how we would function without them. How have the accessibility of these technologies, and the ease with which we are now able to share information, changed the way we communicate? And how can young people in particular better deal with the issues that might arise from being able to communicate so quickly and easily with so many people? This activity will help students recognize and address these issues.

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### Before the Activity

- Provide an overview of the activity in order to set your expectations with regard to the work students will need to complete and what they will hand in at the end of the activity. Let students know that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions; their answers will be based on their personal experiences and beliefs. If they are working in pairs or small groups, they do not have to come to a consensus as long as everyone has had a chance to express their views.
- Suggest a timeline for completing the different parts of the activity.
- Mention the different types of media they will encounter, and identify what they will have to do to demonstrate learning. For example, in addition to their participation in class discussions and the assignment they will complete following this activity, tell students which printed work from the activity will need to be turned in. Because their responses to

the questions are all opinion based, let them know how you will be evaluating their work. For example, you may require them to answer every question and to explain their answers (“yes/no” responses will not be sufficient).

- ❑ Arrange computers so that students can work in pairs and/or small groups.

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## The Activity

### Introduction

Most of us use digital technology without giving it a second thought. We surf, text, download, and post. We often do these things without really thinking about technology’s impact on the way we live, particularly on what we communicate with one another. This activity asks students to stop a moment to consider their online lives, it challenges them to think about how their online interactions might differ from their face-to-face conversations, and it aims to help them identify and avoid potential risks associated with online communication.

### 1. Your Own Piece of the Internet

This screen asks students to consider their relationship with social media. A short video clip featuring teens talking about how and why they use online social networks introduces the topic. After watching the video, students think about their own use of social media and what they get out of interacting with friends in this way. They are also challenged to think about how their use of social networks might be different from that of their friends.

### 2. Too Wired?

Today more than ever, young people are surrounded by opportunities to connect with friends. Whether they’re at the dinner table, doing homework, or trying to sleep, for some, the temptation to reconnect can be hard to resist. The video on this screen features a teen who feels most at ease when he’s connected and knows what’s going on with his friends. Students are asked to watch the video and consider their own level of online activity, their desire to be online more or less than they currently are, and what, if anything, they think they might be missing out on by being online.

### 3. Online vs. Face to Face

Despite the fact that the intent of social networks is to connect people to one another, many people feel a certain degree of anonymity when they are online. Without the instant feedback of face-to-face interactions, people often feel free to be more open and to express things they might not communicate otherwise. The video on this screen shows how statements made online escalated hostilities between two groups of teens. After watching the video, students think about this incident and how online posts might have led to the fight. Students then recall any experiences they might have had posting something that they later regretted. They are asked to compare online communication with face-to-face communication and to consider ways the two forms differ from each other.

#### **4. The “Real” You**

This screen of the activity acknowledges the important role social networks play in many young people’s lives. They are a place where teens can establish new and different kinds of relationships and where they can reveal a side of themselves that they might not show at school or at home. The video on this screen tells the story of two young people whose friendship existed exclusively online for several years. After watching the video, students consider some of the positive aspects of online communication and think about how their online identity might be somewhat different from their in-person identity.

#### **5. Crossing the Line**

Unfortunately, there is an inherent risk in sharing personal information online. Students should recognize that posting information and images and sharing thoughts and feelings on social networking sites can make them vulnerable to exploitation or could come back to haunt them. In some cases, the Internet is no safer than the schoolyard when it comes to bullies looking for a target. The video on this screen tells the tragic story of a boy who was tormented at school and unfortunately found no escape from the same bullies online. He eventually took his own life. After watching the video, students consider how and why this might have happened and what those who witnessed the bullying might have done to prevent such a tragedy.

#### **6. Drawing Your Own Line**

Where does one draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable online behavior? The interactive worksheet on this screen presents students with a number of possible online behaviors. Their task is to categorize each behavior according to whether they think it is okay for them to do. The worksheet includes space for students to type in and categorize additional online behaviors as well. When students are finished with the worksheet, they print it for use in subsequent discussions with their classmates.

The printed worksheet provides space where students can write their reasons for categorizing each behavior as they did. If you have students hand in the worksheet as an assignment, return the sheets after your evaluation or provide students with a copy that includes their handwritten notes. The hope is that students will save this worksheet or at least keep in mind what they consider acceptable personal online conduct and what they feel is crossing the line.

#### **7. Your Personal Contract**

On this screen, students are asked to review and discuss what they have seen and written during the activity. The screen instructs students to form small groups when they have completed the activity and to discuss their answers to questions that followed the videos as well as their responses on the “Where I Draw the Line” worksheet. Decide in advance whether you want to assign students to groups or allow them to self-organize for this discussion and for follow-up presentations. Because the responses are personal in nature, students may not feel comfortable discussing all of them. Remind students that there are no right or wrong answers and that they do not need to come to a consensus on any of the issues. Based on these discussions, students can refine their answers and worksheet responses before handing them in. Students are also encouraged to keep their worksheets (once they have been returned) as a sort of personal contract for their online conduct going forward.

## 8. Sharing Your Ideas

On this screen, students are asked to create a presentation based on the activity. You can assign students a particular question on which to focus their presentation: for example, “Where do I draw the line, and why?” “What would I want to tell my younger brother or sister about being online?” or “What are the benefits and risks of spending my time online?” Or, you can leave the topic open ended. Again, keep in mind the personal nature of students’ responses and allow them the flexibility to share their ideas without feeling put on the spot.

Provide students with a number of format options for their presentation: for example, a video, a podcast, a PowerPoint presentation, a poster, or an essay. You can have students present individually, in self-organized teams, or in groups you arrange. If you choose to arrange them in groups, help students determine the role each will play in that group.

For large classes, you may want to hold a presentation session, in which students can walk around and view or listen to the various projects informally. Alternatively, for smaller classes, you may want to have each group give an oral presentation (5-10 minutes long) in front of the class.

After students have had a chance to learn about each other’s projects, lead the class in a discussion using these guiding questions:

- Has this activity changed your understanding of how and why you use the Internet and social networks? If so, how?
- What have you discovered about the differences between online and face-to-face communication?
- What have you learned about the benefits and potential risks of communicating online?
- How might you avoid some of the risks that come with communicating through social media?
- Has this activity changed what you consider to be acceptable online behavior? If so, how?