

# To Catch a Predator? The MySpace Moral Panic

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*Topics:* Community technologies and networking, Information policy, ethics and law

*Keywords:* social networking, information policy, moral panics, internet filtering

This paper is about moral panics over contemporary technology, which I call “technopanics.” I use two examples, the cyberporn panic of 1996 and the contemporary panic over online predators and MySpace, to demonstrate the links between media coverage and content legislation. In both cases, Internet content legislation is directly linked to media-fueled moral panics that concern uses of technology deemed harmful to children. This is of particular interest right now as an internet content bill known as the Deleting Online Predators Act, or DOPA, was debated last year in Congress, and a variant of this bill may pass in the future. DOPA would require filtering software on internet-connected computers in libraries and schools to block access to all “social software” sites, which would broadly include any website with communication features, including social networking sites, wikis, community forums, and online communities. The technopanic over “online predators” is remarkably similar to the cyberporn panic; both are fueled by media coverage, both rely on the idea of harm to children as the justification for internet content restriction, and both have resulted in carefully crafted legislation to circumvent First Amendment concerns. While both panics have their roots in legitimate concerns, my perspective is not that of a realist – I am not primarily concerned with the extent of the purported harms. However, my research demonstrates that the legislation proposed (or passed) to curb these problems is an extraordinary response; it is misguided and in many cases masks the underlying problem.

The first part of this paper discusses the cyberporn panic of the mid-1990s and its links to internet content legislation. Second, I outline a theory of technopanics, using the moral panics literature to examine fears of technology and modernity. The third section examines the current moral panic over social networking sites and MySpace.com in particular, including the DOPA legislation proposed to solve the problem. The fourth part of this paper takes a critical look at the harms of MySpace and online predators in general. I argue that in order to justify the passage of sweeping laws restricting all minors’ access to MySpace, the problem of online predators using MySpace to elicit underage individuals for sexual activity has been portrayed as socially significant, which I do not believe to be the case. Rather, I believe that it is indicative of a small, visible number of sensationalized cases that have been used by the media to fuel a moral panic around the site. The idea of the “online predator” is further linked to real harms, such as child abuse and child pornography, to create rhetorical significance for legislative-based action. I conclude with some recommendations for legislators, parents, and journalists.

Since moral panics are, by definition, public, any study of a moral panic must attempt to access popular discourse. This paper primarily uses Congressional testimony and popular press articles, both national and local, as evidence. Congressional testimony was found by conducting full-text searches of the Congressional Record, a publication which includes every word spoken on the floor of both the House and the Senate. Popular press articles were found through Lexis-Nexis, the websites of major and local newspapers, and television network and cable news programs.