MySpace to do more to boost safety

By Joseph Menn, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
January 15, 2008

MySpace says it can't guarantee that the people who sign up for its social networking site aren't underage or sex offenders. But it averted a potential legal battle Monday by agreeing to keep trying.

A group of 49 state attorneys general probing safety issues at MySpace and other online social networks signed a deal with the Beverly Hills-based unit of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. MySpace promised to help organize an industry task force to find tools for verifying the identities and ages of people online.

But North Carolina Atty. Gen. Roy Cooper and Connecticut Atty. Gen. Richard Blumenthal, who led the multi-state effort, said in separate interviews that they believed such technology was already available from companies including database specialist Aristotle Inc.

"Would I be happier if the agreement was for a specific means to verify ages and identities? Absolutely, yes," Blumenthal said. "But this result is certainly quicker and less costly and more certain than a lawsuit would be."

The agreement comes after two years of talks that have forced MySpace to address safety as one of its biggest issues. It was never clear what legal grounds the attorneys general might use to bring such a lawsuit, and MySpace has been careful to post general warnings about online safety.

In Monday's "joint statement on key principles," MySpace outlined further steps it would take, such as creating an e-mail registry that would let...
parents keep their kids from signing up for MySpace and similar sites, improving technology to enforce the age minimum of 14, and blocking the personal pages of 16- and 17-year-olds from being viewed by strangers unless the teens changed those settings.

"This will go a long way toward protecting personal information," said Amanda Lenhart, a researcher who had studied teen safety issues for the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

"But every parent needs to be involved in their child's digital life the same way they are involved in their offline life -- knowing where they are going and who with."

MySpace will also set up a hotline for police inquiries and demand that porn stars block access to their pages by minors.

MySpace, which News Corp. acquired in 2005, struck the deal with attorneys general from every state but Texas, where some teens who were allegedly raped by men they met on MySpace are now suing the company.

Monday's compromise could prove to be an interim step toward resolving a controversy about the proper supervisory role for sites that cater to both teens and adults.

The issue gained wide public and political attention after cases of statutory rape and violence, along with media stings, followed meetings arranged through such sites.

Problems have included teens pretending to be adults and adults pretending to be teens.

Websites targeted at pre-teens require substantial identifying information from parents, who then grant permission for their children to get involved in activities. MySpace has argued that such steps are impractical for its tens of millions of members, most of whom are adults.

"In the past two years, we studied all the different technologies out there and didn't find any product that works in identifying under-18s," said MySpace Chief Security Officer Hemanshu Nigam, who was hired in 2006 after the site first faced accusations of being lax on child safety.

"We also recognize that the landscape in the safety area is changing. With a lot of heads working together, I think we can make great progress."

MySpace and faster-growing rival Facebook Inc. have already taken a series of steps under pressure, such as pledging to review posted pictures and videos and respond promptly to complaints.

Of course, restrictions based on age won't mean much if someone is lying about his or her age in the first place.

But at least, said North Carolina's Cooper, MySpace is now on record as acknowledging that age and identity verification are worthy goals -- a concession that could eventually be useful in court, should it come to that.

joseph.menn@latimes.com

Save/Share

Save over 50% off the newsstand price. Subscribe to The Times now!