Future leaders beware: Facebook never forgets

By Maureen O'Connor and Jacob Savage
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Imagine if the current crop of public figures had grown up during the Facebook era. We might have photos of John McCain in Florida slurping body shots off his stripper girlfriend. Barack Obama rolling a joint on a beach in Hawaii. George W. Bush passed out at a Yale frat party, 40-ounce beer bottles duct-taped to his hands. Hillary Rodham Clinton at a Wellesley peace rally, locking lips with her husband’s future Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich.

It’s one thing to hear that your elected representative had a wild time in college. It’s entirely different to have pictorial proof. Would you still vote for someone after viewing a photograph of him passed out in his own vomit?

This isn’t just a thought experiment. The next generation of political leaders is coming of age right now – and it’s unlikely that any one of them will escape digital documentation of their college-era foibles.

Witness, for instance, the 2006 pictures sent to Wonkette.com of presidential nephew Pierce Bush, in which it’s hard to tell what he’s holding tighter: the sorority girls or his Bud Light. Or 18-year-old Antonio Villaraigosa Jr. – son of the Los Angeles mayor – bragging last summer on a Princeton Facebook discussion board about late-night boozing on a Southern California beach: "We had Bacardi, Bailey’s Irish Cream and several Coronas. ... It was great until it got broken up by the po’..."

Our generation – high schoolers, college students and recent graduates – immortalizes the interesting and banal, the innocent and incriminating, all on the Internet. We update our Facebook status as often as we change our shoes, and upload party photos before the last reveler goes home. Nonparticipation is impossible: We file our job applications online and arrange first dates via e-mail. The upshot? America’s standards for personal embarrassment, political scandal and appropriate disclosure are sure to change in the years to come.

The inbox at IvyGate, the Ivy League news-and-gossip blog we edit, fills daily with vicious gossip culled from forwarded e-mails, MySpace screen shots and candid pictures snapped by students’ camera phones. Our tipsters are most often seeking an outlet for anger – be it righteous or petty – hoping to subject their targets to the one modern weapon mightier than the pen: a blog post gone viral.
Tipsters reveal their roommates’ drug use, their sorority sisters’ eating disorders, their classmates’ laughable academic miscues. Our job is to decide which, if any, of these pieces of information is worth publishing. When the “mistake” was mutilating a squirrel and the “classmate” was running for student body president (as was the case last year at Princeton), that was clearly newsworthy.

For every tip we follow up, there are half a dozen we ignore. But we don’t delete them, and neither do our peers. Should the subject ever become famous, you can bet there’s incriminating evidence on a hard drive or server just waiting to explode into the blogosphere.

There are potentially hundreds of images (plenty of them unflattering) of every person between the ages of 18 and 30 floating around the Internet – including your future congressman, city councilman or president.

If representative democracy is not to come to a standstill, we will get over it. Our generation – Generation Facebook – already understands this culture of scandal with far more nuance than our elders. We barely batted an eye over reports of Obama’s admitted drug use or McCain’s hasty and unsavory divorce.

And for all the cruelty involved in spreading online humiliation, we’ve seen it generate a fair amount of empathy as well. Last fall, Princeton’s race for president of the undergraduate student government temporarily derailed when compromising images emerged of the front-runner, a spring-term junior. His white face completely covered in black paint, Josh Weinstein had been photographed grinning widely at a Halloween party his freshman year. He posted the pictures on his blog, though later removed them – but someone had saved copies.

When IvyGate broke the story, our commenters expressed shock, outrage and schadenfreudic glee. But from the rabble of caps-locked condemnations rose a second and, ultimately, more powerful response: a desire to hear Weinstein’s side. A few days later, hundreds of students stood hushed at a public forum where a tearful Weinstein traced the logic behind the costume and expressed regret for his misguided attempt at humor. He eventually won the endorsement of the Black Student Union and went on to beat his opponent in a landslide. The unsavory images were an issue, but they didn’t overtake the election.

The Internet’s anonymity, long memory and free-for-all gossip culture may yet prove a poisonous cocktail. But as our generation grows older and enters public life – thankfully, we have some time – we’ll find ourselves in a political culture that increasingly views these “gotcha” moments in context and with an eye toward forgiveness. After all, the incriminating photo, the offensive blog post, that drunken 3 a.m. e-mail – it could have been any of us.

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