# The digital footprint pt. 1: The front end

Type your name into a Google search and see what comes up. A stream of photos blossoms atop a stack of links, your name repeated line after line. You might have a common name and find yourself inundated with results showing people who definitely aren’t you. Try picking a friend whose name is unique, and search for him or her instead.

This stream of links shows social accounts and photos, some of which you don’t even remember or have any idea how to access. It might show a court case from that driving offense six years ago. And you’d completely forgotten about that forum you joined. You find the link to your old employer’s newsletter where they mention your name, too. Old and new posts by you and *about* you are linked together by threads of the web you didn’t even know exist…thisis what most people think of when we talk about the “digital footprint.”

This is all the *front-end* digital footprint: the traces of yourself you leave, with your name or image, online.

## The front-end digital footprint

There might be a photo or two you aren’t thrilled to see online, but this concept is a much bigger picture to look at. Step back and appreciate the sum of these accounts and photos linked to your name, associated with you, ultimately defining you—and sometimes haunting you.

The details of the digital footprint start to mold into a mess of hidden nuggets when we talk about the trail you leave on social media, in particular. You might have gotten wise long ago about tighter security settings, and perhaps you updated every one of your social accounts successfully. But your privacy settings only stretch as far as your own profile. As soon as you step foot onto the profile or wall of someone else, your footprint sinks in as deep as that other person’s security settings will let it.

This is especially sensitive when it comes to the digital footprints of your kids.

And then, of course, there’s content other people publish on the web about us, whether it’s friendly or not. Cyber-bullying, anyone?

The front-end digital footprint is what we first think of when we talk about that trail of breadcrumbs we leave across the web. It includes photos and accounts we’ve forgotten about, and “likes,” comments and retweets we never thought twice about. It includes those horror stories of online bullying, the racy photos you’re embarrassed you ever took, and all the related consequences. When it comes to our adolescent kids, the hurdles of that “shameful” and sometimes explicit content might include legal repercussions that haven’t caught up with the smartphone. The point is, as soon as it’s digital, data leaves its mark.

It doesn’t have to be someone picking on you to get your name mucked up online. Sometimes, you might just be having a bad day and get caught with your hair down.

In February 2018, an employee of the State of New York had some choice words for another passenger on a Delta flight. The passenger later filmed the government employee as she took her frustration out on a flight attendant. All it took was the footage of the incident to put the government employee’s job at stake and cast public doubt all over the internet about her, personally and professionally.

## How many accounts?

The practical way to start doing an inventory—of either your accounts and footprint or your kids’—is by making a list. Review your email for website purchase confirmations, and ask yourself honestly what social networks, apps and forums you’ve used, even if you only used them for a short period. All of these websites will have a profile you will need to actively close.

Nervous yet? How about when you think about the digital footprint of your kids?

This is the secret on how to opt out of leaving a digital footprint: Never use or come near general computing devices. Never interact with people who use or are ever near general computing devices. No one can know anything about you if they ever use or step near general computing devices.

Yeah. Exactly.

Apps on your phone are a funny beast because many of them store their imprint of your digital footprint on the phone and on the app’s servers (and also the phone manufacturer’s servers) instead of on the web in the traditional sense. The app maker will keep close tabs on your in-app footprint to better advertise other products to you. But, do you know which of your regularly-used apps also have website versions of their product? You might have an account on a website extension of an app without even realizing it.

We never said this would be easy. Expect to spend thought, time and effort managing your digital footprint—and in some genuine sleuthing when it comes to managing your kids’.

Build the list. Evaluate which accounts you want to keep. And be prepared to email website hosts directly to get accounts deleted if the option isn’t immediately available on the website, or if a password has long since been forgotten or lost.

It’s right about when you get halfway through your list and have already found four accounts without an obvious “delete” option anywhere, or when you start to really take in the magnitude of the comments, “likes” and shares spread across the web that you ask: “is some of this maybe a little bit inconsequential?” But don’t let yourself grow complacent, especially when it comes to your kids’ digital mark. This digital footprint—the online portrait of who someone is—paints a picture that only grows over time. It morphs into a lasting picture of whether or not someone is likeable, hirable, or datable. It will trap even the most mundane mentions of a moment in time, or a whim, or a fleeing interest, and stick to you like a piece of toilet paper sticks to your shoe coming out of the public bathroom.

Once you’ve cleaned accounts, be sure to make informed choices about online activity moving forward. Here are a few high-level tips:

* Use separate email addresses to keep different “personas” of your online self in different buckets, like work or personal
* Always assume social media is more public than you anticipate
* “Own” your accounts—review every security setting available to you

For parents whose kids have internet time and are browsing, shopping, creating accounts and participating in online culture, remember that this generation tends to open accounts, follow links and click “accept terms” willy-nilly. Any time they check out an online quiz, or reply to a thread, or check out a new photo-sharing platform, they might be opening an account to do it. Balancing the liberty to use the internet for all its boons and entertainment requires more regular account inventories for tweens and teens.

## The selfie culture

As you start inventorying accounts, you find yourself following image search results to source pages that you hardly remember posting to anyway. You also might find strokes of that digital portrait that you don’t care to erase. You might happily remember a moment when you uploaded a photo or decide that a comment can be left because it paints a picture of you that you’re even a little proud to have online.

Managing your kids’ profiles will be more difficult because of today’s social media status quo. What we’re about to talk about is a global phenomenon, and one that’s not limited to an age group, rooted though it is in the population that’s grown up inundated by it. This phenomenon is a reward system that has lit our brains up, every one of us, and which even reinforces even our basic survival instincts—not to mention the most influential of our social instincts. This phenomenon has become and will continue to be the biggest challenge in reigning in the digital footprint and protecting ourselves online.

This is the selfie culture.

The term selfie has become globally recognized the last five years. Even in most other world languages, the English word has been directly adapted to other alphabets and phonetic constructs: *la selfi, das Selfie, le selfie.*

Selfies are those self-taken photos, usually by cellphone with the camera flipped inward, with an arm or selfie-stick stretched out in the foreground. You might think of women making duck faces or men showing off their abdominals in the bathroom mirror. Every time we hit “refresh” on Instagram, a rolling tide of tens of thousands of selfies are uploaded every second.

So, what is the selfie culture?

The need for validation is the driving force behind social media use. No, it’s not keeping up with news. It’s not keeping up with friends, either. These are marginal benefits that feel like they’re steering the ship when they’re actually just along for the ride.

Humans thrive off of what we call “self-referencing,” or thinking about ourselves. It’s important for self-appraisals, for social competitiveness and to uphold the basic self awareness that tells us when it’s time to eat or sleep. And much though we self-reference *internally*, in the social context we humans talk about ourselves on average between 30 and 40% of the time.

In social media, this number spikes. An average of 80% of social media posts talk about yours, truly. This scratches an itch so inherent to us that it’s one of the driving forces behind how addictive social media is and how the selfie culture took the world by storm.

These numbers reflect a wider selection of users across different age ranges, geographic locations and purported social media use. But what about young people? What about your kids? In younger audiences, self-talk and selfies make up an even more overwhelm majority of content.

Young brains are developing in an environment where social validation and a carefully-curated social media account have been hot-wired to drive kids’ sense of daily purpose. The selfie culture has become a primary tool to authenticate how “happy” adolescents are, or how “successful,” or how “popular” or “clever.” The front-end digital footprint for Generation Z acts as a measure of everything they’re worth. At least, that’s the perception. Social media is the tool to be seen as they want to be seen, defined as they choose to define themselves. And there’s even a veil of protection if, on the other side of the internet, someone doesn’t buy into the persona advertised: contradictory comments can be erased and forgotten forever.

### Technology compels us

The first reaction to selfies was that it’s vanity at its worst. It wasn’t enough that Myspace comments and later Facebook status updates were fueling egocentrism; but, with smart phones, the handy camera flip and the ever-improving camera quality, between 2013 and 2015 the selfie culture exploded and we were inundated with digital close-ups.

The question is, was there more to this boom than closet narcissism?

Technology enabled us to take selfies easily. And with ease and availability, we are a predictable beast. The concept of self-portraits is as old as the hieroglyph, and the concept that technology drives our behavior is as old as Marx. It’s just the contemporary application of today’s selfies—and their ubiquity on the internet—that have taken the world by storm.

The meme (or captioned photos that go viral on the internet and continue to encourage their own replication) is another empowering force in today’s unending stream of selfies. Editorializing and commentating has been reduced to what can fit in the black frame around a funny photo. Quickly-consumable GIFs and photos have taken the place of social dialogue, and in many cases have replaced new and unique interpretations of the world.

This same mentality has been applied to our use of selfies.

This picture we paint of the selfie culture isn’t flattering. Though, it’s not fair to say that selfies are just a reflection of narcissism, or the same could have been said of the advent of full-length mirrors. It is a phenomenon of note, however. The selfie culture and the sense of authentication it provides has become a defining experience in the consumption of social media. It’s a reward system so ingrained in the youngest generation, in particular, that its lasting impact on the digital footprint is positively gargantuan. The management of privacy for all these selfies and all this content is enough for any parent’s heart to beat out of his chest.

### The paradox

Selfies are statements in and of themselves, but the captions and text that accompany them are typically minimal. The statement lies in the visual content of the photo: I’ve traveled to this place, I’m beautiful, I work out, I’m confident. Some of us actually feel we’re trying to be less narcissistic by letting the selfies do the talking for us.

Despite the revolutions taking place across the web with #MeToo, viral stories about racial profiling, and redefining beauty with plus-size models, the selfie culture gives us pause in another aspect of today’s social media trends. If so many millions of users are participating in these movements to be defined by who they are and not by a skin color or a pant size, how does the selfie culture play in? With the endless stream of publications where the selfie is “statement enough,” how will projecting an image of ourselves aid the movements that we should be defined by everything *but* our looks?

How we choose to manage our digital footprint as active users of social media will have to be embarked on a user-by-user basis. Take the time to reflect on the selfie culture and choose how you want to promote self-confidence and self-actualization in your home. What do you teach? Where else can your kids get validation? Do you know what validation they’re seeking? What have you learned about the selfie culture and today’s digital narcissism, personally?

And, when it comes to privacy and legal questions, what are you up against with technology compelling your minor children?

## Minors and photos

One of the first “ah-ha” moments for parents when thinking about their kids’ digital footprints is when they realize that the photos posted on Mom and Dad’s social media have a lasting impact for their kids’ digital personas. But it’s especially when kids hit adolescence, where they open their own accounts and can be tagged in publications by friends and family when photos of your minor children leave some parents with shivers of the unknown implications. And yet, recent study in the UK showed that 97% of moms on Facebook post pictures of their kids, with 46% admitting to posting video. The digital footprint begins to form before the babe can even walk.

There’s another much more serious element of legal hurdles that parents don’t think about, however, and one with much more lasting implications. These are the legal hurdles of the photos that you *don’t* know your kids are taking and sharing. With the selfie culture, and with teenagers essentially living on their mobile devices with an average of three hours per day spent on social media, add hormones to the mix and you have an interesting situation. The day has come where *sexting* (sexually explicit messaging and photo swaps on digital channels) has gone beyond what child protection laws in the U.S. know what to do with.

Because, obviously, explicit photos of minors are illegal to produce, share, or solicit in any context.

Today’s teenagers rocket into puberty with these smartphones that didn’t exist a generation before them. They’re raised on the immediate gratification of selfies amassing dozens of “likes” on Instagram within minutes. When it comes to flirting, it’s only natural that the same tools they use to curate their digital footprint and manage their identity would also be used to send messages and photos of a more intimate nature.

Imagine a flirty exchange that starts with a few selfies. A teenage girl, maybe 14, takes a duck face photo and sends it to the boy she likes. She’s on Snapchat, where messages are automatically deleted after they’ve been viewed, and she feels strangely close and intimate sending the specially-taken selfie to him.

The boy, also 14, replies with a selfie in his wide-billed baseball cap. The logo of the professional football team on the cap glitters with high-contrast through the filter he elects before sending the selfie to the girl.

They continue like this over the course of a week before the boy dares to send a shirtless photo. The girl reciprocates with a selfie on top of her blue comforter on her bed, showing off her body in a way the boy confirms is “very sexy.” They continue with their banter until, ultimately, more provocative photos with nudity are swapped. And it all happens in the intimacy of a private Snapchat where read messages can be deleted and forgotten.

But the young girl doesn’t know that the boy has been taking screenshots of the messages he’s received with her photos. He only wanted to enjoy the photos a little longer.

Even if the boy has no malicious intent, and even if he plans on keeping those photos forever private (even after the flirty banter ends and each teenager moves on to their next crush), according to today’s interpretations of Child Exploitation laws, the boy now has child pornography on his phone. And, if either the girl or the boy saved their original photos of themselves, even as selfies these photos are considered child pornography.

Sexting laws vary state by state, but in general this activity is considered a criminal offense by larger existing federal laws. Anyone who violates or conspires to violate the standard of sexually explicit photos of any person under 18 can be fined and imprisoned 15-30 years. This includes promoting, soliciting, distributing or possessing these photos, even if the offender is both the person pictured and the person who took the photo to begin with.

### How widespread is sexting, really?

You might not want to think about your kids feeling producing or soliciting these kinds of photos. But with the storm of social identities and with technology as the driving force behind it, a recent study of a high school in the southwester United States might shed some light on the sexting phenomenon:

“A 2013 study of 606 high school students, representing 98 percent of the student body from a single private high school in the southwestern United States, found that nearly 20 percent of participants reported that they had sent a sexually explicit image of themselves via cell phone.”

Call it anecdotal if you’d like. Maybe you even have a joke to crack about the southwestern United States that explains away this relatively high number. But this matter is real, and depending on the state you live in, photos of this nature on your teens’ phones can result in felony charges and their name registered forever on the sex offender lists.

As of July 2015, 20 states have taken proactive action to differentiate between child pornography and sexting, but technology obviously doesn’t regard state borders. This issue can quickly snowball into an interstate ordeal that will change the course of a kid’s life forever.

### The legal nitty-gritty

If yours isn’t a state where sexting has been legally differentiated from child pornography, then sexting seen as child pornography production (a felony) can be the charge your child faces if racy photos are found on his or her phone. It becomes even more complicated if the would-be offender is 18 or older, but the subject of the photo is not. Sexting can then see adolescents charged as adults.

In recent history, most of the examples where the steepest charges were pushed are in cases where there was also another illegal behavior present, such as harassment or stalking. Even where the photos of the minor were produced by the minor and sent willingly (remembering that minors aren’t legally able to consent), the most ubiquitous part of teenage romance is how ephemeral it is. People move on, and photos stored can echo hard feelings by one or both parties. These photos, when maliciously shared or reproduced, are most often the ones followed by criminal charges.

It might be a small comfort, but in the case of photos being maliciously used or reproduced, if the person photographed or the person in possession are minors, most states have a legal route to seek the highest penalty.

Although 20 states have already taken action to differentiate between sexting and child pornography, the lack of consensus among those 20—not to mention the 30 states who still have no means of differentiating—leaves this issue in the forefront of millions of parents’ minds today. Some states focus on the age of the person in the image, others on the age of the person who possesses the image, and others on the circumstances around the photo’s production. Some legislation simply focuses on education to avoid the legal consequences of possession, or on production of compromising images altogether.

Whatever the status of sexting laws in your state, the desire to produce, solicit and share these photos doesn’t magically turn on when your kids turn 18. This urge is a compound of hormonal prompts and technology’s unprecedented presence in the lives of Generation Z. Knowing how to manage sexting and its consequences—from embarrassment to bullying to revenge porn and even criminal charges—starts with education at home. Review the current laws in your state to help inform your education and prepare your kids for realistic possibilities with outcomes put into greater perspective.

But, before anything else, take a full step back to look at the front-end digital footprint and appreciate how this curated portrait of ourselves is that much more defining for our kids. Understanding the selfie culture and the “best version of myself” rewards of social media will be the starting point to manage their digital footprints and teaching prudent practices moving forward.

Read on in *The digital footprint, pt. 2* to see what happens on the back-end, including how Facebook knows it’s you even if you aren’t tagged in a photo, how Google knows your every move down to when you get out of your car, how many hours of YouTube young people watch in a day and how the online experience is calibrated to reflect what they want to see.

The digital footprint on the front-end is a thing we can curate and a thing we can keep track of. But on the back-end, its implications shape us more than we realize, and are harder to appreciate and track.