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Keep it clean, kids, software's watching

By Dave Copeland, Globe Correspondent | January 19, 2009

It was the kind of incident that makes college athletic directors cringe.

In November, shortly after Barack Obama was elected president, a second-string University of Texas football player posted a racist comment about Obama on his Facebook page.

It was quickly followed by an apology: "Clearly I have made a mistake and apologized for it and will pay for it," the student wrote on Facebook. "I received it as a text message from an acquaintance and immaturely put it up on Facebook in the light of the election."

But the damage was done, and the athlete lost his place on the team.

These days, with sports-oriented gossip websites like Badjocks.com and Thedirty.com trolling athletes' Facebook pages and MySpace profiles for comments like the one made by the Texas athlete, a few mouse clicks can end a student athlete's career and damage a school's reputation.

YouDiligence, a Montpelier, Vt., company, says it can offer schools a line of defense.

YouDiligence has spent the past two years refining its service, which alerts parents and educators to questionable content on social-networking websites. The company said it has 12 university athletic departments on board. In November, it began marketing a version of the service directly to parents, who may be concerned about everything from reputation-damaging comments to cyber bullying to online predators.

"If I'm the parent of a tween or teen kid, they're buried in their computer from the moment they get home from school, but in most cases I have no idea what they're doing online," said Kevin Long, YouDiligence's president. "This is an opportunity for them to be involved without being intrusive."

The service works by searching social-networking sites for posts by the student or child that contain certain keywords. YouDiligence offers a list of suggested keywords that could signal trouble, but parents can also enter their own - for example, the name of a child they don't want their child associating with, or even sending instant messages to.

But YouDiligence doesn't just search the child's own Facebook and MySpace pages, it also looks at comments they post on other people's pages.

"It's helping protect them from posting things that would be difficult to explain in a job interview, to an alumni booster, or to a reporter who might happen on it," Long said.

The cost of the service ranges from \$9.99 a month to monitor one child to \$24.99 to monitor four or more.

Increasingly, potential employers are looking at social networking sites when they screen job candidates. Currently, about 12 percent of employers use social-networking sites to research job candidates, according to a survey to be released this month by Lewis Johs Avallone Aviles LLP, a New York law firm. The survey, of 1,150 hiring managers, found that 41 percent of job candidates admitted to posting on social-networking sites information about their drug use and excessive drinking, while another 22 percent said they had made discriminatory comments.

"Social-networking sites are a great way to connect with other people, but they're also a powerful way to let the world see who you really are," said Jeffrey Pincus, a partner at the law firm who lead the study. "Employers are being more aggressive in looking at how the people they hire are using these sites."

Schools big and small have not escaped the backlash caused by students' inappropriate online admissions. And when they involve student-athletes, the indiscretions often make news. For instance, Quinnipiac College in Hamden, Conn., with 5,400 undergraduates, suspended a freshman basketball player last fall for posting racially threatening comments on another student's Facebook page.

Incidents like that have the University of Maine's athletic director, Blake James, considering adding YouDiligence's service to his budget.

"I see it as an educational tool - kids put something up at a moment's notice without thinking about it," James said. "I have to constantly remind them that once they put something on the World Wide Web, that's what it is - the world."

James said he doesn't consider the service to be an invasion of privacy, noting that student athletes at the University of Maine and most other schools usually sign a code of conduct.

"They have to realize that as soon as they put on our uniform and our logo, they're representing a lot more than themselves," he said. "And at that point it is our responsibility to educate them on what is appropriate." ■