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Brigham Young University: A Closed Community

Brigham Young University has decided to limit our communication. They have decided to block on-campus students out of useful web pages. Their intent is honorable, their goal worthy: they simply want to encourage students to follow the Honor Code. But among the sites that they have chosen to block are those that would be useful to students. Perhaps they do not trust the students of Brigham Young University, who have signed the Honor Code statement and who have been recommended to the University by their ecclesiastical leaders. Perhaps they are simply taking extra precautions, so the students are not tempted to venture where they should not go.

Now, I'm not saying that the administration should allow full access to every web page, nor am I saying that they should turn a blind eye to what people do online. But, they should allow access to useful web pages: for example, MySpace and YouTube. I will use MySpace to illustrate. MySpace, as one of the more popular internet networking and communication web sites, is used daily by thousands of people. This means that almost everyone knows at least someone who communicates through MySpace. Many of my friends from Florida, where I came from, do not use email, do not use Facebook (which, inconsistently, but gratefully, is not blocked), and do not use any other form of internet communication to keep in contact with friends: only MySpace. One might argue for cell phones – but not everyone has one, and, personally, I almost never have mine with me. Cell phones interrupt people and demand instant attention. The other form of communication is through

the U.S. Postal Service. Though great for writing missionaries or for writing occasional long letters, physical mail is impractical for everyday communication. Because I am at BYU, should I lose contact with my friends? I think that you will agree that I should be able to contact them.

The decision of which web sites to block demands closer consideration by the university administration. MySpace can be useful; but certain sections of the site contain inappropriate things. When I inquired about the possibility of blocking only certain pages, the BYU proxymaster responded that “due to technical limitations on the part of MySpace” this was not possible. So, this being said, there are two options in this case: to block MySpace completely, or to open it completely. This is where the Honor Code comes in. If MySpace is opened completely, then it will be our agreement to the Honor Code that will block the inappropriate pages.

And what of other sites? I'm sure there are other sites that demand close consideration: YouTube, for example. If you don't know how to do some kind of math problem, there is probably a tutorial for it on YouTube. If your friend sends you a movie to watch, it is probably on YouTube. Political debates are on YouTube – is BYU limiting our ability to be informed voters? The easiest way to share a short video online is through YouTube. I was recently in a singing contest. I submitted my recording as a music file. But some people submitted their recordings as YouTube videos. Because of BYU's restriction, I couldn't see some of these entries. Consequently, I couldn't compare my singing to that of the others, and I

was left in suspense as to whether my submission was good enough. So, as you can see, YouTube has many practical uses. Like all technology, it can be used for good or for bad. Perhaps BYU could block certain search keywords on YouTube pages; I don't know if this is possible or not. But, like MySpace, it should ultimately be left up to our commitment to the Honor Code statement.

Now, I have talked a lot about how our personal choices should be influenced by the Honor Code. But I would further assert that the proper use of web sites such as MySpace and YouTube is sanctioned and encouraged by the BYU Mission Statement. Consider these quotes from the mission statement: "The mission of Brigham Young University ... is to assist individuals in their quest for perfection and eternal life," and, "BYU's faculty, staff, students, and administrators should be anxious to make their service and scholarship available to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in furthering its work worldwide ... both by encouraging programs that are central to the Church's purposes and by making its resources available to the Church when called upon to do so."

The resource that the Church has called for is the gospel understanding of the students. In a talk given to students at BYU-Hawaii in 2007, Elder M. Russell Ballard said that we must use new internet technologies to share the gospel and "join the conversation" about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Ballard said, "[W]e cannot stand on the sidelines while others, including our critics, attempt to define what the Church teaches." We must define the Church ourselves, and to do that we need to reach as many people as possible, including through web sites such as MySpace and YouTube. YouTube has become an information database: every topic can be studied through posted movies. Many people go to

YouTube to learn more about the LDS Church. We need to contribute good and true sources of information so that seeking individuals will have better resources for assessing its truth. In fact, M. Russell Ballard specifically mentioned posting our testimonies of gospel subjects on "popular video-sharing sites." YouTube can be a wonderful missionary tool (and MySpace as well).

The Honor Code certainly has the right to specify how we should use the internet, but we should determine for ourselves whether or not what we do online is in line. Some rules should indeed be strictly enforced by administration: for example, the dress code. But blocking an entire, and useful, web site only because of certain pages: I believe that such things should be left to the responsibility of the student. BYU should not be concerned so much about students doing inappropriate things online, but rather they should be excited about the good we could do with these internet resources. Therefore, I call on BYU students: do something about it! Write to the BYU administration! They must realize that their unreasonable internet restrictions have caused us to become uninformed and isolated. We have become, in effect, a closed community.