

Do students need more online privacy education?

Privacy experts say Rutgers suicide might bring more comprehensive rules and education to college campuses

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One privacy expert says colleges should stress internet-use policies in the aftermath of the Rutgers suicide.

Privacy advocates say the rules regarding internet privacy and appropriate online behavior should be stressed at colleges and universities, especially among incoming freshmen, in the wake of a Rutgers University student's suicide after a video of him having sex was posted on the web without his consent.

A lawyer for Tyler Clementi, who was a freshman at [Rutgers in New Brunswick, N.J.](#) ^[1], confirmed that Clementi had jumped off the George Washington Bridge last month. Clementi's suicide came days after the student's private sex acts were made available in an online broadcast set up by two students—Dharun Ravi and Molly Wei, both 18—who were later charged with invasion of privacy, [according to Middlesex County Prosecutor Bruce J. Kaplan](#) ^[2].

The investigation began "after Rutgers police learned that the camera had been placed in the 18-year-old student's dorm room without permission," according to a Sept. 28 release from Kaplan's office. Kaplan said Wei was released after surrendering to Rutgers University Police Sept. 27. Ravi was released on \$25,000 bail.

Since news of the suicide spread throughout the campus last week, Rutgers officials have pointed out that university policy includes a rule against recording someone on the campus "where there is an expectation of privacy with respect to nudity and/or sexual activity."

Clementi's suicide comes during the same week Rutgers launched a program called [Project Civility](#) ^[3], designed by campus officials to encourage students to consider how they treat people. Greg Trevor, a university spokesman, said in an interview with *eCampus News* that the campus tragedy "indicates just why this is such an important topic" and why Project Civility was needed at Rutgers, and throughout higher education.

"You can't go anywhere on this campus without talking to people who don't feel affected by the tragedy," Trevor said, adding that the posting of the Clementi video has been widely admonished by the campus community. "The kind of behavior that has been alleged is not tolerated by the vast, vast majority of the people here."

Internet privacy experts said colleges and universities should pay close attention to the invasion of privacy that apparently led to Clementi's suicide and cultivate more respect for online privacy in orientation and other educational forums.

"There should never be a school from this day forward that says, 'We didn't know this could happen, we didn't know this was an issue on our campus,'" said Jonathan Kassa, executive director of [Security on Campus](#) ^[4], a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit that lobbies for better security in higher education. "That excuse is over."

Ravi first alerted his Twitter followers to the webcast of his roommate having sex Sept. 19, when he wrote that his "roommate asked for the room till midnight" and he later caught Clementi "making out with a dude." The Twitter feed was cached and is available [on various web sites](#) ^[5].

[On Sept. 22](#) ^[5], Ravi tweeted: "Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes it's happening again." Ravi's Twitter account has since been deleted, and his Facebook account is inaccessible.

Paul Stephens, director of policy and advocacy at [Privacy Rights Clearinghouse](#) ^[6], a national consumer group, said that although posting a video of a student's private sex acts online seems like an obvious violation of privacy, the Rutgers case shows that some college students need the most basic online conduct lessons.

"This tragedy proves that some students, in fact, do not have the basic discretion to know what is appropriate," Stephens said. "It makes a compelling argument for institutes of higher education to provide information for what is and what is not appropriate [behavior] online."

The evidence left on Ravi's Twitter page, Stephens said, also should provide a lesson to students who see social media as a private conversation between them and their friends.

"Even one tweet or one Facebook post leaves a digital footprint forever," he said. "There are many consequences to what you do online ... and we have a generation that grew up with this technology and to a large extent, they have not considered what the consequences down the road could be for what they say right now."

Kassa said that although Clementi's suicide proved horrifying for many in higher education, the privacy violation could motivate college decision makers to create stringent privacy policies that are reinforced with persistent marketing campaigns.

"It's sad that it takes such a tragic event to garner such attention, but we all owe it to him and his family and others who experience this invasion of privacy to make a stand and learn something from it," he said.

Meanwhile, more than 66,000 Facebook users had joined the group, "In Honor of Tyler Clementi," as of Oct. 1. Many railed against the unsolicited video posting that set off the deadly chain of events.

"This went beyond bullying," a woman posted on the Clementi Facebook page. "This was a pure invasion of Tyler's privacy."

Another Facebook user wrote, "I wish your privacy had been respected. ... I can only hope for justice and that your death will bring more awareness for the other kids out there struggling."

Material from the Associated Press was used in this report.

Article printed from eSchoolNews.com: <http://www.eschoolnews.com>

URL to article: <http://www.eschoolnews.com/2010/10/04/do-students-need-more-online-privacy-education/>

URLs in this post:

[1] Rutgers in New Brunswick, N.J.: <http://www.rutgers.edu/>

[2] according to Middlesex County Prosecutor Bruce J. Kaplan: <http://www.co.middlesex.nj.us/prosecutor/PressRelease/Two%20Rutgers%20students%20charged%20with%20invasion%20of%20privacy.htm>

[3] Project Civility: <http://projectcivility.rutgers.edu/>

[4] Security on Campus: <http://www.securityoncampus.org/>

[5] on various web sites: <http://gawker.com/5651050/how-a-college-kid-livestreamed-his-roommate-having-gay-sex-possibly-causing-a-suicide>

[6] Privacy Rights Clearinghouse: <http://www.privacyrights.org/>

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