Doing the Right Thing on The ‘Net: 
Some practical guidelines for legal use of the Internet

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Today’s notes, which you are welcome to use freely in your own work or for your community groups, family and friends, touch on some of the legal constraints on what you should and should not be doing on the Internet if you want to stay out of trouble. I hope that readers will go out into their communities and get involved in teaching beginners (young and old) about Internet safety and how to behave properly when using electronic communications media.

1. Copyright: anything you create yourself is automatically protected by copyright law and belongs exclusively to you – unless you give away or sell your copyright.

2. Some social networking and photography sites claim copyright to anything/everything you post there; think about it before you post.

3. You can increase protection of your creative output by including “Copyright © yyyy <yourname>. All rights reserved.” (where yyyy is the year) at the bottom of every page or on all images. You don’t need to pay for a registered copyright on your material but you may decide to do so if your ideas/production are worth protecting strongly. You can have your work notarized (often for free) and then mail it to yourself at the local Post Office using registered mail with proof of delivery.

4. Don’t reproduce other people’s copyrighted materials without their written permission. That means you must not post or technically even e-mail someone else’s writing / drawing / photography / video without their express permission. E.g., if you want to forward someone’s private e-mail message, ask them for permission first.

5. Trademarks (TM, ®) indicate symbols (and possibly words) that you may not use without permission. You may not include trademarked logos on your Web site or in your e-mail messages, images, or videos without written permission of the trademark holder.

6. Trade secrets are protected under law: if you find out something secret about a new product or process, don’t post it in public without permission or you may be sued for damages.
7. Music is protected under copyright. Don’t post or use other people’s musical output in any public materials without expression permission (usually obtained by paying a fee to the Copyright Clearance Center <http://www.copyright.com/>).

8. Before downloading music from the Internet, check to be sure that the Web site you are visiting is a lawful one, not a pirate site. Downloading music illegally can bring serious legal and monetary penalties.

9. Don’t share copies of music you have bought; almost all of it is copyright-protected and may not legally be copied and distributed to others without a license.

10. Pictures and drawings are protected under copyright. Even if an image is posted on a Web site, you must not simply use it in your own work / lectures / Web pages without permission: ask. Many copyright owners are happy to give permission if you indicate the ownership of the work and include the fact that you are using it by permission.

11. Videos are protected under copyright. Don’t post or transmit someone else’s video without the copyright-holder’s permission – especially if it is movie from a commercial studio.

12. Commercial software (not freeware) may not legally be copied and shared without payment to the copyright holders. Read the End User License Agreement to be sure you understand exactly what you are allowed to do with software.

13. Pornography is protected under the First Amendment in the US; if you own the copyright to the pornographic imagery/music/words, you can do what you want with it (and take the social consequences).

14. Obscenity is not protected under the First Amendment. Obscenity is (vaguely) defined as material having no socially, artistically or intellectually redeeming value and which offends (local) conventional standards of decency (in the USA, especially in terms of sexuality). “Local” is difficult to define in the age of the Internet.

15. Child pornography is any visual representation of underage (in the USA, generally under 18 years of age) children engaged in sexual positions, situations or actions. Making, storing and transmitting child pornography are felonies in the USA. There is still some question about the legality of child pornography created using digital modifications of images not involving real children.

16. Defamation is anything that puts someone in a false light. Spoken defamation is slander; written or pictorial defamation are libel. All may incur civil lawsuits for damages. Truth is a defense against an accusation of defamation but the truth must be proven in court to avoid an adverse judgement.

17. Cyberbullying consists of using electronic means to intimidate and humiliate a victim. Cyberbullies have used phones, e-mail, instant messaging, discussion boards, and pictures on
Web sites, and phones to harass their victims. Teach your kids about cyberbullying – not to do it and to report it to you at once if it happens to them.

18. **Cyberstalking** is scary surveillance and harassment through electronic means. Contact your local police! Some cyberstalkers have murdered their victims. See <http://www.haltabuse.org/> for good information about defending yourselves.

19. **Criminal hackers** break into other people’s computers and networks without permission. **Malware writers** create harmful software. They are breaking US federal laws and can go to jail for many years.

20. **Spammers** (people who send out large volumes of unsolicited commercial e-mail) have also been convicted of federal crimes and fined millions of dollars in penalties. Don’t send spam or reply to spam and never buy anything from or send any money to spammers.

**Useful References from M. E. Kabay’s Web site:**

* Ethics section <http://tinyurl.com/2b3kwvl>;


* Overviews of computer crime <http://tinyurl.com/6gqyb7>;

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