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## **Making cyberspace a safe place for kids**

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Sexual predators have found a disturbing new place to lurk: the social networking sites, like MySpace.com and Facebook.com, that are hugely popular among young people.

So the laws to protect our children can't end at the physical world. They must reach into cyberspace.

The lead story in Sunday's Viewpoints section of *The Arizona Republic* revealed how easily a potential predator can pose as another adolescent to befriend teens and learn all kinds of details about their lives.

One strategy, proposed in Arizona and at the federal level, is to require convicted sex offenders to register their e-mail addresses - just as they must already provide the street address where they live. Social networking sites would have access to the lists, so they could screen out known predators.

Of course, an e-mail address is easy to change. But it would be a felony for sex offenders to do so, and they would be back in prison for years if convicted.

Arizona is on track to be one of the first states to adopt the e-mail requirement. House Bill 2734, sponsored by Rep. Bob Robson, R-Chandler, would require registered sex offenders to provide any e-mail address, instant-message name or other identifying Internet information that they use or intend to use. The information would be available to providers of electronic communication services, which would be prohibited from releasing the list and required to inform authorities of any offenders who attempt to access.

An Arizonan is also playing a key role in getting Congress to set similar requirements at a federal level. In a bipartisan move in January, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., teamed with Charles Schumer, D-New York, to introduce the KIDS (Keeping the Internet Devoid of Sexual-Predators) Act.

The bill, which has been endorsed by MySpace and Facebook, includes a provision making it a crime for adults to lie about their age in pursuit of sex with a minor. That wasn't included in Arizona's legislation, Robb said, because of some questions about legal definitions.

McCain made a crucial point when the congressional bill was introduced: "Many children who access the Internet in a safe environment - such as at home or school - forget they are sharing personal information with complete strangers."

Legal protections can go only so far.

The sites themselves need to add and refine safeguards against misuse, a duty that the parent company of MySpace, Fox Interactive Media, has begun taking far more seriously.

Parents, with the help of schools and youth organizations, also need to educate kids about Internet safety.

The electronic neighborhood, just like a real one, needs a combination of effective laws, strong security measures and aware residents to be a safe place.