

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

1. A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

“... technology has not only mediated communication in countless ways, but ... the very ways we communicate—and even the ways we talk and think about communication—are changing as a result.¹”

Social Networking Services (SNS) are changing the ways in which people use and engage with the internet and with each other. Young people particularly are quick to use the new technology in ways which increasingly blur the boundaries between their online and offline activities.

SNS are also changing rapidly as technology changes with new mobile dimensions and features. As such children have become the “Perpetual beta generation²”, the first to exploit the positive opportunities and benefits but also the first to have to navigate and manage risks and dangers.

SNS are also on the rise globally. Recent statistics tracking internet use from home and work by over-15s year olds in the UK indicates that the UK is currently the highest user of SNS in Europe³.

ComScore figures show 24.9 million unique SNS visitors in August 2007 - or 78% of all UK internet users. According to their statistics the UK are also leading the rest of Europe in terms of the number of average hours spent visiting social networking sites (5.8 per

¹ Social Networking, the “Third Place,” and the Evolution of Communication, 2007, The New Media Consortium <http://www.nmc.org/evolution-communication>

² A phrase used by the author herself Josie Fraser to reflect the fact that it is children who are often the testers of new services and are first to recognise the benefits but also often the first to have to manage risks and dangers they may encounter.

³ 1. ComScore Press Release: October 10th 2007
<http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1801>

month), average pages visited (839 per month) and average visits per user (23.3 per month).

The most popular dedicated social network sites in the UK are [MySpace](#), [Facebook](#)⁴ and [Bebo](#). These types of SNS are **profile focused** – activity centers around web pages that contain information about the activities, interests and likes (and dislikes) of each member.

While the number of visitors to social networking sites is increasing, so too are the numbers of new services being launched, along with the number of longstanding (within the relatively brief lifespan of the internet) websites that are adding, developing or refining SNS features or tools. The ways in which we connect to SNS are expanding too. Mobile phone based social networking services which interact with existing web-based platforms, or with new mobile focused communities, are also on the rise ⁵.

⁴ Previously, Facebook membership had been restricted to people with email accounts at recognized academic institutions. According to internet measurement company hitwise, Facebook has jumped from the 126th most visited URL in the UK in September 2006 to the 5th most visited URL in the UK in September 2007 – with ‘FaceBook’ being the third most searched for term in the UK. Hitwise UK Retail and Social Networking Update: October 2007 <http://www.hitwise.co.uk/press-center/hitwiseHS2004/retail.php>

⁵ 3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_social_network

2. DEFINITIONS

Given the speed with which the online social networking landscape is rapidly developing, SNS necessarily refers here to the breadth of existing services, the place of existing services within the history of internet technologies and services, and the rapid development of new tools and practices.

SNS can be broadly defined as an internet or mobile-based social space where people can connect, communicate, and create and share content with others.

They allow users to manage, build and represent their social networks online, usually (but not always) made up of other individuals – networks might also include the profiles of events, companies, even political parties. They may let you add anyone in the network as your 'friend' or contact, or they might ask for all connections to be agreed by both parties. They typically support the public display of networks - although they may offer privacy restrictions, or facilitate closed communities.

Permissions are a very important feature of most SNS. They allow members and groups to control who gets access to their profiles, information, connections and spaces. The level of granularity and control varies from service to service, but typically settings allow you to keep your information private, or to make your information public (– generally so that even people who are not members or are not signed in as members of that service can see them), to signed in service members only, to people on your contacts list, or to particular groups of service users. Through these combinations of permissions and privacy, users can manage a range of different relationships online, as well as managing their online presence – how they appear to friends, acquaintances, or the general public. Managing relationships online and managing your online presence are key to having fun with, and using social networks safely. These are skills that young people are more likely to have developed intuitively or through peer influence, rather than through formal instruction and support from adults.

Social sites vary in the types of tools and functionality they provide.

Boyd and Ellison⁶ define social networking sites as having three common elements⁷: a member profile (in their definition this is always a web page); the ability to add other members to a contact list (the names of your contacts vary – they might be called friends or buddies, for example); and supported interaction between members of contact lists (interaction varies greatly, and there will typically be some degree of interaction facilitated between people who are not named contacts).

Social networking sites are often perceived as closed environments, where members talk to other members. This impression of social networking services as providing a private or other space may account for behaviour, language and postings that do not translate well outside of their intended closed context⁸. While it's important that children and young people understand the public nature of much of their activity within SNS (and can use permissions and privacy controls to manage personal information and communications), we also need to ensure that online activity is

⁶ Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship Danah Boyd & Nichole Ellison <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>

⁷ Danah Boyd has written on the distinction she makes between social networking sites and the difficulties there are in creating boundary distinctions. Our approaches are different, partially due to our definitions (or, for example, profile) and partly because SNS development, particularly in relation to people search, widgets, and digital identity authentication is refocusing traditionally closed services. Another clear distinction is Boyd's use of the term social networking sites, where as this approach uses the term social networking services to refer to a broader subset of social media. Danah Boyd, Social networking sites: my definition, Corante, Many 2 Many, November 2006 http://many.corante.com/archives/2006/11/12/social_network_sites_my_definition.php

⁸ Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross work on Facebook found significant misconceptions in members' perceptions/awareness of the scope and openness of the network and the visibility/public availability of their profiles, on the one hand, and reality on the other hand. Members in the study felt their information was far more private than it actually was, and misjudged the numbers of people they were making personal information available to. "Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook," PET 2006. <http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/~acquisti/papers/acquisti-gross-facebook-privacy-PET-final.pdf>

understood holistically – as the sum of activity all of the online sites and networks we belong to.

3. TYPES OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

This section attempts to order the current range of SNS available, and cover the two main formats – sites that are primarily organised around users' profiles and those that are organised around collections of content⁹. However, it's important to remember that services differ and may be characterised by more than one category. Users are also quite happy to subvert the intended use of platforms to suit their own interests. Educators setting up private groups in order to make use of collaborative space and tools are a good example of this.

Profile-based SNS

Profile-based services are primarily organised around members' profile pages. [Bebo](#), [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#), are all good examples of this. Users develop their space in various ways, and can often contribute to each other's spaces – typically leaving text, embedded content or links to external content through message walls, comment or evaluation tools. Users often include third party content (in the form of 'widgets' [link to glossary]) in order to enhance their profiles, or as a way of including information from other web services and SNS.

Content-based SNS

In these services, the user's profile remains an important way of organising connections, but plays a secondary role to the posting of

⁹ Fred Stutzman describes these as consisting of ego-centric and object-centric networks. These are interesting but limited distinctions – profiles may not be about individuals or self representation, they may be about services, organisations, causes, imaginary people or fakester profiles – profiles of people pretending to be famous or historical figures for example. Additionally, the profile is itself an object or an artefact. Fred Stutzman, Unit Structures: Social Network Transitions, 05/11/07 <http://chimprawk.blogspot.com/2007/11/social-network-transitions.html>

content. Photo-sharing site [Flickr](#) is an example of this type of service, one where groups and comments are based around pictures. There are many people of course who have 'empty' Flickr accounts – people who have signed up to the service in order to view their friends' or families' permission-protected pictures. [Shelfari](#) is one of the current crop of book-focused sites, with the members 'bookshelf' being a focal point of their profile and membership. Other examples of content-based communities include [YouTube.com](#) for video-sharing and [last.fm](#), where the content is created by software that monitors and represents the music that users listen to. In the latter case, the content is primarily the user's activity – the act of listening to audio files.

White-label SNS

Most SNS offer some group-building functionality, which allows users to form their own mini-communities within sites. Platforms such as PeopleAggregator (<http://www.broadbandmechanics.com/>) and [Ning](#), which launched in 2004, offer members a different model, based on the creation and membership of users' own social networking groups. These sites offer members the opportunity to create and join communities. This means that users can create their own "mini-MySpace's"¹⁰, small scale social networking sites which support specific interests, events or activities.

Multi-User Virtual Environments

Sites such as [Second Life](#), an online virtual world, allow users to interact with each other's avatars – a virtual representation of the site member. Although the users have profile cards, their functional profiles are the characters they customise or build and control. There are also hybrids of these and social-networking sites, such as [Habbo Hotel](#) and [Cyworld](#).

¹⁰ Anne Collier describes these as grassroots niche networking services: <http://www.netfamilynews.org/nl070309.html#1>

Mobile SNS

Many social network sites, for example [MySpace](#) and [Twitter](#), offer mobile phone versions of their services, allowing members to interact with their networks via their phones. Increasingly, too, there are mobile-led and mobile-only based communities. [MYUBO](#), for example, allows users to share and view video over mobile networks¹¹.

Micro-blogging/ Presence updates

Micro-blogging services such as [Twitter](#) and [Jaiku](#) allow you to publish short (140 characters, including spaces) messages publicly or within contact groups. They are designed to work as mobile services, but are popularly used and read online. Many services offer 'status updates' – short messages that can be updated to let people know what mood you are in or what you are doing. These can be checked within the site or exported to be read elsewhere¹². They engage users in constantly updated conversation and contact with their online networks.

People Search

People search is another important web development. There are various kinds of social and people search, but sites like [Wink](#) generate results by searching across the public profiles of multiple social network sites. This allows search by name, interest, location and other information published in profiles, allowing the creation of Web-based "dossiers" on individuals. This type of people search cuts across the traditional boundaries of social network site membership, although the data that are retrieved should already be public.

¹¹ Mobile Socializing: Accelerating Change (February 2007)
<http://www.netfamilynews.org/nl070202.html#1>

Library Clips: A list of SMS services and Groups and mobile social networks (March 2007)
<http://libraryclips.blogsome.com/2007/03/09/a-list-of-sms-groups-and-services-and-mobile-social-networks/>

¹² Web 2.0 Teaching Tools: Twitter Tweets for Higher Education (August 2007)
<http://web20teach.blogspot.com/2007/08/twitter-tweets-for-higher-education.html>

4. What do people do on SNS?

People use SNS for countless activities. Among the most common uses, however, are:

- Viewing content/finding information
- Creating and customising profiles

There are many different kinds of profile, although they typically consist of a member owned web page, supported by a range of tools. Profile pages are not just lists of information – they allow members to develop and present an image of themselves to the world, and to establish an online identities. Displays of preferences (favourite music, books, films for example) allow members to represent their personality and taste. Most social networking sites also allow members to customise the look and feel of their pages to a greater or lesser extent – through page templates or content, including video, music and images.

- Connecting with existing networks, making and developing friendships/contacts ¹³

¹³ Boyd and Ellison (2007) write: “What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks. This can result in connections between individuals that would not otherwise be made, but that is often not the goal, and these meetings are frequently between "latent ties" (Haythornthwaite, 2005) who share some offline connection. On many of the large SNSs, participants are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. To emphasize this articulated social network as a critical organizing feature of these sites, we label them "social network sites."

Although sites are indeed designed to facilitate this public articulation of network connections, this distinction is not necessarily a crucial feature, and a potentially problematic way of ‘authenticating’ social networking services. It doesn’t include age related (particularly for users who are under 16) or self-imposed network restrictions. Users do not always display their networks – for example Facebook gives users the option of keeping your friends list private to people who aren’t included; LinkedIn allows you to keep your contacts private from other contacts.

Young people tend to use SNS to consolidate their existing friend networks – however, in the same way that some children and young people collect trading cards or kinds of toy, some young people use social networks to collect contacts and to display their popularity.

- Authoring and uploading content

Content might be in the form of messages or blog posts – it might also be photos, video or music.

- Adding and sharing content

This might be in the form of links or embedded content hosted somewhere else – for example a video hosted at [YouTube](#) or another video hosting service, but playable on a members profile page. Content might be added in widget form – widgets are a chunk of code, usually provided by third party developers, that can be embedded within web pages to display various types of content – these can be simple badges (pictures with links back to other sites) or dynamic content, for example, the last songs catalogued by my [last.fm](#) account. This type of dynamic content makes it easy to move information, content and links from one SNS to another. Quizzes and polls are also very popular to share – with some services allowing you to create your own quizzes, or compare your self with other people on your contacts list who have also answered questions or added that application.

- Posting messages – public & private

Many services support public and private messaging – through message boards or in-service email. [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) offer members an Instant Messaging system.

- Collaborating with other people

Service tools vary – but group space, for example, allows users to collectively create profiles, hold discussions, store, share and comment on objects. In-service messaging can be a rich source of informal collaboration.

5. YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES

Mainstream social networking services are predominantly aimed at and designed for teens and adults. Most services have a minimum membership age of 13 or 14, and many will explicitly state they are designed for over 18s. There may be safety restrictions on the accounts of under 16–18-year-olds – for example, whether they can appear in public searches. There are sites specifically designed for young people – for example, both [Teen Second Life](#) and [Habbo Hotel](#) are aimed at teens. [Imbee.com](#) is primarily a blogging service for tweens (children aged 9-13), requiring a parent's permission to sign up. Both Disney and [Nick.Com](#) have dedicated services for children, Disney having recently acquired [ClubPenguin](#), a virtual world SNS aimed at 6-to-14 year olds, in August 2007. Children and tweens can create penguin avatars, or online representatives, for which they can "buy" (with virtual money earned in in-world games) clothes, accessories, pets, homes, furniture, etc.

Services aimed at children typically have stricter privacy settings, greater levels of moderation and more limited user interactions. Some additionally have parental controls – for example, requiring sign up, usually with a credit card, and set preferences, such as level of in-world communication allowed. Safety limitations may well make child-focused sites less useful for supporting educational practices and projects than mainstream sites, which make collaboration and contact far easier – factors which bring about their own challenges.

The National School Boards Association (US) recently released research findings of an exploration into the online behaviors of US 9 to 17 year olds¹⁴. Their sample included 2,300 children, young people and parents. Nine-to-seventeen year olds reported spending almost as much time on social networking and web sites as they do watching television – around 9 hours online compared to 10 hours of TV. Ninety-six percent of the young people surveyed reported

¹⁴ Creating and Connecting//Research and Guidelines on Online Social - and Educational - Networking, National School Boards Association, August 2007 <http://www.nsba.org/site/docs/41400/41340.pdf>

using some form of social networking technology, and the findings indicated that education-related topics are the most common, with 60% talking about education-related topics and 50% discussing their schoolwork.

What is clear is that young people regard social networking services as just another part of their social and often school-related activities. Accordingly, educators, parents and carers are increasingly recognizing the importance of understanding the appeal and use of SNS amongst young people. This may be in order to prevent or respond to a negative incident – cyberbullying, or other inappropriate content or activities, but should also be in order to realize the positive benefits of young people’s use of technology: To support their media literacy skills and their social participation, and also to explore the potential educational benefits of SNS.