1. What are social networking services?

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."[i]

Social networking services 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 that increasingly blur the boundaries between online and offline activities.

Social networking services are also developing rapidly as technology changes with new mobile dimensions and features. Children and young people within the UK, who have grown up taking the Internet and mobile technologies for granted, make up a significant segment of the "beta generation" – the first to exploit the positive opportunities and benefits of new and emerging services, but also the first to have to negotiate appropriate behaviours within the new communities, and to have to identify and manage risk.

Social networking services are on the rise globally, and this change is also evident in increased UK engagement with sites. Ofcom's recent International Communications Market 07 report[ii] found evidence that more adults use social networking sites in the UK than in any other of the European countries included in the survey. ComScore data from August 2007[iii] suggest that UK Internet users clock up an average of 23 visits and 5.3 hours on social networking sites each month. Ofcom reported that 39% of all UK Internet users use social networking services, while the ComScore figures show 24.9 million individual social networking service visitors in August 2007.
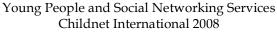
According to recent Hitwise figures, the most popular dedicated social networking sites in the UK are MySpace, Facebook and Bebo[iv]. These types of social networking services are **profile focused** – activity centres around web pages that contain information about the activities, interests and likes (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 social networking service features or tools.

The ways in which we connect to social networking services are expanding too. Games-based and mobile-phone-based social networking services that interact with existing web-based platforms or new mobile-focused communities are rapidly developing areas.

Definitions

"Social networking services" refers here to a wide-range of rapidly developing services tools and practices. **Social networking services can be broadly defined as Internet- or mobile-device-based**

social spaces designed to facilitate communication, collaboration and content sharing across networks of contacts.

Social networking services allow users to manage, build and represent their social networks online. Services usually (but not always) include other individuals; they 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 both parties to agree all connections.

Social networking services 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 social networking services. They allow members and groups to control who can access their profiles, information, connections and spaces, as well as determining degrees of access. The level of granularity and control varies from service to service, but typically settings allow you to:

- **keep your information private** (i.e. be seen by only those to whom you give permission) or
- **restrict the visibility of your information** to:
    - signed-in service members only
    - people on your contacts list
    - particular groups of service users
- **make your information public** so that even people who are not members or are not signed in as members of the service can see it.

Through these combinations of privacy settings, users can manage a range of different relationships online, as well as manage 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. However, the speed of the development of social networking services may mean that young people are more likely to have developed personal strategies or learnt from peers than from formal instruction and support from adults.

Social networking sites vary in the types of tools and functionality they provide (Boyd & Ellison[v] define social networking sites as having three common elements: a member profile (in their definition this is always a web page), the ability to add other members to a contact list, 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 on each other's contacts lists)[vi].

Social networking sites are often perceived by their users as closed environments, where members talk to other members[vii]. This impression of social networking services as providing a private space is likely to account for behaviour, language and postings that do not translate well outside their intended closed context. While it is important that children and young people understand the public nature of much of their activity within social networking services (and can use permissions and privacy controls to manage personal information and communications), we also need to ensure that online activity is understood holistically – i.e. as the sum of activity of all the online sites and networks that an individual belongs to.

Types of social networking service

This section attempts to order the current range of social networking services available, and outlines two main formats: sites that are primarily organised around users' profiles, and those that are organised around collections of content[viii]. However, it is important to remember that services differ and may be characterised by more than one category.

Users may also tailor the intended use of platforms to suit their own interests. For instance, sites that are primarily profile focused may be used by individuals to showcase media collections or be used as a work space for particular topics or events. Educators setting up private groups to collaborate and use tools are a great example of how social networking services can be tailored for users' own ends.

Profile-based social networking services
Profile-based services are primarily organised around members' profile pages – pages that mainly consist of information about an individual member, including the person's picture and details of interests, likes and dislikes. Bebo, Facebook and MySpace are all good examples of profile-based services.

Users develop their spaces 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) to enhance their profiles or as a way of including information from other web services and social networking services.

Content-based social networking services
In these services, the user's profile remains an important way of organising connections, but plays a secondary role to the posting of content. Photo-sharing site Flickr is an example of this type of service, one in which groups and comments are based around pictures. Many people have empty Flickr accounts and signed up to the service to view their friends' or family's permission-protected pictures.

Shelfari is one of the current crop of book-focused sites, with the member's "bookshelf" being a focal point of each member's profile.

Other examples of content-based communities include YouTube.com for video sharing and last.fm, in which the content is arranged by software that monitors and represents the music that users listen to. In last.fm, content is generated by the user's activity. The act of listening to audio files creates and updates profile information ("recently listened to"). This in turn generates data about an individual user's "neighbours" – people who have recently listened to the same kind of music.

White-label social networking services
Most social networking services offer some group-building functionality, which allows users to form mini-communities within sites.

Platforms such as PeopleAggregator and Ning, which launched in 2004, offer members a different model. These sites offer members the opportunity to create and join communities. Users can create their own "mini-MySpaces"[ix] – small-scale social networking sites that support specific interests,

events or activities. Setting up and running a social networking service also means increased responsibility and liability of the creator or host for on-site activity.

Multi-user virtual environments
Sites such as Second Life and World of Warcraft – online virtual environments – allow users to interact with each other's avatars. (An avatar is 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. Friends lists are usually private and not publicly shared or displayed.

Mobile social networking services
Many social networking sites, for example MySpace and Twitter, offer mobile phone versions of their services, allowing members to interact with their friends via their phones. Increasingly, too, there are mobile-led and mobile-only communities, which include profiles and media-sharing just as with web-based social networking services. MYUBO, for example, allows users to share and view video over mobile networks[xxi].

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. These services are designed to work as mobile services, but are popularly used on the web as well.

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, read as text messages on phones, or exported to be read or displayed elsewhere[xii]. They engage users in constantly updated conversation and contact with their online networks.

Social search
Social search engines are an important web development which utilise the popularity of social networking services. There are various kinds of social search engine, but sites like Wink and Spokeo generate results by searching across the public profiles of multiple social networking sites, allowing the creation of web-based dossiers on individuals. This type of people search cuts across the traditional boundaries of social networking site membership, although any data retrieved should already be in the public domain.

What do people do on social networking services?

People use social networking services for countless activities. Among the most common uses, however, are:

- **Connecting with existing networks, making and developing friendships/contacts[xiii]**
Young people tend to use social networking services to communicate and socialise with their contacts and consolidate their existing friendship 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 to display their popularity.

- **Represent themselves online and create and develop an online presence**

Social networking services provide purpose-built spaces for members to create and present an online representation of themselves, either within friendship or wider networks

- **Viewing content and/or finding information**

As well as keeping up to date with what other people are doing, you can use social networking services to generate recommendations based on likes and activities. Social networking services are awash with content – pictures, music, video, as well as event, organisation and topic information.

- **Creating and customising profiles**

There are many different kinds of profiles, although they typically consist of a 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 and project their online identities. Displays of preferences (favourite music, books and films, for example) allow members to share information about themselves.

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, widgets, music and images.

- **Authoring and uploading your own content**

Content might be in the form of messages or blog posts – it might also be photos, video or music.
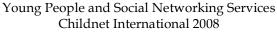
- **Adding and sharing third-party content**

Third-party content 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 member's profile page.

Content may be added in widget form – widgets can be simple badges (pictures with links back to other sites) or dynamic content, for example, a slide show or the last songs catalogued by a last.fm account. This type of dynamic content makes it easy to move information, content and links from one social networking service to another.

Quizzes and polls are also very popular. Some services allow you to create quizzes or compare yourself with other people on your contacts list who have also answered questions or added a particular application.

- **Posting messages – public and 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**

By using service tools to create groups, users can, for example, collectively create profiles, hold discussions, and store, share and comment on objects. In-service messaging can be a rich source of informal collaboration.

Young people and social networking services

Many mainstream social networking services are aimed at teenagers and young adults. Most services have a minimum membership age of 13 or 14, and many explicitly state that they are designed for over-18s. There may be safety restrictions on the accounts of 14- to 17-year-olds; for example, regarding whether their profiles appear in public or off-site searches.
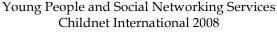
Some sites are specifically designed for young people; for example, both Teen Second Life and Habbo Hotel are aimed at teens. Imbee.com is primarily a blogging service for tweens (children aged 9–13), requiring a parent's permission to sign up. Both Disney and Nick.Com have dedicated services for children – Disney acquired ClubPenguin, a virtual world social networking service aimed at 6- to14-year-olds, in August 2007. Children and tweens can create penguin avatars, for which they can "buy" (with virtual money earned in in-world games) clothes, accessories, pets, homes, furniture, etc.

Services aimed at younger children typically have stricter privacy settings, greater levels of moderation and more limited user interactions. Some require parental permissions – for example, sign up, usually with a credit card – and set preferences, such as the level of in-world communication allowed. As opportunities for contact are limited by safety settings, such child-focused sites may be less suitable for collaborative educational practices and projects than mainstream sites, which make collaboration and contact far easier – factors which bring their own challenges.

The National School Boards Association (in the USA) recently released
research findings of an exploration into the online behaviours of 9- to 17-year-olds in the USA[xiv]. The sample included 2,300 children, young people and parents. Nine- to 17-year-olds reported spending almost as much time on social networking sites and other websites as they do watching television – around nine hours online, compared with 10 hours of TV. Ninety-six per cent of the young people surveyed reported using some form of social networking technology; the findings indicate that education-related topics are the most commonly discussed, with 60% talking about education-related topics and 50% discussing their schoolwork.

It is clear that young people regard social networking services as just another part of their social and often school-related activities.

Educators, parents and carers increasingly recognise the importance of understanding the appeal and use of social networking services among young people. This may be to prevent or respond to a negative incident: cyberbullying or inappropriate content or activities. However, adults should also recognise the benefits of young people's use of technology to support their media literacy skills and social participation, and explore the potential educational benefits of social networking services.

Endnotes

[i] New Media Consortium (2007) Social networking, the "third place," and the evolution of communication. 10 October. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.nmc.org/evolution-communication

[ii] Ofcom (2007) The international communications market 2007 (December). Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.ofcom.org.uk/research/cm/icmr07

[iii] ComScore (2007) U.K. Social Networking Site Usage Highest in Europe. Press release, 10 October. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.comscore.com/press/release.asp?press=1801

[iv] Previously, Facebook membership had been restricted to people with email accounts at recognised academic institutions. According to Internet measurement company Hitwise, Facebook jumped from the 126th most-visited URL in the UK in September 2006 to the fifth most-visited URL in the UK in September 2007, with "Facebook" being the third most-searched term in the UK. (Hitwise (2007) Hitwise UK retail and social networking update. 22 October. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.hitwise.co.uk/press-center/hitwiseHS2004/retail.php)

[v] Boyd, d. m. & Ellison, N.B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13(1), article 11. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html
[vi] Danah Boyd has written at length on definitions of social networking sites, focusing on characteristics she has identified as their unique, key service features. The approach taken here in the Digizen report is a far broader one, and includes a wider subset of social media, which are organised around networking practices within the label "social networking services". This definition takes in the range of activity that takes place across sites for educators – for example, the use of collaborative and other tools which may not be unique to social networking sites but nevertheless make up an important part of the user's experience.

Boyd, D.M. (2006) Social networking sites: my definition. apophenia :: making connections where none previously existed. 10 November. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2006/11/10/social_network_1.html

Boyd, D.M. (2008) Let's define our terms: what is a "social networking technology"? apophenia :: making connections where none previously existed. 18 January. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2008/01/08/lets_define_our.html

[vii] Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross's research on Facebook found significant misconceptions in members' perceptions and awareness of the scope and openness of the network and the visibility and public availability of their profiles. Members in the study thought their information was far more private than it actually was, and misjudged the numbers of people they were making personal information available to.

Acquisti, A. & Gross, R. (2006) Imagined communities: Awareness, information sharing, and privacy on the Facebook. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from 2006.http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/~acquisti/papers/acquisti-gross-facebook-privacy-PET-final.pdf

[viii] 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 or imaginary people, or they may be fakester profiles – profiles of people pretending to be famous or historical figures, for example. Additionally, the profile is itself an object or an artefact.
Stutzman, F. (2007) Unit structures.Social Network Transitions, 5 November. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://chimprawk.blogspot.com/2007/11/social-network-transitions.html

[ix] Anne Collier describes these as grassroots niche social networking sites.
Collier, A. (2007) Mini-MySpaces: Social web's new phase. Net Family News, 9 March. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.netfamilynews.org/nl070309.html#1

[x] Collier, A. (2007) Mobile socalizing: Accelerating change. Net Family News, 2 February. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.netfamilynews.org/nl070202.html#1

[xi] Tropea, J. (2007) A list of SMS services and groups and mobile social networks. Library Clips, 9 March. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://libraryclips.blogsome.com/2007/03/09/a-list-of-sms-groups-and-services-and-mobile-social-networks

[xii] Lew, A.A. (2007) Twitter tweets for higher education. Web 2.0 Teaching Tools, 19 August. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://web20teach.blogspot.com/2007/08/twitter-tweets-for-higher-education.html

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xiii 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 social networking services, 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'."

Boyd, D.M. & Ellison, N.B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13(1), article 11. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html

xiv National School Boards Association (2007) Creating and connecting: Research and guidelines on online social – and educational – networking. July. Retrieved 20 February 2008 from http://www.nsba.org/SecondaryMenu/TLN/CreatingandConnecting.aspx