

4. Evaluating social networking services

The following guide is designed to accompany the social networking services evaluation chart, which can be downloaded from Childnet's Digizen website (<http://www.digizen.org/socialnetworking/checklist.aspx>).

There are many social networking services. New sites appear daily and existing sites update their services all the time in what is still a rapidly developing area. Most services are profile or content focused, and although they may seem to offer similar services, there are significant differences between sites, tools and services.

This checklist is designed to help you review sites to see whether they meet your needs as an educator (perhaps with a specific learning and teaching aim or project in mind), parent, or even as a potential site member. Currently, most UK school networks block access to many social networking services. However, there are many reasons why educators may explore social networking sites. Educators may be interested in:

- staff development and digital literacy – for example, to better understand sites that are popular with learners, or to be able to deliver e-safety information
- engaging with students and other members of the school, college or organisational community who are using services – for example, by setting up a school profile to provide information about the institution
- using social networking services for e-learning – for example, working with learners or supporting their collaboration on a particular class, topic or project
- ICT provision planning – for example, exploring services because they are considering hosting or running services for their communities
- personal learning environment planning – for example, seeing how particular services can be incorporated into institutional service provision, and how learners might use social network services as hub sites, exporting and importing resources created in other locations.

The evaluation chart that accompanies this checklist outlines a framework of things to look out for, and covers basic questions in a range of categories.

These reviews are current at the time of publication. The chart is, however, likely to date quickly.

The listing of information about these services by Childnet does not imply an endorsement of these services. The services are examples of a range of services, and are provided only to demonstrate the evaluation process and the social networking services evaluation checklist. If you want to explore or use one of these services, or any other, you should carry out your own review.

The comparison chart looks at several existing services: Bebo, EducatorCentral, Facebook, Flickr, MySpace, Ning, TakingITGlobal and YouTube. These services were chosen to illustrate a reasonable range of the different types of service available.

Bebo, Facebook and MySpace are among the most popular social networking sites in the UK.

EducatorCentral and TakingITGlobal are designed to support learning and teaching. Both are free services provided by TakingITGlobal, a not-for-profit organisation. Educator Central is also run on the open source platform Elgg, and several UK universities host their own versions.

Ning has a lively educator community exploring how the platform can be used to create web-based mini-communities.

Flickr and YouTube are examples of services that concentrate on media resources.

Social networking evaluation checklist

General info

About

This section provides a brief overview of the services. If you are planning a project around, for example, particular media, it may be worth checking sites that specialise in those media, since they may include a broader selection of supplementary tools.

Membership types

Check what account types are on offer. If you are likely to need additional storage space, do you have to pay for it? Are there advert-free options? Many commercial sites make their money through advertising and by selling or renting types of user data. Check whether there are ad-free or premium services available.

Age restrictions

Most sites, but not all, specify that users need to be 13 or over. MySpace requires users to be over 14. Flickr has no age restrictions for its free service, but requires verified parent/guardian consent. Ning allows members of any age, but setting up communities specifically for people under the age of 13 is not allowed.

Most sites assume or request parental consent – schools and colleges need to consider how this can effectively be obtained.

Profile privacy and moderation settings

Many social networking services are profile-centric – activity takes place around content and information displayed on a member's profile page. Profile fields can sometimes be extensive, allowing (and sometimes requiring) users to supply private contact details like their addresses as well as details of their interests and activities. What level of privacy is available to site members? Can they keep their profiles private from people who they don't know? Can they select who gets to see different parts of their profile pages? Are they allowed to use pseudonyms or do they have to use their real names? How easy will it be to delete their accounts and data should they want to?

Another important area to look at is the degree of control that users have over contact on the site. The degree of control a young person needs will depend on a variety of factors, but might also change over time. Can people befriend them without permission? Most profiles include a

comment wall – how can they moderate this? Can they control who can message them through the site? It's important that all site members take the time to familiarise themselves with privacy controls, so they are confident about how they can control their information.

Members' toolkit

Most sites offer members a range of tools; for example, most provide a blog. As with stand-alone blogging tools, these vary from service to service. In addition to tools for each individual member, there will be group tools (often the same as or similar to the tools available to individuals, but able to be used by several members collaboratively) and a range of site-wide public tools – for example, message forums.

File upload

What types of file can you upload to the site? What are file storage limits? How can content be displayed? How can content be shared or made available for collaborative work?

Groups

Social networking services provide members (and sometimes non-members) with a range of collaborative spaces and tools.

Group settings

Consider how private or public you can make your group. Can you control who joins?

Group tools

What does your group let members do? What controls do you have over tools? What restrictions are there on members? Can you give different members different permissions and roles?

Mobile

Services increasingly provide mobile versions of their sites and ways for members to interact with and contribute to sites using mobile phones. It's important to be aware of the charges that members might incur, and it may be useful to know what network or handset restrictions there are on mobile services.

Other collaborative tools

What other tools are available to users?

Search

How can users find each other or be found? How much information is available to people who users don't know, either through on-site or off-site search engines?

Design and customisation

Templates

Can users change the look and feel of their sites?

Content and/or design customisable

How much choice do members have over the content they can include in their spaces? Can they display content they create or upload it to other sites? Can they embed useful tools they use elsewhere, like calendars or bookmarks? Can they control who gets to see this content? If they are using third-party widgets to add content to their profiles or pages, they should ensure that they understand what they are agreeing to by using additional services, for instance what they are allowing third-party companies to do with their information.

Adverts

Most web-based services have adverts. How intrusive are these? Are they appropriate for children and young people?

Security and access

Content ownership

Who can do what with the content that members produce or upload on site? When you sign up to a site, you agree to licensing conditions. These can be found in the terms of service.

How easy are the terms and conditions to understand?

Agreements vary drastically. MySpace users, for example, only grant MySpace a functional licence – that is, a licence that allows the service to display the users' content on site. MySpace will not sell or distribute members' content. Members of TakingITGlobal maintain ownership of their content, but give permission for TakingITGlobal to distribute and modify any publicly posted content within or outside their site. Members should understand how their public profile pictures, conversations and content could be used by their social networking services.

Adult content

Most services don't permit adult content, although some do, and some services contain material that while not explicit, might be regarded as inappropriate. How easy is it for members to access adult material? Are there age-related restrictions?

Managing inappropriate content

What can users do if they come across inappropriate content, particularly content that transgresses the social networking service's terms of use, is illegal or is copyright protected?

Age-specific functions

Some services control aspects of user activity according to the age submitted to the member's profile.

Some services have permissions that can be applied to age groups. For example, Bebo lets users set age ranges for other members to be able to view their profiles and contact them.

Safety information

What safety information does the site provide? In addition to generic information, does the site warn or remind users about safety when they are on the site?

Viewing and moving content

All social networking services should have a terms of use agreement and a privacy statement. Additionally, sites may provide safety information, user guides or site overviews.

Getting external content in

How easy is it for users to personalise their spaces or make them more useful by importing content and tools from other services? It is important that users understand that they must have permission to upload content to the site – i.e. users must have created the content or have permission from the person who created it.

Content out

Can users export content from sites? Can they export calendar information or feed information produced on the site to another location, for example to an e-portfolio or blog?

Privacy policy

Most commercial sites only allow users over the age of 13. This is because they collect and may sell or rent user data, and in the USA, where most services originate, it is illegal to collect this kind of information about people under the age of 13 without parental consent. Members need to read the privacy policy and understand how their information will be used.

Terms of use

All members need to read and understand the terms of use. A lot of the information will refer to commercial issues (most services do not allow commercial activity), passing on or collecting other members' information, and use of malicious software. The terms will also cover what content and activity is allowed on site, and specify age-related conditions of membership.

Community guidelines

Community guidelines are often user-friendly versions of the terms and conditions. Social networking services generally do not moderate or check all members' content or behaviour centrally; they rely on the good conduct of members of the community and on members reporting unacceptable behaviour and content.