

Faculty of Education

Emerging Technologies Conference 2008

University of Wollongong

Year 2008

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networking sites in education

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This conference paper was originally published as Griffith, S and Liyanage, L, An introduction to the potential of social networking sites in education, Proceedings of the Emerging Technologies Conference, University of Wollongong, 18-21 June 2008.

This paper is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.uow.edu.au/etc08/9>

An introduction to the potential of social networking sites in education

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Abstract:

This paper reviews Social Networking Sites (SNS) that have become available via the Internet in the light of usability for teaching and learning. Membership rules relating to entries for some popular sites, such as “Facebook” and “MySpace” are reviewed. Characteristics of these sites are reviewed and then compared to evaluate the trust and privacy issues of shared information available to any given social group. Trust and privacy plays a critical role when SNS are used for the purpose of teaching and learning. Thus, the negative and positive aspects of SNS are reviewed in detail. This knowledge will form the basis to assist with regulating SNS for teaching and learning.

Introduction

Since the start of the industrial revolution, social commentators have presented ideas that comment on the effect of technology to human social interaction via any modern invention. These ideas take into account how the change of technology could affect how people interrelate. Since the rise of the Internet, people have formed relationships without having another person within a close geographic location. Is this situation safe? Or should there be rules governing the Social Networking sites (SNS) in respect to a formal educational setting?

Common problems to social networking services include issues with security, privacy, inappropriate content and cyber bullying. In light of addressing these issues, this paper reviews Facebook and MySpace in greater detail with reference to the educational viability on its users, and some of the technological limitations with SNS systems.

Section two of this paper will compare the SNS sites of “Facebook” and “MySpace” and look at the environment variables of trust, privacy and profiling. How far do these sites go and what sorts of privacy issues arise here? Is this conducive for learning via online social network services? Does advertising or marketing influence their content and how can these sites be useful for educational institutions?

Facebook

Founded on February 4th 2004, *Facebook* is primarily owned by its author Mark Zuckerberg with Microsoft owning a 1.6% stake after it paid \$240 million. This has led to believe that the company is worth \$15 billion and it has an estimate annual sale of \$150 million (Forbes - 2008). All that is needed to join the Facebook SNS is a valid email address whereby any regional area or interest group is able to join the SNS once registration has been completed (Facebook – About, 2008).

Facebook features include:

- “The Wall” – a space where messages can be posted on each other’s profile page.

- “Pokes” – Virtual Pokes can be given to each other.
- Users “Status” – Information can be given to friends on the current actions or whereabouts of the user
- “News Feeds” – where Facebook can announce changes to its site like upcoming events, profile changes and birthdays related to friends
- “Photo” application – users can load photos for their friends to see.

Facebook has two principles when it comes to privacy. Facebook’s mantra is for the user to have complete control over their data or information and have access to the information that other people wish to share (Facebook – Privacy Help, 2008). Apart of the terms and conditions of Facebook allows the site administrators to access a users profile and computer, as well as tracking the user’s usage (Hodge, 2006). That is not to say that Facebook is not without security scares.

Facebook allows plain text for users who want to customize their details. A number of users however, have customized profiles by using different XSS (Cross site scripting) vulnerabilities or hacks (Laverdet, 2006). A worm was created by using a custom CSS (Cascade Style Sheet), which changed the profiles of the users and any friends that accessed the infected site. This in turn changed the site to look like *MySpace* profiles. It took the Facebook staff a few hours to stamp the worm out and release a fix.

MySpace

The history of MySpace resolves around the creators Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe and was launched in 2003. These creators were involved in other companies that involved music storage and an “email list broker” which sold e-mail subscribers to other companies for marketing purposes. The messages generated by this e-mail sale was often thought of as spam, and legislation was enacted that help curtail this practice (Bosworth, 2005).

MySpace offers share capabilities with features that include:

- Talking online with friends
- Matchmaking, either for friends with other friends or an opportunity for singles to meet other singles.
- Keeping in touch with families
- Businesses or co-workers interested in networking
- Studying with study partners
- Looking for long lost friends. (MySpace - About Us, 2006).

As a SNS, it is popular to teenagers and young adults who share a passion for music and media artists. The music industry is also eager to market a young audience who appear to have a large disposable income. This condition also attracts advertisers who are keen to exploit the young people demographic resulting in large profits to the MySpace company (Bosworth, 2005).

In 2005, News Limited paid \$580 million for the Intermix company, who owned MySpace at the time of which MySpace value was approximated to be \$327 million (Wikipedia – MySpace, 2008). Though a company such as News Limited that is experienced in mass-media marketing controls, MySpace the site is extremely popular because of its flexibility to change you're the user profile to suit your current style. Advertisers validate and reflect their messages towards this genre that blends in for the target audience (Bosworth, 2005) that also like to share their data.

Common characteristics (features) of Facebook and MySpace

Boyd and Ellison (2007) 'define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.' Both Facebook and MySpace feature these characteristics. The target audience has now blended, but originally, MySpace appealed to a mostly teenage audience whilst Facebook proved popular amongst young adults.

Differences between Facebook and MySpace

Facebook is often compared to MySpace but where MySpace users can customize their profiles with HTML and CSS, Facebook only allows users to use text. This is where the two sites differ significantly (Wikipedia – Facebook, 2008). Other differences are minor but noticeable. MySpace employs approximately 300 staff but it does not disclose profits or revenues separately from its current owner, News Corporation (Wikipedia – MySpace, 2008). Facebook employs approximately 500 staff and has an estimated revenue of \$150 million (Wikipedia – Facebook, 2008).

Applications of Facebook and Myspace in teaching and learning

Facebook and MySpace are two examples from the Internet of Social Networking Sites (SNS). Both sites had similar beginnings and both these sites had a social networking plan as its basis. Facebook originally started out in the halls of Harvard University. Its membership was closed for all but members of the University. It has since expanded to include other educational institutions such as recognized schools, colleges, universities, organizations, and companies within the U.S, Canada, and other English-speaking nations (Yadav, 2006). By September 2006, Facebook became available to all users of the Internet (Wikipedia – Facebook, 2008).

The sharing of information amongst groups can have a positive effect. In an article on the British Newspaper "The Independent", Journalist Harriet Swain outlines some innovation among academics of some English universities to communicate with their students on Facebook (The Independent, 2007). With Facebook, academics are learning more about the students they teach simply by viewing the student's profiles on Social Networking Sites (SNS). Universities are learning

to use SNS and placing information onto student's group sites. However, the SNS are usually privately owned and any information listed on these sites remains the property of the owners of the site. However, academic institutions aiming to actively seek students can use SNS.

In a recent study by (Seckor, 2005) for the London School of Economics and Political Science, a case study had looked into for the use of Facebook amongst librarians. In this study she has noted that many librarians have joined Facebook for purely social reasons but the application can overlap into the professional world for promotion of library related events. She also noted that Facebook has a number of related tools, such as search tools COPAC (Copac: the UK and Irish Academic and National Library catalogue - (Copac, 2008) and JSTOR (short for Journal Storage is a United States-based online system for archiving academic journals – (Jstor, 2008), as well as “various tools that allow virtual bookshelves or resource lists to be shared with others” (Seckor, 2005, p2).

Sector also noted that Facebook had its origins in academia and that it enabled communication with people in same class situations where information is shared, and that Virtual Bookshelf applications enabled discussions about prescribed readings across many courses. Indeed, Sector also relates the experience from the Georgia Institute of Technology where they discovered that 1300 students were registered with Facebook and as such used the social network site as an “Outreach tool to promote library services to students in the School of Mechanical Engineering” (Seckor, 2005, p4).

Benefits of Facebook and Myspace in relation to teaching and learning

Tynes (2007) highlights the psychosocial benefits of SNS, which includes the facilitation of identity exploration, provision of social cognitive skills such as perspective taking, and to fulfil the need for social support, intimacy and autonomy. The “social spaces” available to people can enable a more personalized experience for learning in an online environment. This support from instant messaging, wikis, blogs, discussion boards, and other Web 2.0 facilities can complement what is taught in a traditional classroom setting. Tynes (2007) further suggests when writing in discussion forums, a participant must take time to reflect on the sequence of entries and responses in order to carefully construct his or her own posting for others to read.

The interactivity available on SNS has proved to be popular with students in an academic environment. Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2007) suggest students expect a more professional website, which is different to the normal “static” pages usually presented within a school or department from a University. Students are also motivated by the amount of information disclosed on a teachers' or academics' SNS. The research conducted by Mazer et al. (2007) reveals that the more personalized the SNS presence the greater the motivation of students to participate and learn course material.

So with the continual popularity of network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, main stream institutions are adapting this new social structure to promote services and inspire discussions among relevant interest groups.

Limitations of Facebook and Myspace in relation to teaching & learning

The amount of information shared between users of SNS can vary greatly. This information can be collated and data mined for illicit use. Many young people can be victims of “sexual predators” as well as “cyber bullying”. At times the appeal of a “global stage” can lead people into revealing details about themselves which may seem harmless for friends to view, however each user of SNS must be aware of the permissions they set on these sites for public viewing. In FaceBook, most of the permissions set as default enable friends of a user to view everything in a person’s profile. Of course a person can choose the amount of information to disclose but each permission set needs to be reviewed so that the user understands how much information is released.

Mazer et al. (2007) suggest that Facebook can be a potential hazard for teachers as some applications allows users to communicate through the SNS network. “The Wall” which is an application within FaceBook, is similar to a discussion-board. The content can lead to discrediting or defamatory messages on a users FaceBook site. It is further suggested that teachers must also determine the type of information presented to students via a SNS to avoid any negative ramifications and to protect their credibility in the classroom. Mazer et al. (2007) argues that teachers need to be aware of how they approach a student – based domain, as their level of participation may have a negative effect on the students because of the connotations already associated with FaceBook (e.g., FaceBook contains defamatory student websites).

Another area, which may affect the learning experience for students, is the type of advertisements, which appear in the SNS page. As students disclose information relating to studies on the SNS the level of marketing may appear intrusive or inappropriate. This is a factor beyond the control of the academic community, and is a service which each user agrees too when signing up for an account with the SNS service.

Conclusion

The positive aspect of SNS and their use is starting to emerge. Academic and established institutions are discovering that SNS can reach people that are attracted to their special interest groups. Students are now using SNS to help in their academic studies for group and team based work. The various networks and social structure established within an SNS can help promote additional interaction between the educator and student.

Due to their large popularity, SNS sites have become a part of every day life for a majority of Internet Users. SNS sites can be used to form study groups, promote research based projects and even help with academic support for distance and campus based education. The level of information disclosed on a SNS site is another tool, which can be used to facilitate another portal of communication between the student and educator.

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Cite paper as: Griffith, S, & Liyanage, L. (2008). An introduction to the potential of social networking sites in education. In I. Olney, G. Lefoe, J. Mantei, & J. Herrington (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Second Emerging Technologies Conference 2008* [pp. 76-81. Wollongong: University of Wollongong.

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