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★ Social Networking

Social networking websites are places on the Internet where people can connect with those who share their interests. These sites began to appear in the mid-1990s, and gained traction in the early 2000s. Typically, social networking refers to sites that allow users to directly connect with people they know socially ([Facebook](), [MySpace](), [Tagged]()) or professionally ([LinkedIn](), [Xing]()). Other social networking sites are built around common topics ([Yahoo! Groups](), [TripAdvisor](), [FanNation]()) – or real-time geographical locations, as sites are accessed through a mobile application ([FourSquare](), [Loopt]()). A few sites have increasingly been deployed by companies for marketing and customer outreach (Facebook, Twitter).

One major impact of social media is that Internet users are increasingly demonstrating a general impulse toward participation with and contribution to websites. Some sites are leveraging this impulse to aggregate (and often to moderate or rate) a body of content ([YouTube](), [Flickr](), [Wikipedia](), [AllRecipes](), [eHow]()). Other sites help users make purchasing decisions by providing user-generated ratings of products or businesses ([Epinions](), [Yelp]()). Still others promote philanthropy by encouraging site visitors to pool donations or investments to achieve a larger goal ([DonorsChoose](), [Kiva]()). These diverse examples show how social networking sites can function as economic "platforms" that serve different groups of many users.

Overview

These issues arise in discussions of social networking:

- Social networking enables new ways to connect, share information, and do business –and these forms of engagement have impacted culture and society.
- Data posted to these sites is often publicly available and may persist years into the future. Information shared online has the potential to damage a person's reputation later on – for example, in college applications or job interviews.
- The companies hosting these sites ultimately control the information users post. There is an ongoing debate on whether there should be limits on how these companies use and share information about individual users.
- As social networking sites are increasingly used by children and teens, and information posted online is immediately and easily shared, the potential for online bullying and the difficulty of ensuring child safety is a concern.
- Some social networking sites allow users to share audio, video, and written content; this may enable theft of copyrighted content.
- Some personal information shared on social networking sites may be publicly accessed and used in identity theft or even home break-ins.

Social Networking Sources

These sources are a good place to start in understanding issues involving social networking. Anirban Sengupta and Anoshua Chaudhuri examine online harassment of teens in "[Are Social Networking Sites a Source of Harassment for Teens? Evidence from Survey Data]()." [James Grimmelmann]() offers an overview of the law and policy of privacy on social network sites in "[Saving Facebook]()." [Jonathan Zittrain]() explores the relationships among social networking sites and users in "[Facebook Rules: Privacy Invasions From Other Users]()."

Relevant Academics

[danah boyd]()
New York University
[zephoria@zephoria.org]()

[Urs Gasser]()
Harvard University
[ugasser@cyber.law.harvard.edu]()

[James Grimmelmann]()
University of Maryland
[jgrimmelmann@law.umaryland.edu]()

[Jonathan Zittrain]()
Harvard Law School
[zittrain@law.harvard.edu]()

Media Contact

Lorrie Faith Cranor and Sarah Spiekermann describe how to design privacy-friendly sites in "Engineering Privacy." Urs Gasser and John Palfrey look at bullying, safety, copyright, and privacy issues in "Empowering Parents and Protecting Children in an Evolving Media Landscape." In "The Drama! Teen Conflict, Gossip, and Bullying in Networked Publics," danah boyd and Alice Marwick present a more nuanced understanding of how teens interact online in order to help further inform cyber-bullying policies.

Please note that all links on this fact sheet are accessible from the online version at www.techpolicy.com/socialnetworking.aspx.