

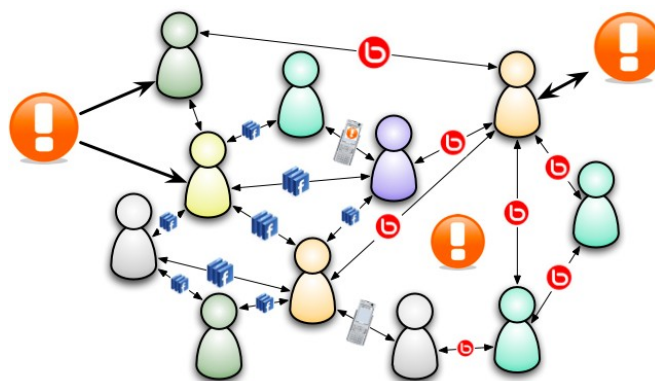
Safe and Effective Social Network Site Applications for Young People

Summary discussion document
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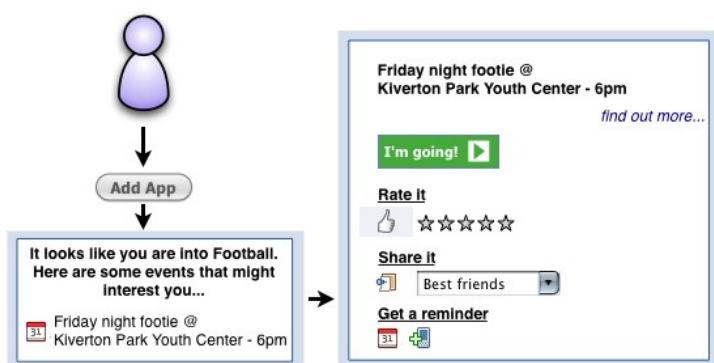
Word of mouth matters when it comes to discovering new positive activities – and Social Network Sites (SNS) create new opportunities for activity information to be discovered and shared peer-to-peer.

However, in developing strategies and applications targeted at young people which take advantage of the social & information sharing features of SNS the safety of young people should be a paramount concern. This paper seeks to show how risks to young people can be managed whilst building effective SNS applications and engagement strategies.



What are Social Network Site applications?

SNS applications are generally third party web-based tools which sit within SNS such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace. They can display extra information on a users profile, integrate the SNS with another online tool, or make use of the information a user has on their profile and in their friend's list to provide new features within the SNS.



For example: an application might enable you to display the shield of your favourite football team on your profile (low level of integration); it might provide a way of sending multimedia messages (rather than plain text messages) to your friends on the site (mid level of integration); or it might use the information on your profile and friends list to suggest positive activities you might be interested in, and to help

you share information about the activities you are involved in or planning to attend with people on your friends list (high level of integration).

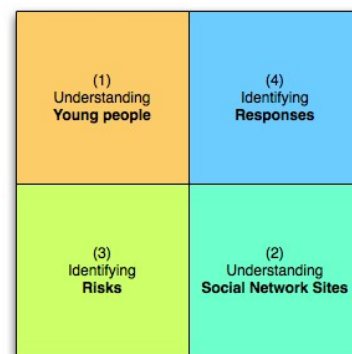
What about strategies that use the pre-existing tools on Social Network Sites?

You can promote positive activities on SNS without building an application using in built features such as profiles, status updates, groups and events. These approaches are not specifically considered in this paper. See the *Youth Work and Social Networking Final Report* (NYA, 2008) for an analysis of how youth sector professionals can use SNS in their work, and refer to the *Digizen Report* (Childnet International, 2008) for a framework to help assess your engagement with different online platforms without using applications.

Using applications opens up opportunities (and risks) not present using only the inbuilt feature of SNS.

Why are special considerations needed when building Social Network Site applications?

Applications can affect the flow of information through SNS – making it easier for their users to access, use and share information. They can also be used to gather 'User Generated Content (UGC)'. This offers exciting opportunities for promoting positive activities and gaining dynamic feedback on activity provision. However, in facilitating the flow of information and UGC within the SNS, an application takes on a responsibility for handling this information in a way that ensures the safety of young users.



What are the potential risks to young people?

Risks can be divided into six categories: content, conduct, contact, commerce, confusion and exclusion.

Without careful design, an application could unintentionally facilitate creation of, access to, or sharing of inappropriate content. Applications which allow interaction between users may enable inappropriate conduct, including bullying. By increasing the availability of information about a users interests, by allowing interaction between users, and by linking users to specific activities or locations an application could increase risks of inappropriate contact with young people – including, in the most serious cases, grooming and sexual solicitation. Applications which involve commercial transactions, or are open to phishing abuse, could put young people at risk of financial loss.

Application designers should also be aware of risks related to the often confusing privacy settings and feature-sets of SNS – which may lead to users sharing information more widely than they wishes, or not being able to give true informed consent to the applications actions. Given there are many different SNS platforms, some popular with particular minority communities, and given highly integrated applications tend to be designed for specific platforms, it is important to also be aware of the risks of excluding particular groups by investing in only a limited number of profiles.

These risks should be understood in context. Many of the risks listed above can be addressed by limiting the features of a Social Network Site application. However, such limitations may (a) reduce the effectiveness of this particular application, and (b) lead to other applications, which have not given adequate consideration to safety, replacing your application in popularity and reach.

Why are special considerations needed for applications targeting young people?

Applications need to be designed with the specific position of children and young people under the law taken into account. Bodies providing SNS applications need to take seriously their obligations to promote the protection of young people. In some cases, the terms and conditions, or the law, may impose age-based restrictions on the data applications can collect and share. Youth is a specific life-stage – and in developing applications it is important to be aware of how young people will respond to the textual, visual and interaction-design cues they are presented with. The design of an application needs to consider to what degree young people should be expected to manage possible risks, or to what extent they should be protected from encountering such risks.

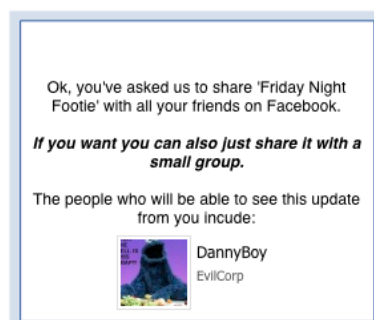


The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child offers a useful framework to show how young people should be increasingly participating actively in their own protection in line with their increasing age and maturity.

How should application developers and commissioners respond?

Whilst in some cases the best approach will be to limit the use of rich interactive features in SNS application, application commissioners and developers should not cut themselves off (and thereby young people) from the rich social-interaction possibilities of application development. Safe and effective applications can be developed, and in ways that can contribute to making SNS safer spaces for young people overall by modelling good practice and promoting young people's critical literacy online. Application developers and commissioners should:

- Adopt **ethical guiding principles** that start from the interests and wishes of young people; gain informed consent for their actions; and which adopt the highest standards of data protection and data security.
- Work through a **risk assessment** to ensure the application and its implementation does not expose young people to unacceptable risks;
- Consider how the application can **model best practice** and build in safety. For example: by highlighting privacy settings; offering clear and transparent abuse reporting; and helping young people to visualise the impact of sharing actions on SNS.



Applications can be designed to provide feedback and information which increases young people's awareness of the impact of their actions using SNS and which supports them in making sensible decisions. This makes the application itself safer, and promotes young people's critical literacy in the online space.

More work is needed to identify and evaluate specific best practice in pro-social youth-targeted social network site applications and to continually review this in light of changing SNS platforms. However, this ongoing learning should result from, rather than hold back, proactive application development and innovation.

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### Moving forward:

This summary is based on the working paper: '**Safe and effective SNS applications for young people**: considerations in building social networking applications for under 19s' (Davies, 2008) available from <http://is.gd/9Hxm>

This working paper will form the basis of resources to support the safe and effective development of Social Network Site applications and projects building on the data made available through the Information & Signposting project. These resources will be released through the Plings website and blog at <http://www.plings.net>

Please send all comments to [tim@practicalparticipation.co.uk](mailto:tim@practicalparticipation.co.uk)

### Further resources:

If you are interested in wider issues relating to youth engagement and social networking please refer to

- Youth Work and Social Networking – Final Report: <http://blogs.nya.org.uk/ywsn/>
- Digizen Social Networking - <http://www.digizen.org/socialnetworking/>
- Youth Work Online network – <http://www.youthworkonline.org.uk>