

MSc in Computing (Information Technology)

Online Social Networking in Ireland: Risks and Opportunities

Maeve O'Reilly

D07113963

D210

maeve.oreilly@student.dit.ie

Abstract

The paper looks at Online Social Networking use in Ireland, in particular the risks and the opportunities for a better Ireland. It concludes that, while there are risks, user education as well new technologies and guidelines for the sites can help mitigate them. The sites provide new opportunities for children to learn and develop a sense of belonging while also helping parents and social educators identify children at risk.

1 Introduction

This paper seeks to examine the nature and use of online social networking sites (OSNs) among the youth (defined as under 18 years old) of Ireland. The benefits and risks are looked at followed by suggestions on how the concerned bodies can benefit from social networking while also mitigating the risks.

Section 2 examines the most popular sites and delivers some statistics on their use. Section 3 looks at the risks young users of these sites face and Section 4 the benefits of them. Risk Mitigation is looked at in Section 5. Section 6 presents the conclusions.

2 Online Social Networking Sites and their Popularity with the Irish youth

OSNs are part of the wave of Web20 technologies which allow the user to actively participate in creating the content of the site [O'Reilly, 2005]. The OSNs tend to start with a self created profile of the user including information such as age, gender and date of birth combined with photos, text, instant messaging, boards and video clips. A user can send a 'friend request' to other users, or persons whose email address they know. When they log in, users will automatically see updates to their "friends'" profiles. Users are normally connected by groups or by invitations from known friends. In Ireland the first major site was Bebo, with children connected to each other via their school [Anchor, 2007]. They can see all other members of that school, irrespective of whether their profile is private or public and irrespective of whether they really attend that school.

The Anchor survey of 374 Irish 10-20 year olds found 69% use OSNs 2 to 3 times per week. It also found 85% of children use the sites primarily to communicate with people they already know. Hence we surmise that for children the social networking sites are a way of keeping in contact with existing friends, not so much for making new friends. [Anchor, 2007]

However a 2006 study of 846 Irish children by NCTE found 27% have been asked for personal information by people they do not actually know [Webwise, 2006]. The PEW study in the USA showed similar statistics [Lenhardt *et. al.*, 2007].

3 The Risks to Children using OSNs

The OSNs involve a registration process which normally asks for full name, email address, phone number, address and date of birth. Depending on the site, some or all of this information may be published. By default Bebo, the most popular site with Irish youth, publishes the user fullname.

The release of such personal information has been linked to an increase in vulnerability. Children releasing personal information are thus put more at risk from predators - sexual and financial. [Atkinson *et al.*, 2007]

There is also the question of their impact on social development. Unlike traditional communication between teenagers/children, what is put on an OSN is persistent – it stays there; can be replicated with alarming speed and thus taken out of context; can be found via search tools by an unintended audience. This, Boyd contends in her paper "Social Network Sites: Public, Private or What?", is their main difference from a group of kids meeting on a street corner and thus it is these aspects which we need to educate our children on. [Boyd, 2007].

4 The Benefits

The Irish based Anchor study can:

"wholeheartedly say that these sites can play a very positive role in social development of our children". [Anchor, 2007]

It is recognised that social interaction is important for our children and these sites provide a new way for this, perhaps also for the benefit of those who would otherwise be relatively excluded.

The previously mentioned Boyd sees the OSNs a new public place, where teenagers in particular can interact and learn how to behave in society. They also give opportunities to spot when children are in trouble and need help, though this should be done with some respect for their privacy. [Boyd, 2007].

The OSNs have a power to unite people and in some way empower them, what Aguiton and Cardon call 'the strenght of weak cooperation' [Aguiton *et al.*, 2007]. Which could be used for the betterment of society as a whole. Or perhaps just for the benefit of the individual, giving her a sense of place and belonging in a virtual community.

5 Risk Mitigation

Boyd contends that educators should embrace the sites and become themselves involved in teaching children how to behave in these sites by example. She contends that all technological walls we build to try and protect children will be broken. [Boyd, 2007].

Studies in the USA to see if age verification software can be used to provide better protection for children have so far failed to come up with a solution. [Christ *et al.*, 2007].

In the previously referenced Anchor study, they conclude that relatively simple measures by sites like Bebo, such as not publishing the full name of users who state they are under 18, would reduce the risk. [Anchor, 2007].

Perhaps the most feasible suggestion comes from Atkinson who suggest enabling the user to track their personal details online via technology. She presents a prototype tool whereby users can see what information they have given out and who is storing it. Thus enabling the individual to track and assess the risk of their own actions in releasing the data [Atkinson *et al.*, 2007].

It should however also be noted that the most worrying risk, grooming of children for sexual exploitation, is an offense. Enforcement of the law in this area is necessary. This the Department of the Justice have committed to, recently setting up the Office of Internet Safety with protection of children high on its agenda [Lehehan, 2007].

5 Conclusions

The Web20 tools including OSNs are making for a very exciting time.

For children they are a new platform where social behaviour is learnt. They are also a place where new risks are present. We know from the statistics that for the most part they only want to talk to people they already know but contact with strangers does happen.

With a mix of education, enforcement of the law and technology they can be for the benefit of all.

As an area of future study it would be interesting to see if their increased uptake in rural Ireland would have any impact on detection of suicidal teenagers. Perhaps even the sense of community and belonging these sites have the potential to give could reduce Ireland's suicide rate.

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