

ABSTRACT

Social networks: dangers and privacy protection

by LE, Germain

This report presents a major issue of today's life on the internet: privacy protection on social networks. It analyses the emergence of these networks and their daily use: who uses them and for what. Then, it reviews the dangers implied by the use of social networks, supported by several examples, facts and figures. The report also includes a guide explaining how to protect our private life on social networks and a bibliography of the websites, newspapers and books that were helpful to its writing.

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Social networks: dangers and privacy protection

By

Germain Le

ID: 9714855

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the eighties, the internet (also known as World Wide Web) has been developing so quickly that life without it seems to be impossible. We use the internet for many purposes: work, music, e-mail, etc. But in 2004, Mark Zuckerberg, a computer science student at Harvard, along with three of his roommates founded a website that would change the Web: *Facebook*, bringing with it a brand new use of the internet: social networking. Regardless the controversies and security issues, *Facebook* became the most visited social network, gathering around 1.2 billion visits per month ^[1], way ahead *MySpace* and *Twitter*.

In this report, we will start by analyzing the success of these social networks, and then discuss the controversies of these networks. We will prove that social networks should be forbidden to children.

2. WHAT IS A SOCIAL NETWORK?

2.1 Emergence & development

2.1.1 Facebook

Facebook has become the most used social network in the world. Nearly everyone has a *Facebook* page and regularly posts photos, videos, etc. But anyone can also share with the whole world information that is much more private, such as marital status or sexual orientation. According to the website itself, *Facebook* has more than 300 million active users and 70% of them are outside the United States, confirming that the website has become global ^[2].

At the beginning, *Facebook*, originally named *TheFacebook*, was only intended to target people studying at Harvard. Then, it expanded to other colleges, such as Stanford. Now, it has become a real phenomenon.



Figure 1 – TheFacebook original main page ^[10] (as of 2004)

2.1.2 MySpace, Twitter and the others ^[3]

Behind *Facebook*, two social networks, namely MySpace and Twitter, are fighting to take the number one spot.

MySpace was created in 2003, before *Facebook* became global. It defines a more music-oriented social network: the original purpose was to allow everyone to share their own tracks on the Web. MySpace receives 800 million visits per month ^[1] and is still popular among young people. It enables artists to maintain a direct bond with their audience.

Twitter was founded in 2006. The website enables users to send *tweets*: short messages of less than 140 characters. Lots of politics, including Barack Obama, many artists and causes use *Twitter* to send messages to their audience via the Web, or directly via mobile phones. The number of users increases every day. As of January 2009, Twitter had more than 54 million monthly visits ^[1].

But these “big three” are not alone. Smaller networks are settled on the Web, such as *Linkedin*, *imeem*, *LiveJournal* or *myYearbook*.



Figure 2 – The White House’s official twitter news feed ^[11] (as of November 11, 2009)

2.2 Who uses social networks and why?

2.2.1 Personal use ^[4]

Most of the users sign up on Facebook with their real names, so that friends and family can find them easily. Therefore, Facebook allows its users to search for people they know and keep in touch with family and friends, but also to reconnect with old friends or classmates. Through photos, notes, and status updates, anyone can know what his Facebook friends are doing at any moment. Behind this main feature, three minor uses also exist: you can buy and sell goods through *Marketplace*, keep an online journal with *Notes* and make new friends through *Groups*, *Pages* and *Events*.

2.2.2 Professional use

The era of posters and TV advertisement is coming to an end, as the internet becomes the new popular way to communicate. That is why many companies have now settled on Facebook, ensuring a great exposure on the web and allowing them to send direct messages to the users. For example, if one signs up on *Tim Hortons*®'s page, he or she will receive regular promotional messages from this company. In addition, users can also find jobs on Facebook or even collaborate on projects.



Figure 3 – Tim Hortons® official Facebook page ^[12] (as of November 22, 2009)

3. CONTROVERSIES & CRITICISM

3.1 Examples

Through the years, social networks have been facing various controversies. Many people, organizations and even governments have been criticizing these websites. As it is the most visited one, Facebook is for sure the most controversial social network ever. The website raises many issues, such as users' privacy, data mining, security and impact on children ^[5].

In 2005, two students from MIT managed to download profiles from four universities with a shell script ^[6]. Even though this was part of a research project on Facebook privacy, it shows the dangers of letting personal information on the web. Additionally, more and more companies are denying access to Facebook to their employees. In May 2007, the province of Ontario, Canada started to forbid its staff from navigating on Facebook from government computers ^[7]. In addition to this, many suicides and murders have been reported to be caused by information on Facebook. In October 2008, a man was so upset that his wife had changed her marital status to 'single' that he murdered her ^[8]. On top of that, several phishing issues have also been reported.

3.2 Impact on children

The most important issue raised by social networks is doubtlessly the impact they have on children and teenagers. The problem is that people from this age group might have difficulties to secure correctly the information they put online. Without knowing the consequences of their acts, they tend to upload lots of personal photos and information. Someone with bad intentions could easily use this information to spam or fool the kids. Relationships also play an important part in this issue: social networks tend to make relationships virtual. Studies show that around 44% of the users accept friend requests from people they don't even know ^[9]. Other reported impacts include suicides and content controversies.

4. HOW TO PROTECT YOUR PRIVATE LIFE ON SOCIAL NETWORKS?

Despite these issues, social networks can still be fun and useful if you use them correctly. For that, several simple rules must be followed:

4.1 Secure your profile

- Give only access to people you really know
- Separate your personal and professional contacts
- Avoid giving access to third-party applications

4.2 Think twice before posting

- Do not post compromising pictures
- Avoid posting sensitive information (address, phone number)
- If you still want to post this information, give access only to people you trust.

4.3 Customize your privacy settings

- Hide from web and Facebook searches
- Create a limited profile

5. CONCLUSION

Social networks can be a wonderful tool to communicate with friends, boost our own business and stay in touch with family all over the world, but it has to be used very carefully. When someone posts something, he or she must be aware that it can be used by virtually anyone. This is why social networks should be forbidden to children. Even though these websites set a 13 year old minimum to register, studies show that 25% of eight to eleven year old children who have access to the internet have an account on social networks ^[13]. Parents must be aware of these dangers and teach their kids how to behave on the internet. It all starts with education: the earlier the kids know the rules, the better they will be protected. As the proverb says, “better be safe than sorry”.

(1,100 words, from introduction to conclusion, excluding headings)

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