

Viviane Reding

Member of the European Commission responsible for Information Society and Media

First European agreement of Social Networks – a Step Forward to child safety online

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Safer Internet Day

Luxembourg, 10 February 2009

Ladies and gentlemen,

Listening to the youngsters present here sharing their online experiences, I realize that I am still impressed that one can do virtually anything on a social network. And it is great that we can find new friends, meet new ones, share photos and videos, discuss politics or send birthday cards. However, doing everything online means that those who are not part of the network are excluded from the information circuit that eventually extends into real life.

I recently read an article about a mother of two children describing how amazed she was to discover many new things about them by joining the same social network. I also know people who missed social events because they did not have a profile on the social network where organization details had been discussed.

Not being part of the network is something most young people cannot imagine anymore. And this is only one change brought about by this service which has had a spectacular evolution in the past couple of years, both in terms of number of users and impact on our daily lives.

Therefore I would like to shortly talk to you about the development of social networks, touching on the benefits and risks they bring about, as well as on the way they change our lives, especially as regards privacy. To finish with, I will stress the role and importance of self-regulation in a field such as online services, and will present the main reason why we are all here today: the first European agreement on safer social networking.

Network expansion

In the past couple of years, the number of users of online social networks has exploded. From June 2007 until June 2008, the number of users in **Europe** has grown by 35%. In comparison, the number of mobile phone subscribers has surged nearly 25% **worldwide** annually for the past eight years¹. In March 2008, 57% of Internet users were members of a social network². **A quarter of a million users sign up to social networking sites every day worldwide**³. Users do not only sign up, many of them are very active: a third of those who have a profile on a social network update it daily⁴.

Many of these users are young people who have adopted particularly quickly and enthusiastically the services offered by the social networks.

The enhanced interactivity of social networks encourages participation and creativity. People not only set up a profile on a social network but use it to organize their social agendas; to make shopping decisions by asking their network; to get travel advice; to look for jobs with the help of specialized business networks.

¹ http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?no=383986&rel_no=1, Retrieved on 25.01.2009

² Universal McCann, March 2008

³ Nelson Wire and Forrester Research

⁴ Universal McCann, March 2008

The rapid development and adoption of social networks has been supported by growing access to the Internet, especially broadband. **Broadband Internet access** among European households has risen over 50% in 2008⁵. According to the 2008 Eurobarometer results, **75% of the European children and young people use the Internet**. Moreover, 42% of 6-year olds are online. By the time they are 17, almost all of them are online.

Mobile phones are also a new way to access social networking sites. One should keep in mind that 82% of 12 years old have a mobile phone while the number of those who own a mobile phone with Internet access is growing every day.

Why register? – Benefits and risks

Growing access to technology alone does not explain the popularity of the social networks that gather audiences in comparison to those of traditional media players, such as TV channels. So, why do people, and especially youngsters, join one or more social networks every day?

The basic human need of **socializing** is my first guess. The possibility of having **user-generated content** seems likely to be another reason.

Social networking sites allow people to **join communities**, to meet new people and enlarge their "friends" network, find long forgotten childhood friends, debate on topics from the melting of glaciers to current political trends. In addition, **users can be whomever they want**; their profiles could be real or could correspond to their ideal self. They can act as they do in reality or they can do things they would never dare to think of in their real lives.

In order to better integrate within their network, users have the possibility to **create content** and share it with others. They can write blogs, post videos and photos in a user friendly way; they can build up their profile, post comments and real-life experiences. The fact that we can create content and then show it to the world is extremely seductive. For example, in Spain, 18.2% of the population is writing a blog. In the Netherlands, UK and Spain, more than 20% of the population uploads photos online⁶.

Everyone will agree that the opportunities offered by social networks are potentially unlimited. I am sure that social networking has enormous potential in Europe, to help boost our economy and make our society more participative. However, risks for minors using these services also exist and it is our shared responsibility to mitigate those risks.

The main and most frequent risk online, identified by young people themselves, is **cyberbullying** by peers. That is precisely why this is the focus of the Europe-wide campaign being launched by the Commission and the INSAFE awareness network.

⁵ Eurostat

⁶ Universal McCann

As people are protected by the anonymity offered by the Internet, one other risk young people face online is talking with someone who is not who they think they are. This can lead to inappropriate contacts from adults – so-called **grooming**. Even though it does not occur as often as cyberbullying, grooming is the risk with the greatest danger that young people may encounter online, given its potential consequences. The new Safer Internet programme 2009-2013 will co-fund projects to provide the public with a network of contact points that can be reached either via a website or via a phone number, for reporting illegal and harmful conduct, such as grooming.

Another risk, which parents in Europe fear the most their children may face online, according to a Eurobarometer survey run by the Commission⁷, is exposure to **inappropriate or illegal content**, such as sexually or violently explicit images, racist content, but also information about self-harm, suicide, and eating disorders. According to the same survey 63% of European parents do not allow their child to create a profile in an online community. For parents of children aged 15-17, it is still 44%. Parents' fears do not necessarily reflect real risks, but we also have to take them into account and it is in the industry's interest to improve parents' trust in their services.

Privacy policy

Together with the development of the Internet and web 2.0 in particular, privacy has also become a long discussed issue and raised controversial opinions and solutions.

Some youngsters post online photos of their friends or family, addresses and phone numbers, or even sexual preferences, without realizing that someone with bad intentions or a future potential employer may access this data.

A recent study⁸ shows that the ability to remain anonymous and to specify who can view and use their information, security policies and security icons are important to people, including youngsters, but they do not frequently use these controls on social networking sites.

The first question that arises is: **Why do youngsters not use these controls?** Some people claim that it is not easy to check the privacy settings of one's own profile; and that if they manage to check them, it takes some effort to find the necessary tools to make changes.

For other people, using privacy settings is against the very definition of "social network"– making friends, chatting, meeting new people. And whereas this perception may be the natural, instinctive reaction, it is also true that many youngsters' online networks are much bigger than the real ones. An explanation might be that, while in real life people would be highly suspicious of strangers who knock on their doors and ask "do you want to be my friend?", in the online world the door is wide open most of the time.

⁷ 2008 Eurobarometer survey : Towards a Safer Use of the Internet for children in the EU - a parents' perspective

⁸ " Study on the Methodology for conducting a survey on needs and requirements on future electronic identification (eID) systems", The Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, European Commission Joint Research Centre

The other question is: **In this context, do youngsters need to be protected from themselves?**

I would say that the answer to this question depends on the needs of different users. If we think about children **under 12**, protection means that social networks that specifically target them, such as Club Penguin or Barbiegirls.com, are expected to use high levels of pre-screening of content for chatting and messaging, moderation and minimal collection of personal information, and possibly some kind of parental control.

If we think about **teenagers**, of course, things are different. They are close to turning into adults and we have to prepare them to face the world confidently and independently. Therefore, the solution is empowerment rather than protection. Empowering them to deal with any kind of risks they may face online, informing them about what these risks may be.

What can we do to empower and protect children online? – the role of legislation, awareness raising and self-regulation

So how do we protect our children while giving them all the opportunities they deserve to thrive in the digital environment?

First and foremost, we must not be shy of stating clearly that Europeans consider privacy and data protection as their fundamental rights and have put in place laws and regulations to protect them. These rules apply not only to European companies but also to all businesses having an establishment or processing operation in the EU. Although this legislation does not contain specific provisions for minors, they are of course protected by this legislation and youngsters should be aware of their rights and obligations.

They should know and understand that by processing other people's personal information– which is what we all do when we upload our friends' photos on a social network for example – they fall under the provisions of the EU legislation on data protection that require the consent of those whose photos we want to upload.

It is true, however, that when European legislation on data protection was written it did not have in mind new phenomena such as web 2.0 which allows anyone to process other people's data and thus requires virtually everybody to be aware and understand the legal context. Therefore, whereas it is important to have legislation in place and working, this is not enough.

One of the objectives of the Safer Internet Programme is to inform and empower young people, to use the Internet in a safe and responsible way. The communication campaign on cyberbullying launched today complements the actions taken at national level by the **Europe-wide awareness network** - INSAFE. The activities of the network aim to empower parents, teachers and children. Awareness centres develop information material, organize workshops in schools and co-operate with social networking sites on safety issues. Self-regulation is also a solution that could complement existing legislation for child safety online.

The European Commission is very much in favour of strengthening existing and launching new self-regulation systems as such systems often enable or facilitate flexible and workable solutions, in particular in sectors where regulation is rather complex and difficult to execute, such as the Internet and particularly web 2.0.

A positive example of self-regulation is the "European Framework for Safer Mobile Use by Younger Teenagers and Children" signed in 2007. Under this agreement, brokered by the European Commission, mobile operators committed themselves to access control mechanisms, to raise awareness and education to the classification of commercial content and to fighting illegal content on mobile community products or on the Internet. The agreement was an important step forward for child safety.

Monitoring of this exercise is ongoing. In March 2008, GSM Europe published a report highlighting the key achievements one year on from signature: national self-regulatory codes of conduct cover 23 EU Member States, around 550 million customers, which represents 96% of all EU mobile customers. I am satisfied with the timely signature of national codes and I hope the signature of these codes, in the few remaining Member States such as Luxembourg will happen very shortly.

As far as implementation is concerned, we know that concrete steps have been taken, like the provision of free of charge parental control tools; however the complete picture is still missing. For this purpose, a progress report on the implementation of these codes is scheduled for discussion at the Czech Presidency's conference in Prague in April 2009.

Terms of use

Following this successful initiative, and given the growing popularity of social networks among young people, the Commission convened a **Social Networking Task Force** in 2008. The Task Force brought together 18 operators on the European market for under 18s, as well as organizations involved in child welfare and researchers. The Commission acted as a facilitator for bringing together all these stakeholders and also contributed to gather input from a wider range of organisations through a public consultation run in summer 2008.

I find the work of the Task Force admirably efficient given the fact that it gathered operators of varying sizes and market reach, relevance to local markets and number of users.

I am happy to announce that today we will witness the signature of the **first European agreement** on safer social networking by some of the most popular players on the European market: Arto.dk, Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, Netlog, Hyves, Skyrock, Dailymotion, Zap.lu, One.It, YouTube, Habbo, MSN, Piczo, StudiVZ, StudentiMediaGroup, Yahoo!Europe, nasza-klasa.pl.

I believe this is a very important step forward and it comes at a time when other countries have also taken action in this field – and I am now thinking about the agreements MySpace and Facebook reached with the state attorneys general in the US, as well as at the UK Home Office Social Networking guidance approved in April 2008.

The EU agreement aims to put in place appropriate measures and tools designed to mitigate potential risks for under 18s, such as: having the full online profiles and contact lists of website users who are registered as under 18s set to "private" by default; guaranteeing that privacy options are prominent and accessible at all times, so that users can easily work out if just their friends or the whole world can see them online; providing an easy to use "report abuse" button. I am happy to say that these provisions also respond to the suggestions and requests made by the youngsters who took part in the Youth Forum which the Commission organised on Safer Internet Day one year ago.

I am sure that the industry will give us more details on the document to be signed.

This agreement is an example of the industry's sense of responsibility, for which I am grateful and which I hope will be followed by others in the near future. However, I would also like to emphasize that this is an ongoing process and it is not time yet to declare victory.

The industry will provide the Commission with a **self-declaration** on their individual safety policies, specifying how they implement these principles, by April 2009. For transparency, they will also make public the non-confidential part of this information. The European Commission intends to **monitor** what we hope and expect will be continuing progress in the development of safety measures, as well as efforts to implement these measures effectively and in a transparent way. We will come back to this agreement and evaluate the progress made in a year's time.

This agreement is an important step forward for child safety and the social networking industry in Europe and I am convinced that it can actually make a difference. Social networking has enormous potential to flourish in Europe, as long as children and teenagers have the right tools to remain safe online. Congratulations again to the industry for a very constructive approach. And I wish you good luck with implementing it!