

## SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THEIR INFLUENCE UPON CHANGES IN USE OF THE INTERNET AT SCHOOLS

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**Abstract:** *The focus of use of the Internet has changed in recent times, particularly among children and young people. The previous core concept for employment of the Internet in schools, which is to say as a medium enabling the acquisition of the most up-to-date information in a wide variety of disciplines and fields, has been supplanted by a tendency toward the creation of teaching programmes and distant learning options and this evolution continues. For younger people it is more and more frequent that the primary purpose of the Internet is the use of social sites and search engines, which make it possible for them to dive into a whole new world of virtual relationships and special interest groups, rather than the focus being on broadening their educational horizons. This simple fact is, in my opinion, a potential issue in the social and emotional growth of young people, as it can lead to dissociative tendencies with regard to their physical fellow students around them, and the replacement of real relationships with the ephemera of e-friendship, the parameters and risks of which are frequently less than clear. The school, which is to say teachers and parents in this particular scenario, is often inadequately prepared for this change. The concurrent dissolution of social bonds within the class may well lead to a generally deteriorated atmosphere therein. This presentation endeavours to address in detail a number of issues arising from this situation.*

**Keywords:** *social networks, Internet, school atmosphere*

The sea change laid out above in the employment of the Internet by younger people, away from the use of the system as a tool and informational source, and the simultaneous growth of interactive computer games, which envelop the user in a virtual world and draw them into a cyber community, has led to the rapid growth of semi-permanent social groupings among players. Today we can likewise see the almost exponential expansion of such social networking sites as Facebook, ICQ, Twitter, and Skype, with young people clearly in the vanguard among users. In today's world, the time consuming, or arguably wasting, capabilities of particularly Facebook and Twitter are practically unparalleled. The chasm of comprehension as regards the capabilities and use of such programs between children and the majority of parents and teachers means

that, in practical terms, the students have an interwoven online life, accessible equally at home or at school, of which the adults around them are largely unaware. Specialists and school network administrators have struggled with the implications of these new phenomena, thus far without any guaranteed positive outcome. It seems Facebook and Twitter are resculpting our social landscape. Facebook users, having created a profile and attached photographs and provided telephone number and e-mail address in order to “hook up”, with likeminded friends, are precluded from thereafter reclaiming their data, or even transferring it to another server. Facebook has begun to collaborate with those who advocate open standards. The new Facebook Connect service enables users to sign in and work on more than 10 000 web servers worldwide. Social networks, it may reasonably be assumed, will form an integral and inseparable cornerstone of the Internet, owned by no one company. This demonstrates the clear necessity for schools to reassess its use and, as far as possible, eliminate the more extreme risks inherent in such social networking.

## **What is a social network?**

From a technical standpoint, the core components of a social network are simply a combination of specialised webhosting services and search engines. A user completes a standard profile and immediately is added to the catalogue of profiles held, able to search and be found. Simple and elegant. The result is something beyond the wildest dreams of a 20th century researcher, the instant creation of a comprehensive profile, structured from data which can be individually or collectively recombined at will and expressed in its base form as a collection of precise numbers. If one is looking for former classmates in order to arrange a reunion and both time and space pressures apply, the social networks are the clearly optimal solution. Likewise when searching for a fellow air-model specialist or a potential eponymous party in New York, this would be a most logical first stop. Friends or acquaintances, old hands or new faces, any combination can be rapidly put together and collectively addressed. As the number of e-mail addresses and phone numbers we need grows with abandon, the system adapts ever more rapidly, expanding its capabilities to meet and exceed this need. For those who require this world forever at their fingertips, the service supplier offers the glittering “premium membership”, obviously at a price.

These networks grow constantly in numbers and popularity due to their perceived reliability and ever-expanding customer base. Today social networks form a vital part of Internet content and are thus creating a kind of more organised social space. E-workshop, the organisation of which the author is a key member, has predicted this along with other specific developments.

## **School and social networking**

The appropriate response for schools to this phenomenon is our next concern. Whilst the services cannot be ignored, it must be emphasized to students that, from the educational standpoint, the computer is essentially a working tool, providing us with the capability to address tasks and obtain educational information which would other-

wise be impractical or impossible. The existing skills and creativity of the students can perhaps be employed in enabling the teachers to “raise their game” on a technical front, showing them the opportunities and capacities for education of these systems. However, an absolute prerequisite, on the part of the teachers and parents both, is to make students fully aware of the potential risks entailed in interaction with and involvement in these social networks.

When considering the use of social networking in schools the following subdivisions would seem appropriate:

1. As a means, in the context of lessons, to facilitates the exploration of political, economic, and cultural scenarios.
1. At home for supplementary and consultation use by teachers and students and among groups of students.
3. With careful application as a tool in social context to improve relationships between the various students.
4. As a means of communication between parents and the schools and similarly amongst parents.

## **Using social networking in tuition.**

Twitter is arguably the best medium through which to acquire the most up-to-date information on events around the globe. It boasts that it is faster than CNN, and recently proved its prowess by enabling an astronaut in orbit to send a message home. Claims are being made that Twitter saves firms both time and money. Its coolness is testified to by Pepsi, who have its logo on their cans. The whole world is suddenly tweeting, at least according to Newsweek magazine, which now has Twitter on its pages.

And a tweet is all it takes... Last year when Egyptian police arrested James Buck, an American student, it was enough for him to send his 48 followers the single word “arrested” whilst on his way to jail, and they immediately informed his university (Berkeley), the American Embassy in Cairo and many other organisations, so that the next day he was free.

The upside of this system, which limits the informational content to the maximum of 140 characters per tweet, is that in an extremely concentrated form it is possible to simultaneously appraise an entire group of the purpose or sources of a given project. Moreover, due to the fact that the information is usually in English, Twitter can be used in language learning.

Facebook, as opposed to Twitter, permits the creation of non-public groups of users, who can collectively create projects involving text and pictures. Other social networks such as “Spolužáci” (i.e. Classmates in English) and the like make communal project work via a social network a distinct possibility. The advantage of employing this new technology in teaching is the probability of engaging the students’ interest and directing it towards expanding didactic methods.

The blending of new technology and older approaches allows us to use versions of various didactic games, which we believe may rouse the interest of students in matters of history, politics, and culture. Using modern technology may help the teacher to earn the respect of students for their capabilities, since the current situation generally en-

dorses young people's perception that the older generation "does not get it". The teacher should endeavour in their work to involve the students and their interests where possible and allow them to creatively generate new methods of communication, a statement predicated on the concept that the teacher will be able to employ the technology adequately to guide the outcome toward their didactic aims.

## **Using social networks in study preparation at home**

For the teachers so inclined, never in history has there been such a ready tool for individual interaction on a regular and repeated basis as is offered by the various Internet and Internet-related social services. The aforementioned social networks, when employed in distance learning, allow the creation of student groups, with a variety of potential parameters, and a possibility of direct communication between the teacher and specific groups or individuals, as well as within the said groups. It similarly permits the teacher to support those parents who seek to assist their children with homework by providing advice or further details where necessary. In general, it is to be recommended that the teacher explore the possibilities of such social groups and establish clear guidelines for work within them. Ideally, the objective is to employ students' creativity and Internet experience in forging an equal partnership in learning. An advantageous combination of distant study materials and compatible programmes may well enhance the effectiveness of teaching and bring a more active dynamic to on-site learning, in which the fact that students have done the majority of preparatory work at home will speed the process. The optimised outcome would be that learning in school would focus more on discussion and similar exploratory methods such as excursions, developmental projects, cross-curricular studies, educational films, etc. It is conceivable that social networking groups may undermine bullying, as those students who in the physical classroom might be inclined to perpetrate such activity are, in general, not the group leaders in cyber space and their influence can, hopefully, be suppressed to some degree by the teacher, particularly in combination with appropriate grouping, wherein the teacher aids in the creation of mutual support groups for the more capable students and seeks to remove the stimuli to aggression in potential bullies. In this way, and as a positive consequence, the atmosphere in the classroom can be improved in a non-violent manner.

## **Using social networking as a tool for improving relationship among classmates.**

The contemporary atmosphere of schools, particularly in larger cities, is not necessarily conducive to creative and enduring friendship between students, both in any given class and between classes. While the bedrock of society is individualised relationships, young people today are less inclined to sport than they were a couple of generations ago and tend to spend considerable time seated in front of a screen or monitor. This time can, maybe, be turned to advantage by employing social networks to strengthen the links between students of various years, and might lead to a greater sense of community within a given school. It has been shown that social networks can

serve as the trigger for social activities, e.g. the protest against the state standardised school leaving exams, and precipitates gatherings not only in cyber-space but also in the real world. In the hands of an educator it may be hoped that advice and appropriate incentives for recreational and sportive activities, or suitable substitutes, would be found. In the context of a school, social networks might be employed to spark discussion on a variety of vital topics, such as drugs, racism, unfocused aggression and the like. Given the existence of certain student groups and the opportunity to analyze them, it would follow that we might track the growth of given dynamics within the said community. From this it would follow that appropriate input in the real world would likewise lead to improvement in the given areas. One technique to garner considerable attention has been the analysis of negative social relations within certain groups by school psychologists in conjunction with behavioural therapists and class teachers, which has led to improved configuration of work groups within classes and in home study. The specialists have recommended that, particularly in basic schools, work groups in social networking should be composed of heterogeneous blend of both sexes, and be of diverse academic ability. The objective of such groups needs to be so chosen that each member can, based on individual strengths, contribute something vital to the outcome.

## **Using social networking for communication between parents and the school and among parents**

A key issue in modern schooling is communication between the school and the parents. The interaction between the teacher and parent has swung from the earlier extreme of the dominant pedagogue, the qualified educator, through a balanced input of two contributors with the communal aim of raising the given individual, to the current unhealthy perspective of service provider and client.

Social networking sites such as Facebook can be tools for the creation of a community through which the aforementioned client-provider relationship is restored to the balance of equal partnership, a state which allows teachers and parents to improve their partnership in the interests of the student. The downside of current relations between the teachers and the communities of parents, is that the parents often create groups only in opposition to school practises. The kernel of such a group is often made up of the parents of children with behavioural or learning issues, who seek to lay the entire blame for any difficulties firmly on the shoulders of the teacher, rather than endeavouring any sort of cooperative solution. In such circumstances it is advisable to attempt to create mixed groups of students, parents, and teachers in the pursuit of an improved class and school atmosphere. In such extreme cases it might be necessary for the teacher to elicit descriptions of the situation from students who are somewhat more objective in order to provide a balanced picture and seek a collaborative solution. Such use of the social network may reduce negative feedback between the school and parents. A program like Twitter might prove useful in gathering a community to share life in the classroom. In this way it would be possible to provide parents with concise up-to-date information on current events in the school.

## **Dangers inherent in participation in inappropriate groups on social networks.**

Appropriate use of social networks in the school context can reduce the risks inherent in the unrestrained participation of young people in social networks. Parents and students alike should be aware of the potential dangers to which involvement in social networking might expose them, to help them develop into informed users. It may be viewed as the teacher's responsibility to draw students' attention to certain core characteristics of reliable social networks:

The classic definition of socioware today [3] declares that it (socioware) links people by the means of seven basic mechanisms:

- Identity
- Reputation
- Presence
- Relationships
- Conversations
- Groups
- Sharing

What are the respective qualities of these mechanisms?

### **Identity**

Identity encompasses your screen name, nickname, icon – anything, which represents you within the network on a constant basis and is used for sharing and activities as a point of recognition, whether that is of the physical or virtual persona. The constancy of this identity is extremely important; the question of identity theft and similar is frequently addressed all over the net.

### **Reputation**

Each identity has an attendant reputation and it is, therefore, important that the socioware can work with the reputation in an appropriate manner, represent it and clarify its function. Reputation is something of a synonym for trustworthiness, that is to say, the extent to which this identity can be relied upon as the source. In the cases of certain socioware systems, reputation is an extremely complex chain of relationships, in which who trusts and is trusted by whom plays a very significant role and so such trust may be "inherited" in a manner similar to real life – if you are dealing with someone who is trusted by someone whom you trust, then, in all probability, said third party can be trusted by you.

The matter of reputation can clearly be abused; there is the danger of a whispering campaign or the like. There is a risk, for example, of someone creating negative reputation deliberately and putting it into other virtual identities. In such a case it may be hoped that monitoring software, recognising the unprecedented deterioration of reputation, would seek out the source.

## **Presence**

Reputation depends on the presence and identity. The presence is the movement and staying of an identity within the context of a given virtual reality and, generally speaking, the movement of identity in cyber space should be reflected in the reputation. The presence can be also summarised as the simple fact that the identity is active in the virtual reality or community (online).

## **Relationships**

The interaction of the identity with the other like identities creates relationships which, clearly, maybe positive, negative, or essentially neutral. Significant impression is made upon these relationships by the fact that there are real people behind them who, for reasons of their own, have a variety of preferences and prejudices. It is therefore necessary to assess, on a personal basis, whose advice is worth taking.

## **Conversations**

Conversations take a vast variety of forms from posting on chat boards, where anyone can contact anyone, through to real time conference calls. Socioware systems frequently include specific discussion forums, where one can seek a partner for a conversation on an agreed topic. These differ from open discussion forums in that the majority of conversations are open sending and can be read by anyone. Conversations differ from discussions and message systems, e.g. e-mail, by the manner in the way in which users approach it. Such a conversation is, for example, to be found in an ICQ window, where participants in the conversation can scroll earlier comments, the participants address each other (the identities of those involved are clearly defined) and it is surprising how difficult it is to wind things up. Posting on a discussion board, on the other hand, is a shot in the dark, an opening gambit to which one hopes to receive a response. Email can be similar; it is specifically addressed, but can go astray or be left unattended.

## **Sharing**

At present the most commonly used function of the Internet as a whole and the socioware is sharing. The underlying logic, that friends and people with shared interests can easily send one another items of interest, means that this is much used for music, films, books, etc.

## **Reservations about socioware**

The aforementioned mechanisms are the clear core of any socioware and its implementation.. For example, a reputation which is not monitored and does not manifest in the system, seems pointless. And, conversely, an identity's reputation has to be protected against wilful and malicious damage by third parties.

There are, of course, many initiatives which attempt to assess the processes and phenomena emergent from socioware. More significantly, they endeavour to render these phenomena and processes in pure mathematical terms, thus disconnecting them from standard sociology and reassociating them with programming and artificial intelligence. One such initiative is The Augmented Social Network.

Another point of interest is the reserve with which socioware today is greeted. A number of “veterans” of the Internet condemn such initiatives as something which endeavours to mathematically express such simple processes as interpersonal relationships, which every human being naturally comprehends. However, it is not that straightforward; apart from anything else, interpersonal relationships are not remotely simple and to attempt to render them in pure mathematics is, in the view of many psychologists and sociologists, an endeavour akin to heresy. We could draw a comparison to the attempted appraisal of grammatical language – why evaluate and analyse something so natural and self-evident? On the other hand, without a detailed blueprint of grammar, how is it possible to train a computer to comprehend human language? And likewise, lacking a detailed description of the functions of human interaction, how might a computer begin to aid people in mutual understanding?

Computers deal with more and more communication as well as saving more data. They are capable of saving enormous quantities of information and also retrieving the data, if given the right command; however, it is difficult for them to sort out the information and help us with it, e.g. tell us if the provider of a particular piece of data is trustworthy or if another piece of information could help us.

For example, how trustworthy is information that product X provides the same services (use value) as product Y, however, for half the price? Even today’s Internet finds verifying such a piece of information difficult and reserved only to advanced users with enough time to go through adequate forums, results in Google and then assess them themselves to discover if that was a marketing statement by the producer of X, or an invaluable recommendation of an enthusiastic user, which will genuinely save your money.

Today’s socioware can deal with the above described situation only within very specific parameters – in fact, only in the case when the individual users state their opinion regarding the said problem. Future systems will be probably able to evaluate the trustworthiness of a given piece of information themselves on the basis of the behaviour of individual identities, frequently also according to what is not said. It will not be necessary for a user to put their negative opinion, it will be enough if a user with certain reputation fails to respond to a problem, having encountered it (irrespective of how it might be visualised on the Internet).

Socioware in its current form comes down to essentially a slightly more intelligent version of a discussion forum, the difference from which evades many users.

Although such information regarding the dangers of socioware have been widely publicised, it is essential to ensure that any students or parents planning to use it are fully aware of the risks.

## Selecting an appropriate profile photograph

*Not recommended:* Do not insert into your profile a photograph, which is “too sexy, a caricature, or which could easily offend a visitor.” Also avoid quick self portraits with inadequate facial expressions or in costume.

## Short bio

*Elements to consider:* The biography section varies from site to site. Facebook, for example, offers its users a column with wide range of interest headings. Some data can be provided only to a closed circuit of users. Describe yourself briefly and avoid untruths.

*Not recommended:* Due to the fact that currently information has the value of gold, do not reveal everything about yourself as you could pay for it later (note: when filling in your date of birth, do not fill in the year).

## Inserting content, links, and news

*Elements to consider:* Insert content expressing your personal interests and the field of study qualification. You can also include a slideshow with your personal photos, though only under safe circumstances.

*Not recommended:* Be aware of spamming. Do not automatically expect that every tiny detail of your life would be of interest to every acquaintance. Your loves and losses you should keep to more secure channels. And above all, do not broadcast the various doings of family, schoolmates, and friends!

## Talking to one, talking to many

*Elements to consider:* To ask something of a whole network of schoolmates and friends is suitable only for questions of a general nature (e. g. which of two telephones to choose). Responding to such a message should be done directly, i.e. specifically addressed.

*Not recommended:* Do not post on any wall messages of the order of “tomorrow at the park at five.” Your friend’s friends are not interested in such spam. Better to send them a private message.

## Considering the tone of expression

*Elements to consider:* Politeness is paramount. Share only things which would not lead to problems in real life. In-jokes should be kept within your circle of friends.

*Not recommended:* Avoid making remarks in public forums which contain sarcastic humour or in-jokes. If that is your idea of fun, it is better to set up a group of like-minded souls.

Keep in mind the constant risks inherent in Internet use, such as Identity Theft, Phishing, Cyberbullying and the various viral strains etc. often encountered on pornographic pages and the like.

# SOCIÁLNÍ SÍŤE A JEJICH VLIV NA ZMĚNY POUŽITÍ INTERNETU VE ŠKOLE

**Abstrakt:** V poslední době se mění zaměření použití internetu zejména u dětí a mládeže. Původní myšlenka použít ve škole internet jako prostředek umožňující získat nejnovější informace z nejrůznějších oborů lidské činnosti, vytvořit výukové programy a dokonce celé výukové servery poskytující distanční opory pro celé ročníky základní školy se vytrácí. Stále častěji se stává, že mladí lidé začínají používat služeb specializovaných vyhledavačů umožňujících vytvářet sociální sítě a vstupují tak do zvláštních virtuálních vztahů a skupin, místo aby využívali internet pro své vzdělávání. Tato skutečnost je podle mého názoru zejména pro mladé lidi problematická, vede k odcizení skutečné reálné skupině spolužáků, u některých jedinců, nahrazuje skutečná přátelství (e-přátelství) s nejistým, a někdy i nebezpečným partnerem. Škola, učitelé ani rodiče nejsou na tuto změnu dostatečně připraveni. Rozpad soudržnosti třídy může vést ke zhoršení klimatu třídy.

**Klíčová slova:** sociální síť, internet, školní klima