It's your information

Using social networking sites safely

Social networking websites, where people can meet, chat and message each other online are used by millions of people all over the world. Some people are worried about how safe it is to use the internet to share personal details in this way. A website which collects information from you has among other things to keep the information safe, keep it up to date and not use it in a way you might not expect. However, users also have a role to play in protecting their own privacy. This guidance will encourage safe use of these sites and help you enjoy the benefits of being online while reducing the risks of posting information about yourself on the net.

What is social networking?

There are many different types of social networking sites and they all work in slightly different ways but basically, they help you keep in touch with friends, get to know new people online or store and share pictures, music and experiences with other people.

If you use a networking site, chat in a forum, or if you use internet dating then you may be putting personal information online so this guidance may be useful to you too.

On most sites, you will create a profile for yourself. A profile may just be a username and a contact address but might include a photo. Your profile will often be a description of you, the things you enjoy doing, the music you like or even videos you have made. It will often have links to your online friends' profiles.

Taking care of personal information

The reason why social networking sites are so popular is because they make it easy to share information with so many people: it's easy, for example, to let your friends see your holiday photos before you even get back home, or, when you do get home, you can instantly look up the profiles of the people you met on holiday and send them a message. But it's important to remember that any information you post on a site could be public and may be seen by lots of people.

This means you have to be careful about what you reveal about yourself to other users. If information you post is seen by more people than you expect, this could pose a risk to your privacy or even your personal safety. Once information is 'out there' you might not be able to control what happens to it: your profile may be seen by thousands of strangers, parts of a website may be 'public spaces' so what you say on them is also public, and not everyone will agree with what you write. Also, it can be easy for others to copy your pictures, even alter them, and send them to people you don't know.

So, before you create a profile, post a picture or tell the online world what you got up to today, have a think about the following and consider whether you are being as safe in the online world as you would be in the offline world.

Are you using the right sort of site?

People network for all sorts of reasons and there are different sites to suit their needs. You need to make sure that the sites you use are the right ones for you. For example, some sites are aimed at specific age groups so you need to be sure that other users are in an age group you are comfortable with.

Also, you may find it helpful to chat about how you and others have coped with a difficult time in your life such as an illness or the death of a family member. The internet can be a good way of doing this but you need to find out if the site you use allows you to talk about these issues safely and with people who understand your situation. For example, the site may allow you to restrict access to certain personal information.

Do you know how the site works?

Most sites let you control how public or private your profile or information about what you have been doing on the site is. These controls are often called 'privacy settings'. Choose a site that gives you as much choice as possible over who is able to find your profile and how much information they can see.

While on some sites privacy settings are automatically set at their most 'private level – in other words, if you do nothing, your profile and activity will be hidden – on others, all your information could be seen by other users unless you take action. On the site you want to use, check out how it works by viewing any profile settings and identify the privacy settings before you start building your profile. Set the privacy level as strictly as you can – remember, you can always make more information available to more people as you get used to the site and the other users but you can't take information back from a stranger once

they've seen it. Also, to learn more about a site's privacy procedures and settings it's a good idea to read any privacy policies and user agreements regularly. This will help you understand how the site operators use your personal information, for example whether they pass it on so other people can send you marketing.

Would you want a stranger knowing this about you?

You might think that only your friends would want to look at and use information about you but you should always be careful with the information you post. Little bits of information about you can be used by others to build up a picture of who you are. In social networking, this is often a good thing as it helps you get to know people quickly and work out who likes the same things as you. But sometimes you might be revealing more about yourself than you would like and this could be misused.

For example, it might seem obvious to suggest that you should never reveal information such as your home address or telephone numbers to strangers but people still do – some people even give out their passwords allowing others the chance to access and alter their profile. Make sure your password is safe by avoiding ones which others might guess (such as the name of your dog or the football team you support) and keeping it secret. Change it regularly. You may use some of this information as passwords for other things such as internet banking so think carefully before you put it in your profile.

You might have decided not to allow people to see how old you are until you get to know them. So make sure that any email address you give out does not reveal the year you were born such as janesmith1994@emailaddress.com. It's a good idea to have one email address that you only use for social networking; that way, until you get to know someone, you don't have to tell them any of your other contact details.

Also, if you don't want people you meet online to work out your 'real life' location, take care not to give out information which would reveal where you are likely to be at certain times such as the school you go to, a work email address or even telling people that you work in 'Café Society in town on a Saturday morning'. Always remember that your personal safety offline can be affected by what you tell people online.

What will other users think?

It's not just a matter of personal safety. You should also remember that what seems frivolous or even trivial to you and your friends could damage your reputation when seen by others. For example, there are stories of how pictures taken at parties and posted on a profile have caused embarrassment, or worse, when seen by parents, teachers, employers and law enforcement authorities. Before you post something, ask yourself what impression someone would get from seeing your web presence. If you applied for a job, would you want the people interviewing you to have seen everything on your profile?

Who else is online?

One of the attractive things about social networking is that it gives you the chance to meet people you'd never have met in the offline world. But remember that online friendships don't always work in the same way as offline ones. Before sharing personal information, you need to judge whether you really trust someone with your contact details or private thoughts. Also, the dozens of people you meet online will also have met dozens of other people as well as you and all those people will have other online friends. Would you be happy for hundreds of people to be told all about your private life? If not make sure your friends know how to treat the information you share with them before you share it.

It's just as important to remember that your online friends will also have their own expectations of privacy and how they would want you to treat their personal details. Just because they have told you something does not mean they want you to share it with people you know but they don't.

Finally….

Most people use and enjoy social networking sites safely and this guidance is not meant to scare anyone. If something starts to spoil you enjoyment – unwanted attention, offensive comments – most sites allow you to report inappropriate activity. Make sure you read and understand how to do this.

Social networking sites are a useful way to meet people and keep in touch with friends and they can be a privacy friendly way to socialise – sites should allow you to control who you contact, who contacts you and what information, if any, they find out about you. Make sure you control access to yourself online you as you would offline, hide details you think are sensitive or simply don't post them at all. Above all, learn how the sites you are using work and how you can use them safely.

More information

If you need any more information about this or any other aspect of data protection, please contact us.

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