



Kids online

A new research agenda for understanding
social networking forums

Dr. Sara M. Grimes
Faculty of Information
University of Toronto

Dr. Deborah A. Fields
College of Education
Utah State University

Fall 2012
The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop
with support from Cisco Systems and the MacArthur-
UCHRI Digital Media and Learning Research Hub at the
University of California, Irvine

executive summary

A growing number of kids at increasingly younger ages are engaging in online social networking today—a development that is leading to a surge of news stories, media attention, and economic investment. These shifts in usage and public discussion demand a better understanding of the ways that social networking sites mediate kids’ socializing and the opportunities and limits they place on kids’ participation.

This paper is a first step in that direction.

Here we attempt to establish what we already know about kids’ social networking activities and identify key gaps in our collective knowledge of these as-yet-emerging practices. This paper also addresses the underlying question of how kids’ social networking is defined and delineated: What is it we are referring to when we talk about kids and online social networking? What technologies, activities, and platforms are involved? Who is included in this discussion, and who and what are being left out?

We are also concerned with online sites and other forums directed toward or highly populated by kids aged 5-18 that have an underlying “social-ness” to them—sites that, by design, promote kids’ socializing and networking as a primary (if not sole) activity. These sites include more traditionally thought of “social network sites” (SNS) like Facebook and MySpace, but also encompass virtual worlds, networked games, and project-sharing sites. Throughout this paper, we introduce the term **social networking forums** (or SNF) to refer to this broad, more inclusive range of online social activities, practices, and platforms. Because most research on online social networking focuses only on the traditional social network sites, little is known about what social networking practices look like in these other types of forums, some of which are specifically directed toward children.

To remedy this substantive gap in research, we point to the need to document and understand social networking across many different types of forums (platforms, technologies, and genres) and to research kids’

participation *in and across* these forums. To support this end, we suggest a new classification system for examining SNF and their features related to the *forms of communication* they enable, the *personal profiles* they allow users to create, the *networking residues* they encourage, and the *hierarchies of Access* they afford. This classification system also serves as a way to broaden the scope and definition of what we talk about when we talk about social networking and kids.

Over the past several years, overall participation in online social networking has steadily increased across the world. Studies document a consistent and significant increase in online social network usage among teens and young adults. Though less thoroughly documented, a similar upward trend is becoming apparent among kids between the ages of 9 and 12. Regarding the SNF practices of younger children, especially those 8 years old and younger, we have little to no research evidence despite the rise in online forums directed specifically toward this age group.



executive summary

This gap in our knowledge is problematic because we cannot assume that children use SNF in the same way as teens or young adults. Children are at a much different stage of development cognitively and socially than their older counterparts and often have different influences at home and school that may affect their participation in SNF. Given that research on the social networking practices of younger children (especially those under the age of 9) tends to be fragmented and incomplete, we aim to redress these omissions by documenting and highlighting the sites and activities that children and tweens (i.e. those between the ages of 5 and 13 years) are actively engaged in to date.

As part of this attempt, we feature several case studies regarding SNF primarily populated with children and include several different kinds of forums throughout the paper. These begin to demonstrate the range of types of participation within these different kinds of forums. Each case describes a very different type of SNF, with the focus placed on a different facet of children's online

social networking in keeping with the issues and research addressed in that particular section of the paper.

The omission of younger kids from so many of the large-scale reports reviewed in this paper points to an urgent need for research that specifically investigates the online social networking practices of kids under the age of 12, and especially under the age of 9. As such, we call for research on children, specifically in regard to their particular developmental needs and social contexts, as well as their own preferences and practices. We ask: what are children doing in social networking forums, how does that relate to their developmental trajectories, and what does that mean for their social and cognitive development as well as their developing literacies in digital participation and production?

Research on Internet use in the home has consistently demonstrated that family dynamics play a crucial role in children's and parents' activities and experiences online. We need further research on the role of parental

limits, rules, and restrictions on children's social networking as well as how families, siblings, peers, and schools influence children's online social networking.

Finally, we also call for more research into the practices of the adults who design, manage and regulate children's social networking, including discussion of how developers are negotiating child-specific legal policies (e.g. COPPA), marketing tactics, and age-related content or restrictions on activities (e.g. chat filters). This also reflects a need to understand how children themselves navigate these legal policies, manage their information and privacy online, push back against site designs, produce content, and influence site development.

