Practical Participation provides research, training and consultancy in the use of social media tools with young people and communities. This series of guides aim to explore different Online Social Networking platforms. This guide was last updated in January 2008.

Practical Participation
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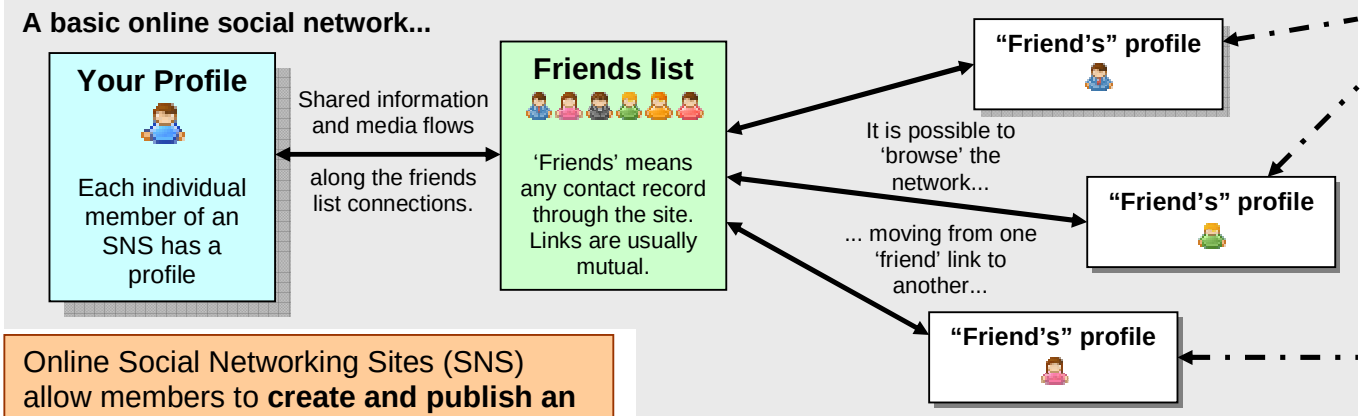
Online Social Networking



On some SNS profiles only represent real people. On others, profiles may exist for bands or brands. Some SNS allow profiles to be heavily customized, on others there is a set format. Each SNS has its own unique features.

Online Social Networking Sites (SNS) allow members to **create and publish an individual profile** within the network.

Through a profile, individuals can **publish and share information and media**. Most sites allow profiles to be heavily customized.

At their core, Social Networking Sites allow users to create a 'friends list' which creates **mutual connections between their profile and other profiles**. These connections are usually displayed on a members profiles, and it is possible to browse through these connections.

These **connections have increasingly become 'channels' for sharing information and media** – so that, for example, a user can post an update on their profile, and all those they have recorded a connection with will notified in some way of that update.

Different social networking sites have different features and focus – ranging from a focus on music and bands, to video sharing or to being a 'social utility' and a platform for other 'social' applications.

Opportunities and challenges

Through the amount of data they collect and make available SNS create new opportunities for individuals to build connections (with people, brands and causes), develop social capital and create and share content. But by encouraging individuals to disclose and share online personal data, they also raise many concerns and challenges.

Useful analogies

Using analogies can help us to understand Social Networking Sites and to test our intuitions about how to respond to events that take place on them. No analogy is perfect, but each can offer us some useful insights.

Social Networking Sites can be like...

...a town centre on Saturday afternoon

It is a space shared between young people and adults. Some young people are hanging out with friends. Some are there on their own. It is public space, but dominated by local and global business trying to sell their products. Groups congregate on the basis of existing friendship networks, or around particular interests (e.g. congregating in the music shop, or around particular clothing stores). Friendship groups overlap, intermingle, and new friendships or relationships might be formed. Most activity going on in the town centre is positive and harmless. Some adults and some young people alike may engage in anti-social or problematic behavior.

...a large music festival

A commercialized space, but also a space of diverse new experiences – where many everyday conventions are suspended. Individuals experiment with and express individual and group identity. New friendships and acquaintances are quickly formed.

What analogy would you use to explain social networking sites?

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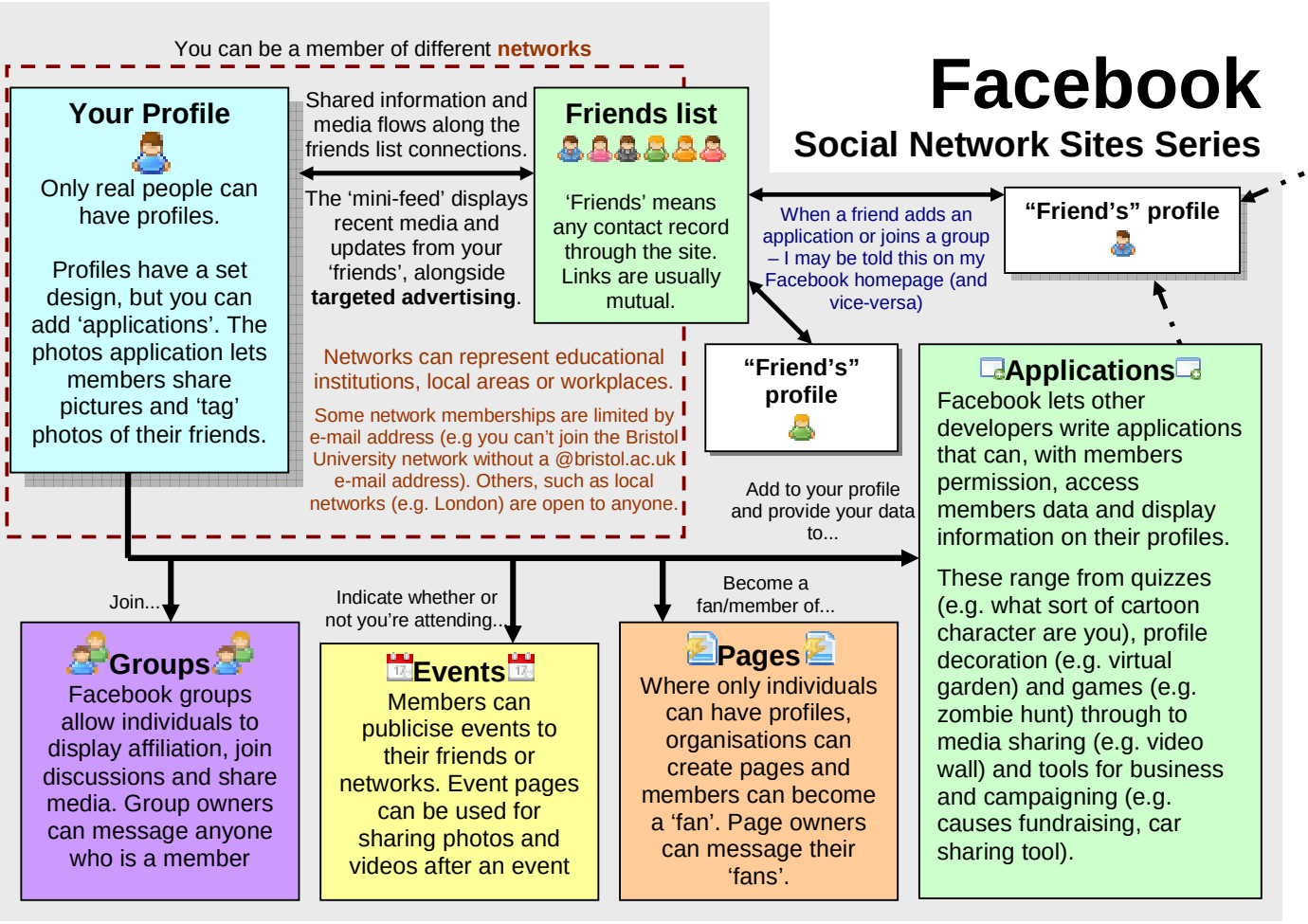
Facebook

Social Network Sites Series



Facebook started as a network for University students, but has since opened up to a wider audience.

Facebook describes itself as a 'social utility' – aiming to act as a platform for other applications that can use the 'friends' list and network membership connections to share information and provide services (e.g. car share, auctions etc.).

Facebook profiles include a message wall, and members have personal message inboxes within Facebook.

Privacy settings

Facebook has extensive (but complicated) privacy settings. Access to virtually all aspects of an individuals profile and public information can be restricted by:

- **Network –** access is restricted to anyone in all, or a selected sub-set of a members networks
  and
- **Friends list –** access is restricted to people confirmed as 'friend' contacts

Privacy settings can control what is shown in search results, what is visible on a members profile, and what applications can know about a user.

Privacy settings for members who register as over 18 are initially set as very permissive. Members registering as under 18 must register linked to a school or college although this is not verified.

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