

Introducing social networking

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Equipment needed: Access to a computer (desktop or laptop) with an Internet connection; your own email address.



Skills needed: Some basic experience of using a computer, enthusiasm and an open mind.



For years now, the Internet has been bringing people together: best friends who lost touch after graduation, families divided by oceans, and former colleagues who went their separate ways. Online, they can rediscover each other, chat, play games, and share photos and videos. School reunions can be orchestrated, from tracking down the old sixth form through to sending out invitations and sharing the post-event photos. Current friends can keep in touch more easily, and plan their get-togethers, and strangers with common interests can seek and share advice, and celebrate their successes.

So what allows people to come together in this way? Social networking sites make all this possible. You might have heard talk of Facebook, Friends Reunited or Twitter, and wondered what the fuss was about, or didn't even understand what or each they were. Perhaps younger family members are already using these sites, and want to keep in touch with you using them, but you simply don't know how.

Using this book, you'll learn how to use the Internet to make new friends and how you can reconnect with old friends you've lost touch with. Whether you've already made a start with sites like Facebook, or you're new to the whole concept

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of social networking, this book will introduce you to some of the leading places you can connect with friends online. By the end of the book, you will have the confidence and skills to explore other social networking sites out there. Social networking sites are powerful tools, but they are easy to use. Some familiarity with using a computer, access to an Internet-enabled computer and an email address are all you need to get started.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I introduces you to the basic idea of social networking, and the general procedures and techniques needed to begin. You will learn how to log in to a network, create an account, and complete an online profile. The techniques learnt here will be required for all the sites considered in this book, so take your time to get the basics right.

Part II introduces you to some of the best-known and most widely used social networks: Facebook (in Chapter 3), Friends Reunited (in Chapter 4), and Twitter (in Chapter 5). You will see how to use the skills you have acquired in Part I of the book to find old friends, make new ones, and post messages.

In Part III, you'll learn how to connect with other older and wisers at Saga Zone (Chapter 6) and Eons (Chapter 7). You will also discover how to use Meetup (Chapter 8) to organise get-togethers in the real world, and the most advanced topic of all – how to create your very own, personalised network using Ning (Chapter 9). If you participate in a local group (such as a U3A group, Probus, or a writers' circle), you can use Ning and Meetup to create a private social network for your members. Alternatively, you could also use them to start a new network dedicated to your hobby, and recruit members online and from your address book.

If you're new to the Internet, there is an appendix at the back of the book that will take you from your first click through to being an internet wizard. You can refer to this at any time, or give it a quick read now if you'd like to brush up your web skills before diving into social networking. It will also show you how you can magnify web pages and use keyboard shortcuts, for if you struggle with the text on screen and with the mouse.

I've try to keep the jargon to a minimum, but as with everything to do with computers, some of it will be unavoidable. The book contains a glossary at the back to provide a quick reminder if you forget what a key term means, or if you come across a phrase you're not familiar with.

You may be surprised to know that there are many more social networking sites out there, just waiting to be discovered. So at the end of the book, you can find a directory of new places to explore.

As this book is intended as an introduction to social networking, it's not possible to cover every feature of social networking. You may be interested in checking out some additional resources in support of this book by going to my own website, www.sean.co.uk. There you will find bonus content there wasn't room for here, and all the links used so you can save time typing them in. Take your time. The book covers a wide scope and you will need practice at each stage to gain in both competence and confidence. Read on to make a start . . .



Feel free to experiment to see what else you're able to do. I'll show you the most important features for finding and communicating with friends, but there's plenty of other fun stuff to discover.

What is social networking?

The term 'social network' has been coined for websites that give you tools to help you communicate with your social circle and find new friends. You may not realise that family members and friends are possibly already online at these websites, waiting for you to connect with them.

Here are some of the things you can do using social networking sites:

- Find old friends you lost touch with, from school or work.
- Bring together groups of your current friends on the Internet so you can easily keep in touch with everyone.
- Make new friends, by introducing yourself to your friends' friends, or by finding others with similar interests and/or in your age group.
- Share albums of photos and videos, and let your friends and relatives add their comments to them.
- Have discussions with friends and strangers about life, the universe and everything.

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- Play games against your friends over the Internet.
- Broadcast what you're doing or reading to the world, by sending out status updates in real time.
- Keep in touch with what your favourite celebrities are doing, and send them messages.
- Find events that you can attend to socialise in the real world, or use social networking tools to organise and promote your own events.

If you're new to all this, it might seem odd to socialise with people who aren't even in the same room as you, maybe not even in the same country. But if you use email already, you can think of social networking as an extension of that. Instead of having communications going from one person to another, your conversations can take place in a more public space, where your mutual friends can chip in. It's a bit like being in a room full of friends, with everyone jumping in with their thoughts, jokes and memories.

Communicating this way might sound a bit cunning but don't worry because although some of the activities on social networking sites take place in public, or at least in front of your friends, you can still have private conversations and share private information with people. As we explore social networking websites together, you'll learn the privacy implications of the different activities: who can see what, who can find you, and who can find out what you're doing.

So why bother to use social networking sites? People like social networking for different reasons. If you're geographically isolated, or if you're unable to travel far, social networking can enable you to build close friendships without even leaving the house. Some people like the fact that they can switch on the computer at any time and see what their friends have been up to. For others, it's about being able to share their creative work, and their ideas, with a global audience. You might most enjoy being able to talk about your hobbies and interests with people who share your passion. That certainly stops me having to bore my real-world friends with my own particular enthusiasm for Prince 12" remixes and vintage arcade games!

As we take a tour through some of the most popular social networking sites, you will discover your own ways to make social networking enhance your life, online and offline. Perhaps you'll rediscover a friend from decades ago. Maybe you'll find a new hobby, or start a romantic relationship? Anything is possible!

What you need

Throughout this book, I am assuming that you have already acquired the basic skills of using a computer, keyboard and mouse. To get started with social networking, you need access to a computer, an Internet connection, an email address, and some familiarity with the Internet.

A computer

The beauty of social networking is that you can do it using virtually any computer type with an Internet connection. For the examples presented in this book, I've used a PC (personal computer) running Windows Vista. If you're using a Mac or a different version of Windows, you'll find your screens sometimes look a little different, but don't worry as you should still be able to benefit from all the guidance in this book.

You don't necessarily need your own computer; you might be able to use one in the library, although you'll find it easier to keep in regular contact with your online friends if you have your own PC. Photo uploading can be much more time-consuming on public computers, too, because you probably won't have permission to install the software needed for bulk uploading (more on this later, in Chapter 3).

An Internet connection

To gain access to social networking sites, your computer needs to be connected to the Internet. As well as having a cable between the computer and the wall socket, you'll need to subscribe to an Internet Service Provider (ISP), which does the same job as a phone company like BT does for telephones: it connects you to the communications network. In fact, most phone companies provide Internet services too, so if you don't already have an ISP, contact your phone company and they can probably help you get connected. The cost of being connected to the Internet can vary depending on the company you use, so you may be able to save money by shopping around before making a decision.

You have two main types of Internet connection to choose from:

- *Dial-up* connections require you to 'phone up' the ISP each time you want to use the Internet or email. For light users of the Internet, dial-up connections can be cheaper, but they come with the disadvantage of being rather slow.

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- *Broadband* connections are always switched on. That means you can just go into a website whenever you want, straight away. There's no need to wait for the computer to connect to the ISP. Broadband can be over 20 times faster than dial-up. If you want to use video or music websites, broadband is essential. The snag is that it isn't available everywhere, depending on where you live, and it does cost a little more, but again, you should check out the availability and rates of different companies to help you decide.

For most social networking, it doesn't really matter whether you've got dial-up or broadband. You'll have more fun on broadband, though. There will be less hanging around, and you can be more spontaneous. If you've got the choice between a Ferrari and an old banger that you have to start up by cranking the handle, why not opt for the smoother ride?

If you are able to use your computer to download email or to visit websites like the BBC site (www.bbc.co.uk), then you've definitely got a working Internet connection already.



Make sure your computer is protected with a *firewall* (to stop other people snooping on your PC when you're connected to the Internet) and *antivirus software* (to eradicate malicious programs that try to get access to your data or corrupt your PC). Security suites include antivirus software and a firewall, and can be bought in high-street computer retailers as well as through online stores like Amazon. You don't necessarily need to splash out, though. You can get free antivirus software from AVG (free.avg.com), and Windows XP, Windows Vista and Windows 7 all have a built-in firewall. Security software is essential whenever you're connected to the Internet, and the threat is equally high whether or not you're using social networking sites.

An email address

Your email address is used in social networking to forward messages from your friends on to you, and to alert you to updates within your network. For that reason, you'll need to have a working email address to sign up to most social networks. They won't let you in if you don't have one, or if you refuse to tell them what it is.

You're unlikely to have a problem with receiving lots of junk emails. The big social networks explored in this book are well-established businesses, and they won't abuse your email address for a quick buck. Their reputation is worth too much to them for that to be a smart move.



You should consider setting up a new email account to protect your privacy. Your email address can reveal all kinds of things about you, including where you work (if you use a work email address) and even where you live (if you have your own website). If you're not comfortable with that information being available to some of your friends online, you can register a more anonymous email account for free through www.googlemail.com. Having all your social network correspondence in one place might make it easier to manage, too.

Some familiarity with the Internet

You don't need fancy technical skills to take advantage of social networking, but you do need some familiarity with the Internet. If you've used a website before for shopping, email, researching holidays, or similar activities, you have all the skills you need.

If you haven't used the Internet before don't worry, it really doesn't take too long to learn. See Appendix A for a tutorial, which will take you from your first click to mastering your browser. See also *The Internet for the Older and Wiser* by Adrian Arnold, another book in this series, for a comprehensive guide to using the Internet.

Overcoming common fears

When embarking on something new, it's natural to have some reservations. Sometimes scare stories in the newspapers about the Internet can alarm us, but if our world view were defined by the tabloids, we'd be terrified to climb out from under the duvet. I'd like to start by reassuring you about some of the most common fears people have about social networking.

I don't like the kind of people who are online

Oooh. That hurts!

Like at any social gathering, there are all sorts of people on the Internet. Some are witty, bright, fun and a joy to be with. Others can be real bores. A tiny, tiny minority might be out to rip you off. As long as you take care, particularly if you choose to meet up in real life, there's nothing to worry about. Don't let fear stop you from making dozens of new friends and having fun on the Internet. You wouldn't let it stop you from leaving the house.

Online communities tend to be extremely polite and welcoming. Many of them regulate themselves because other site members can see what is being said. In the extremely unlikely event that you ever receive an abusive message, either privately or in a public forum, report it immediately to the owner of the social network. There are rules in place to make sure that everybody feels welcome and can speak freely, and network owners should respond quickly to any allegations of abuse. Disruptive members who don't meet the standards of the online community are likely to be banned.

I'm too old for this!

Think you're too old to be using social networks? Tell that to Ivy Bean. At 105 years old, she's widely believed to be the oldest person using the social networking site Twitter. There are 48,000 people of all ages following her daily updates, and she has made 4,500 friends on Facebook. She even has her own fan clubs on Facebook, with over 12,000 members between them.

She's not the exception either: across many social networks, the over-50 age group is one of the fastest growing groups. Two new networks have even been created to cater exclusively for seniors, Saga Zone and Eons, which have over 738,000 members between them (see Chapters 6 and 7).

They'll steal my identity!

Identity theft is a growing crime, but the risk of it happening to you remains tiny. You can limit your risk by taking simple steps to protect your privacy, and being selective about what information you share and with whom. In particular, don't

share your date of birth, place of birth, or any financial details. When chatting online, take care with who knows when you'll be out of the house too, to avoid the risk of burglary – just use your common sense.

Social networks offer different levels of privacy. For each network described in this book, you'll learn who can view what you're posting and any controls that help you to limit that. You have ultimate control over the information you give out – social networks cannot share information you don't give them.



People aren't always who they say they are online. Unless you can see someone typing their words, you can't really know who's behind the keyboard. Exercise caution before sharing personal information with someone you meet online.

I'll mess up the computer!

Computers can be grumpy beasts, and if you live with one, it's natural to worry about upsetting it. Happily, social networking is one of the safest activities you can undertake with a PC. Most of the time, you're just using websites, with the same low risk as checking the weather forecast online.

If something does go wrong, the worst that's likely to happen is that you'll have to restart your computer. This happens extremely rarely, and when it does, it doesn't matter much.

Because of the way social networking sites operate, you're not likely to lose any of your data, either. If you were mid-way through typing something when you had to restart, you might lose that. But everything else should be safely stored.

I'll embarrass the youngsters!

The great thing about social networking is that it enables you to keep in touch with friends and family of all ages, wherever they are in the world. If younger family members would prefer to keep in touch with you in other ways – to save their embarrassment – that's okay: on some sites you have to both agree to be friends on a social network before it will connect you. This applies to Facebook,

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where the generation gap is most easily bridged. Even when you're connected, it doesn't necessarily mean that everyone can see that connection, and see the messages you send each other.

Because there are communities dedicated to your interests and to your age group in many social networks, you'll probably find you cross paths with younger family members rarely, and that you'll only really be in touch with them when you contact them directly or reference them in family groups. Some networks have more privacy than others: some are like a gathering of friends at home, while others are like a picnic in the park with everything taking place in the open. By explaining who can see what, I'll help you decide what is appropriate to publish. I'll also tell you about any controls you can use to restrict who can view your content.

This sounds expensive . . .

If you are concerned that joining social networking sites might come at a cost, happily, that isn't true. Most social networking sites are free to use as they are funded through advertising. To make the most of social networking, I'd recommend you have your own computer but it doesn't have to be particularly fast or expensive. You can use a library computer or a friend's machine if you don't have one.

Summary

- Social networking is about using the Internet to socialise online including: exchanging messages; sharing photos, videos and links; and playing games
- Social networking provides tools to trace old friends and keep in touch with current friends
- You can use any computer with an Internet connection including the computers available at your local library
- You need an email address to receive messages from social networks
- Most social networking sites are free



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Brain training

Let's see how well you've taken in the basics about social networking with a quick revision quiz. There might be more than one correct answer to some of these questions, so don't be too eager to choose your final answer!

1. Social networking can be about . . .

- a) Finding old friends
- b) Making new friends
- c) Keeping in touch with current friends
- d) Using the Internet to plan a meeting with friends at the pub

2. To use social networking websites I need access to . . .

- a) A computer
- b) An Internet connection
- c) An email address
- d) Years of computer experience

3. For the best Internet experience you should use . . .

- a) A dial-up connection
- b) A broadband connection
- c) A couple of tin cans joined with string
- d) The library

4. To make the most of social networking you need to be . . .

- a) Of school age
- b) Under 50
- c) Over 50
- d) Any age – it really doesn't matter

Answers

Q1 – All four answers are correct

Q2 – a, b and c

Q3 – b

Q4 – d