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Editorial: Social networking in the health context

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Software and services for creating online social networks.

Social networking in the Internet context comprises software and services for creating online social networks. Though the term has started to be used fairly recently, online social networks existed before the Web in the form of email discussion lists and bulletin boards, and these are still going strong. Other current technologies include instant messaging, chat rooms, internet forums, blogs (online diaries) and wikis (online collaborative production of documents). Communication can be one-to-one (e.g. email), one-to-many (e.g. blogs) or many-to-many (e.g. wikis). Well known examples of services include:

- *MySpace (connecting people via personal profiles and interests, and sharing items such as music, photos, videos etc.)*
- *Friends Reunited School (tracing old school friends and organising reunions)*
- *LinkedIn (establishing professional contacts)*
- *Flickr (photo sharing)*
- *YouTube (video sharing)*
- *WikiTravel (social guide)* <http://wikitravel.org/>
- *del.icio.us (social bookmarking – the sharing and categorisation [folksonomy] of links to Web sites)* <http://del.icio.us/>
- *Second Life (3D virtual world)* <http://secondlife.com/>.

Characteristics that underpin social network services are bottom-up development, democracy, decentralisation, user-generated content, freedom to share and re-use content, peer-to-peer exchange.

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However, such services also have their problems, e.g. insecurity of personal details, misrepresentation, fraud, data mining, surveillance, cyber bullying and sexual predators. Additionally, a number of these services are now being taken over by commercial organisations.

Social networking is often regarded as synonymous with the term Web 2.0 – 'Web 2.0 is about the architecture of participation'.[1] However, the definition of Web 2.0 is open to debate, for example: <www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/podcast/dwi/cm-int082206.txt> and <http://radar.oreilly.com/archives/006/12/web_20_compact.html>.

What role can social networking play in the healthcare context?

Healthcare professionals have for a long time communicated with each other using email discussion lists and are now starting to use the new tools and services. The same is true for patients, carers and health consumers. And now both parties are starting to join together in the same social networks.[2] A long list of sites and resources can be found at <http://healthcarebloglaw.blogspot.com/2007/02/healthcare-blogging-and-web-20.html>.

Some examples include:

- *AskDrWiki (medical wiki generated by healthcare professionals)* <http://askdrwiki.com/>

- *Daily Strength (collection of online support groups)* <http://dailystrength.org/>

- *grouploop (online support for teens with cancer)*

- *Organized Wisdom (doctor-reviewed and user-generated health information)*

- *Real Mental Health (online community)*

- *Trusted.md (healthcare blogger network)* <http://trusted.md/>.

Two interesting questions come to mind:

1. *How do people find a social network to meet their needs out of the ever growing number in existence – and how do they assess its 'quality'?*

2. *What impact does social networking have on people's health?*

The first question could be the topic of a future article. The answer to the second question is open. A recent systematic review[3] found that interactive health communication applications had positive effects for people with chronic illness. An earlier systematic review[4] found no evidence of either harm or benefit. As usual, the reviews called for more research into the topic.

References

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2. Landro L. Social networking comes to health care. post-gazette.com, 29 December 2006 <www.post-gazette.com/pg/06363/749317-96.stm>.

3. Murray E *et al*. Interactive health communication applications for people with chronic disease. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2007, Issue 1.

4. Eysenbach G *et al*. Health related virtual communities and electronic support groups: systematic review of the effects of online peer to peer interactions. *BMJ* 2004; **328**: 1166 <www.bmj.com/cgi/content/abstract/328/7449/1166>.

healthyBooks

This Web site lists books aimed at children to help them understand illness and emotional problems. The books are organised under subject categories, and a search function is also provided.