ICT Teachers, Social Network Sites and Online Privacy

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Abstract

The article looks at primary and secondary ICT teachers' attitude to social network sites and privacy protection on the Internet. Attention is devoted to student-teacher friendships within online network sites. The study includes a description of specific habits as well as a discussion of how teachers make decisions and what influences them.

The research has used in-depth semi-structured interviews, focusing on ICT teachers with differing views on the issue in question. Our investigations have been supported by triangulation, which involved accessing information about given teachers on social network sites. Data gained from interviews and triangulation has been processed using open coding.

The results of our investigation show that teachers appreciate SNS because of the possibility to communicate and keep in touch with people they know, including former pupils. Teachers are concerned about the risks associated with using SNS, particularly security and privacy risks, and they feel even more under threat due to their occupation. Some teachers decided not to reject their pupils' friend requests for educational reasons, claiming SNS serve as a channel of communication to support teaching and learning.

Keywords

social network sites, Facebook, ICT teachers, e-safety, routines, privacy, open coding

Introduction

One of the current ICT issues is the protection of user privacy, particularly on social network sites (abbreviated SNS). The main emphasis is placed on children and youngsters. Their behaviour on SNS has been the subject of a number of studies such as (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008) and (Ofcom, 2011). As stated by Kapoun, Kapounová and Javorčík (2011), most young people use their computer on a daily basis as a means of communication. However, due to their lack of experience, knowledge and ability to cope with certain situations, they are relatively

risk-prone (OECD, 2011). One example quoted by the OECD (2011) is that children often wrongly suppose that personal information posted online will not go any further than where it was sent. Overall, young people are more likely to share private information than older people (Get Safe Online, 2010). However, such behaviour could put their future at risk as some colleges and universities have visited an applicant's social networking website as part of the admissions decision-making process (Wong 2008) and a large number of employers do the same (Cross-Tab, 2010).

Being the closest, parents should be approached when children and teenagers need to ask for advice. However, they are often only familiar with the ICT they use at work (Kapoun, Kapounová and Javorčík, 2011) and feel unequipped to help children in the digital world (Byron, 2008). Ofcom (2011) has revealed that two thirds of parents believe that their children, aged 12 to 15, have a better knowledge of the Internet than they do. As children and young people need to be encouraged to stay safe (Byron, 2008), the role of the school needs to be prioritized. Becta (2005; 2007) claims that schools ought to take most responsibility for leading pupils to critical thinking and suitable behaviour that will protect them from the risks associated with Internet use.

Social network sites in the school environment

A widespread trend in a number of schools is the regulation of pupils' use of the Internet, possibly blocking unsuitable websites and SNS (Sharples et al., 2009). However, as suggested by Valcke et al. (2007), such intervention will not develop pupils' e-safety skills. The Federal Communication Commission (2012) disapproves of blocking SNS, preferring the idea of pupils being guided to use these technologies suitably. Moreover, SNS are considered by some researchers as education-friendly technologies (Maranto and Barton, 2010).

The teachers' personality has proved to be important as he should set his pupils examples in terms of privacy protection (Buettner et al., 2002). However, a number of teachers lack personal experience in terms of e-safety, not having gained enough background knowledge – indeed they have never personally formed online relationships themselves (Chou and Peng, 2011). Phippen (2011) found that about three fifths of teachers use Facebook, about a third of teachers use Skype and approximately one seventh of teachers use Twitter.

The risks of teachers' presence on social network sites

Teachers' use of SNS is a highly controversial issue and teachers are increasingly required not to be present on SNS like Facebook or MySpace (Simpson, 2008). There have been cases of teachers being dismissed because of their inappropriate behaviour on SNS and possible unprofessional contact with pupils (Simpson, 2008).

Although two thirds of teachers worldwide consider friendship with pupils on SNS risky, around one third of teachers worldwide have friendships with their pupils on SNS (Symantec Corporation, 2011a). However, the situation differs greatly among individual states; information on European countries is shown in Fig. 1. Teachers may become victims of abuse in an online environment. Phippen (2011) claims that around a third of teachers or their colleagues have experienced this. Pupils were involved in two thirds of the attacks, their parents

in one fifth and other staff in one in ten cases (Phippen, 2011). Sharples et al. (2009) claims that negative experiences caused by students using Web 2.0 were frequently encountered by one in twenty teachers, occasionally by one in five teachers and rarely by a quarter of teachers.
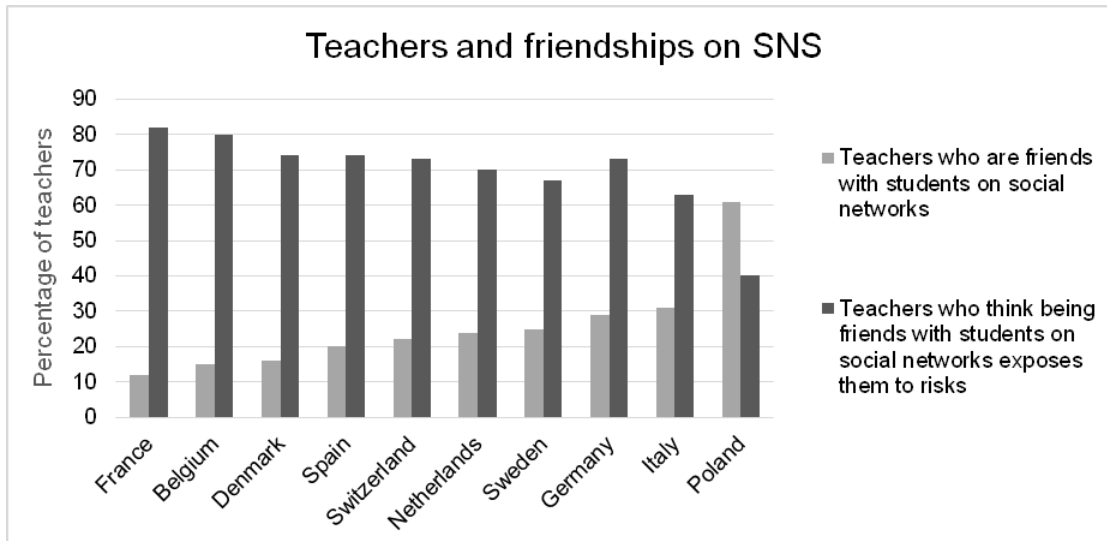

Fig. 1: Teacher-pupil friendships on SNS (according to Symantec Corporation 2011b)

A study of ICT teachers' behaviour on social network sites and the protection of their online privacy

Given the above mentioned findings, we decided to carry out a study focused on ICT teachers' behaviour on social network sites and the protection of their online privacy. Its aims are as follows:

- To explore how ICT teachers use social network sites and protect their online privacy.

- To analyse the reasons why teachers behave in such a way.

- To investigate how teachers' decisions are influenced by their occupation, particularly in terms of teacher / pupil interaction.

Methods

The study was carried out at the same time as our research on knowledge and routines of ICT teachers as regards technical e-safety (Šimandl, 2015). Therefore, the sample of study participants and research methods are similar. The study was designed and carried out as qualitative. Participants chosen for the study were primary, lower secondary and high school teachers of Informatics, Information and Communication Technologies, ICT and other similar subjects. 15 participants were interviewed in the study, chosen according to various factors – ICT teacher qualification, type of school (lower secondary or high school), length of service, size of towns where teachers work, age and gender.

Three of the study participants were qualified high school ICT teachers with relatively little experience in schools (approx. five years). Two participants were teachers teaching ICT for their first and third year but not qualified to do so, each with a very different approach to ICT self-study. Another two participants were trainees having completed teacher development studies for ICT coordinators. Although neither of them is a qualified ICT teacher, they have long-term experience of teaching ICT at high school, interest in the field and further education in it.

In order to include participants with experience at lower secondary schools in the study, two lower secondary school teachers were approached. They had already cooperated through short-term teacher development programmes before. Both teachers were employed in schools in smaller towns. Another participant was chosen due to his position as headmaster and another three teachers not qualified to teach ICT were added to the list. For these three, there was no evidence of them having attended courses or ICT teacher development. These participants were chosen particularly for their age, ranging from around 35 to 65. The last study participant was selected for his enthusiasm towards SNS and pupil friendships in the online environment.

Data collection

Data collection involved individual meetings with each study participant. A semi-structured in-depth interview formed the basis of each meeting. Study participants were informed of the aims of the study and assured anonymity. They were subsequently requested to take part in the study and to agree to have their interview recorded on a voice recorder.

The triangulation concept was incorporated into data collection (Švaříček, 2007). This involved exploring publically accessible information about the teacher's "virtual life" on the Internet, particularly on Facebook. Our focus of attention was placed on whether the teacher is registered on Facebook, what kind of information he presents there and whether he accepts pupils as friends. If we had been unable to find a particular teacher on Facebook before the interview itself and the teacher spoke of his activity on SNS during the interview, we made efforts to find him on Facebook subsequently.

Data analysis

Analysis of acquired data was based on the open coding method. The analysed text was divided into units and these units were allocated a certain code that represents a certain type of reply and differentiates it from the others (Šeďová, 2007). Codes from the generated list were subsequently grouped into categories according to internal similarity (Strauss and Corbin, 1999). The principle of constant comparison was included in the process of overall analysis (Šeďová, 2007). The aim of this comparison was to find differences within data sources relating to one study participant and within data concerning various participants.

Results

Analysis of the interviews identified several categories related to teachers' attitudes to SNS (especially Facebook and Google+) and to maintenance of their privacy and how they are

formed. The most important categories are Specific protection routines on SNS, Causes of behaviour on SNS and Evaluation of others. Further categories were discovered during the study, some of them having been described in (Šimandl, 2015). The following text goes on to describe each of the categories mentioned above.

Specific protection routines on SNS

The category Specific protection routines on SNS concerns specific ways ICT teachers use SNS and to what extent, how they protect their privacy therein and whether they accept their pupils as friends.

The extent ICT teachers use SNS. The teachers differ greatly as to the extent they use SNS. While some claim not to use SNS, others use SNS occasionally and another group use them often (as shown in Case study 1). There are also differences in the ways they use SNS. Whereas some only use them for communicating via chat and possibly receiving information, others actively create content to be seen by others.

> *Case study 1. Having previously found out that one of the teachers used SNS quite often, we viewed his Facebook profile. We discovered that 55 statuses had been placed in his profile in the last three months (not including possible comments under the status). Some of them were initiated by the teacher in question while others were posted on his wall by his friends.*

Although most teachers addressed in the study use SNS for personal reasons, we did meet a teacher who sees his SNS profile as a work-hobby one and claims not to publish any personal information: *"(...) I don't need to share any of my private life. I'm more into joining some discussions, those that I'm keen on or I'm interested in"*. Apart from that, some teachers use alternative SNS, which help them with their hobby (for example, the travel site Couchsurfing.com).

Privacy. Teachers usually try to protect their privacy on SNS. Some decided not to publish details of their private life via statuses, not even for their circle of friends. This is illustrated in the following quote: *"If I want people to know my current status, I tell them in person or I call them. Or I send a text message. Or I write it in a chat message. But I don't have to post it on the wall"*. However, some of these teachers are willing to publish information on SNS provided they regard it as not being of a personal nature: *"I don't see anything wrong in that, because I think that's information which, if someone asked me, I would definitely tell him"*.

> *Case study 2. An interesting approach was encountered here – publishing messages on SNS in the form of allegories. As the teacher in question stated, although these messages can be seen by all friends, only close friends should be able to determine their real sense. People who the teacher does not keep in close contact with (the teacher's pupils in this case) can only understand such a message at a superficial level and privacy is preserved.*

Other teachers do not object to publishing private information, but they do insist on such information being carefully selected and rights for chosen people being strictly set – an example being one of the teachers' statements: *"You can show them what's new but I would also insist*

on everything being as it ought to so that no stranger can see it, so that no one can get to it". Moreover, we have even encountered the case of a teacher who is not concerned about posting details of his private life within his circle of friends on SNS: "*Sometimes I boast with my current status, when I get really angry and want to scream out loud to the world. Or with my status in the morning, if it is funny*".

> ***Case study 3.*** *During our investigation we found a business card photograph in one of the teachers' Facebook profile accessible to the public. The photograph portrayed the teacher in question with his dog and his car was standing in the background with a clearly visible registration number. Apart from the teacher's full name and nickname, his address and mobile phone number had been inserted into the photograph. Other photographs also contained information about the teacher's private life (his interest in cycling, ownership of a certain breed of dog, and car registration number). Having expressed during the interview that he did protect his privacy, we confronted this teacher with the above mentioned findings. He was surprised, explaining that access settings for the photos must have been wrong and claiming that he knew nothing of the problem (the photographs had been posted on his profile for around two years). After being informed, he removed the business card photograph from his profile.*

Handling photographs. Teachers' perception of publishing photographs on SNS varies. Some of them refuse to post photos on their profile whilst others do not disapprove of posting photos for their circle of friends: "*So you're on holiday, you seem to have a few decent photos, even without any people, so you post them, so people can take a look at them*". Some consider the Facebook option of labelling a certain person in a photo as a threat to privacy, because such photographs are made accessible to friends of the labelled person: "*I don't like those third party rights to mark people on photographs. That really gets to me*".

> ***Case study 4.*** *During our study we encountered a teacher who posts photos of himself having fun with friends at parties. When asked how he perceives these photos, he replied: "A photo of me holding a drink somewhere with someone doesn't matter. But if it were a photo which could ruin my personal or professional reputation in some way, then that would really get me".*

Some teachers place their photographs in specialised web photo galleries rather than publishing them on SNS. Some of them use passwords to prevent their photos from being accessed by unauthorised people: "*I use servers that specialise in storing photos and it's protected by password, it can only be accessed by people I give the password to*". Other teachers publish some of their photographs on web photo galleries without explicitly protecting them against possible access: "*(…) otherwise, I'm more likely to give my friends a link to a web like rajče.net (…)*". It has to be said that even just being required to enter the right link to get to the photo gallery might be considered a certain form of security. However, the possibility of using a search engine to find a given photo gallery cannot be ruled out, even without knowing the exact URL address.

> ***Case study 5.*** *During our investigation, we encountered a teacher who posts documentary photo albums from his holiday travels on Google+, whilst also having a link to them on his own website. When questioned as to whether he perceived this*

a privacy risk, he replied that he didn't as "(…) these are explicitly things that are public and I'm making it available to anybody at all, whoever is interested. I am occasionally approached by people who have Googled me or maybe Googled something about a place I know and I'm able to advise him (…)".

Befriending pupils. Befriending pupils on SNS is a current and sometimes controversial issue for a number of teachers, but there are great differences in teacher behaviour. Some teachers strongly reject being friends with pupils, as seen in the following quote: "*I would rather not accept pupils as Facebook friends and I think it would be good if all teachers were of that opinion and rejected them*". Others do not disapprove of such behaviour or do actually befriend their pupils under certain conditions. The most common requirement is not to reveal one's private life to pupils. To achieve this aim, he might make efforts not to open up his private life (as discussed above) or to separate his virtual friends into certain groups with restricted access to each group's posts: "*(…) I think I have a hierarchy in my posts so what I don't want them (pupils) to see is restricted to certain groups (…)*". During our study, we encountered a teacher who opens up his private life to pupils on SNS, as documented by Case study 6.

> **Case study 6.** *During our study, we encountered a teacher who accepts pupils as Facebook friends, even publishing posts of a personal nature (see Case study 4). He claims not to have changed his behaviour on Facebook because of his pupils. When questioned as to how pupils reacted to these posts, he replied: "The statuses were (for them) attractive and they didn't make anything of it, just making fun of it, making light of it, so it didn't go any further, as far as school is concerned and so on, it was just between us. Or, should I say, those who had seen it all. (…)".*

A number of teachers befriend their former pupils via SNS, as documented by the following quote: "*I have a rule not to add the person concerned if he were my student, but as soon as he ceased to be my student and sent a friend request, I would accept him*".

Cancelling unused accounts. Some teachers try to cancel social network site and community server accounts which they no longer use, due to efforts to control personal information that has been online and to remove traces of any previous activity. One of the teachers accounted: "*I know there can still be something from the past even though I have tried to cancel accounts on sites like Spolužáci.cz and other similar ones. (…) And I don't want anyone to access this information about me*".

> **Case study 7.** *During our investigation, we found a nickname on one of the teacher's Facebook profiles. Using this name in a Google search, we found the given teacher's profile on a certain dating portal with a number of personal details and photographs. This case demonstrates how suitable it is to do an information audit and discover what information the Internet holds on us and to reconsider the suitability of such personal details being online.*

Causes of behaviour on SNS

The Causes of behaviour on SNS category looks at the circumstances which influence teachers' decision making as regards whether and how to use SNS. This particularly concerns the benefits

and risks of using SNS in the teacher's personal life, the possibilities of including SNS in their teaching and the teacher's approach.

Benefits of using SNS. One of the reasons for teachers using SNS is the possibility of private communication, particularly with friends or relatives. SNS enable teachers to gain information about people who they are not in contact with: "*If I haven't heard from someone for a long time, I have a look at his profile to see if he's written anything interesting about himself*". This approach is used by some teachers to find out about their former pupils: "*I know where they (my former pupils) are and if they have children, I know what their kids look like and that kind of thing. It's like a never-ending reunion. (…)*". Teachers also use SNS as a source of entertainment or interesting information: "*I often get involved in discussions around here and that sort of thing. Cause people post interesting materials there (…)*".

Risks of using SNS. Some of the teachers (without regard to whether they use SNS) are concerned about the security risks associated with using SNS. These include the risk of insecure data protection from intruders (from other users and hackers), the risk of identity theft or the use of fictive identities. Teachers are also concerned about the abuse of posted data: "*I think you have to accept the risk of having any of the information you post used against you*" and about their privacy: "*I don't want strangers to look into my private life (…) I might have some kind of phobia but I don't want just anyone to be able to find me and see what I look like, what my name is, where I live or what my house looks like. I simply don't want that*". The above mentioned fears are multiplied due to the teacher's position and some teachers are anxious about their pupils accessing their private content: "*I think they (pupils) could get to it (my private photos). Because I wouldn't post it there but a friend of my friend and his friend might*".

Scepticism towards SNS. Teachers who do not use SNS argue that they are not really interested in this service: "*I don't need to present myself on the Internet. If somebody needs to, why not…*". Some teachers are extremely sceptical towards SNS, though, arguing that so much time can be wasted on them: "*The point is these kids spend so much time on Facebook … I think it's a waste of time and if I think so, I won't be using it*". We also recorded opinions criticizing the impersonal nature of SNS, superficial communication, lack of cooperation and the spreading of untruth and rumours among users. One teacher remarked: "*I don't think these social network sites actually meet up to what they were originally set out for – for cooperation. If you have a look at these social network sites, what's going on there, they (users) are just chatting there (…)*".

Including SNS in teaching. Teachers have great differences of opinion on the use of SNS in the classroom. Some of them don't expect to use SNS in the classroom: "*As a teacher, I see my students every week, so I don't need it (a social network site)*". Others regard SNS as a communication tool, enabling them to be accessed by their pupils: "*(Pupils) asked me about something like regarding a test, that they're writing a test after the weekend, so they asked for details (…)*" or "*It mainly served for communication, like a note from a pupil saying he's going to be absent the next day (…)*".

Teacher's approach. To ensure professionalism, teachers adapt their behaviour on SNS (particularly with regard to teachers befriending pupils). Some teachers try to keep a certain distance from pupils in fear of losing authority: "*If a student sees those photos of yours there*

or if he can comment on something about you, then let's say that gap disappears, it's completely wiped out" or in an effort to keep work and private life separate: "*I don't think I need to chat with them in my free time. My job is to teach here, so I teach, but it's still only a job (…)*". We have recorded a contrasting opinion, though, where the teacher tried to get as close as possible to his pupils via SNS: "*I like talking to them (to pupils), I want to find out how today's teenagers behave, how they think. So (I try) to get in among them. It's my kind of teacher strategy*".

Some teachers' awareness of their role as educator is evident from their view of pupils' profiles. They are aware that by accepting pupils as friends they would begin to have more direct access to the content of their profiles with all the various statuses. Some of them are concerned about this situation because of the possible presence of unsuitable statuses, which they would have to respond to as teachers: "*He might have something written on Facebook, so if I responded to it in some way, he would unfriend me and it's as if I had never befriended him but if I didn't respond to it, I don't think it's quite in accordance with who a teacher is. Because a teacher should be involved in his pupils' upbringing*". Other teachers do not find this situation troubling and believe pupils would soon adapt their profiles: "*Students who befriend teachers realise they are under control. That someone will later see their posts (…)*". During our study, we encountered the case of a teacher who discovered unacceptable statuses on some of his pupils' profiles, as shown in Case study 8.

> **Case study 8.** *During our investigation, we met a teacher who befriended pupils from his class on Facebook. As the teacher confessed, after some time, some of his pupils started to post statuses with inappropriate content: "(…) despite knowing we were friends, they wrote stuff they might have known or, more to the point, I think they knew I would disapprove of, particularly concerning school, and they planned various things like what will happen in the mountains (…) and whatever else". Finding this a serious matter, the teacher refused to ignore it, which turned these pupils against him. He decided to unfriend most of the pupils. In his statement, the teacher told of this matter dividing the class into two groups – those who accepted his approach and the rest who began to behave "brutally". When asked to review this matter, he said: "I'm really glad I had such an experience and I think it's a good thing because (…) at least I know what can happen and I've simply learnt a lesson to watch out who, as far as pupils are concerned, I make friends with".*

Interest in new trends. The role of ICT teacher is evident in some teachers' efforts to keep themselves informed on the latest ICT trends. It might become the impulse to actually register themselves on SNS: "*The only reason I tried Facebook was because I wanted to know, … when I started teaching Informatics a few years ago, so I knew what it involved. I didn't really catch on, though (…)*".

Evaluating others

The Evaluating others category concerns teachers' opinions on other people's use of SNS. Teachers gave their evaluation spontaneously to explain their attitude to a certain issue in more detail. As they usually restrict their own behaviour according to other people's, they mostly criticise, rarely agreeing with other people's behaviour.

Intensity of SNS use. Some teachers are critical of the intensity of social network site use by other people, particularly pupils: "*When I started teaching at the lower secondary, the students were capable of spending all their free time on Facebook. Which is really frightening (...)*". There was no positive evaluation of the intensity of SNS use by others.

Privacy. Teachers mostly criticise the ways other people protect their privacy. While some of them criticise their pupils' improper habits: "*I have a few kids from high school on my Friends list (on Facebook) (...) and these are blatantly expressive (...)*", others are critical of their real friends' behaviour: "*I have a friend and every time she goes on holiday, she rushes headlong into posting all 200 of her seaside holiday photos on Facebook the day after she gets back. She's a real stunner, by the way. I would say she's really stupid (...)*". There was only one positive evaluation of other people's privacy protection, the teacher quoting his wife as an example of somebody who manages their personal details prudently.

Befriending pupils. As teachers do not have a unanimous opinion on the issue of befriending pupils, their evaluation of others also varies in respect to this. We thus encountered criticism of colleagues and pupils for befriending each other: "*I know there are students like that at our school who friend request some teachers and the teachers accept. Or it might even be the other way round. I find it a bit alarming (...)*". On the contrary, one of the teachers (who does not personally oppose befriending pupils) indirectly encouraged his colleague's similar behaviour: "*One colleague from lower secondary has a motto, which I really like, saying: »I do not accept requests from under-15s, only in virtuous exceptions « (...)*".

Conclusion

Our study has led us to discover how teachers behave in social network site environments and what motives lead to such behaviour. Teachers particularly appreciate SNS because of the possibility to communicate and keep in touch with people they know, including former pupils. Teachers are concerned about the risks associated with using SNS, particularly security and privacy risks, and they feel even more under threat due to their occupation. Some teachers decided not to reject their pupils' friend requests for educational reasons, claiming SNS serve as a channel of communication to support teaching and learning. Our study has found that teacher-pupil connections on SNS do not necessarily mean teachers inappropriately reveal their private lives – some teachers use their profiles for work only or at least do not present any personal details.

Further research should focus on how a teacher's knowledge and attitudes regarding online privacy protection influence his teaching. One particularly important question seems to be how teachers with varying experience of using SNS build pupils' knowledge that will protect them from the risks of using SNS.

Acknowledgement

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