

# Implementation of the Safer Social Networking Principles for the EU: Testing of 20 Social Networks in Europe February 2010

## HYVES.NL

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### Introduction

Hyves is one of the most visited websites in The Netherlands and counts more than 9 million members. This social network platform started five years ago and is available in two languages (Dutch and English). The founders refer with the name of their SNS to a *beehive*, full of activity. Members can keep contact with friends and meet new people. Next to their profile, users can develop and consult blogs, post comments on profile pages, upload and browse through users' pictures and videos. Also 'gadgets' can be added to one's own profile (embedded third party applications). Moreover, users can create groups ('Hyves') that gather persons sharing, for instance, the same interests. The SNS has created also a mobile application, giving the possibility to be connected everywhere. Persons younger than 16 years need their parental permission to subscribe. According to a recent study, three quarters of the Dutch 8 till 17-year-olds has a profile on Hyves (*Mijn Kind Online*, 2009<sup>1</sup>).

### Test

Test performed on 28-29 October 2009.

### Summary

The SNS provides information on safety and security issues in a dedicated webpage (Hyve safely). Moreover, links are included to websites that offer more practical advice. Also the FAQ-page is in general well organized. However, the length and the inclusion of legal jargon in the Terms of Use will prevent users to read this essential information. Concerning minimum age requirements, the provider states that users younger than 16 years need parental consent to subscribe. How this requirement is assessed, stays unclear. Users are given a broad range of privacy settings that are easy to find. Yet, more awareness raising initiatives could be taken. According to the self-declaration, profiles of users younger than 16 are by default private. However, tests concluded that adults are able to find and have access to profiles of minors. Finally, users can easily report inappropriate content or conduct. An abuse report that was sent to test this service, has led to positive conclusions on the speed and the adequacy of the answer.

### Reporting on testing results

*Principle 1: Raise awareness of safety education messages and acceptable use policies to users, parents, teachers and carers in a prominent, clear and age-appropriate manner.*

According to the self-declaration the social networking site (SNS) provides tips to users on, amongst others, sharing personal information online. The provider also states that educational

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<sup>1</sup> *Krabbels & Respect plz ? Hyves en Kinderen*, September 2009, <http://www.mijnkindonline.nl>

campaigns are run with *Mijn Kind Online* (My Child Online) on a regular basis. The SNS participates in the Safer Social Networking Task Force and works in close collaboration with the Dutch Police Online Task Forces. Users can contact the SNS's personnel members through the help-link available on every page.

During testing, it was observed that the SNS includes links to several sections dealing with safety, security and privacy.

In the Hyve safely (« Veilig hyven ») webpage, accessible for subscribed users and also visitors, the provider gives an overview of important safety and security hints. Handy tips are formulated in short paragraphs that address several important issues (for instance, how to choose a 'strong' password, how to protect sensitive information like phone number, e-mail, location). The provider also urges users to watch out for fake sites and to think before they post. How to report abuse and how to take screenshots as 'proof' of for instance, inappropriate comments on a user's profile, is briefly touched on. Yet, no clear overview of tips and tricks, do's and don'ts using, for instance, appealing graphs or videos are included.

Moreover, links to websites dealing with safety online are included. These links to leading organizations' websites offer users more safety tips, not only for children and teens, but also parents and teachers.

The link to the safety page is situated at the bottom of the webpage that is divided into ten sections, including a total of 29 links. Yet, the links are divided in sections that facilitate users to search for specific information (for instance, the link to the safety-page is situated under the heading « Hulp nodig? », Need help).

In the footer of the homepage a link leads to the Terms of Use (« gebruiksvoorwaarden »).

However, during the test it was observed that the link was not clickable for visitors who haven't subscribed. One has to start a subscription procedure to be able to click on the link. The Terms of Use webpage outlines extensively the prohibited activities and refers to the consequences of such behaviour (like for instance the discontinuation and/or removal of the user's account temporarily or permanently, or the removal of specific content). Furthermore, users are informed on how to report unlawful content. The information needed in this report is clearly described. Yet, the Terms of Use constitute a full-fledged legal text that is not adapted to young users. What's more, this text consists of 14 paragraphs and a total of about 340 lines and 3060 words, which is not appealing for (young) users to inform themselves on their rights and obligations.

The Privacy Statement clearly informs users about the uses of disclosed personal data but also automatically generated data (like IP address, cookies etc.). The fact that advertisement is adapted to the user's profile is explained clearly (including some examples). Moreover, users are informed about their privacy rights (like for instance right of access, correction and to object to e-mail notifications of the SNS, to grant or withdraw consent to receive e-mails from partners).

A link to a FAQ-page is also inserted in each webpage's footer. The answers to frequently asked questions are categorized in several topics (for instance: general, sections, photos etc., abuse & spam,...). Users can easily contact the SNS personnel using an online form that is accessible from every page (in the footer, under the header « Need help? »).

*Principle 2: Work towards ensuring that services are age-appropriate for the intended audience.*

According to the self-declaration, no explicit restrictions are made concerning minimum (or maximum) age for registration. Yet, persons younger than 16 years need parental permission to subscribe (cf. also Terms of Use and Privacy Statement). However, no information is given in the self-declaration nor in the website how this will be checked. Subscribers are only told that « By accepting these Terms of Use you guarantee that you are aged sixteen (16) or over or have the consent of your parents or guardian to create an account ». However, when registering users are asked to select their year of birth from a drop-down menu (reaching from 1900 till 2009). Therefore it was possible to subscribe as an 11 year-old, without further questions or remarks.

The provider states in the self-declaration that, on request, parents can have their IP address blocked to prevent their child from joining the SNS against their consent. However, no specific information for parents could be found in the site. No information is given in the self-declaration on how the uptake of parental involvement or control is promoted.

Although no information is given concerning the functionalities that are used to label, rate or restrict content, the provider states that « Alcohol related ads are not targeted to under 18 ». Moreover, no information is provided in the self-declaration on what functionalities are possibly provided for content providers, partners or users to label, rate or age restrict content.

*Principle 3: Empower users through tools and technology.*

The provider briefly states in the self-declaration that « No user can search for under 16s ». Moreover, the provider declares that 'new' profiles of under 16 year-olds are automatically defaulted to private.

Concerning the default privacy settings of minors, some supplementary information can give a more detailed view of the measures that are in place to protect minors' profile. Not only in the privacy settings (accessible through a drop-down menu) but also when checking the personal data through the account webpage, users can adapt the access to their personal data. By default, registered users have limited access to profile information of a minor user (picture, age, online status, first and last name, day of birth), whereas friends can have access to the e-mail address and memberships (of online groups). By default, nobody sees the messenger account, mobile phone number (and also position on Google maps). Furthermore, supplementary profile information can be added (like religion, favourite books, films, food, destinations, games, ...). Users can set their profile to private and allow only those users they have proactively added to their contact list to see when they are on IM and to be able to contact them. Finally, subscribers can refuse a friendship request and add a contact to a blacklist, preventing them from seeking contact again. An easily accessible and recognizable button can be used to block a contact. Also comments on one's profile page can be deleted. By default all users can post comments. A subscriber can restrict posting comments and also the access to comments to specific groups (for instance: nobody, only friends, friends of friends). Users can also choose which images/videos will be visible for friends, their friends or everybody. What's more, users can conceal their online status.

Concerning the protection of minors' profiles for adult subscribers, tests have been conducted. An adult user (32 year-old) could find the profile of the young SNS user (11 year-old) and send a message. Yet, the adult user could not see the profile of the minor user. However, by searching for other (nick)names through the SNS search engine, minor users could be found. Some profiles were not accessible, while full access to profiles of some 12, 14 and 15 year-olds was possible.

No information is given concerning the elaboration of specific information for parents on how they can use tools (like filters or parental monitoring) to help them accompany, monitor or help their youngsters.

*Principle 4: Provide easy-to-use mechanisms to report conduct or content that violates the Terms of Service.*

In the self-declaration the provider states that users can easily report abuse. Wherever user-generated content appears, complaints can be easily filed. Also inappropriate behaviour or other types of abuse can be reported. Users are also given the possibility to provide reasons when reporting Terms of Use violations.

When assessing the report mechanism in the SNS, it was observed that users can easily report inappropriate content in several ways.

First, in the Terms of Use page a link to the online report form is included. Users are also informed about which information is needed to report abuse. In the FAQ-page, a specific section is dedicated to abuse («Misbruik, pesten & spam»). Also in the Hyve Safely-page, users are informed about this option. The form is well designed and gives the user the possibility to choose between several categories of questions or abuse reports (for instance: I am bullied on Hyves, I have found a spammer, I have found a profile with porn, ...).

What's more, near the section of user generated content an easily accessible and recognizable picture (figure of a policeman) and a link (Flag as offensive, « Dit is niet OK ») are available leading to a pop-up form offering the user the possibility to select a category of abuse (bullying/stalking, spam, discrimination/racism, ...) and to add comments<sup>2</sup>. In this online form, the provider states that when specific content is « flagged » six times, it is the automatically and temporarily made unavailable. SNS personnel will check the content and decide to delete it permanently or put it back online.

In sum, the procedure is easily accessible, understandable and age-appropriate for young users. The provider stipulates that « reports of abuse are acknowledged immediately and acted upon expediently by dedicated teams ». As part of this study an e-mail was sent (on 30/10/09) seeking assistance as the user receives « scary messages ». A message appeared on the screen confirming that the report was sent. The next day, an extensive and personal answer was sent giving concrete tips how to deal with this situation (amongst others, how to block a user). The moderator concluded by informing the user that, if the aggressive contact continues, the victim could send more information to the moderator (namely the nickname(s) of the perpetrator(s) and screenshots as proof).

*Principle 5: Respond to notifications of Illegal content or conduct.*

The provider declares that the Customer Care Service handles questions and users' complaints. The provider stresses also its close collaboration with the Dutch online Police report systems.

When assessing the social networking site, it was observed that the safety-page includes hyperlinks to Dutch organisations dealing with online safety. Next to several informative websites (like for instance <http://www.mijnkindonline.nl><sup>3</sup>, <http://www.internetsoa.nl>, <http://www.surfwijzer.nl>), also a link is integrated to an online report system, part of the Inhope child abuse report system (<http://helpwanted.nl/>). Moreover, a link is included to the Dutch Safer Internet Centre (« Digivaardig & Digibewust » <http://www.mijndigitalewereld.nl>).

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<sup>2</sup> If the user needs more space, the provider refers to the contact form (hyperlink to the form is provided).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, hints for parents are summarized in two handy reports « Mijn puber op Hyves » (for parents of + 12-year-olds) and « Mijn kind op Hyves » (for parents of 6 to 12-year-olds), cf. <http://www.mijnkindonline.nl>

*Principle 6: Enable and encourage users to employ a safe approach to personal information and privacy.*

In the self-declaration the provider refers to some issues discussed under Principle 3 for more information on how measures are implemented. First of all, the provider stresses the protection of profiles of users younger than 16 years old (namely, new profiles are defaulted to private and no user can search for under 16s, cf. assessment under Principle 3). Next, the provider refers to tools to manage their profile information, block users from contacting them and conceal their online status. Finally, applications are governed by the same privacy controls available in the SNS.

When analysing the processing of personal data and the users' privacy settings, the following observations were made.

To register, a visitor has to provide first and last name, e-mail, date of birth, user name and password. Other data are optional. Although the inclusion of a mobile phone number is not compulsory, the provider encourages users to include it in the form by noticing: «Niet verplicht, wel handig!» (*Not compulsory, however handy*). This remark could stimulate youngsters to include this (sensitive) information in the online form.

A link to the Terms of Use and to the Privacy Statement is provided at the end of the online form. New subscribers have to check a box stating that they agree with the Terms of Use. The SNS is also using a *CAPTCHA*<sup>4</sup> in the subscription form to prevent the use of automated systems to subscribe and engage in spam. Moreover, an e-mail verification system is used to prevent unwanted subscriptions.

By default some personal data (name, age, gender, day of birth and place of residence) are visible for all SNS subscribers. The user's e-mail address is by default only displayed to friends. Other contact details such as a phone number or a messenger account, but also place on Google maps is by default not visible for others.

A subscriber can change his/her privacy settings and restrict the access to friends, friends of friends or make personal data invisible to all users. Users can restrict or make public several personal data in their account profile. They can also easily adapt their privacy settings. A link can be found on the menu link on top of the page (« My account » and « Privacy »). In specific webpages (« Hyve safely » page and the FAQ, for instance) users are informed about how they can protect sensitive data, how to adapt their privacy settings and how to delete their account (cf. e.g. <http://www.hyves.nl/index.php?l1=ut&l2=da>). The deactivation of a profile is not possible. When removal of the profile took place, this is permanent.

*Principle 7: Assess the means for reviewing illegal or prohibited content/conduct.*

The provider refers to the information included in the self-declaration under Principle 2 and 5 for more information about measures that were taken.

Automated as well as human moderation is used in the SNS. For instance, the provider states that alcohol related ads are not targeted to under 18 year-olds. Furthermore, near all content a notification link is provided, to report abuse.

The provider states that the Customer Care Team handles « sensitive user issues ». Moreover « a dedicated security team ... works to identify potential problems and takes immediate action when security issues occur ».

No information is provided in the self-declaration form concerning steps taken to minimize the risk of employing candidates, who may be unsuited for work that involves real-time contact with children or young people.

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<sup>4</sup> *Completely Automated Public Turing Test to tell Computers and Humans Apart* is a challenge-response system test designed to differentiate humans from automated programs ([searchsecurity.com](http://searchsecurity.com)).

## Summary of results and Conclusion

First of all, the efforts of the provider to inform SNS subscribers about safety and security have to be underscored. In the Hyve Safely page, users are sensitized about several issues. Moreover, references are included to websites that offer practical advice to children, teens, parents and teachers. Yet, to inform and sensitize young users only textual information could be found, no tips or tricks are given using graphs or videos.

The Terms of Use and Privacy Statement are quite long. Especially the Terms of Use are not appealing for young users. In fact, the length and the inclusion of legal jargon will prevent users to take the time to read this essential information. Although the FAQ-page is in general well organized, questions concerning security, safety, etc. could be grouped. Users can easily report inappropriate content or conduct. An abuse report that was sent to test this service, has led to positive conclusions on the speed and the adequacy of the answer.

The provider states that users younger than 16 years need parental consent to subscribe. Yet, no information is provided on how compliance with this requirement is assessed.

In the self-declaration the provider refers to the specific possibilities for parents to block the access to the SNS. However, during the test no information for parents could be found on the SNS to use this option. According to the self-declaration, profiles of users younger than 16 are by default private. Yet, testing revealed that adults can find and have access to profiles of young users.

Finally, users are given a broad range of privacy settings and these options are easy to find. Still, these privacy options are not accompanied with awareness raising efforts to encourage users to make informed decisions.

### Assessment of the Principles vs. the Self-declaration

Principle	Compliant	Partially Compliant	Not Compliant	Not Applicable	Comments/Clarification
1		X			
2		X			
3		X			
4	X				
5	X				
6		X			
7		X			

### Assessment of the Self-declaration vs. the measures implemented on the SNS

Principle	Compliant	Partially Compliant	Not Compliant	Not Applicable	Comments/Clarification
1		X			
2		X			
3		X			
4	X				
5	<i>Not Tested</i>				
6		X			
7	<i>Not Tested</i>				

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