

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

SKYROCK.COM

Cédric Fluckiger, University of Lille 3.

Introduction

Skyrock is a SNS specifically dedicated to teenagers and young adults. It offers a blogging service very popular among teenagers in France. Users can create a blog, where articles are mainly based on pictures and short texts. Teenagers use Skyrock blogs to create kinds of “profiles”, and communicate with friends. Users can comment other user’s articles. One of the important features, that made this blogging platform become one of the most popular SNS among teenagers, is the possibility to set up a list of friends and friend’s blogs. The minimum age is 12 to create an account.

Conduct of the testing

The testing was conducted from October 25th to October 30th 2009. For the testing, the screen resolution was set to 1024*768. Note that the accessibility of information and readability is lower at that resolution than at a higher resolution. Skyrock was tested in French.

Summary of findings

- Information is sufficient, adapted to adults and children. The only concern one might have is that this information is somewhat “hidden” in the terms of use page and not more directly accessible.
- Children under 12 cannot create a profile on Skyrock. However, when rejected for being too young, a user can immediately change his/her age and register as an older teenager (according to Skyrock, this problem is dealt in backoffice).

Reporting the results

Principle 1: Raise awareness of safety education...

In the self declaration

In its self declaration, skyrock.com states a large number of safety measures, which can be roughly summarized in sending security warnings before posting; providing a “flag this content” button on every page; providing minors and parents with guidance, education information, tips and context-specific warnings; displaying the Insafe national campaign about bullying; participating in EU Safer Social Networking Task Force, having relationship with the Minors brigade in Paris and in “Alerte Enlèvement” (French Amber Alert equivalent).

Information provided

The self-declaration says that “Skyrock provides since April 2009, clear targeted guidance to minors and parents in a prominent accessible and easy to understand format (cf <http://www.skyrock.com/safety/index.php>).” Indeed, the “Terms of use” page is easily accessible from a link at the bottom of the page. However, one could regret that the link displayed is “Conditions”, which stands for the french usual “Conditions d’utilisation”, but could be rather difficult to understand for youngsters.

On the “terms of use” page, the terms are presented in both extended or summarized way. This allow to have a full “legal style” terms of use on one hand, and easy-to-understand language, relevant for teenagers on the other hand. The summarized version of the terms of use gives safety information and lists age requirement, contents and conducts that are not allowed on the site. It also indicates the consequences of engagement in prohibited behavior. There is a “sécurité” (safety) link beside the terms of use that leads to the terms of use.

Indeed, the terms of use page provides also users with other useful and clear information. However, these pages are not very visible in the terms of use page.

The safety information is divided into: help - terms of use – parents – minors. The “Help” page gives information on registration and login access, but gives also useful security/privacy/report information. For instance, it explains what to do in different situations: “Someone hijacked my account! What do I do?”; “What do you do with my personal information?” or “How do I delete my account?”; etc. The “Minors” (under 18) page (<http://fr.skyrock.com/safety/minors.php>) gives 10 pieces of advice to young users in an easy-to-understand and age-appropriate language, such as: “warn your parents that you want to open an account on Skyrock.com and get their authorization”; “when registering give your real age”; “the blog and profile are public spaces accessible to everyone”; etc.

Information for parents or teachers

As stated in the self-declaration, information is given to parents. The “parents” page gives information to parents (<http://fr.skyrock.com/safety/parents.php>). It gives parents advices on what to do when they discover inappropriate content, on how they can close any account their child has created, and so on. No information is given to teachers.

Links to association and help services

As announced in the self-declaration, Skyrock.com provides links to: Internet sans crainte (Insafe programme in France) ; E-enfance (association implied in the insafe program); Safer Internet page; and Net écoute (a phone help line, operated by e-enfance).

Specific information and tips

The self-declaration also states that “, before accepting the Terms of use, a short summary of users major engagements”, which is verified in the testing.

The self-declaration states that “All users receive security warnings before posting content on the platform”, and that “Skyrock.com provides education and tips about online safety and privacy”, when posting content, safety and privacy tips are given. Though the message is not very visible, it is complete and adapted to children.

Principle 2: Work toward ensuring that services are age-appropriate...

The self-declaration says that “The Skyrock.com service is mainly designed for young people (12 or older). Skyrock.com does not host any “adult” content or does not have any specific sections or services for adults”. Indeed, the testing confirms that the Skyrock service is designed for children and teenagers: there is no specific service or content not suitable for them. Therefore, there is no parental control device, restricting the access to some parts of the content to adults.

Creating a profile

“Skyrock’s Terms of Use clearly indicates a minimum age to use, and moreover to register on Skyrock.com”. However, in the self-declaration, no reference is made on how it is made clear. It only says that one cannot register when too young.

In the testing, it was confirmed that a child under 12 cannot create a profile: a message is displayed in the form: “registration is only authorized to 12 years-old or older”.

The self-declaration says that “Skyrock uses cookies session, permanent cookies, email and IP addresses on its registration page to flag users who will change their age if the initial age was below the one specified in our Terms of Use”. However, during the test, it appeared that one can change his date of birth and log-in without a problem once this message has been displayed. When a child (older than 12 years-old) creates an account, he or she receives an e-mail.

The user is also asked if he/she wants to receive promotional offers from partners, though teenagers might not be fully aware this means advertising. Users can also decide whether they can be found by their e-mail, first or last name, or not (all in one).

The self-declaration states that “Skyrock uses filtering algorithm especially in French, Dutch and English, to seek and delete individuals misrepresenting their age.” The test could not validate or invalidate this statement. It could not be tested either that “Skyrock moderation staff actively searches out underage users manually. Upon discovery that a user is not 12 years or older, Skyrock.com deletes the user’s account, blog and profile.”

The self-declaration states that “skyrock uses cookies session, permanent cookies, email and IP addresses on its registration page”. However, it is possible to log as an adult after being logged as a child, without having to remove a cookie.

Means to limiting exposure to potentially inappropriate content

Skyrock says that “All hosted images are hashed when uploaded and are all reviewed by the Skyrock.com moderation team for compliance with Terms of Use. All deleted images are then hashed to ensure they cannot be re-uploaded.”- “Skyrock.com filters automatically thousands of inappropriate terms and urls every day”. In the conditions of the testing, it was not possible to test these statements.

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

Skyrock provides users with some tools to manage their contacts and choose some privacy and safety options. In this section, are detailed the main features mentioned in the self-declaration. Age-based search restrictions are detailed in the principle 2 section above.

Accepting or blocking friends requests

A user can accept other users as “best friends” (meilleur ami), accept as friend, refuse or wait. On the profile settings, one can decide who can write a comment on its blog: all users - all registered users - only friends - only best friends

Controlling comments on the blog

A user also has the possibility to validate comments before they are displayed (the comment says that “this option allows you to check comments on your blog before they are published”).

Contact options

Skyrock states in the self-declaration that “Minors or majors cannot contact members who are not in the same age group”. Search options are detailed above. The testing shows that an adult can send an invitation to a 15 years-old girl and be added on its friend’s list. However, when those users are “friends”, they cannot send messages to each other

The black list

One important feature cited in the self-declaration is the black list. Every user can black-list another user. When a user is black-listed, he/she appears in the black list. The user has the option to unblock any user in its black-list. Surprisingly enough, a user in the black-list still

appears in the list “My complete list”. From that list, one still can add him as best friend! This means that this user will appear *at the same time* in 3 lists: My complete list - My best friends - My black list

Note that a user is not warned that he/she is black-listed: when he clicks on “add a comment”, nothing happens.

Deleting a profile

Information about deleting a profile can be found in the FAQ section, and is therefore not so easy to find for a child. Information is quite complete and understandable for children “if you delete your account, you will lose information on your blog, your profile”, etc.

In order to delete his/her profile, a user has to find the “delete” button, just below the advertisement. This button is not easy to find in the page. It leads to a specific page where one can delete his/her profile.

Regarding the conservation of personal data, the terms of use explains that data are either erased or anonymised.

Principle 4: Provide easy-to-use report mechanisms...

As stated in the self declaration, there is a button to “report an abuse” on every blog. When a user click on the button, a window appears, where the user is asked to enter a valid e-mail ; choose a category of the abuse; write an additional comment; precise if the report concerns : the entire blog – pictures – messages - the blog’s presentation – videos – comments – other. When the user clicks on “send”, the following message appears: “WARNING: it is not advised to report an abuse on a blog if it does not violate the General Conditions of Use of the service. For your information, if your request proves to be unjustified, it shall be sent to PROPER AUTHORITIES (police or tribunal). Therefore are you sure you want to report an abuse on this blog? ”

It is not possible to send the message “someone is sending me scary messages...” as Skyrock only provides a mechanism to report a specific blog.

A few minutes after sending a report, an email is sent from the “skyrock team” saying : “Hello, Skyrock.com received your report regarding – lucasmartinssnpt09 – Pornography. It will be treated by our teams as soon as possible. If you wish to complete your report, thanks for answering to this email without changing the subject. Thanks for contacting Skyrock.com.” However, 3 days later, the reporter was not informed if the report was taken into account, and if the reported blog was compliant with the terms of use.

Principle 5: Respond to notifications of illegal content or conduct

According to the self-declaration: “Extremely inappropriate contents or behaviors such as paedo-criminality, racial hate, inciting or advocating crimes against humanity are reported to the French Interior Minister centralized platform (PHAROS).”

Principle 6: enable and encourage users to employ a safe approach...

In the self-declaration, the only information provided is that “Skyrock.com allows users to manage their personal information and privacy in an all-in-one URL”. These options were tested during the testing and are detailed in section 3.

Information added onto the profile is: age, gender, home town and a picture if the user uploaded one.

Concerning age restrictions, only one functionality is mentioned: which category of contact is allowed: “The age registered by the user will determine which categories of age groups the user will be able to contact or be contacted by”.

Indeed, the test showed that searchable profiles depend on the age of the user: unregistered users cannot search under the age of 16; users registered as adults cannot search minors under 18; when connected as a 15 years-old girl, searchable profiles are categories from 12 to 16.

Principle 7 : assess the means for reviewing illegal...

In the principle 3 of the self-declaration, Skyrock states that it uses both human and automated forms of moderation:

- Skyrock.com moderators are experienced and trained”. Also in Principle 5: “The moderation staff works 24/7 and is seized to handle the thousands of reports or millions of images, texts or other contents and behaviors that are illegal are removed immediately by the Skyrock.com team upon notice and saved for possible police investigations
- Skyrock.com uses a series of tools and algorithms to identify anomalies in how a user might be using Skyrock.com. Users’ behaviors are then rated and Users can be excluded from the website”. In principle 2: “Skyrock.com filters automatically thousands of inappropriate terms and urls every day

Skyrock also states that reasonable steps are taken to minimize the risk of employing candidates who may be unsuited for work which involves real-time contact with children or young people: “Skyrock.com moderators are experienced and trained. All moderators’ backgrounds are checked when hired.”

Conclusion: global assessment of compliance

Assessment of the Principles vs. the Self-declaration

| Principle | Compliant | Partially Compliant | Not Compliant | Not Applicable | Comments/ Clarification |
|-----------|-----------|---------------------|---------------|----------------|--|
| 1 | X | | | | |
| 2 | X | | | | Nothing is said about parents being able to “manage their children’s use of service” |
| 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 | | | - No measures are taken to “prevent users from attempting to re-register” |
| 3 | X | | | | |
| 4 | | X | | | - Notification possible only on content (one specific blog), not on conduct |
| 5 | | | | Not Tested | |
| 6 | X | | | | |
| 7 | | | | Not Tested | |

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