

# IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SAFER SOCIAL NETWORKING PRINCIPLES FOR THE EU YAHOO! PULSE

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## Introduction

Yahoo! Pulse is an online social networking platform which allows users to create a personalised profile, communicate with others, post videos and images, and provide updates to contacts. It was launched in 2010 to replace Yahoo! Profiles<sup>1</sup>, though the photos, guestbook and blog applications are being disabled after May 2011<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult to find information on the number of Yahoo Pulse! users or available languages, but Yahoo! is available internationally in over 40 countries and languages (e.g., English, Chinese, Danish, Italian). Pulse has a minimum registration age of 13 but caters to a wide user demographic, and requires a Yahoo! ID to sign in. It provides a variety of privacy settings which control access to content, and provides extensive safety information to young and adult users.

## Summary of main findings

Pulse has been successful in implementing the principles and safety measures described in their self-declaration. The service provides accessible and age-appropriate safety information for children and young people. Although the Terms of Service provided are framed in legal language, the Community Guidelines provide this information in age appropriate language, including behaviours which constitute violations and potential consequences. Yahoo! ID is used to ensure compliance with age requirements, although as no 100% reliable age-verification mechanism exists up to date, there are no specific technical or other tools to prevent users aged below 13 creating an additional ID with an amended date of birth to register with the site. Pulse provides young people with a high level of control over the amount of personal information included in their profile page through the accessible and easy to use Privacy Settings. It also provides clear and accessible information about the risks associated with disclosure of personal information on Pulse in the Community Guidelines and associated safety guidance. The reporting mechanisms provided by the service are also accessible and easy to use. The speed and nature of action taken in response to the test report was consistent with the timescale described in the self-declaration, and the nature of the violation and expected responses were made clear in the resulting email.

## Analysis of Results by Principle

### *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*

#### *Main findings in relation to the self-declaration*

The provider claims to provide prominent safety guidance (common to different services which share similar features) on the general Yahoo! Portal (e.g. the Yahoo! Help Central linked from the Help home page) including safety information specifically targeted at parents and carers (e.g. teachers) as well as specific guidance for children and young users. The self-declaration also states that the Yahoo! Privacy Policy offers users specific information on topics such as privacy and disclosing personal information and content on user generated services.

The provider states that a Yahoo! ID is required in order to create a Yahoo! Pulse profile. When acquiring such an ID, users commit to general terms of service governing the use of all Yahoo! including Yahoo! Pulse. According to the provider, additional Community Guidelines “set out standards of behaviour for community-based services” which are supplemented with additional guidelines for Yahoo! Pulse explaining the do’s and don’ts for users and the possible consequences of breaching these guidelines. According to the provider, this

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<sup>1</sup>Source: [http://help.yahoo.com/l/uk/yahoo/pulse/welcome/welcome-01.html;\\_ylt=Api14HgnfT40uLbQvKpFwMmLgHIG](http://help.yahoo.com/l/uk/yahoo/pulse/welcome/welcome-01.html;_ylt=Api14HgnfT40uLbQvKpFwMmLgHIG) (Accessed 08.06.11).

<sup>2</sup>Source: [http://pulse.yahoo.com/y/download\\_tool](http://pulse.yahoo.com/y/download_tool) (Accessed 08.06.11).

information is not only easy to understand for children and young users, but is also easily available via the footer of every page on Yahoo! Pulse. Relevant links to this information are provided in the self-declaration.

#### *Main findings in relation to the website*

Pulse provides clear, accessible and targeted safety information for young people, adult users and parents in the Community Guidelines and the Pulse Safety Guide. There is also a wide range of information available on Yahoo! Safely which can also be accessed from the homepage of Pulse. This is a general online safety resource which has sections for parents, young people, general tips and product specific safety guides. It covers general issues of online safety, as well as safe use of specific Yahoo! services including Pulse. The section of the site for young people contains information on a wide variety of topics (e.g., cyberbullying, sexting, etc.), and an archive of relevant safety videos. This includes links to a number of external sources of information for young people, parents / carers and teachers. There is a direct link to Yahoo! Safely from the homepage of Pulse, as well as through the Community Guidelines which can also be accessed from the homepage. Users do not need to be registered with Pulse to access these sources of information, enabling potential users and parents to find out more about the service without being a member.

The Terms of Service for Pulse are generic to all Yahoo! products and services, and can be accessed from the bottom of the homepage (where links to the Privacy Policy, etc. are located). These are presented in a standard legal format with text formatted in separate, generally short paragraphs. It is a generic document which is not specifically targeted at children and young people, and the text is framed in legal terms which may not be sufficiently clear to them. However, the main issues relating to inappropriate use of the service and associated violations (e.g., bullying, hate speech, impersonation, violent or sexual content) are described in accessible and age-appropriate language within the Community Guidelines. The consequences of violating the Terms of Service are also clearly described in these pages and include the removal of abusive content, termination of the Yahoo! ID and access to all associated accounts. The main strength of the SNS in relation to Principle 1 is the accessible and age-appropriate nature of safety information for young people and parents.

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

##### *Main findings in relation to the self-declaration*

According to the self-declaration, the minimum age required to subscribe to Yahoo! Pulse is 13. The provider claims to have technical blocks in place to prevent users younger than 13 from creating a Yahoo! Pulse profile. “Where a young user is found to have lied about their age and breached Yahoo! Terms of service, customer care will delete their profile.” The provider claims to have a number of measures in place to protect young users from inappropriate content and contact. These include: By default, users with a registered age of 13-17 years, can only share their profile information with their connections, although, if they wish, they can choose to share their profile with all users. The provider also claims to provide users with further advice on what content is or is not acceptable on the service via the Yahoo! Pulse help pages.

As stated in the self-declaration, “Yahoo! Pulse does not provide tools which allow parents to control their children’s accounts”. However, they claim to provide relevant information to parents about other tools outside Yahoo! (e.g. parental controls) which can be used to supplement the safety features provided by Yahoo!

##### *Main findings in relation to the website*

Pulse has a minimum age of 13 for users. This is specified in the Community Guidelines, though not in the UK Terms of Service. Attempting to sign up as a minor aged below 13 for an ID resulted in a direction to set up such an account. Users must have a valid Yahoo! ID account to sign into Pulse. Signing up for a Yahoo! ID requires the user to provide their name, gender, country, postcode and date of birth. This process generates an email address, username and password which can be used to register or sign into other Yahoo! services including Pulse. These details are checked when a user signs into Pulse for the first time, and users aged below 13 are not permitted access. However, there is no technical mechanism which can prevent a child registering another Yahoo! ID with the appropriate age, and using this to sign into Pulse.

There are no specific services or content designated as inappropriate for minors, and the testing did not identify content or postings of this nature, though the Community Guidelines asks that younger users be considered when

using the service. As stated in the self-declaration, Pulse does not provide parental controls, but general information about parental monitoring and associated tools are included in Yahoo! Safely.

The main strength of the SNS in relation to Principle 2 is the use of Yahoo! ID to ensure compliance with age requirements, although as no 100% reliable age-verification mechanism exists up to date, there are no specific technical or other tools to prevent users aged below 13 creating an additional ID with an amended date of birth to register with the site. There is also no mention of age restrictions in the UK Terms of Service.

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

#### ***Main findings in relation to the self-declaration***

The provider claims to employ a number of tools and technologies to assist children and young people in managing their experience on the service, particularly with regards to inappropriate or unwanted content or conduct. These include, among others, that users may create an online identity or nickname and use it instead of their real name; the profiles of 13-17 years old are, by default, shown to connections only so that even though all user profiles are searchable in Yahoo! Pulse, the *default* profiles of users aged 13-17 will not be shown; sharing contact information such as the user's Messenger ID or email address is optional. If users select this option, it is, by default, set to "connections only".

The self-declaration also states that all users can block, ignore or delete users from their contact lists, they can also accept or reject invitations to connect with other Yahoo! Pulse users, and they can control who can see specific elements of their profiles and apply specific access control to content posted by them (e.g. they can prevent other users from leaving comments in their guestbook, updates, blog or pictures by blocking them; they can also delete other users' comments left, etc.)

#### ***Main findings in relation to the website***

The profiles of users below the age of 18 are not searchable via external search engines. Indeed, testing the internal search function did not enable the identification of adults or minors by first or full name. It is possible to make random internal searches in Pulse, but these did not enable access to the profile pages of users aged 13-17 by default.

The profile page contains the full name, username, gender and birthday of the user. Information about likes and dislikes can be included in the profile, but is only visible to contacts by default. Registered adult users who are not contacts of minors can access their profiles if they have friends who have young people on their contact list. These "friends of friends" are able to see minors' username and gender, access and comment on their user updates (which are public by default), and send an update (friend) request. Adult "friends of friends" cannot see other personal information (e.g., likes / dislikes), photos or associated comments unless these are set to be publicly accessible. They cannot see the contact list, though this can be accessed by "friends of friends" who are minors.

Users are provided with privacy options when uploading photos, and by default this only allows contacts to have access and comment, though this can be changed to make them available to all users. All registered users are able to make comments on the publicly accessible updates of minors, but only contacts can access the guestbook or comment on photos by default. There is no pre-moderation facility for comments before they are published, but they can be deleted or reported as inappropriate by the user. There are no private messages facilities on Yahoo! Pulse.

The strengths of this SNS in relation to Principle 3 are the minimal amount of personal information required in the profile page, and the high level of control that younger users have for determining its accessibility. There is also clear and accessible information about the risks associated with sharing personal details in the Community Guidelines and associated safety guidance.

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

### *Main findings in relation to the self-declaration*

The provider claims to provide easily accessible mechanisms to report inappropriate content, contact or behaviour on their website via a permanent link to a “report abuse” form on every profile page. Besides, the provider claims to have in place a prominent “report abuse” link next to every photo, blog entry, update and comment. Via this link users can report “anything that may breach the terms of service or require review by Yahoo! Pulse staff”. According to the provider, the report abuse form is user-friendly even for children. The provider also states that reports are acted upon expeditiously, typically within a time-frame of 48 hours, although complex cases may need more time to be resolved. According to the provider, users receive guidance on the information they need to provide with their report and/or on what they can do to resolve the matter themselves, and whenever they send a report they receive an on-screen notification.

### *Main findings in relation to the website*

There is extensive information in the Community Guidelines and Pulse Safety Guide about reporting abusive behaviour, contact or content. Pulse does not provide a link to its reporting mechanism at the bottom of each page (where links to the Terms of Service and safety information are located). Instead, individual Report Abuse links are provided on profiles, photos, updates and comments. These links direct the user to a menu-based reporting system, which differs slightly in terms of the information required depending on which part of the service is involved. The Report Abuse page asks users to select the particular problem they are reporting from a list (e.g., violations of Terms of Service, threats or violent content, harassment, etc.). The user is also asked to provide a brief description of the issue being reported. If the report is a profile or photo, the associated URL is also captured and included on the reporting form. The reporting page also includes a link to remove the connection with the specific user, as well as links to the Terms of Service and Community Guidelines in some instances. Users can also be blocked via the profile pages. Information about the action taken in response to violations of the Terms of Service is included in the Community Guidelines (e.g., remove abusive content, termination of the Yahoo! ID and all associated accounts). The reporting mechanisms and related information are accessible for minors and easy to use.

The reporting system was used to report bullying comments and photos posted to a minor by other young users. This generated an automatic message that acknowledged the submission of the report, and stated that it would be investigated and further action taken if necessary. Within 12 hours the minor making the report had received an email summarising the category of violation reported, a further link to the Terms of Service, and stated that the report would be investigated. There was no indication of the timescale for this, or whether they would hear anything further from Pulse, and they were not subsequently informed of the action taken by Yahoo! in response to the report. Approximately an hour after this email was sent; the user who had been reported received an email from Yahoo! reminding them of the Terms of Service and behaviours which constituted violations. They were informed that Yahoo! felt that these had been violated by the user, and that they should cease any related activity immediately. The comments and photos were not automatically removed by Pulse, but the user who had been reported was clearly informed that they should immediately delete content or activity from any parts of the account that were involved in the violation. This is consistent with the information provided in the self-declaration. However, they did not subsequently remove the bullying comments or pictures, and did not receive any further warnings as a result. The main strength of the SNS in relation to Principle 4 is the accessibility of the reporting mechanisms and their ease of use. The speed and nature of action taken in response to the test report was consistent with the timescale described in the self-declaration, and the nature of the violation and expected responses were made clear in the resulting email.

### ***Principle 5: Respond to notifications of illegal content or conduct***

#### *Main findings in relation to the self-declaration*

Yahoo! states that they have expeditious mechanisms in place to process notifications from users about content or conduct which breaches their terms of service and that reports of abuse are resolved in a timely manner. Yahoo! claims to have arrangements in place with relevant law enforcement agencies in Europe that include the handling of urgent matters within hours and the passing on of suspected illegal content or reports (e.g. in cases of grooming of minors) to relevant bodies. The self-declaration further indicates that Yahoo!

supports the local hotline<sup>3</sup> in charge of handling reports related to images of child sexual abuse and that it provides links to such organizations in its Help Central page and Yahoo! Safely<sup>4</sup>.

Because of ethical reasons, Principle 5 was not tested on the site.

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

#### ***Main findings in relation to the self-declaration***

According to the self-declaration, users of Yahoo! Pulse are provided with a range of easily-accessible and always available privacy setting options as well as with supporting information to help them make informed decisions about the information they post online via the “Settings” link at the top of every page on Yahoo! Pulse. Yahoo! also claims to offer users a dedicated Privacy Centre (accessible from the “privacy Policy” link at the foot of every page) with practical tips to manage user’s privacy and personal information. According to the provider, when completing their profile, users are clearly informed about what content will be made public. The self-declaration mentions that users can delete their Yahoo! Pulse account, but in order to do this, they must cancel their Yahoo! account.

#### ***Main findings in relation to the website***

The privacy settings for Pulse are clearly available at all times through the settings tab which is present on all pages. These enable users to control who has access to the profile page, included personal information, updates, photos and comments. All the privacy settings are accessible and easy to use for younger users. Supporting information is included on the specific page containing the privacy settings, in the Privacy Policy, the Community Guidelines and the Pulse Safety Guide. The privacy settings provide distinctions between all users (everybody), contacts and nobody, and allow or restrict access to content and activities (e.g., guestbook, photos or comments). Privacy settings also include the ability to block other users and contacts.

No personal information is required in the registration process as the Yahoo! ID is used to sign into Pulse. Other types of information can be added to the profile, but is not required by the service. Users are warned about disclosure of personal information and associated risks in the Community Guideline and the Pulse Safety Guide. As stated in the self-declaration, it is not possible to delete a profile from Pulse unless the main Yahoo! ID account is terminated, though the privacy settings can be used to hide the profile from all other users. It is easy to find the associated information and settings. The strengths of this SNS in relation to Principle 6 are the accessibility and ease of use of the privacy settings. They provide the ability to distinguish between contacts and all users, and manage access to content and the ability to engage in different activities accordingly.

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<sup>3</sup> Yahoo! indicates that the local hotline in the UK is the Internet Watch Foundation. Yahoo!’s membership status is confirmed on the IWF website at <http://www.iwf.org.uk/members>.

<sup>4</sup> Links to these bodies are available on Yahoo! Help Central [http://help.yahoo.com/l/uk/yahoo/abuse/issues/report\\_other.html](http://help.yahoo.com/l/uk/yahoo/abuse/issues/report_other.html)

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

### *Main findings in relation to the self-declaration*

The provider claims to assess their service to identify potential risks to children and young people via report abuse forms generated and by the flagging of inappropriate photos by users. According to the provider, customer care agents typically handle complaints about content or conduct which breaches the Terms of service. Besides, the self-declaration states that “serious abuse in a Yahoo! Service may be escalated internally to a dedicated team within the Legal group which provides professional support and advice on more complex matters and determines an appropriate response”.

The provider claims that the so-called community managers “engage with the community to promulgate and encourage respect for the standards of behavior set out in the community guidelines and the Yahoo! Terms of service”. These community managers also offer help to users via the Help Forum.

Because of ethical reasons, Principle 7 was not tested on the site.

## **Summary of Results and Conclusions**

Principles 1, 2, 4 and 6 were very satisfactorily assessed and principle 3 was rather satisfactorily assessed. Yahoo! Pulse has been successful in implementing the principles and safety measures described in their self-declaration. The service provides accessible and age-appropriate safety information for children and young people, *while the Community Guidelines provide this information in a child-friendly format and language.* Yahoo! ID is used to ensure compliance with age requirements. Yahoo! Pulse provides young people with a high level of control over the amount of personal information included in their profile page through the accessible and easy to use Privacy Settings. It also provides clear and accessible information about the risks associated with disclosure of personal information. The reporting mechanisms provided by the service are also accessible and easy to use. The speed and nature of action taken in response to the test report was consistent with the timescale described in the self-declaration, and the nature of the violation and expected responses were made clear in the resulting email. The testing on the website revealed some areas of attention, for instance:

- In spite that the self-declaration states that “profiles of users 13-17 years are defaulted to “connections only”, testing demonstrated that registered adult users who are not contacts of minors can access their profiles if they have friends who have young people on their contact list. These “friends of friends” are able to see minors’ username and gender, access and comment on their user updates (which are public by default), and send an update (friend) request. Adult “friends of friends” cannot see other personal information (e.g., likes / dislikes), photos and associated comments (on photos) unless these are set to be publicly accessible. They cannot see the contact list, though this can be accessed by “friends of friends” who are minors.
- The reporting mechanism proved user-friendly and quite effective, but the bullying pictures uploaded during testing were not removed from the site and the bullies did not get any further warnings for not having removed them.
- The fact that users cannot delete their Yahoo! Pulse profile unless their Yahoo! account is deleted may prevent users from deleting their accounts (even if they wished so) because by cancelling the Yahoo! account, users would also be unable to access / use any of the other Yahoo! services which use the associated username and password. However, Pulse provides the possibility for the users to hide their profile as an alternative<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The information is available via the “Manage privacy settings” option on this page <http://pulse.yahoo.com/y/settings>. This is accessed via the “Settings” tab at the head of the Y! Pulse home page <http://pulse.yahoo.com/>.

### Assessment of the Principles in the Self-declaration

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Very satisfactory</i>	<i>Rather Satisfactory</i>	<i>Unsatisfactory</i>
1	x		
2	x		
3	x		
4	x		
5	x		
6	x		
7	x		

### Implementation of the Self-declaration on the SNS website

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Very satisfactory</i>	<i>Rather satisfactory</i>	<i>Unsatisfactory</i>
1	x		
2	x		
3		x	
4	x		
6	x		

