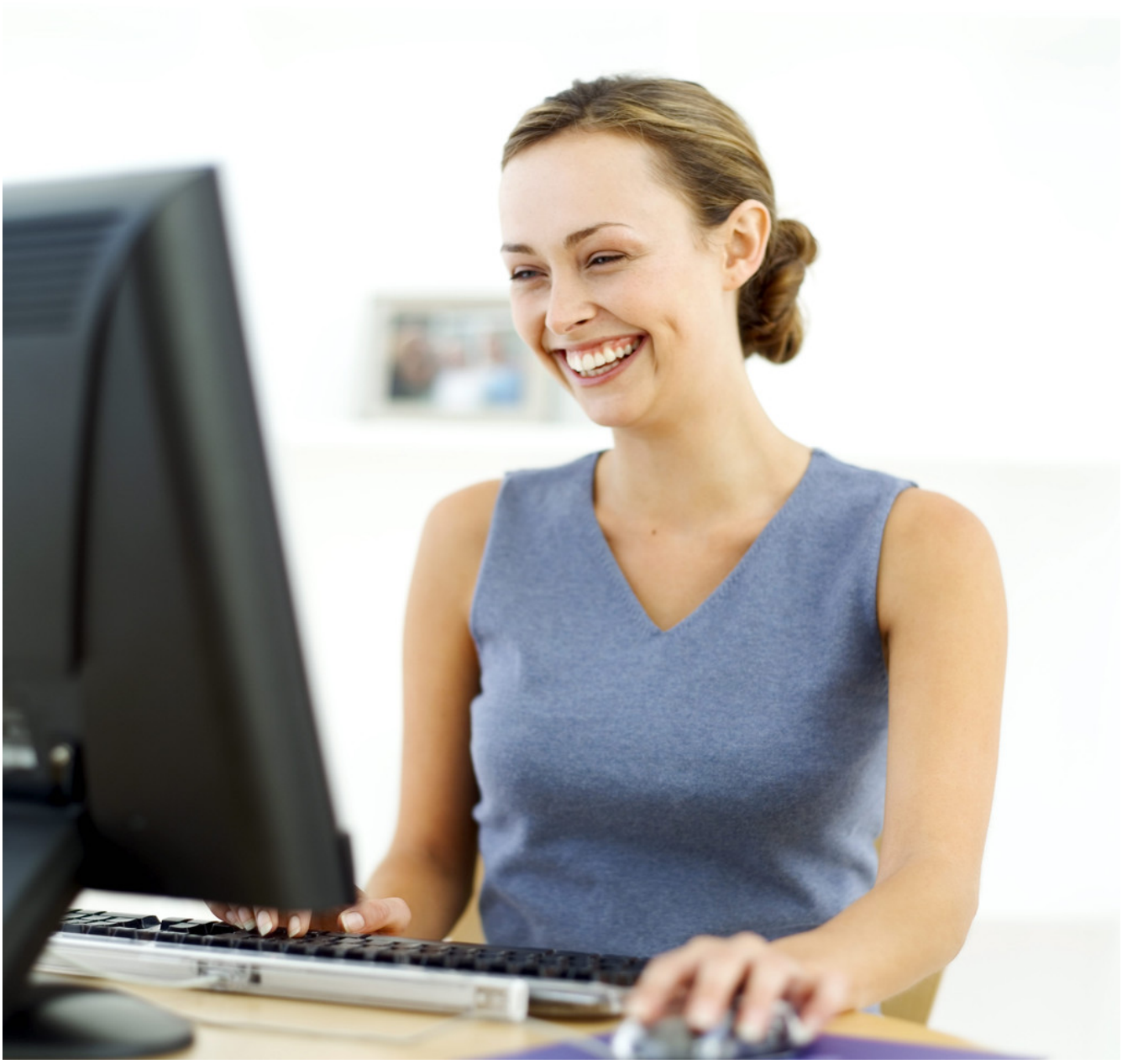
Guide to Online Social Networking

For Military Families



Welcome!

The Guide to Online Social Networking for Military Families was developed by the MilitaryHOMEFRONT, a Department of Defense Quality of Life website designed to help troops and their families, leaders and service providers.

The Guide is designed to help military families understand online social networking sites, the basic features that are typically available, and the benefits of using such sites. Use the Feedback section on MilitaryHOMEFRONT to send any comments you may have about the Guide.

DISCLAIMER

The websites or social networking sites referenced in this guide are created and maintained by other public organizations. The websites are referenced solely for your information and convenience.

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Introduction

According to *internetworldstats.com*, there are close to 211 million Internet users in the United States. More than 50% of Internet searches conducted in the United States are people searching for social networking communities. Focus groups and interviews with Service members and their families indicate that 77% of military families use the Internet, and one third of the focus group participants already use social networking communities. This research indicates that military families are willing to use the online environment to connect with other military families and with their loved ones during deployments.

The *Guide to Online Social Networking for Military Families* is designed to help military families understand online social networking sites, the basic features that are typically available, and the benefits of using such sites.

Web 2.0

The term "Web 2.0" was coined in 2005 and is used to define the next generation of World Wide Web applications. There are several mechanisms that define how "Web 2.0" is characterized and these mechanisms have dramatically increased the way people use and interact with the Internet and how they deliver, access, and share information. This guide highlights some of the fun and useful tools available today on websites and social networking sites.

Social Networking Communities

A social networking community is an online community that brings people together who have common interests. It is a place to connect with friends and make new acquaintances. The popularity of social networking has led to the creation of several different genres of communities such as:

- e-commerce communities (buying and selling goods)
- communities of interest (travel, food, hobbies)
- fantasy communities (imaginary online environments, role playing)
- communities for social good (charity, spiritual growth, personal empowerment, support for people with disabilities)

Examples of some of the common characteristics of social networking sites include:

- free registration (payment may be required for extended services)
- video and audio files, photos
- discussion forums/electronic bulletin boards, blogs
- chat rooms, instant messenger, email, or private messaging

Benefits of Social Networking

Military families regularly use social networking tools to stay in touch with their friends and extended family members. They author blogs about their adventures while stationed overseas and share photos, videos, and other items of interest with one another. Others enjoy social networking simply because they like to network with other people, especially those with similar interests.

> We stay connected with our extended family back in the U.S. by posting videos, photos, and interesting news. It was fun for our children to sit with me and read their Grandparents', Aunts' and Uncles' posts. It helped us feel connected to them although we were living on another continent.
>
> ~ USMC Spouse~

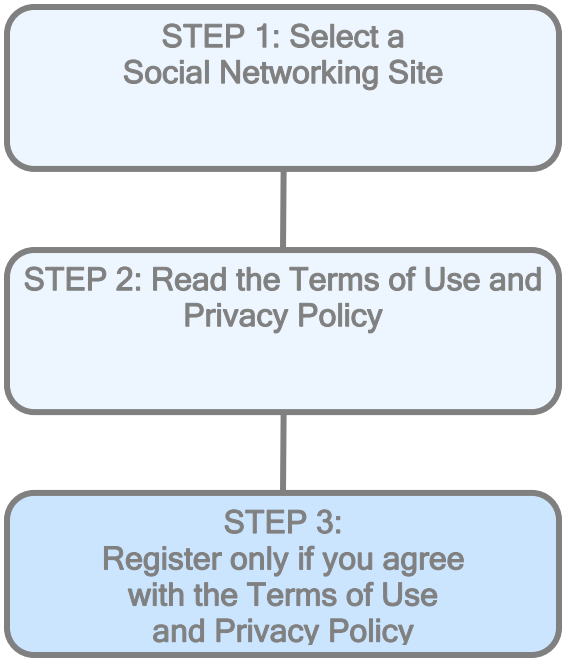
You can find social networking communities or groups for just about anything. Here are just a few examples:

- bargain hunting
- Civil War
- colleges and universities
- fishing
- scrapbooking
- travel abroad
- parenting

Many organizations also use social networking sites to inform people living in the area about upcoming events. For example, a family support center on a military installation might advertise an upcoming workshop on a social networking site.

The beauty of having your own community or group page on a social networking site is that it is easy-to-use and done in real-time. There is no waiting for a web design team or webmaster to upload your information at their convenience!

Standard Social Networking Site Features Defined



Registration
The required registration information to join social networking sites varies. Some social networking communities ask you to provide your gender, date of birth, relationship status, and religious or political views. Whenever you register for any site, ask yourself how the information you provide will be used by the website and always read the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy first.

Terms of Use Agreement
Agreeing to a social networking site's Terms of Use means that you agree to follow their rules when using the site. Before you nonchalantly click "I Agree," it is important that you read the Terms of Use because the agreement is legally binding. Often websites state that they can change the rules at their leisure. The bottom line is that once you read the agreement, you have to weigh the risks and the benefits. If you do not agree with a site's Terms of Use, do not register.

Privacy Policy or Statement
A website or social networking site's Privacy Policy describes what the site does with the personal information you provide during the registration process and while you are using the site. The Privacy Policy also describes how your information is collected, disclosed, or sold to other companies. Read the Privacy Policy carefully and understand how your personal information is stored and shared.

Customizable Profiles
There are usually optional areas in the profile you create where you can decide whether or not to share information such as your real name, email address, gender, or date of birth with the people or "friends" you want to invite to your page.

Other settings in your profile may include the ability to notify your "friends" when you post an article or another item of interest. In addition, you may want to be notified by email when another user posts in a discussion thread or forum (see the section "Email Notifications" on page 8 for further information).

Avatars

For the purpose of social networking, an avatar is an image that you choose to represent yourself on a website. In some cases, users will upload photos of themselves (not recommended) or they will find and upload an animated image or 3D image to their profile instead. Your avatar will appear whenever you post on the site and next to your username. There are entire websites dedicated to helping you design your own avatar. You can choose the hairstyle, facial features, themes, clothing, and accessories.

Friends Lists

During the registration process or later, you may be prompted to invite your friends, colleagues, and family to your community. You will be asked to send your friends an invitation to join the site. You can either type out each email address or there may be a less labor-intensive option offered that will essentially import all of the contacts you have in your Microsoft® or web-based email accounts such as *Hotmail.*

Remember to read the Terms of Use Agreement and Privacy Policies on the site first to learn how the site will use this information. You may be giving the site permission to spam your friends' email accounts with invitations to join the site or to purchase products from the site's partners. The rule of thumb is to exercise your common sense and always be conscious of operational security (see the section "Be Operational Security Conscious" on page 14 for further information). If you have colleagues, family, and friends in your home or web-based email accounts that have military email addresses, you should think twice about sending an invitation to join the site to that email account.

Discussion Forums/Message Boards/Electronic Bulletin Boards

There are many names that sites use to describe a web application that holds general topic discussions or discussions geared towards a specific interest. Posted messages are displayed in chronological order and discussions can branch off when the topic being discussed expands. Discussion forums are generally not the venue for extremely lengthy posts, but they are a place where you can share your ideas, voice your opinions, and learn from others on a wide range of topics.

Most discussion forums have their own "netiquette." However, there are established controls you can use if you find inappropriate content on a discussion forum. Some sites ask you to contact the webmaster; other more developed social networking sites have a reporting tool on the forum for reporting abuse. Examples of discussion forum content that would warrant reporting another user to the webmaster include: vulgar language, defamation, racist comments, and inappropriate or sexually explicit photographs or videos that have been embedded or attached.

Email Notifications
Email notifications are very useful when you don't have time throughout the day to check the activity on your page. Sites usually make email notifications a function that you can turn on or off, or specifically tailor to your preferences. You can find the email notification function in your profile or preferences and choose the types of content about which you want to receive notifications. For example, if you have posted a comment on another user's blog or participated in a discussion on a forum group, you might want to be notified when someone has posted on that blog or thread.

Private Messaging "PM"
Private Messaging or PM is used as a method for private, member-to-member communication on a social networking site. This is not a functionality that you turn on or off; it's always there when you want to communicate with other members more directly. There are advantages to using the private messaging feature on a site rather than connecting with another site user via email. Private messages are just that—private. It is an in-house feature that will not display your email address or Internet service provider if you choose to use it.

Let's imagine for a moment that you have met someone on a site, but you don't want to bog down the entire knitting community or group discussion forum with your lengthy conversation about specific basket weaving techniques. Use private messaging to communicate with each other one-on-one instead of including the entire group in the process. If another user sends you a private message and you don't want to talk to him/her, you can ignore that user. There's no netiquette that says you absolutely have to respond to any private message you receive from another user.

Chat Rooms
A chat room is a synchronous conferencing tool, much like Instant Messenger, that facilitates instantaneous communication with other people with similar interests. Using a chat room is similar to texting with someone back and forth. However, chat rooms have evolved and can support voice chat and videos as well. For example, *Yahoo! MySpace Chat* is a relatively new chat feature that is available on the social networking site *MySpace* and is used by registered users to chat directly with each other.

The majority of facilitated chat rooms have hosts or moderators that have the responsibility of keeping the conversations in the chat room free of undesirable behavior. Some chat rooms enable users to chat privately with other users if they do not want their conversation with each other to dominate the dialogue in the chat room.

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)

Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is the technology that is used to transmit voice conversations using the Internet. VoIP is the preferred method to use if you want to make a free phone call or an inexpensive phone call. This technology is great when you have Service members stationed overseas or away from home.

Our family uses Skype® to communicate with each other. We don't wait for photographs to arrive in the mail. We can see them and talk to them real-time! The kids loved it when Grandma got a new puppy!

If you have a fast broadband connection, a web camera, a microphone, and speakers, then you can also make video calls using this technology. There are several companies that provide VoIP services and downloading the software is usually free. Make sure your computer is running on a fairly recent operating system such as Microsoft Windows 2000, XP, or better.

Blogs

If you have already spent time browsing on social networking websites, you may be familiar with blogs. The term *blo*g is taken from the original term *web log* which means web content arranged in chronological order. There are some people that have become infamous just because of their blog entries. Bloggers write blogs for multiple reasons. Some bloggers publish their blog on a website instead of writing in a diary and use their blog to voice their opinions or to discuss their interests or hobbies.

There are multiple reasons why you might be interested in writing your own blog. Before you start, it is helpful to plan your blog and decide both the blog's purpose and intended audience. Figure 1 provides an example of a blog entry that is written by a military family member discussing the multiple ways he or she saves money.

You can have a lot of fun writing blogs; however, there are some caveats to publishing your blog on the Internet:

- Never publish your personal information. Anonymity is the best rule for a blogger to follow.
- Never publish another author's work without his/her explicit consent unless the work is copyright free.
- Do not write about your place of employment unless you are willing to face the consequences.

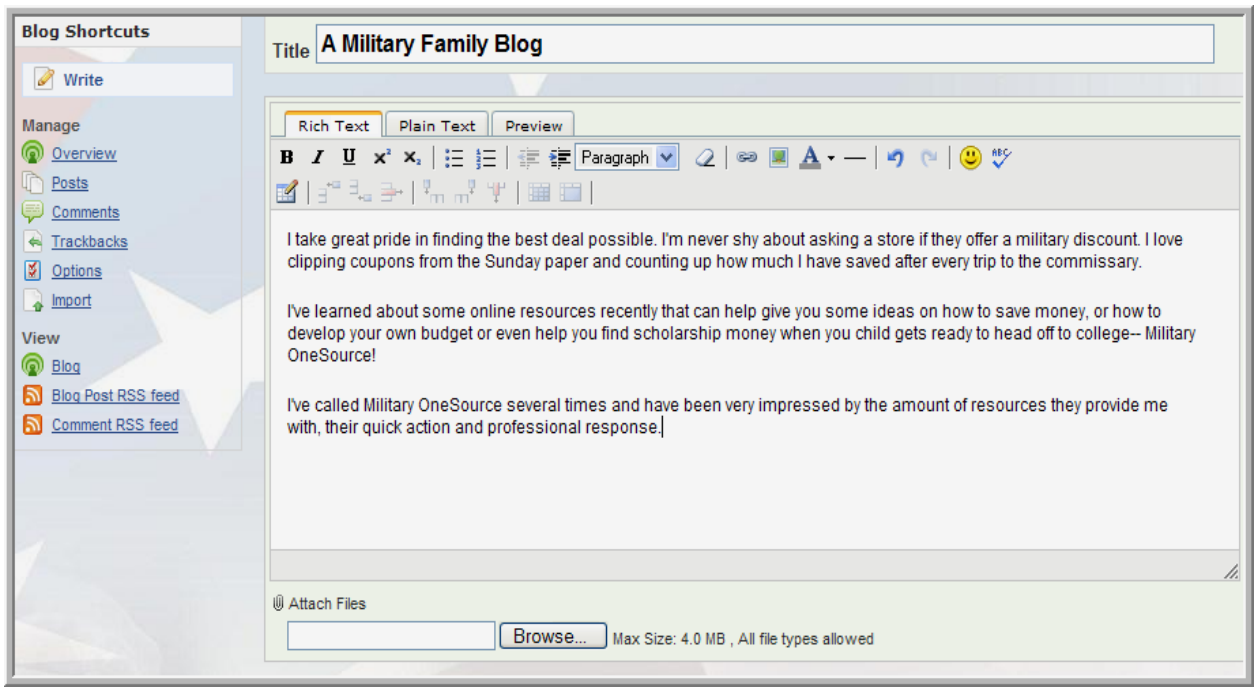


Fig.1. A sample blog entry using wiki software

Wiki

Wiki is software that allows users to create, edit, organize, and link to other content on the web. The blog shown in the figure above uses wikis that allow users to bold, italicize, or underline text, add bullets, images, emoticons, and more. When you create a discussion thread, respond to a discussion, or add a comment on a social networking website, you are using wiki software.

Uploading Images and Videos

Entire social networking sites, such as *You Tube*®, are dedicated to hosting users' uploaded videos so that others can view and comment on them.

Photos and videos are another way you can spruce up your profile page and make it more appealing. Some social networking sites have placed restrictions on the length of the video or the pixel size of the photographs and other images. Learn about the video or image parameters of the site beforehand to save yourself some unnecessary frustration.

Before you post any images on the Internet, make sure to ask yourself how others may feel if they see your photographs. Would you want your parents or your employer to see your photographs? Look closely at the images before you post them to make sure there is nothing that could indicate where you live, work, or go to school.

Folksonomic Tagging or Collective Tagging

"Folksonomic Tagging" means the classification of content or objects on a site. When you browse by tags, you are using a site, community, or user-made indexing system. You and other people apply tags like index keywords to new content to make the content easier to locate on the site. For example, if you upload a flyer for a support group meeting to your page and you want everyone on the site to find it easily, create a tag for it. Users search for content they are interested in by clicking tag names to see a list of related content.

A tag cloud visually groups tags so that you can look by popularity (more popular tags are in a larger font) and by alphabetical order.

Really Simple Syndication

Do you have a favorite website that you like to visit regularly to check for updates? Checking a website, blog or discussion thread daily for updates can be frustrating and time consuming. Really Simple Syndication (RSS) is an Extensible Markup Language (XML) based format that is used for distributing and collecting content on the internet. A website that allows other sites to publish some of its content, such as news headlines, creates an RSS document and registers the document with an RSS publisher.

A user who can read RSS-distributed content can use the information on a different site. For example, you can subscribe to the RSS feed for the DoD website, MilitaryHOMEFRONT, and add the feed to your user profile on *Facebook*®. Now all your friends in your network can read the same headlines you enjoy reading daily, if they visit your profile page. If you have a blog, having RSS is a great way to drive readers to your blog from your profile page on the social networking site that you belong to. RSS also eliminates the need for you to subscribe to website newsletters that can bog down your email inbox.

Special readers, called 'news aggregators' are required for you to be able to use RSS feeds. You can locate RSS readers via web search engines such as *Google* or *Yahoo*. Once you have your feed reader, it is a matter of finding sites that syndicate content and adding their RSS feed to the list of feeds your feed reader checks. Many sites display a small icon with the acronyms RSS, XML, or RDF to let you know a feed is available.

Social Bookmarking

In a social bookmarking system, users save links to web pages that they want to remember and/or share. In the past, popular commercial websites, such as news sites like *CNN.com*, provided visitors to their site with a mechanism to email news articles they found interesting to their colleagues, friends, and family. Today, these same websites provide users with the opportunity to share articles via social networking and on social news websites. Some social networking sites even offer an area for you to provide comments on an article before you post it on your social networking site profile.

For example, imagine you've just found a wonderful news article about a military family (see Figure 2) and you want to share it with all of your friends. You notice on the news website that there is a button or link that you can click that allows you to post the news article on your profile or page on the social networking site. There is a comment box for you to add your own details such as the comment added in Figure 2 below.

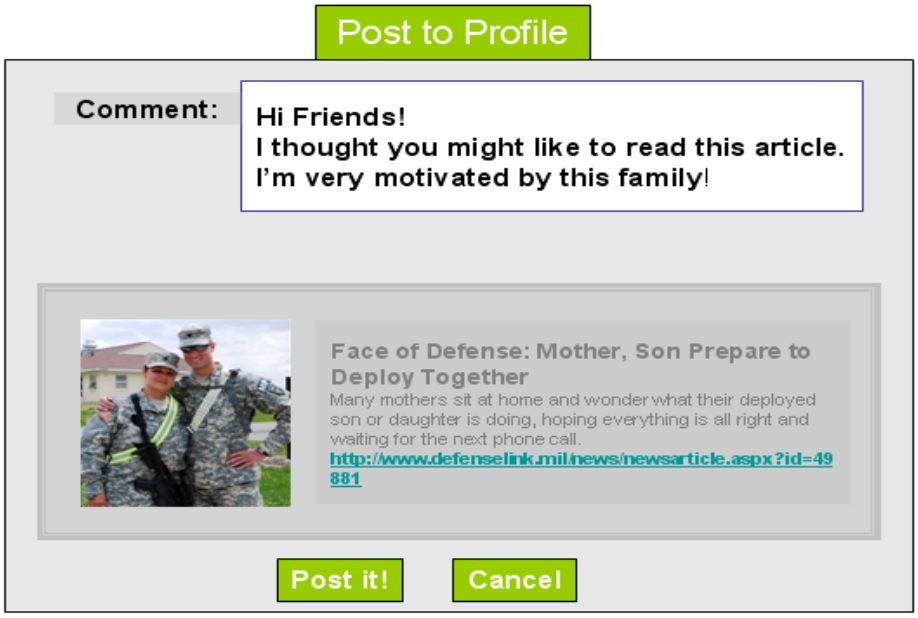


Fig. 2. Social bookmarking example

The Fun Stuff – Advanced Applications

Social networking sites have a lot of fun, ingenious Graphical User Interface (GUI) widget applications that help you customize your profile and interact with the other members of the site. For example, on the popular social networking site *Facebook*®, you can download a travel map (see Figure 3 below) that points to all the places you've visited around the world. You can also download and add famous quotes or music to your page.

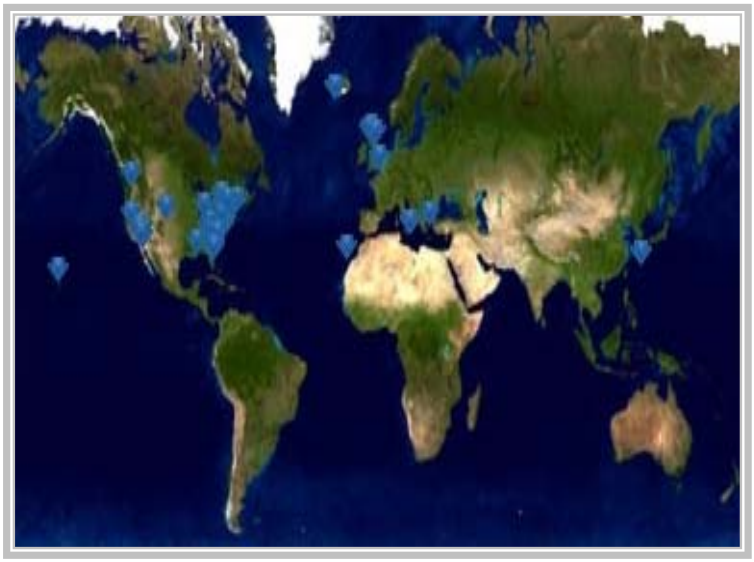


Fig. 3. Facebook travel map example

Widgets

Graphical User Interface (GUI) Widgets are snippets of computer programming code that are already built that can be inserted and moved around on your social networking page. Widgets help make your page more appealing and personalized. An example of a widget might be one that displays the Dow Jones Indexes or NASDAQ summary on your site or a widget that displays your local weather or a clock.

Glossary

If you are new to social networking, you may still feel a little overwhelmed by the social networking terminology. Get Net Wise, a project of the Internet Safety Foundation, has a comprehensive *Guide to Internet Terms: A Glossary* that you can use to familiarize yourself with even more social networking terminology.

Always Think Safety First!

Be Operational Security Conscious
Anyone can gain access to a social networking website and claim to be a military member or affiliated with the military by providing false credentials. The Director of the National Security Agency states that sharing the following information could pose operational security concerns:

- details about assignment history
- pictures from downrange
- details about personal decorations received
- recruit training
- combat and operation history

Service members should speak with their public affairs officer to receive guidance on the type of information they can divulge on social networking sites.

Although it is tempting, please try to disclose as little information as possible about your loved one serving in the U.S. military.

Children and Teenagers
Most social networking sites have established a minimum age (usually 13 years old) for children if they want to participate. Unfortunately, young children can easily gain access to sites and create profiles by entering the wrong birth date.

Ultimately the responsibility of keeping children safe while they are using the Internet falls on the parent(s). Monitor the amount of time your child spends on the internet and ask questions that address who your children are communicating with online.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation developed A Parent's Guide to Internet Safety to help parents understand the complexities of online child exploitation. Take a moment to read this important guide and speak to your children about using the Internet responsibly.

Locating Commercial Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites are easy to locate. Type "Social Networking Sites" into any search engine such as *Google* or *Yahoo* to begin your search. The free web content encyclopedia *Wikipedia* also has a comprehensive list of major social networking sites.

Department of Defense (DoD) Social Networking Sites

- **Defense Knowledge Online (DKO)** – Defense Knowledge Online is the DoD's world-wide intranet. With approval from the sponsor, verified family members (family members enrolled in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) as dependents) can register and join DKO. DKO's online collaboration tools include discussion forums and instant and private messaging. You can also store files, upload videos, and join groups and communities.

- **HOMEFRONTConnections** - Launched in 2008, HOMEFRONTConnections is a DOD social networking website that is free of targeted and commercial advertising. HOMEFRONTConnections has several communities and is steadily growing in the number of registered users and communities. Users can participate in discussions, write their own blogs, comment on others' blogs, and post videos, photos, and other documents.

Service-Specific Sites

- **Air Force Crossroads Spouse Network** – This site allows users to communicate online with other Air Force spouses. Talk about living the military lifestyle, cooking, and more.

DoD Affiliated Sites

- **Military OneSource Discussion Boards** – This site includes discussion boards that focus on a variety of military lifestyle topics, such as special needs, college education, and reducing your debt. Military OneSource also has podcasts, webinars, and RSS Subscriptions.

- **Military Spouse Career Center Spouse Community Forums** – This site includes discussion forums where military spouses communicate about employment, careers, TRICARE, and more.

- **SpouseBuzz** – This site includes a variety of blogs written by military spouses for military spouses on over 30 different topics.

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