**Social Networking Tool**

The present invention relates to a social networking tool and more specifically to a tool which takes the form of a portable electronic device.

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There are currently a number of social networking tools made available by service providers over the internet. Such tools make use of applications which are downloaded to personal computers connected to the internet and which allow a user to upload information for access by other users of the service. Thus a

10    user can establish a profile which is visible to others online.

Services of this kind are becoming increasingly popular since they allow users to initiate social contact with others regardless of geographical proximity. A number of conventional services of this type are available which allow a user to identify

15    another user based upon a variety of user information including their name, their appearance, geographical location, friends or history, such as the organisations or educational establishments with which they have been associated in the past.

These conventional types of social networking services are therefore useful in

20    allowing contact between users who already have some basic knowledge of each other based upon prior contact or events. They also allow communication of a wide variety of information or data electronically.

However these tools fall short when a user does not know sufficient information

25    to allow them to search effectively for a particular individual. Such instances occur when a user knows an individual by appearance only or else when a user knows only limited personal information, such as a person's forename or the like. This can result in a search returning hundreds or thousands of profiles for a user to review manually in the hope of finding the relevant individual.

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Furthermore, conventional tools require a user to interact with the service

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provider via the Internet and so there is often a significant delay between events in real time and a user updating their profile as a result of such events. Typically this delay is caused due to a user being away from their home when an event occurs such that they can only update their profile upon their return.

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Whilst a number of service providers do provide tools for updating their online profile using a portable electronic communications device, the process of updating information on a server for access by others can be time consuming. Thus the potential for unplanned social networking using conventional services is

10 limited since the instant in which social contact can be made has generally passed by the time the relevant users can update their own profile and/or check the updated profile of another user.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved social networking

15 tool which allows a user to check a profile of another user in real time and without the need for prior knowledge of their personal characteristics or details.

According to the present invention there is provided a social networking tool comprising machine-readable instructions for a portable electronic device,

20 wherein the device has: user input means, processing means connected to a memory for storage of user data pertaining to a user profile and means for transmitting and receiving wireless data signals relating to said user profile, characterised in that at least a portion of said user data is broadcast by the device over a predetermined area, such that other users automatically receive

25 said broadcast data when located within said predetermined area in the vicinity of said first user.

Thus the present invention avoids the need for the device to be reliant upon profile data which has been uploaded or downloaded to or from a server and can

30 instead allow real time monitoring of other users' profiles based upon proximity instead of personal details. Access to a user's profile then reveals personal

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details allowing a user to establish whether or not to instigate social contact.

In one embodiment he present invention allows profiles of users to be monitored and updated using only the portable electronic device and without connection to the Internet.

In one embodiment, the portable device can be connected to the Internet in order to synchronise with a concurrent user profile which is stored for access by others via the Internet.  Unlike conventional systems, the online profile acts as a back-up of the profile on the portable device.  Thus the online profile is of secondary importance and is not required for operation of the network implemented by way of multiple portable electronic devices.

According to a one embodiment, the electronic device automatically stores data pertaining to other users' profiles upon receipt.  Thus upon passing within the transmission radius of another user's device, the device according to the present invention will receive data which a user can view and/or process immediately or at a later time.

The device typically deletes unviewed or unprocessed data automatically according to present criteria.  The present criteria may comprise a certain time duration or else a count of more recent profiles encountered.

Preferably the device comprises any or any combination of a display, audio alert means, electro-mechanical alert means and/or a visual alert means such as an LED.  Any of said display or alert means may be used to indicate receipt of a profile data signal from another device.

According to one embodiment, a black list of profiles can be created and stored in the memory of the portable device.  Accordingly any data received relating to a profile stored in said black list may be blocked or rejected by said portable device

without storing the same.

In one embodiment the broadcast profile data from said first phone may not be visible to a black listed device in the transmission radius of the first device. Preferably black list data is broadcast with the profile data by the device identifying devices or profiles for which the proximity or profile data is to be blocked or rejected. Accordingly each device and/or profile may have a dedicated ID code. Thus when a device receives its own code as a black list data transmission, it will be prevented from displaying or storing the associated profile data within that transmission.

In one embodiment the user can store a white list identifying profiles for which a user wishes to be alerted of their proximity.

Whilst the above invention is discussed in relation to social networking, it is to be appreciated that the social element of the invention does not preclude uses such as, for example, business networking or the like. The present invention may be particularly useful when employed to aid in establishing meetings with potential contacts, for example, at business exhibitions or the like.

According to a preferred embodiment, the receiving device determines and displays a value of the distance between the transmitting and receiving devices. This may be determined based upon the strength of the received signal.

The present invention is particularly advantageous in that it can serve to enable contact to be made between two users without the need to exchange information which has not been pre-allowed by the users. Thus the broadcast data can be as scant or detailed as a user wishes. Upon meeting and assigning another user as a friend, the other user may then be able to view more detailed profile information on the first user.

In one embodiment, the device is also capable of transmitting and receiving data in a manner suitable to allow conventional voice communication and/or data transfer in line with the standards adopted by conventional portable communications devices. The device may have a single or multiple transceiver means for handling the transmission and reception of signals having different signal characteristics as required for operation of the device in a conventional mode as well as in conjunction with the present invention.

According to a second aspect of the present invention, there is provided a social networking system comprising a plurality of portable electronic devices.

Accordingly to a third aspect of the present invention, there is provided a method for facilitating a social network using portable electronic devices.

It will be appreciated that the associated network is established by a plurality of devices sharing profile data and white and black list data. In this regard the network is transient and limited to specific areas in the vicinity surrounding individual devices.

Individual network will overlap as devices move around. In one embodiment separate transmission means may be provided to broadcast data emanating from one or more proximate devices over a greater area.

Preferred embodiments of the present invention will now be described in further detail with reference to the accompanying drawings, of which:

Figure 1 shows a schematic of the basic components of an apparatus according to the present invention;

Figure 2 shows a schematic of a system according to the present invention;

Figure 3 shows a flow diagram of an application start routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention;

Figure 4 shows a flow chart of a data retrieval routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention;

Figure 5 shows a flow chart of a profile input routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention;

Figure 6 shows a flow chart of a main routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention;

Figure 7 shows a flow chart of a search and update routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention;

Figure 8 shows a flow chart of a browse routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention;

Figure 9 shows an alert setting sub-routine for operation of a portable device according to the present invention; and,

Figure 10 shows a synchronization routine for operation of the portable device to communicate with a web site server.

Turning firstly to figure 1, there is shown the principal components of a device 10 according to the present invention. The device generally takes the form of a mobile telephone, the basic components of which will be well understood by a person skilled in the art.

The device 10 generally comprises a housing 12, to which is mounted an antenna 14.

The antenna 14 is connected to transmission and receiver means which may take the form of a multi-channel transceiver module 16, which is in turn connected to control means in the form of a micro-processor 18. In this embodiment, the microprocessor 18 is integrated in the form of a micro-controller such that it comprises a CPU, RAM, ROM and one or more timers. However it will be appreciated that a separate non-volatile memory 19 is also provided for storage of data as will be described below.

The device also comprises a power source in the form of a rechargeable battery cell 20. The battery 20 supplies power to the electronic components within the device which further comprise a display screen 22 and audio input/output means 24 which takes the form of speaker and microphone.

The micro-controller 18 is provided with machine readable instructions for operation of the device which are stored as a program on the micro-controller chip. In addition the non-volatile memory is used to store profile data for one or more users.

The transceiver module 16 is capable of transmitting and receiving radio signals to allow wireless connectivity with mobile phones, mobile PCs, handheld computers and other peripherals. The transceiver module 16 is typically capable of transmitting signals in the frequency range 2.4 to 2.5 GHz and with data transfer rates of up to 720 or greater kilobits per second such that the device 10 can operate according to the BLUETOOTH (RTM) standard. The effective transmission range of conventional mobile telephones is in the region of 10 metres although greater ranges may be achieved using boosting equipment which may provide an effective range of 50-100 metres or more.

The transceiver module 16 may also be capable of operating under WiFi (RTM) specifications conforming to the IEEE 802.11 protocol.  This allows faster data transfer at up to 54Mbps or higher at similar ranges to that of BLUETOOTH.

5      The device is also capable of operating in the frequency and power range suitable for conventional voice call and related data to be exchanged.

Turning now to figure 2, there is shown the basic components of a system according to the present invention, which comprises a number of devices 10,

10     which are each capable of transmitting and receiving radio signals as described above.

Each device running the application to be described below emits a signal over a transmission area indicated by the area enclosed by line 26.  The signal contains

15     data indicating that the application is running on the device 10 and is emitted either continuously or intermittently when the application is running.  Each device running the application searches for the application signal emitted by other devices.  Thus when one device 10 enters the transmission area of another device, the devices receive the application signal along with any profile data

20     transmitted therewith.

This establishes a localised wireless network of devices, over which selected profile data about the users can be exchanged.

25     Whilst not essential to the present invention, it will be appreciated that mobile telephones and the like provide for connection to one or more base stations 28 in order to allow voice calls or other data transfer over a communication network. Thus profile data stored in the device memory 19 can also be transmitted to a web site server 30 over the internet 32 via the base station 28.  Accordingly a

30     service provider may host a web site on the server 30 which is accessible via the internet 32.  The web site will typically allow access to each user's profile using

search tools and the like in a conventional manner as will be understood by user's of such services.

The present invention is particularly advantageous in that social events and interactions between users of the networking service occurring in real time will be logged by the portable device 10 carried by the user. This therefore allows concurrent recordal of such interactions and events by the portable device 10. The logging or recordal of such events will be automated and can be uploaded either automatically or else manually to a profile stored on the server 30 at a later time.

The avoidance of the need for a user to manually instigate and enter details of social events or interactions online promotes networking on the move which more closely corresponds to real life events. This can lead to a significant increase in social interactions, such as friend requests and the like, when compared to conventional networking online, which requires such interactions to be premeditated. Thus, unlike other networking tools, the present inventions is operated based on the physical proximity of users.

The operation of the mobile device 10 will be described in further detail with reference to the flow charts of figures 3 to 10. The present invention may be implemented by on or more modules of code, typically forming a program or application, which is stored on the mobile device. The application may be programmed using Java and may be run on the device for example by way of a Java Applet. The application may be preinstalled on the mobile device hardware or else may be downloaded thereto in a conventional manner.

Each of the application functions described below may be implemented by one or more modules.

Turning to figure 3, there is shown a flow chart relating to the application start sequence. At step 34, the user is requested to accept a license agreement before allowing access to the main program functionality. In the event that the user has previously accepted the current version of the license agreement, the application proceeds to step 36. If the user has used the application before, the main subroutine 46 is run which presents the user with a main menu as will be described below.

If the user has not used the application before, a profile for the user will need to be established and saved to the device. At 38, the user is presented with the options of running a 'wizard' routine 40 for profile data input as shown in figure 5, or else a routine 42 for retrieval of profile data from web server 30 as shown in figure 4.

Before proceeding to the main subroutine, the application performs a check of the profile data at 44 to ensure it meets certain requirements. These may comprise minimal data requirements and may further require validation of the data against profile data made available from one or more other sources.

Turning to figure 4, the data retrieval process first requires the user to verify their identity at 48 by entering verification details such as their email address and/or password for accessing an online profile. The device 10 then attempts to access the profile data on the servers 30 over the internet using the user input credentials at step 50. If the user if correctly identified the profile data is downloaded at 52 and the user may then access the main menu.

Step 50 may also perform a check to determine whether the profile data request from the device conflicts with a profile established on a different portable device 10. In this instance the user may be asked to further verify their identity and given the option of sharing the profile between two devices or else restricting the profile to only one device.

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When the user contacts the web servers 30 for profile data upload or download, the server may forward further data automatically to the device such as program updates or else data relating to marketing media such as graphical and/or audio information data to be presented to the user in the form of messages or adverts. Thus the user can be kept informed of any information relating to the social networking service or provided with adverts from selected providers. The adverts may be selected in accordance with a user's profile data such that they are customized for each user. This form of advertising provides a useful revenue stream for the service provider which may avoid the need for user subscription costs.

In figure 5, the wizard routine allows a user to create a profile using the device 10. The user is guided through a series of profile data entry steps 53 to 58, which allow a user to enter a number of pieces of information such as their name, nick name, gender, date of birth, work status, employer, current status, socials habits, apparel, musical preferences, physical appearance and size, marital status, sexuality, membership of sporting or recreational organizations and clubs, social activities as well as other personal information and preferences. The user may also select a photograph or other physical representation to save for display with their profile.

At 58, the application may check the user's age from the entered data or else ask the user to verify their age. Access to the service may be prohibited at step 62 for people under the age of 18 years old. This step may also be undertaken at the license agreement stage 34 in figure 3.

At 60 the user is informed how their personal profile information will be made available to other users and asked to select at 56, which profile data can be disseminated to other users by the service. In this regard, the user's profile is preselected and authorized by the user prior to being made available to others.

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The detail of the profile may therefore be tailored by a user to be particularly detailed or scant depending on their openness to sharing information and potential contact by other users.

5   The profile data and preferences are then saved to the device at step 64.

The main routine 46 is shown in figure 6 and commences by loading the user's current profile data from the device memory at step 66. Once the profile data is available, the routine initiates the wireless data transmission, search and update

10   routine 68 as shown in figure 7. Once activated, this routine runs constantly or else intermittently in the background such that a user's profile is visible to others in the vicinity of the user until the user deactivates the application or turns off the device. This routine is discussed below in relation to figure 7.

15   The user is presented with a main menu at step 70, from which a user can select from the main application functions including a browse function 72, a messaging function 74, a profile view and amendment function 76, a friends list function 78, a block user function 80, an alert function 82, a web site synchronization function 84 and a settings function 86. The browse, alerts and web site synchronization

20   routines are described below in relation to respective figures 8, 9 and 10.

The messaging function 74 allows a user to send and receive messages from other user's of the service in a conventional manner. The messages typically comprise text or voicemail messages but may additionally allow sending and

25   receiving of other data files relating to for example still or moving images, sounds, music or the like. The messaging function provides a user with access to an inbox which lists the messages sent to the user, allowing the user to select the relevant message or associated data file for display. The messaging function also allows a user to compose and send messages and manage sent and

30   received messages by saving them to selected folders or deleting them as appropriate.

The friends list 78 and block user 80 functions allows a user to select other users, which are respectively preferred or disallowed contact with the user. A friends list will typically be established by a user acknowledging another user's profile. This will be achieved by a user opening a profile of another user when they are in range and selecting an option to save that user as a friend. The application will firstly check to determine whether the profile of the other user is already blocked or else saved as a friend and store or update the profile data as necessary.

The friends list allows a user to view the profiles of their friends even when they are not within range. The profiles in the friends list are stored with friends identifier so that the device will automatically recognize when a friend comes within transmission range. The device may then automatically update the stored friends profile to correspond to the current profile data being transmitted by the friends device.

Conversely, a user may select to block another user by opening their profile and selecting an option to block that user. The application will firstly check to determine whether the profile of the other user is already blocked or else saved as a friend and store or update the profile data as necessary. An identifier for each of the blocked users will be stored against their profile so that the device can automatically recognize when a blocked user comes within transmission range or attempts to instigate contact with the user by way of a message or otherwise.

The identifier may take the form of a piece of data, such as for example a data string which can be shared with the other device upon transmission of the profile data therebetween. Thus it is possible that a user can select to block any or all communication or contact with e blocked user. A user may select that transmission of their profile data is not visible to the blocked user and vice versa such that the blocked user's are not notified when they are in transmission range.

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Alternatively or additionally, a first user may be alerted when a blocked user is in range.

One simple method of implementing a friends and blocked users function is to provide each user profile with a unique alphanumeric identification string which is transmitted along with the user's profile data for receipt and storage by other devices. A device may transmit the strings of friends or blocked users as part of the user profile data. This identification string for friends or blocked users may be amended to include the friend or blocked user identifiers such that upon receipt of its own identification string from another device, the receiving device can immediately acknowledge that it has been updated as a friend or blocked user by that device and take appropriate action to either inhibit or forward message or profile data from that device to its user.

Accordingly blocked devices may still receive data transmitted by blocked device but may inhibit dissemination of that information to the user.

Bothe friends lists and blocked users lists are stored in the device memory for retrieval, viewing and/or amendment by a user. Thus a user's friends and blocked users selections can be changed over time in accordance with the user's preferences.

The profile review routine 76 may run the wizard routine shown in figure 5 but will typically display editable profile fields to the user with the option to simply view them or else delete or update them as appropriate. Deleted or updated fields are then stored to the device memory.

Turning now to figure 7, a search and update routine is shown, which is referred to in figure 6 as the "wireless" subroutine 68. The routine initializes and then enters an iterative loop 88. The loop 88 steps start with the device searching at step 90 for other devices running the application in the transmission area 26 of

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the first device 10. The device then retrieves profiles at 92 from the near-by devices found during the search at 90 and enters them within an array. The profiles may be listed and recognized by the unique identifier as described above or else by other profile information such as name, email address, or the like.

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The array, typically in the form of a list, of profiles/devices encountered are stored to the device memory automatically and are maintained in the device memory for later review by a user. If a profile is blocked then it may be handled differently and may be saved and/or discarded separately from other profile entries.

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At 94, the most recently received profile data is compared to previously saved profile data for which there is an entry in the array and the array is updated with any new entries. In the event that previously saved entries have not entered the vicinity of the user for a predetermined length of time, then they may be deleted from the array automatically. Alternatively, the array may be updated based on the number of times a user has viewed and entry in the array but taken no action in relation to that profile. Additionally or alternatively, the array may be updated to remove entries based upon the number of times an entry has been presented to a user by the device without the user selecting to view the full profile information for that user.

Once the array has been updated to delete any relevant entries, the array is sorted at step 96 by one or more criteria, such as alphabetically by name or else by time order in which the profiles were last received.

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The device then checks the newly encountered entries at 98 to determine if they have previously been identified by the user as either friends or blocked users. In the event that a friend or blocked user is encountered, the device issues a visual, audio or tactile alert to the user via the display screen 22, the speaker/buzzer 24 or a vibration means (not shown). Additionally , or else alternatively, the device

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may remove an entry from the array in the event that it is determined to relate to a blocked user.

Once the array of users has been updated the device then updates the user's message function at 100 by sending any messages prepared for sending by the user. These will typically be saved for sending in the user's message outbox. At this stage the device may also check for any received messages from other user's in the vicinity of the device 10.

At the step 102, the device then updates the profile data stored for sending by the wireless transmission means 16 to take account for any profile changes made manually by the user or else automatically by the device. This ensures that the transmitted data is always up to date.

At 104 the application pauses for a period of time before iterating the steps 90 to 102 of the loop 88. This pause helps to avoid unnecessary processing of data and thus reduces power consumption. The length of the pause is dependent on the number of users concurrently found by search step 90. Thus if there are a large number of transmitting devices in the vicinity of the user, the pause will be minimal in order to ensure that the information presented to the user by the device 10 is up to date. Conversely, if there are no other devices in the vicinity of the user, the pause will be greater to avoid unnecessary processing of data when there are no changes to report.

In figure 8, the array of users detected in the vicinity of the device 10 are displayed to the user on screen at step 106. The array is typically presented as a list wherein each row provides minimal profile data such as the name or nick name from each profile such that the user can scroll up and down the list to highlight the relevant entry.

The user can then select to either view the full profile for an entry at 108; add the entry as a friend at 110; add the entry as a blocked user at 112; or send a message to that user at 114.  This list of options is non-exhaustive and it is envisaged that further actions may be available in respect of a list entry such as a flag action, and add reminder action, and/or an add comment action.

If no action is selected by the user at 107, the routine enters a loop 109 which refreshes the list is automatically as a result of operation of the search and update routine shown in figure 7.

Figure 9 shows how alerts can be established and effected using the device.  At step 116 the user is presented with a display indicating the current alert settings. This typically shows a checklist of actions or criteria which result in an alert being provided by the device.  At 118 a user can manually enable or disable alerts for friends or blocked user conditions and set the type of alert to be provided, such as a vibration, sound, flashing of the screen 22, or display of a textual and/or graphical message on the screen.

The changes made by the user are saved or discarded at 120.

A user may also select a custom edit option which displays a greater variety of alert options for a user at step 122.  This option may allow a user to set an alert at 124 for example when the device receives profile data for a person of a certain age range, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, physical or social characteristics or other personal criteria which may be provided in a user's profile.  In this manner alerts can be established in respect of not only friends and blocked users but also for new individuals encountered for the first time by the user.  This helps instigate networking between individuals who may otherwise not have met or been aware of each other's presence.

In addition, if a user is intending to meet someone at a particular location, the user can set an alert for a known characteristic of that person so as to be alerted of the other person's presence. This function may be particularly useful at busy events such as exhibitions, festivals, concerts or other social or business gatherings.

The alert settings can be saved or discarded by the user at 126.

Turning now to figure 10, there is shown a routine for synchronizing the profile on the device 10 with the profile for the user stored on the web site server 30. At step 128 the user is prompted to enter verification data such as their email address and password in order to allow the device to contact the web site servers 30.

Once the user have been verified against login information required by the server, profile data stored on the device can be uploaded via the internet at 130 to the user profile stored on the server. The device may require the user to input the login account credentials at step 128 or else may provide the required login credentials automatically upon input of the user verification required by the device application.

Similar to step 50 in figure 4, the server may download service or marketing data to the device during upload of the profile data at 132. The downloaded data may be displayed to the user during data transfer with the server and/or may be stored by the device for display at a later time, such as when the user undertakes specified application steps using the device, such as initiating the application, closing the application, adding or deleting friends, alerts or messages or else upon receipt of an alert. The downloaded data may comprise machine instructions to overwrite, update or delete existing marketing or service data stored on the device from a previous download.

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In a different scenario, the user may have been using their online profile for networking without activating the application on the device, for example when at home.  In this instance the server based profile will be more up to date than the profile stored on the device.  In such an instance the user may elect  to download profile data from the server 30 in order to update the device profile, which data is subsequently saved on the device at 136.

For either uploading or downloading, the profile data is accompanied with corresponding friends data, message data as well as any other profile-related data for update to ensure that both online and device accounts are in line.  In the event that the user attempts to upload or download data which has been superseded by newer profile or message data, the device may issue a warning to the user that such steps will result in the loss of more recent data.

Once synchronized, the application returns to the main menu at 138.

When using the file upload to the server, the online profile essentially acts as a backup of the profile stored on the device.  Thus if the device profile becomes corrupted or if the device is lost or stolen, a user can simply retrieve the last stored profile on a new device according to the steps of figure 4.  In addition the user can use the online profile to block subsequent communication with the old device.

In one embodiment, for the sake of practicality, the online profile may comprise more detailed profile information than the mobile device.  The online profile may store multiple application as well as images and videos selected by the user as will be understood by the person skilled in the art.  The web site will also allow searching for individuals in a conventional manner using known profile data.  A user can also see the friends lists for their friends profiles.

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By way of a further development, hubs may be provided for installation in public places or recreational areas such as bars, pubs, cinemas or other venues. These hubs could perform two purposes.  Firstly they could help increase the wireless range of devices such that signals received by the hub could be

5    transmitted over a wider area.  Secondly they could provide an additional avenue for advertising or other downloadable material to be sent out to people running the application.   This could include general advertising, specific promotions, service information or other data such as news alerts, or else information relating to the venue or event being attended..

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The adverts could be controlled and scheduled to be sent from individual locations, or from a head office using demographics to determine advertising targets via their profiles.  In any embodiment it is envisaged that the user will have the ability to opt in or out of some or all of the update services which are

15    transmitted to the device upon communication with the web site or a hub.

## Claims

1.    A social networking tool comprising a first portable electronic device, having:

5          user input means;

processing means connected to a memory for storage of first user data pertaining to a first user profile;

a display for output of said first user profile data to said user;

means for transmitting and receiving wireless data signals relating to said

10    first user profile, wherein the device is provided with machine-readable instructions  controlling the device to broadcast at least a portion of said first user profile data over a range-limited broadcast area,

and wherein the device is controlled to automatically recognize and receive broadcast profile data from one or more further devices when located

15    within said range-limited area so as to allow display of said received profile data pertaining to one or more further users located within the vicinity of said first device.

2.    A social networking tool according to claim 1, wherein the wireless data

20    signal comprises an identifier recognisable to said one or more further portable devices within the broadcast area of the first device, said identifier indicating that the first device is broadcasting profile data.

3.    A social networking tool according to claim 1 or claim 2, wherein the first

25    device is controlled to broadcast said first user profile data continuously or intermittently.

4.    A social networking tool according to any one of claims 1 to 3, wherein the first electronic device automatically stores data pertaining to a further user's

30    profile upon receipt.

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5.      A social networking tool according to claim 4, wherein the first electronic device is controlled to automatically delete said data pertaining to said further user's profile once predetermined criteria are met.

6.      A social networking tool according to claim 5, wherein the predetermined criteria comprise a period of time for which the stored data pertaining to said further user's profile is not accessed.

7.      A social networking tool according to claim 5, wherein the predetermined criteria comprise a number of profiles received and stored by the first device subsequent to said further user's profile.

8.      A social networking tool according to any preceding claim, wherein the device intermittently checks for wireless data signals broadcast by said further devices pertaining to one or more further user profiles.

9.      A social networking tool according to claim 8, wherein the device pauses between checks, the duration of said pause being determine in relation to the number of further devices detected.

10.      A social networking tool according to any preceding claim, wherein the device allows a user to assign a status identifier to a received user profile.

11.      A social networking tool according to claim 10, wherein the status identifier may comprise any or any combination of a friend identifier or a blocked user identifier.

12.      A social networking tool according to claim 11, wherein the data signal broadcast by said first device comprises data pertaining to one or more further users for whom a status identifier has been saved on said first device.

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13.     A social networking tool according to claim 11 or claim 12, wherein the device is controlled to provide an alert to said first user when a signal is received from a further device for which a status identifier has been stored on said first device.

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14.     A social networking tool according to any one of claims 11 to 13, wherein upon receipt of a blocked user status identifier in relation to a further user, the first device prevents the display of information pertaining to said further user on said first device.

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15.     A social networking tool according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the first device is controlled to determine the distance between the first device and one or more further devices upon receipt of the data signal therefrom.

15     16.     A social networking tool according to any one of the preceding claims, wherein the first device is controlled to allow the user to select only a portion of the stored profile data for broadcast.

17.     A social networking tool according to any one of the preceding claims, 20     wherein the portable device is arranged for data transfer with one or more servers via the internet so as to allow comparison between an online profile for the first user and the first profile stored on the device.

18.     A social networking tool according to claim 17, wherein the device is 25     arranged to update the first user profile with corresponding data received in respect of the online profile in the event that the online profile data has been modified more recently than the corresponding data stored on the device.

19.     A social networking tool according to any one of the preceding claims, 30     wherein the first portable device is arranged to provide an alert upon entry of another broadcasting device within said broadcast area based upon preferred

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profile criteria stored on said first device by said first user.

20. A social networking system comprising a plurality of portable electronic devices according to any one of claims 1 to 19.

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21. A social networking system according to claim 20, further comprising one or more servers on which a corresponding user profile is stored for said first and further users, wherein said corresponding user profiles are accessible via the internet and wherein, upon receipt of user profile data from a first or further

10 portable device, the server is arranged to compare said received data with the corresponding user profile data stored on said server.

22. A social networking system according to claim 21, wherein the server is arranged to update the corresponding profile data on the server with the profile

15 data from the portable device in the event that the received data has been modified more recently than the corresponding profile data stored by the server.

23. A method for facilitating a social network using portable electronic devices comprising:

20 providing a data carrier comprising machine readable instructions for a first portable electronic device wherein the machine readable instructions are arranged to control the device to broadcast at least a portion of said first user profile data over a range-limited broadcast area and to automatically recognize and receive broadcast profile data from one or more further devices when located

25 within said range-limited area so as to allow display on said first device of said received profile data pertaining to one or more further users located within the vicinity of said first device.

24. A method according to claim 23, further comprising the steps of:

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storing user profile data for said first and further users on one or more servers in order to establish corresponding user profiles which are accessible to said users via the internet;

allowing communication of profile data between said first and further devices and said server;

comparing communicated profile data with corresponding profile data stored on either the portable devices or the server in order to establish whether the stored data should be updated with said communicated data; and,

updating at least a portion of the stored profile data with the corresponding portion of the communicated profile data.