

The Top 10 Social Networking Annoyances

It's great to keep in touch with your friends and colleagues, but does the price have to be spam, zombie bites, and friend invitations from people you've never heard of?

Scott Spanbauer, PC World
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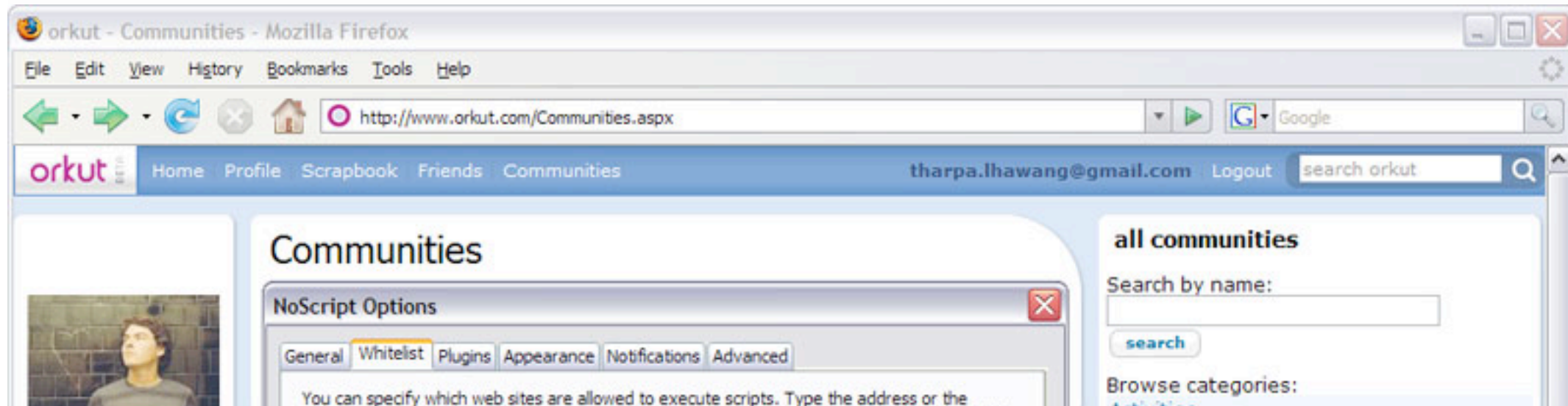
The same question people used to ask about before they came around? The answer is yes, mail, but creating and maintaining these virtual most about today's social networking services.

10. MySpace Kitsch



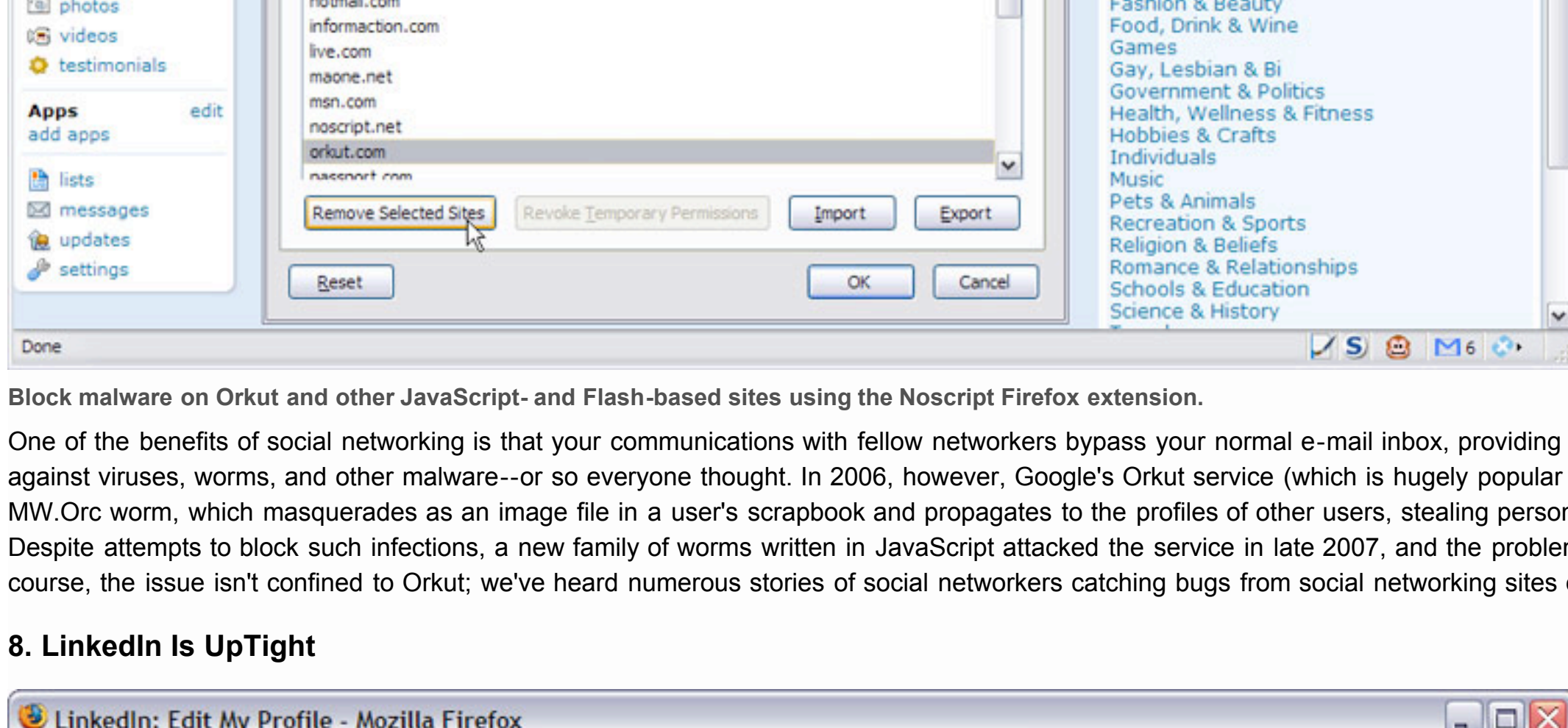
The Custom Layout Dis/Enable Greasemonkey script in Firefox can prevent your browser from crashing while rendering MySpace pages. Unlike Facebook, which adheres to a relatively rigid blue-on-white, three-column design, MySpace lets you decorate your page with background images, themes, and unconventional layouts. That flexibility provides just enough rope for many Myspacers, and the results range from ugly to completely unreadable. Some MySpace pages are so poorly designed that they can crash the hardest browser--and this alone has caused many social networkers to flee the aesthetic chaos of MySpace for the relative calm of Facebook. Thankfully, some enterprising script authors have come up with scripts that tone down the MySpace bling and clutter: One of my favorite MySpace scripts puts a button on the screen that turns custom page styles on and off with a single click.

9. The Worms Crawl In



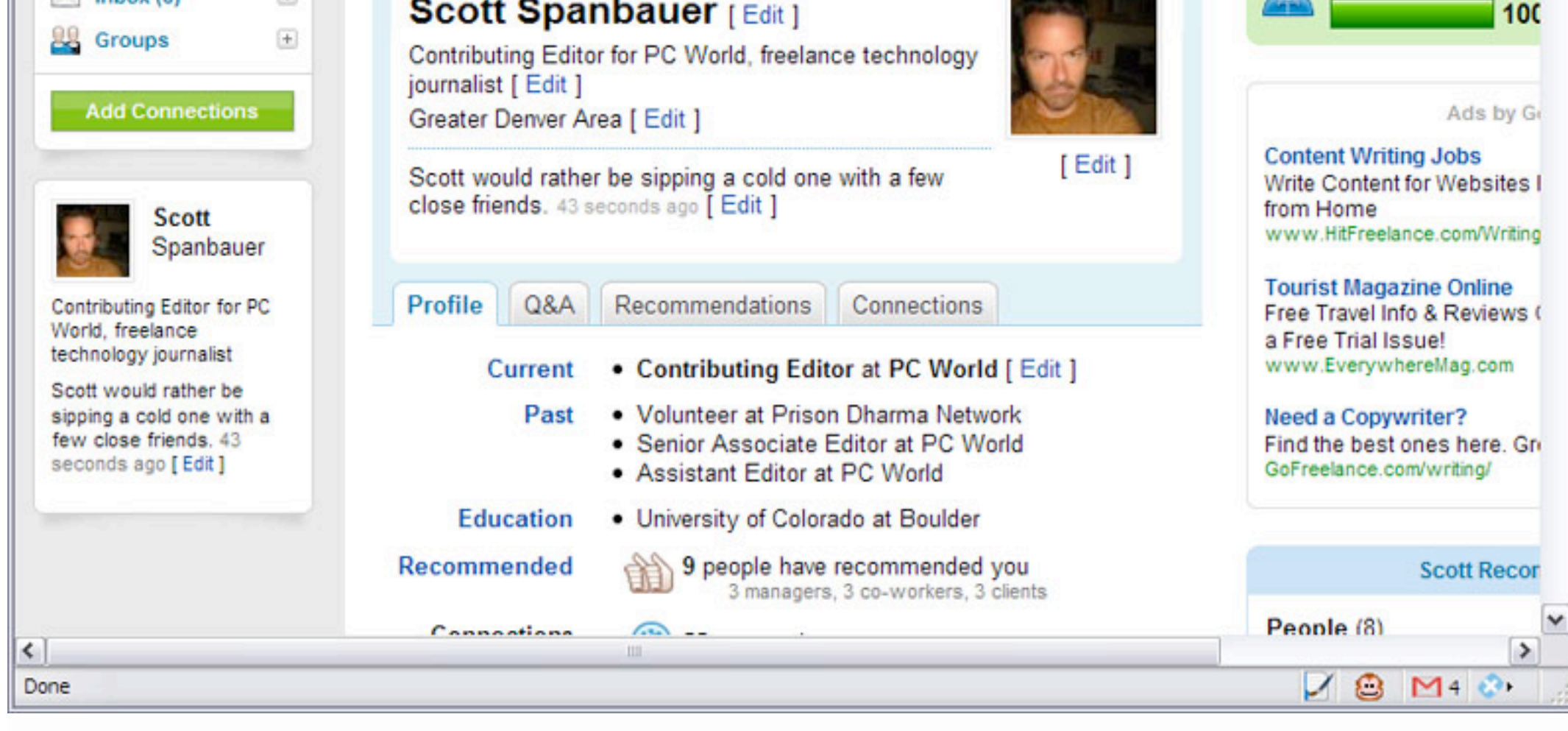
Block malware on Orkut and other JavaScript- and Flash-based sites using the NoScript Firefox extension. One of the benefits of social networking is that your communications with fellow networkers bypass your normal e-mail inbox, providing a measure of safety against viruses, worms, and other malware--or so everyone thought. In 2006, however, Google's Orkut service (which is hugely popular in Brazil) was hit by the MW.Orc worm, which masquerades as an image file in a user's scrapbook and propagates to the profiles of other users, stealing personal data along the way. Despite attempts to block such infections, a new family of worms written in JavaScript attacked the service in late 2007, and the problems continue today. Of course, the issue isn't confined to Orkut; we've heard numerous stories of social networkers catching bugs from social networking sites outside Brazil too.

8. LinkedIn Is UpTight



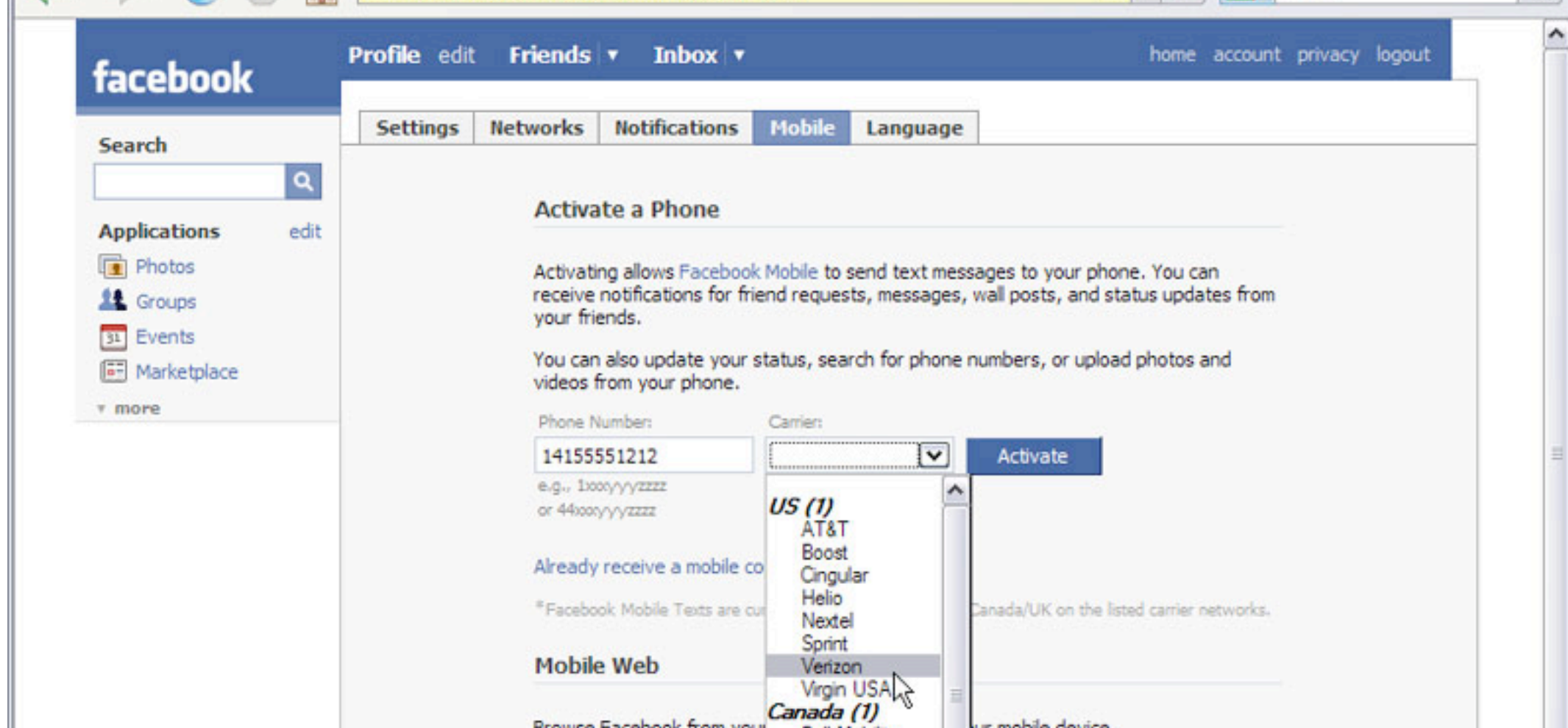
LinkedIn doesn't leave users much room to express their personalities. Almost anything goes on MySpace, but not so on LinkedIn, where the strictly-business motif discourages personal expression outside of a photo (a fairly recent innovation), a status line, and standard resume entries. Sure, the whole point of LinkedIn is to put your most professional foot forward, but really, LinkedIn, couldn't we loosen the necktie just a little? LinkedIn may never support psychedelic backdrops or party photos, but it could do a lot more to help you project something more than an utterly antisipic persona.

7. Mobile Social Networking Still Kinda Weak



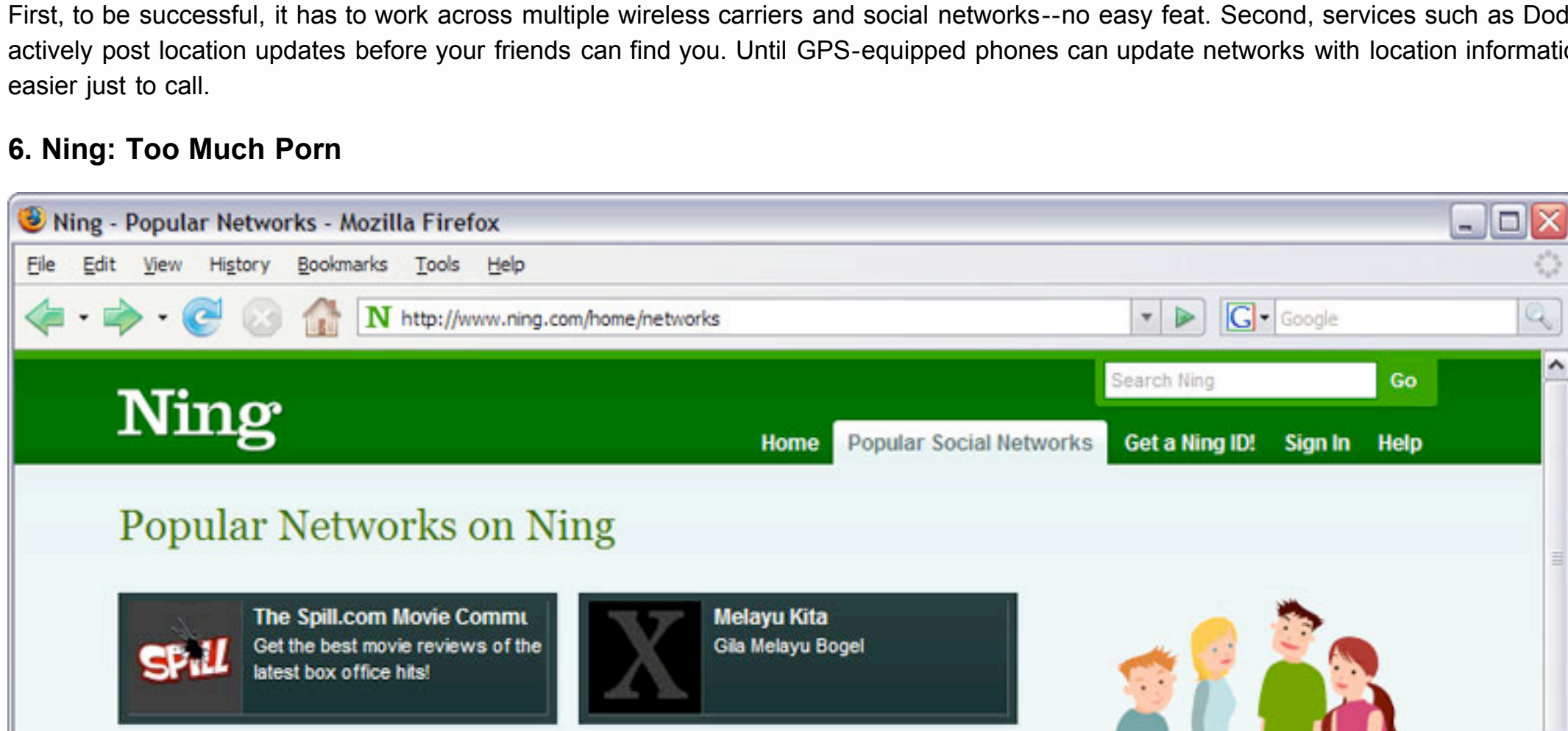
You can put Facebook on your phone, provided that your wireless carrier is supported--sorry, T-Mobile subscribers. Imagine receiving real-time, location-based status messages from your friends as they make the rounds of the local bars and restaurants. Although Facebook, MySpace, and other services are gradually adding mobile-phone features, that kind of mobile social networking is still just a dream for a number of reasons. First, to be successful, it has to work across multiple wireless carriers and social networks--no easy feat. Second, services such as Dodgeball require you to actively post location updates before your friends can find you. Until GPS-equipped phones can update networks with location information automatically, it's still easier just to call.

6. Ning: Too Much Porn



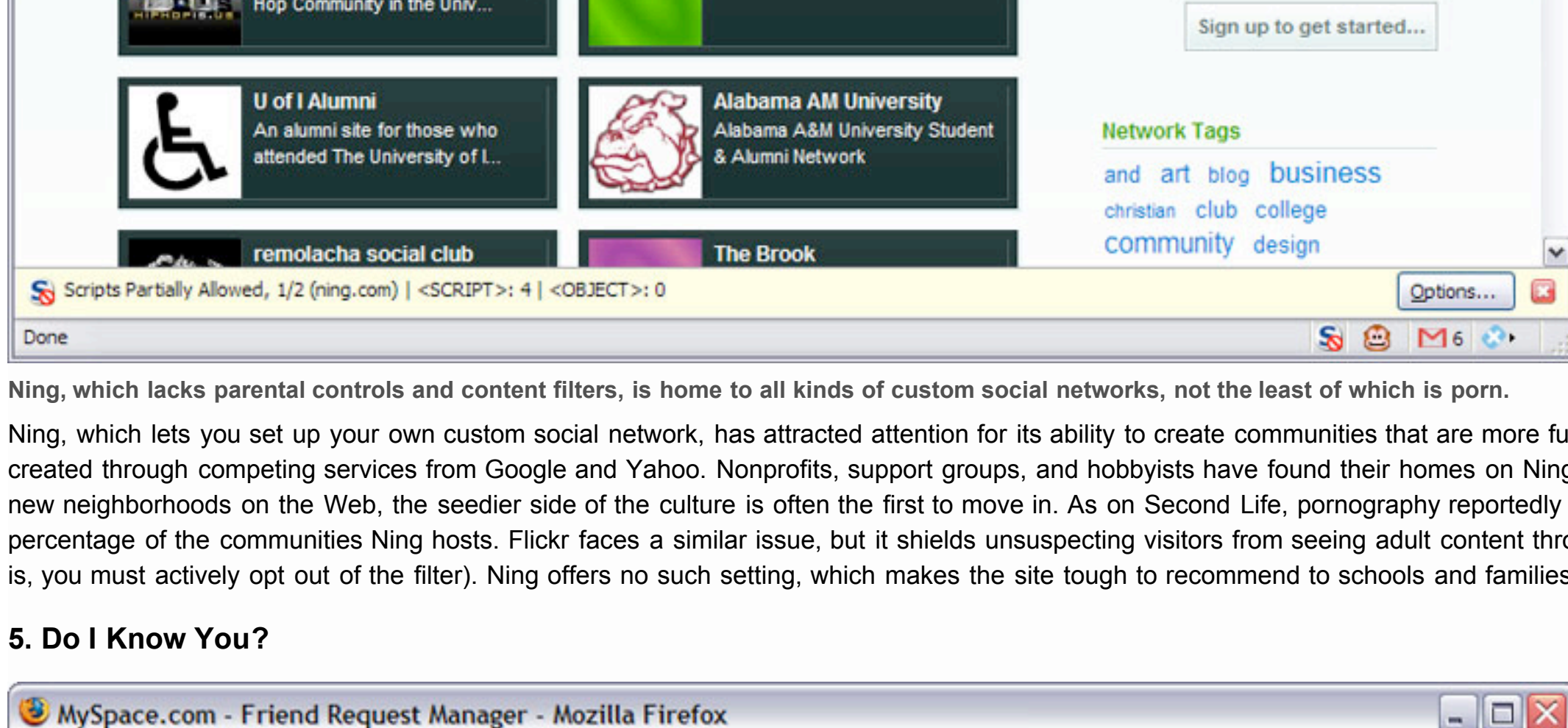
Ning, which lacks parental controls and content filters, is home to all kinds of custom social networks, not the least of which is porn. Ning, which lets you set up your own custom social network, has attracted attention for its ability to create communities that are more functional than those created through competing services from Google and Yahoo. Nonprofits, support groups, and hobbyists have found their homes on Ning. But, as with many new neighborhoods on the web, the seedier side of the culture is often the first to move in. As on Second Life, pornography reportedly comprises a significant percentage of the communities Ning hosts. Flickr faces a similar issue, but it shields unsuspecting browsers from seeing adult content through default filters (that is, you must actively opt out of the filter). Ning offers no such setting, which makes the site tough to recommend to schools and families.

5. Do I Know You?



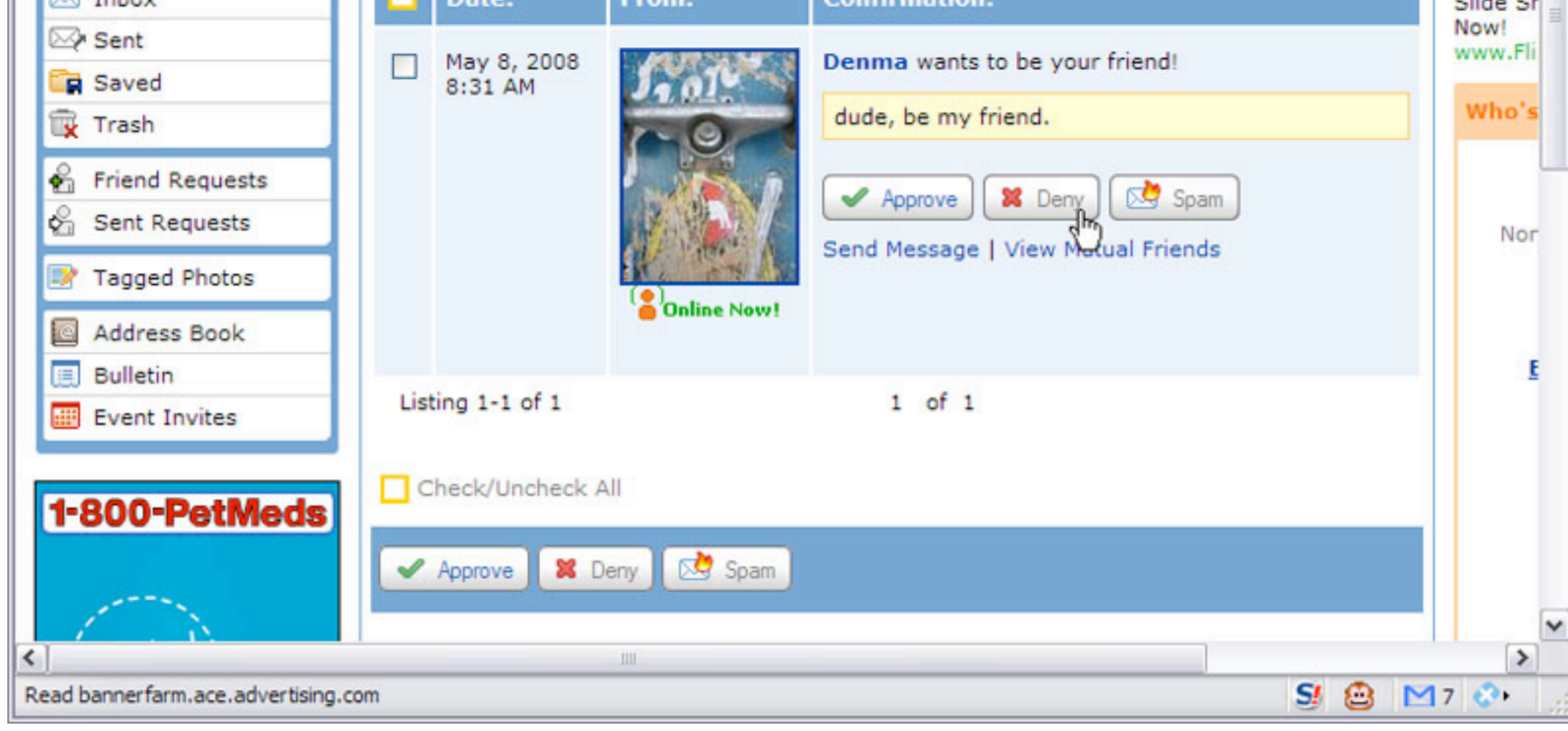
It's okay, even preferable, to say no to friend requests from people you don't know. Facebook started out as a way for college students to put faces to names: "Hi, I think we took Poly Sci together last semester, and you're friends with my friend Brittany. Would you be my Facebook friend?" Now that Facebook is a global phenomenon, exchanges can go more like this: "I don't know you, and we have no friends in common. I live in Colorado, you live somewhere far away. And yet you'd like to be my friend and show me your baby pictures. And you want to see mine. Hmmm, let me think about that ... request denied." Not only is it okay to ignore friend requests from people you don't know, your privacy may depend on it.

4. Thanks for the Add! Here's Some Spam



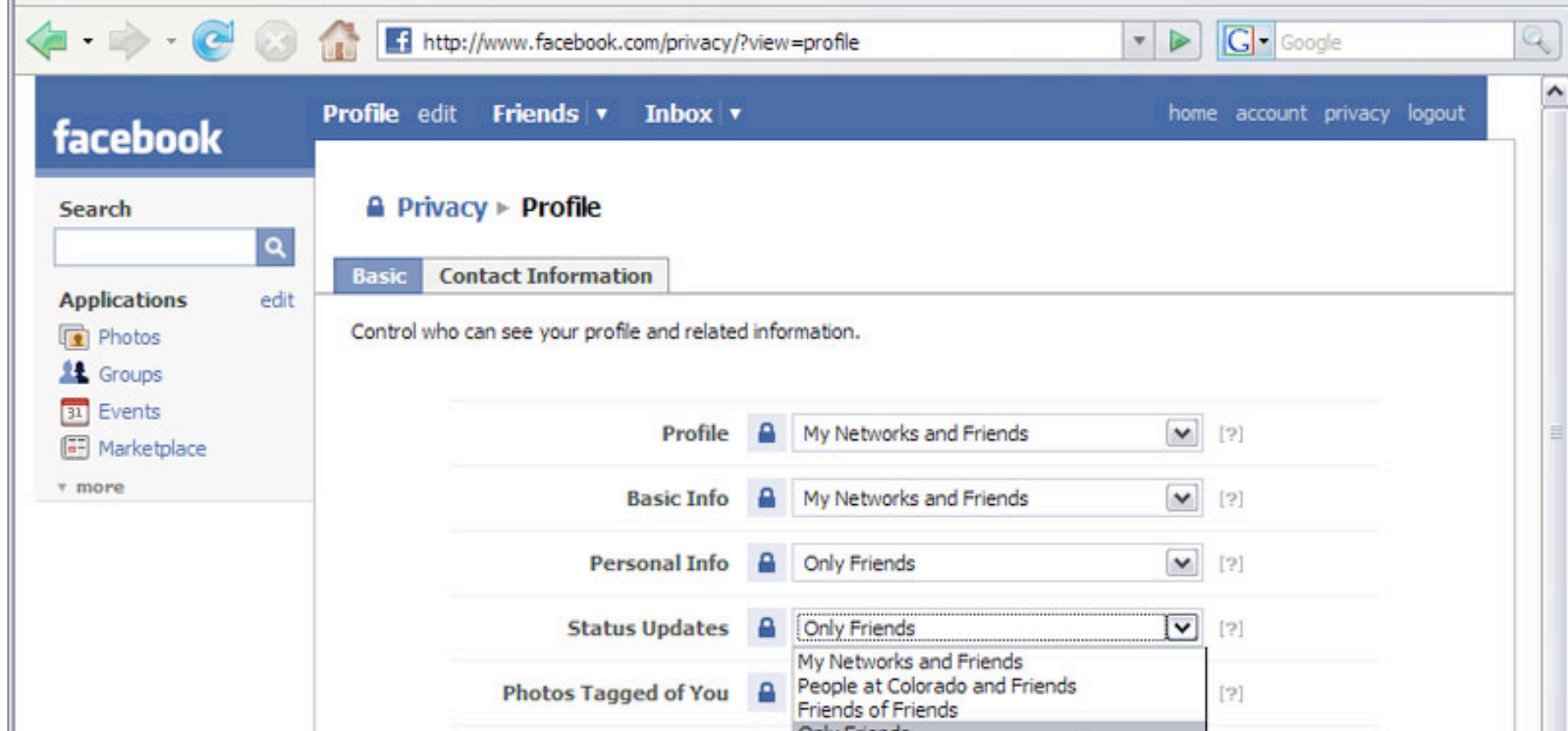
Guard your privacy by befriending only people you know in the real world, and limiting access to your profile to others. Slightly more annoying than random friend requests from total strangers is the increasing presence at social networking sites of good old-fashioned spam--you know, the kind where somebody is actually trying to sell you something. On Facebook, MySpace, and many other sites, you can expect to receive all kinds of unsolicited commercial and noncommercial requests, promos, and e-mail messages in your inbox. All manner of enterprises, from fledgling rock bands to escort services to professional headhunters, are trying to use these newfangled social network things to drum up business, and that means spam.

3. Breaking Up Is Hard to Do (Too Hard)

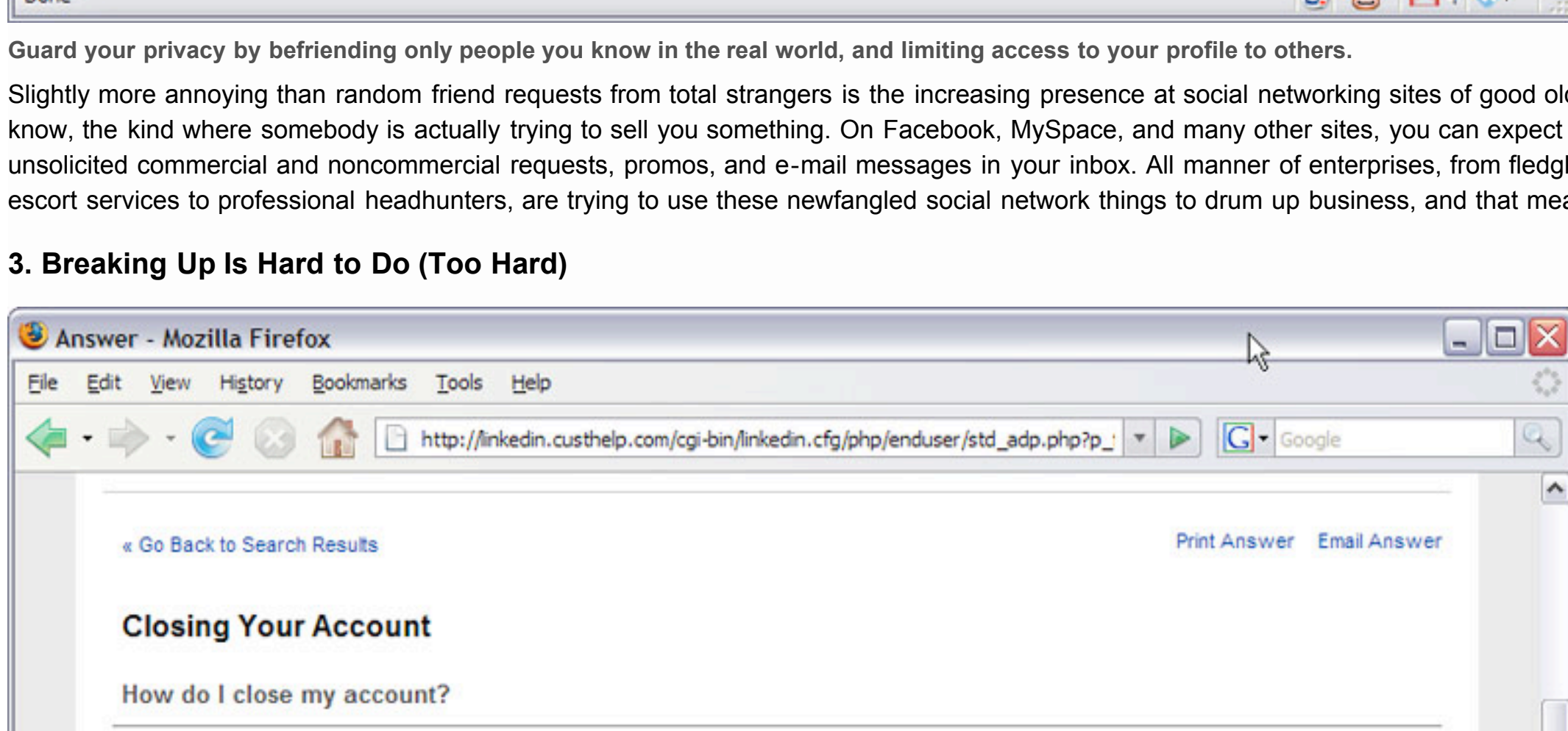


Closing your social networking account is rarely easy. LinkedIn, for example, requires you to call customer service. Late last year I realized that I'd read one too many inspirational piece, true love, and happiness-through-vegetarianism bulletin posts from some random friend on MySpace, and I decided that I'd had enough. I decided to cancel my account. I wanted to disappear from the scene--to commit "MySpace Suicide" but I quickly found out that it wasn't as easy as clicking a Deleted Account button. Perhaps to protect accounts from unauthorized deletion, some services require you to send a formal cancellation request--LinkedIn requires you to contact customer service, for example. MySpace does let you delete your own account, but only if you still have access to the e-mail account you used to set it up. Unlucky for me, I had changed ISPs during my two years of MySpace membership, and I no longer had my old e-mail address. So began a four-week account-cancellation process, culminating in my actually having to e-mail MySpace a picture of me holding a piece of paper with my MySpace user name scrawled on it. I might have been better off just leaving the account active and deleting all the data and content it held.

2. Zombies, Pirates, and Other Pointless Facebook Applications



Facebook applications allow my friends to share their movie tastes, opinions, news picks, and other items with me, but accepting these tidbits requires me to install each corresponding app in my own profile (at which point it has access to my personal information). One app informs me that a friend has just urinated on me, poked me, or vampire-bit me. An alarming number of my female friends want me to know them by their stripper names. Why my friends devote so much time to these curious little apps I haven't figured out, but I know that cumulatively they've begun to demand way too much of my time.



In Facebook you can block repeated invitations to unwanted applications by clicking on the nearly invisible "Block" link. To make matters worse, Facebook applications promote themselves, too, applying to get in touch, and even pecking me with spam. If you're encountering the same thing, you can fight back. To make silly apps go away, open the application invitation and click on the "Block (application name)" link in the bottom-right part of the window. Or, you can banish all applications from your Facebook experience by installing the Facebook custom app hider Greasemonkey script.

1. Multiple Social Network Syndrome (MSNS)

With the advent of social networking, my e-mail traffic has gotten worse, not better. Here's an e-mail telling me that my brother has sent an e-mail within Facebook. Another message informs me that Susie has updated her profile at Friendster. Another announces that Bob over at FriendNet has just brushed his teeth. Another proclaims that Dave has written the latest installment of his ingenious blog at MySpace. And many other sites, you can expect to receive all kinds of unsolicited commercial and noncommercial requests, promos, and e-mail messages in your inbox. All manner of enterprises, from fledgling rock bands to escort services to professional headhunters, are trying to use these newfangled social network things to drum up business, and that means spam.

The major social networking sites are very aware of such frustrations, and are taking steps to increase their ability to interact with one another. MySpace recently announced that it will let its users push their bio information out to other sites such as eBay, Photobucket, Twitter, and Yahoo. Not to be outdone, Facebook has announced its own plans to do the same thing with partner sites.

That's all good, but I'm not holding my breath for the day when I can share data and content directly between my MySpace account and my Facebook account. Still, it's a positive sign that the big players are acknowledging that social networking is about bringing folks together online, not confining them inside

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