

Social software and the social inclusion of marginalized youngsters

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we explore the potential of social software tools to support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters.

Keywords

social inclusion, social software, ICT, marginalized youth

INTRODUCTION

Can ICT, and more specifically social software, support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters? This is the main research question of INCLUSO, a research project funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework programme [1].

E-inclusion is one of the current priorities for Europe, as stated by the The Riga Ministerial Declaration of 2006 [2] and confirmed at the Ministerial e-Inclusion Conference and exhibition in Vienna of November 2008 [3].

As more and more information and services are available in digital form today, socially disadvantaged people and those less favoured find themselves at risk of being excluded from the potential benefits of our ever-growing information society. One of those groups at risk of being excluded from today's information society are youngsters who, due to socio-economic, legal, cultural or geographic reasons, have limited or no access to these tools and the benefits associated with them or lack the skills to use them properly.

All over Europe, welfare organisations working with marginalised youngsters face the reality that social software has become an essential communication tool for many youngsters.

This creates both opportunities as well as challenges for organisations that work with these disadvantaged youngsters. While youngsters quickly become natives in this fast-evolving world of online, social interactions, many welfare organisations are still migrants here.

The question remains on how these organisations can extend their work into these digital environments as they struggle to adapt to the organisational, financial, personal, methodological, cultural and communication issues that arise.

Additionally, social software is all about the social interaction of individuals, who need to be skilled in the proper use of these tools in order to make use of them successfully. While acquiring these skills seems to be less of a problem for most youngsters, this is often different for staff members of welfare organisations. While trained and experienced to work with youngsters in more traditional ways, they find themselves faced with the need to bolster their ICT-related skills in order to make use of a wide range of fast-evolving online tools.

Getting involved on social software platforms to interact with youngsters has the potential to connect to a world where marginalised youngsters need not necessarily be marginalised. The Internet seems to be an ideal place for both youngsters and welfare organisations working with them to find each other, removing the need to travel to a specific location and thus negating both practical as psychological barriers. Some social software tools have the potential to facilitate interactions between welfare organisations and youngsters and between youngsters themselves due to the disinhibition effects related to the use of these tools [4]. Additionally, when used correctly and with the right purpose in mind, these tools could assist marginalised youngsters to transcend their current social identities by extending their social networks and thus increasing their social capital [5].

On the other hand, although access to Internet and ICT in general throughout Europe has steadily increased over the past years, it is often exactly this group of marginalised youngsters that have little or no frequent access to ICT, which puts them even more at risk of social exclusion. Moreover, it is important to recognise that access to ICT is only one aspect of the Digital Divide today. In order to make use of the full potential of ICT and social software in specific, those making use of these tools must also know *how* to use them and how to use them *in such ways that they benefit from it* [6].

OBJECTIVE OF THIS PAPER

The objective of this paper is to explore the link between inclusion and e-inclusion and the potential of social software to support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters. We aim to create a better understanding of the different aspects that need to be considered when using social software as a tool within welfare organisations and explore not only those aspects that relate to the organisations' way of working, but focus on ethical and privacy issues as well. Finally we also touch upon the need for social-software to bridge the so-called socio-technical gap, being the difference between what popular social software currently supports technically and what is needed socially.

METHODOLOGY

The content of this paper draws on preliminary results from the INCLUSO project. The project started in September of 2008 and will end in September of 2010. Desk research is supplemented with focus groups and contacts in the field. Focus groups were organised with different groups:

- marginalised youngsters;
- staff members of organisations already working with ICT;
- staff members of organisations hardly using any ICT;
- ICT specialists.

The greater part of the project consists of ongoing pilots carried out in four different countries, to develop a business and sustainability model and a measurement tool that can follow up on success factors. In the course of the 4 pilots, organisations working with marginalised youngsters and the young people themselves will use social software tools to support their interactions.

SUMMARY

Inclusion and e-inclusion

Various definitions are given in literature to define social exclusion. One that is commonly used is:

'Social exclusion is a multidimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal, normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live.' [6]

Social inclusion can then be defined as a strategy to fight social exclusion.

With regards to this the EU sees the following challenges that need to be met in the fight against social exclusion [7]:

- to eradicate child poverty by breaking the vicious circle of intergenerational inheritance;
- to make labour markets truly inclusive;
- to ensure decent housing for everyone;
- to overcome discrimination and increase the integration of people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and immigrants;

- to tackle financial exclusion and over indebtedness.

We see the role of ICT in this area as twofold, underlining the need for an e-inclusive society. On the one hand, we live in a modern society today that offers more and more information and services through the Internet. As the importance of online media rises, so does the importance to have the necessary skills to access and navigate through these online media. Not only are we expected to have a basic understanding of modern technology in order to function well on the modern work floor, but even the very process of finding a job or a decent place to stay can be completed online today, often even more efficiently than via traditional means (e.g. Classifieds in newspapers). Having access to an Internet enabled computer is a start. Knowing how to use the Internet properly, or where to go to, is another thing. Hence, in order to enjoy the full benefit of our growing information society, those at risk of social exclusion should be instructed and guided in how to make use of these technologies in such a way that is beneficial to them.

On the other hand, not only does the Internet facilitate access to useful information or institutions online, but it could also stimulate social relations between people, making it potentially easier for those people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and immigrants to connect and interact with others. In recent years the Internet has evolved from a medium that offers information to a medium that supports social interactions as well.

The use of 'Social software' or software that can be described as software that enables people to build up connections, to communicate and to collaborate with each others, has become very popular and widespread, especially amongst youngsters. The potential of social software, as a tool to support social inclusion is large. Social software is today in the heart of the youngsters community and it opens up to world to connect to both real life contacts and on-line groups of interest and resources [8]. As the youngsters' natural habitat is moving to the on-line world, guidance and counselling can find new ways to connect to the youngsters. Youngsters, who are having trouble communicating in real life, often find it easier to talk on-line about personal problems, due to the disinhibition effects related to on-line communication [4].

Apart from more intimate communication, social software also enables youngsters to connect with peers around subjects of shared interest. It is in these interactions that youngsters often connect with social networks that extend beyond the networks they share in the real world [8] and thus broadening their social identities and social integration laying the foundations for an increase in both emotional as material social capital [5]. In on-line communities, youngsters can participate and interact with others on a wide variety of topics, bridging many of the practical and social barriers that would prevent them from being present in traditional communities. Social software has become a

part of youngsters' lives in a way that for them the borders between online and real life are slowly disappearing.

Furthermore, through the casual use of many of these social software tools, youngsters are challenged to increase their ICT skills, as they need to learn how to create and maintain their various online profile pages and experiment with customising them in order to stand out [8]. These same ICT skills, when directed towards other goals, could also enable them to benefit from other aspects of our information society.

Social software and the welfare organisation

The dual role of ICT and social software is specific in the area of social inclusion also translates to how welfare organisations working with marginalised youngsters need to look at it.

On the one hand, welfare organisations could translate or extend many of their traditional activities towards the online world, potentially reaching a larger audience or facilitating interactions with their youngsters. Chat, for instance, has been successfully used by a number of welfare organisations throughout Europe for a number of years now, as a way to supplement or replace traditional face-to-face talks. Other social software tools, like message boards or social network sites (e.g. Facebook, Netlog) could perhaps also be used in this way and quite a number of organisations are experimenting with these tools as well.

On the other hand, even if welfare organisations working with youngsters have no ambition to bring their services on-line, there can be a task to inform, educate and guide youngsters and work on issues like: personal privacy, relations, cyber-bullying, inappropriate content, addiction on the one hand but also opportunities to develop skills, find a job, a house, counselling, friends, hobbies etc.

Availability of computers and Internet access is growing and literature is now focusing on the second and third digital divides. Yet there is a danger to forget that the remaining group of people, not having access, is concentrated in a group that is already facing social exclusion in many ways. Focus groups reports in 4 countries confirm that the group of marginalised youngsters are often deprived from ICT access. In addition to this, marginalised youngsters are even more vulnerable to the negative aspects that are connected to on-line activity.

Introduction of social software into an organisation working with youngsters poses different challenges. While some staff members are enthusiastic about the potential, others raise questions about the extra work, legal responsibilities, the blurring boundaries between work and private life, technical problems, not being skilled to support and guide youngsters on-line. Most organisations are not structured to embrace on-line work. There is a need to develop new methodologies for on-line counselling and guidance and the development of organisational processes.

Starting up on-line activities to support on-line social work is one thing. Making it sustainable is another. Costs for

purchase and maintenance for hardware and software and training will go up while no extra income is generated. There are issues on reliability, affordability, scalability, standards, training, acceptance, ownership, internal processes and others. Organisation management has the need to measure the effects of actions on the organisation's goals. Existing tools seldom show effects of on-line work and hence it is hard to evaluate the return.

Bridging the socio-technical gap

When welfare organisations in Belgium first started to use chat software almost 10 years ago, many of them adopted those tools that were readily available or popular in use by their target groups. This brought along a number of problems, as these tools not always appeared to be that suitable for the specific needs of the online counsellor. Over the next years, specific chat applications were built specific to the needs of these welfare organisations.

When we make use of social software online, many of us often take the way these platforms are built for granted. As the level of complexity of the social interactions that these platforms use grows, we are faced more often with the limitations of these systems to support the very nuanced way in which we interact with others in real life [9].

While till recently, having many on-line 'friends' was cool, people now are 'de-friending' on their social networking sites, because they felt more and more obstructed to share various aspects of their personalities with a growing number of 'friends'. For the same reason, some people create different profiles on different social networking sites, in order to share different aspects of themselves with different people. This was also mentioned in the focus groups, organised by the Incluso project. Most youngsters were interested in joining an on-line social platform to connect to the organisation but at the same time they stated to start up a new profile. As if they were saying: "It's OK to get connected but I will not give you access to my personal territory".

As the frequency and complexity of our social interactions via online media rises, it becomes clear that there is a gap between what social software tools currently support technically and what we expect of these tools socially. This gap is called the 'Socio-Technical' gap [10].

Bridging this socio-technical gap requires continuous communication between the makers of these social software tools and their users, based on feedback by the latter and the view of what could be technically supported by the first. But in this discussion we also see room for other actors. Input from academic sources could provide for software that better takes into account the social needs of its users and input from legal and government actors could result in software that is better equipped to respect individual privacy and fight the abuse of these tools.

INCLUSO: social software for social inclusion

INCLUSO is a collaborative project between seven European partners, funded by the European Union in its 7th Framework programme of Research.

INCLUSO aims to deliver verifiable proof that ICT, and more precisely, social software tools, can facilitate social inclusion of marginalized young people. INCLUSO will make suggestions for future research and development, based on desk research, expert input, pilot projects in 4 countries, the development of a measurement tool to screen evolution in social inclusion/exclusion and a business and sustainability model for organizations working with ICT in the area of social inclusion.

The pilot projects are initiated in strong, existing organizations with or no experience in the use of social software, but already working with marginalized youngsters and with a high potential to succeed in successful ICT implementation. 4 pilots will focus on complementary groups of youngsters

For pilots are initiated in strong, existing organizations with little or no experience in the use of social software, but already working with marginalized young people and with a high potential to succeed in successful ICT implementation. The pilots will focus on complementary groups of youngsters:

- (1) young people that are all subject of the Flemish 'Special Youth Assistance'-act or the Belgian 'Child Protection, located in Brussels (BE);
- (2) socially excluded youngsters in Aberdeen (UK);
- (3) young people from day-care of full-time-care institutions described in the Social Service Act (PL);
- (4) young people associated with the *Jugend Zentren* in Vienna (AT).

Social software will be introduced as an empowering tool for inclusion in general and, more specifically, to meet the participating organizations' goals. As inclusion is a very broad term, more precise and limited goals have been defined for the INCLUSO project in general and for each and every pilot in particular:

encourage and support personal development:

- Foster independent living & self-management
- Improve educational attainment
- Increase employability skills
- Improve communication skills
- Facilitate digital inclusion

encourage and support social participation:

- Foster social relations
- Increase community capacity
- Promote active citizenship

Feedback from the pilots will enhance the White-book that presents implementation scenarios for ICT as a tool for social inclusion. Pilot feedback will also strengthen the business and sustainability models and the measurement tool that screens social inclusion/exclusion.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Desk research, focus groups and initial pilot feedback already made clear that many aspects need consideration in order to successfully introduce social software as a tool to support the inclusion of marginalised youngsters. There is a need to better understand the issues and develop strategies to support organisations on different levels. Many answers need to be found to develop sustainable and successful strategies. It is already clear that in order to formulate these answers a proper exchange of knowledge and experience needs to take place between academia, lawmakers, organisations in the field, the industry and the youngsters themselves. This paper aims contribute to preparing the grounds for such an exchange.

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