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INCLUSO: SOCIAL SOFTWARE FOR THE SOCIAL INCLUSION OF MARGINALIZED YOUTH

ABSTRACT

INCLUSO: Social software for the social inclusion of marginalized youth
Can ICT, and more specifically social software, support welfare organizations in their work with
marginalized young people? This was the main research question addressed in INCLUSO, a
research project funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme. In this paper,
the authors start by introducing the concepts of social exclusion, e-inclusion and the digital divide.
They discuss the concept of social software, its use by youngsters and the potential of social
software to contribute to social inclusion. The authors then report on the organizational challenges
met as they guided four social welfare organizations from Austria, Belgium, Poland and the UK in
their implementation of social software tools to support their interaction with marginalized young

people. They identify these challenges and present tools to assist social work organizations in defining successful strategies for adopting ICT and social software within their organizations.

Keywords

ICT, social software, social inclusion, marginalized young people, organizational issues, implementation of ICT

SAMENVATTING

INCLUSO: Sociale software ten behoeve van sociale inclusie van gemarginaliseerde jongeren
In hoeverre kan ICT, en in het bijzonder het gebruik van sociale software, een bijdrage leveren aan de sociale inclusie van kansarme jongeren? Wat is de rol van welzijnsorganisaties in dit proces en wat zijn de voornaamste belemmeringen voor het gebruik van sociale software als middel om sociale inclusie te stimuleren? Deze vragen stonden centraal in het INCLUSO-project, een onderzoeksproject dat werd gefinancierd door de *European Commission's 7th Framework Programme*. Dit artikel start met een toelichting op concepten als sociale uitsluiting, digitale inclusie en *digital divide*. Ook wordt ingegaan op het gebruik van *social software* door jongeren en de potentie ervan voor sociale inclusie. De auteurs doen vervolgens verslag van de organisatorische uitdagingen die ontstonden bij de begeleiding van vier welzijnsorganisaties, bij de implementatie van social software ten behoeve van sociale inclusie. Zij identificeren deze uitdagingen en presenteren hulpmiddelen die welzijnsorganisaties behulpzaam kunnen zijn bij het zoeken naar succesvolle strategieën om ICT en sociale software in hun organisatie toe te passen.

Trefwoorden

ICT, sociale software, sociale inclusie, kansarme jongeren, gemarginaliseerde jongeren

INTRODUCTION

Can ICT, and more specifically social software, promote the social inclusion of marginalized young people? This was the main research question to be addressed by INCLUSO, a research project funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme. The project aimed to define and explore the challenges and opportunities that present themselves when social software is

used by welfare organizations that work with marginalized youngsters as a tool to support their approach to alleviating social exclusion.

Even though the scope of the INCLUSO project also examined the business and sustainability aspects of the use of ICT by organizations that work with marginalized youth, at the outset of the project in 2008 our focus was fairly technological. The project consortium was keen to explore and measure the exact effects of the use of social software applications such as social network sites (SNS) by marginalized youngsters and the organizations that work with them.

It soon turned out, however, that the actual adoption process of these ICT tools by our target organizations would pose very different challenges to those that we had anticipated. Many of the social work organizations we talked to, including those that were part of our project consortium had little or no experience of using ICT and social software to interact with their target groups. Rather than technological questions, we fielded mainly organizational questions. How could existing methods to work with a target group be successfully complemented by online activities? Could this be a spontaneous, bottom-up process or would it need to be fully integrated into the structure and strategy of an organization? What would this mean in terms of cost and training for staff? What about the equipment needed? What about the privacy of both the youngsters as well as the social workers involved? How could success be measured over time?

These and other questions made us realize that the project would grow much larger in scope than simply finding the right technology and implementing it.

SOCIAL INCLUSION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Promoting social inclusion, or undertaking affirmative action in order to reverse the social exclusion of individuals and groups in our society, has become one of the European Commission's particular strategies over the past years. More and more coordinated actions are being taken at various levels in order to make sure that every European citizen is able to contribute to and benefit from social and economic progress.

Describing the concept of social exclusion in full is an enormous task and goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that even though many initiatives that aim to alleviate social exclusion are based on creating jobs, social exclusion goes beyond the issue of material poverty and can be seen as a multidimensional concept (Silver, 1994, 2007). It can be seen as including other forms of social disadvantage such as the lack of regular and equal access to education, health care, social care and housing. Likewise, the causes of exclusion include a wide range of factors, such as discrimination against immigrants, ethnic minorities, the disabled, the elderly or

ex-offenders (Hills, Grand & Piachaud, 2002). In short, one can be socially excluded in a multitude of ways, and for a multitude of reasons.

Although the reasons for the social exclusion of adults and youngsters are broadly comparable, it is worthwhile examining the specific case of youngsters more closely. Young people find themselves in a crucial stage of their life where one mistake can often be paid for repeatedly, well into adulthood. The socio-economic status of the parents, gender, disability, health, ethnicity, religion, place of residence and geographical mobility are among the factors that can impact on future unemployment or earning potential. Similarly, good education and training, good health and similar productivity-enhancing investments made during one's younger years will often pay off later in life.

Youngsters today need to be able to experiment with their identities and how they see themselves in the future. Yet this experimentation with various identities and rebellion against older generations is less straightforward for those growing up in poorer communities and socio-economically homogenous neighbourhoods (Silver, 2007). When there is no constructive outlet for feelings of rebellion and experimentation, peer-group relations can lead youngsters into a negative spiral of social exclusion. Research increasingly takes neighbourhood effects into account when predicting the individual disadvantage of youth (Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). Too much internal interaction in socio-economically homogenous neighbourhoods may socially isolate residents and limit information networks (Tienda & Wilson, 2002).

E-INCLUSION AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

As more and more information and services are becoming available in digital form, the socially disadvantaged find themselves at risk of being excluded from the potential benefits of this ever-growing information society.

Although access to the internet is on the rise throughout Europe and it seems that the digital divide is slowly being bridged, we should not forget that those who are most socially deprived are the least likely to have access to digital resources such as online services (Helsper, 2008), a situation which could lead to a "rich-getting-richer" scenario, if the issue is not handled properly.

More recent literature remarks on an evolution in the nature of the digital divide. Although the digital divide that separates those with access to ICT and the internet from those without may be narrowing, some researchers have pointed out that the digital divide needs to be seen as encompassing many layers or stages of access to ICT and its adoption (Bonfadelli, 2002; Helsper, 2008; Steyaert & Gould, 2009). What we do with ICT depends on our skills, as well as what we seek from it on a personal level. When observing how those at risk of social exclusion

make use of the internet, we should look beyond training and skills alone, since what people expect, want and "consume" on the internet seems to be related to their socio-economic status. Research by Bonfadelli (2002) finds that people with lower incomes more often use the internet for entertainment purposes and people with higher income more often for informational and service-oriented purposes. Helsper (2008) finds that the "complexity" of what we do online is connected to our socio-economic status, with those higher up the ladder of social inclusion using the internet for activities such as managing their finances or civic engagement. Another study by Valentine *et al.* (Valentine, Marsch & Patti, 2005) finds that students who used ICT for educational purposes achieved a higher level of educational attainment than those who used ICT solely for entertainment purposes. In other words, it is not only access to ICT that matters, but more particularly how ICT is used.

WHAT WE KNOW: SOCIAL SOFTWARE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Youngsters and social software

Since its conception by Eric Drexler (Drexler, 1991) the term "social software" has been adopted and interpreted in different ways. According to Boyd (2006) it was consultant and writer Clay Shirky who later popularized the term and used it to encompass all uses of software that facilitate group interaction, even if that interaction itself takes place offline. Many argue that the term social software is just another way to describe tools that facilitate forms of social interaction between people that predate the internet. Tools such as e-mail and message boards are decades old, after all.

What, then, makes these tools today so different from their predecessors? Boyd (2007) argues that as more and more people have found their way onto the internet, the traditional ways of grouping people online simply around subjects proved less scalable and more sophisticated ways were needed to allow people to find their place online. Just as in the real world, where people do not flock together simply on the basis of a shared interest, we also look for shared cultural values and perspectives on those topics: we try to find those places online where people not only share a similar interest, but also similar tastes, and a similar way of communicating or style (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The internet is no longer just a repository for information and services, but is also becoming ever more a virtual representation of the real world; a public space in which we need to define ourselves as clearly as possible and interact with others in the same nuanced way as we do offline. For many youngsters throughout the world with regular access to the internet, social software tools have become a popular way for them to learn to express themselves in public, experimenting

with different identities under the guise of pseudonyms and interacting with peers (Teens and ICT, 2008; Boyd, 2009), whether for entertainment purposes ("hanging out") or educational purposes. Whereas early studies on the potential of ICT to facilitate social interaction, explored the potential of these platforms to extend the personal network by meeting new people, much of the literature today finds that social software is used especially to stay in touch with people they already know (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006; Vanhoenacker, 2006; Ito *et al.*, 2008). Youngsters use new media as an almost natural extension of offline interaction, bridging the gaps between moments of face-to-face contact (friendship-based network interaction).

When youngsters do interact with people that they do not already know in an offline context, they mainly do this in online communities concerning specific topics of interest. Interest-based network interaction is noteworthy because it seems to be designed to encourage social interaction with people beyond the direct vicinity of these youngsters and thus making new contacts (Ito *et al.*, 2008).

Potential benefits of social software

We see the potential of social software as a tool with which to alleviate the social exclusion of marginalized youngsters as twofold. Firstly, the proper use of social software can have beneficial effects on one's social capital (Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001), increasing the benefits one might gain from having social ties to other people. Many of the benefits that we gain from an increase in social capital are associated with being more socially included (Zinnbauer, 2007).

The literature on social capital is extensive and introduces many dimensions. Putnam (2001) describes two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. The benefits that we receive by being a part of closely knit networks held together by strong ties are termed bonding capital, and these benefits include emotional support, financial support and the swift flow of (redundant) information. Bridging social capital encompasses those benefits that we receive from being connected to networks outside our regular networks, usually through people that we do not know so well. Granovetter (1973, 1983) elaborates the notion of bridging social capital further still by describing the benefits that we may gain from the weaker ties in our networks and states that it is through these weak ties that we are most likely to gain access to useful information or new employment opportunities, for example. This is especially interesting for the specific case of marginalized young people as a means of lifting themselves out of their socio-economically homogenous network and bring them into contact with others (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Alongside the intrinsic effects of using social software, we can also look at social software as a way of supplementing the work done by welfare organizations with marginalized youngsters. Certain

activities between these organizations and their target groups that are already being done offline today could benefit from being supplemented online because online interaction can be briefer and more efficient due to the fact that participants are not bound to participate at the same time or be at a certain location (Resnick, 2002).

Youngsters needing help could benefit from working with organizations that employ social software as a tool to interact with them. The online medium is a medium with which these youngsters often feel at home. Various studies mention that such tools lower not only the physical barriers to approaching an organization that could help them (they do not need to go there physically), but also that the psychological barriers to interacting with welfare organizations face-to-face are higher than with online communication, which has a disinhibiting effect (Suler, 2004).

PUTTING THEORY TO PRACTICE: MAKING NEW TOOLS FOR THE TRADE

The aim of the INCLUSO project with regards to putting theory into practice was to guide four organizations from different European countries, which were already working with marginalized young people, in implementing different social software tools to support their work with this target group. Even though the organizations had the same target group, each organization employed very different methods. Moreover, various factors contribute to whether a youngster can be called marginalized or not: socio-economic status, cultural background or even one's geographical location can all have an influence on one's full inclusion into European society. It was therefore agreed that we would design the exact activities of each pilot project together with our pilot partners. We would provide the academic insight into the potential of such tools, while the partner organizations would translate this into activities which could facilitate their work with their young people.

An initial literature study and focus group interviews with youngsters, representatives from organizations in the field and ICT experts was a valuable source of information and inspiration regarding the potential of social software to facilitate the interaction of social work organizations with their younger target groups. These focus group interviews were held in all four countries in which the partner organizations were based. We talked to marginalized young people connected to the organizations about their use of social software and how they felt about using such tools to interact with the organizations. With representatives from the organizations we discussed their knowledge of such tools, how they are currently used, views about how they might be useful for the organization and the feasibility of doing this. Finally, we held interviews with ICT experts in

each country about their view on how best to proceed with implementing social software tools in organizations in their countries.

These interviews provided valuable information on how to proceed. For example, we learned that even though the social network Netlog, which is aimed primarily at young people, was available in Poland and had plenty of interesting functions that could be used, it was not popular at all with the target group of young people in Poland at the time. Polish youngsters were primarily using a much older platform called "Nasza Klasa". We would have to take these cultural differences into account and should not try to dictate which software to use. It became clear that we would have to define our tools in close collaboration with the youngsters and our partner organizations.

In order to connect this theory to the reality of social work, we also needed to deliver all of this information in such a way that it would be understandable and useful to the social workers within our four partner organizations from Austria, Belgium, Poland and the UK. After all, it was the aim of the INCLUSO project not to simply tell these organizations what to do, but rather to provide them with the right tools and allow them to decide for themselves which information and guidance they required and to come up with valuable and effective strategies for using ICT within their organizations.

The information and tools needed to be available in such a way that they would be of use for other organizations outside of the scope of the INCLUSO project and serve as sustainable tools which could be developed further. The pilot projects in the four partner organizations would provide us with an evaluation of these tools as well as an understanding of which challenges and opportunities these organizations would encounter whilst carrying out the pilot projects (Hargittai, 2008). Good and bad practices, gathered through desk research and our interviews about which ICT tools worked best and why (or why not) would also be incorporated into a revised version of the outcomes of the INCLUSO project.

From our work on this project, a number of tools emerged which were evaluated, revised and made publicly available towards the end of the project. (1) A model that connects sociological theory to the reality of social work, which we came to call "The Big Picture". (2) A manual that brings together the knowledge and experience gathered throughout this project and presents a methodology for implementing ICT and social software within social work organizations. (3) A measurement tool that aims to measure the social inclusion of marginalized youngsters and thereby measure the effectiveness of an organization's ICT initiatives over time. (4) A business and sustainability model to help organizations set up their ICT initiatives in such a way that they are sustainable over time. (5) The INCLUSO Game, which offers social work organizations a playful, yet inspiring tool to help them brainstorm about the potential uses of social software tools as part of their organization's strategies. In the following section, we will delve a little deeper into the Big

Picture Model (1), the INCLUSO Manual (2) and INCLUSO Game (5). Both the measurement tool (3) and the business and sustainability model (4) are discussed in detail in the INCLUSO Manual.

"The Big Picture"

The multidimensional nature of social exclusion and the fact that the specific nature of social exclusion varies so much from place to place has led us to conclude that the best approach in this project would be one that puts the organizations working with marginalized youngsters at the centre of our study. Rather than deciding upon a number of actions from the top down and forcing these organizations and their youngsters to participate in the activities that we had specified, we asked our partner organizations to look at their current activities and we then defined various strategies together to support these activities via a number of different social software tools. To help us link all these actions together, show how they contribute to social inclusion, and evaluate and compare the different actions undertaken in the four partner countries, we constructed the model shown in Figure 1 based on our literature study and focus group interviews.

All activities that aim to alleviate the social exclusion of marginalized young people within most welfare organizations can be placed somewhere within this model. The model is also comparable with strategies on social inclusion as defined by the EU (Frazer & Marlier, 2007). By employing different social software tools in a variety of activities placed within this model, we aimed to create the basis for a useful matrix that can assist in defining which tools can best be implemented for which purpose and which factors will determine success in that particular type of case.
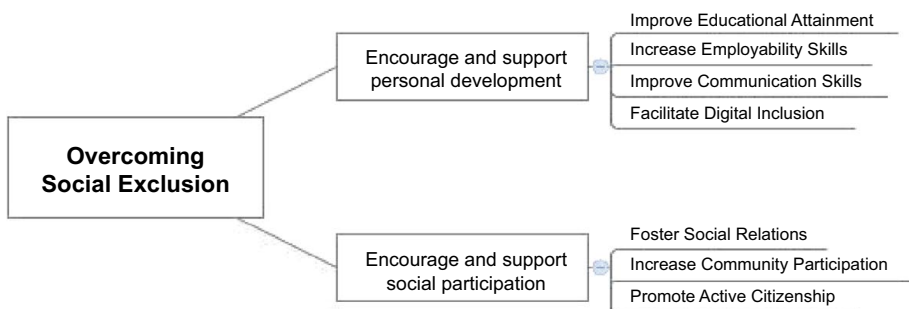

Figure 1: Aligning the pilot actions with the theory on overcoming social exclusion.

The INCLUSO Manual and INCLUSO Game

The purpose of the INCLUSO Manual is to support organizations working with young people at risk and interested in integrating social media into daily practice. The manual is one of the tools of the INCLUSO-project and focuses on the organizational perspective of using ICT within social work organizations. It presents a manual that helps the introduction of social media into the practice of youth work, taking into account the boundaries and opportunities of the organization and aligning them with the organizational goals. It was built up from desk research and experience in the four INCLUSO pilot projects. In it, we began working on the basis that social media tools like Netlog, Facebook, Ning or chat boxes are widespread and have become part of most young people's lives. On the other hand, social work organizations working with young people are often unfamiliar with the opportunities that these new tools can bring to their daily practice. There is often even some hostility and fear that nothing productive will result.

We promote the idea that the social media can be used as a tool to support social inclusion of young people at risk if precautions are taken to limit any potentially negative aspects. By tapping into the aspirations of young people, new forms of communication can guide them to expand and diversify their networks to their benefit, develop their skills and interests and improve their self-esteem.

The manual is divided into four main parts: (1) How to set up a project; (2) How to run a project (How to engage with young people); (3) Examples of what you can do and (4) Project sustainability. The first two parts discuss goals, organizational readiness and how to choose the right activities and related tools. A card game was developed to help with this first step.

The INCLUSO Game was inspired by the "Social by Social" game developed by David Wilcox, Amy Sample Ward and Andy Gibson, based on the Social Media Game originally developed by Beth Kanter, David Wilcox and Drew Mackie (http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/Social+media+game). The INCLUSO game took all of this on board and redesigned the game to fit into the INCLUSO concept, focusing on organizations that work with young people at risk.

The game takes about 2.5 hours to play and involves, ideally, eight to ten team members from an organization that works with young people at risk and is interested in taking a quick tour of the various aspects that will become part of a road map for the future. The game cards introduce the type of organization, the goals that can be pursued, organizational readiness, the activities planned

to achieve the chosen goals, tools and sustainability aspects. During the game, the participants are given time limits to discuss all these topics and presented with some of the questions, opportunities and problems that will occur as soon as the organization starts to use social media concepts in their daily work. We judged the game to be a useful tool for those organizations that are at the very beginning of implementing a social media strategy or that want to move beyond the experimentation phase. The game helps organizations to realize the full scope of what is involved in implementing social software.

The INCLUSO Manual discusses many of the pitfalls that are related to the fact that organizations working with young people at risk often have no existing digital culture at all. Introducing ICT and social software concepts would affect the whole organization: the views of the management, communication with stakeholders, personnel matters, skills, technical set-up and support and so on.

The experience within the four INCLUSO pilots showed that setting up a project does not always lead to success. Those activities that were inspired by the young people themselves were probably the most successful. Engaging with young people and tapping into their creativity and aspirations seem to be crucial factors. Young people at risk are vulnerable in many ways. Social media add a new dimension to this vulnerability. It is therefore most important to consider safety, security, privacy and ethics when working with young people using ICT. These topics are discussed in the INCLUSO Manual. Young people go online anyway. If there is a good reason for youth workers to get involved, then it is probably that they can play an important role in guiding young people to go online in a safe, secure, sensible way while respecting ethical principles.

Organizations which invest in social media need to follow up on results. Methods for feedback and follow-up are also discussed in the INCLUSO Manual. A special chapter is dedicated to "examples of what you can do". Throughout the two years of the INCLUSO project, pilot schemes in four countries tested out numerous approaches. Some were successful, other were not. This part of the Manual distils some of the ideas that have worked which could inspire other organizations to get started. Last but not least, the question of sustainability is considered. Investing start-up money in ICT driven initiatives has often led to very low satisfaction and sometimes even frustration. It is clear that the introduction of ICT into the daily work of organizations that work with young people at risk will require significant resources. These resources (staff time, investment in hardware, software, internet connections, technical support etc.) can be important at the start of the project but the ambition should be to ensure a return on investment and find ways to make the online projects sustainable for the long term. The INCLUSO business and sustainability model offers a framework in which to view the various

factors that need to be monitored and optimized in order to ensure that the investment will lead to sustainable organizational changes.

CONCLUSION

Our experiences with the INCLUSO project have certainly confirmed the potential of ICT – and social software in particular – as a useful tool in supporting the interaction between social work organizations and their target group of marginalized youngsters. We come to this conclusion mainly on the basis of a thorough evaluation of the pilot activities through both interviews with the pilot partners. Many youngsters feel at ease in an online environment and whether they are met on the platform of their choice or guided towards a platform that is tailored to support the activities of a social work organization, they seem willing to interact with social workers in the digital world when approached correctly.

As we find ourselves at the beginning of social work's venture into this area, we feel that organizations in the field are eager to explore, experiment and structurally embed the use of these fast-evolving tools. At the same time there is a clear need within these organizations for methods that can help them do all this. Whether these methods are for organizations that are just starting out and are looking for inspiration or more experienced organizations that would like to incorporate the use of these tools in a sustainable way. Tools like the INCLUSO Manual and INCLUSO Game are this project's answer to their needs.

Moreover, as more and more organizations throughout Europe start working with social software tools, it makes sense to encourage them to gather and disseminate good and bad practices as they go. Models like the Big Picture could form a basis for the improved comparison and evaluation of different activities. It is not only social work organizations that should take part in this gathering and sharing of best practice. Academia could provide a better understanding of why certain tools could be useful in certain cases. Policy makers should join in to provide a more complete picture of needs with regard to privacy and ethical policies. Software developers themselves need to join the discussion as well, so as to ensure that their tools are constructed in a way that answers the social needs of youngsters, the specific demands of welfare organizations and policy makers.

It thus becomes clear that a continuous dialogue between these partners is in order. A matter such as social inclusion through social software is too complex for any of the aforementioned actors to take on individually. The internet is a fast-evolving medium and youngsters are often apt to evolve just as quickly. It is high time that welfare organizations, software developers and policy makers developed the same aptitude.

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