Social Software as a Tool for the Social Inclusion of Marginalised Youngsters

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Abstract: Can ICT, and more specifically social software, support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters? What is the role of welfare organisations working with such youngsters in this story and what are the main challenges that need to be overcome when using social software as a tool to aleviate social exclusion? This paper presents the reliminary findings of the INCLUSO project, bringing together the results from a literature study, focus group interviews with welfare organisations and youngsters and 4 pilot projects throughout Europe.

Keywords: Social inclusion, social software, ICT, marginalised youth, eInclusion

1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief Word on the INCLUSO Project

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. The project aims to define and explore the challenges and opportunities met when social software is used by welfare organisations working with marginalised youngsters as a tool to support their approach on aleviating social exclusion.

1.2. Social Inclusion and Social Exclusion

Promoting social inclusion, or undertaking affirmative actions in order to reverse the social exclusion of individuals and groups in our society, has become a strong focus of the European Commission over the past years. More and more coordinated actions are being taken on a variety of levels in order to make sure that every European citizen is able to contribute to and benefit from social and economical progress.

Describing the concept of social exclusion in full is a daunting task that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Yet it is worth noting that even though many initiatives aimed at aleviating social exclusion focus on creating jobs, social exclusion goes beyond the issue of material poverty and can be seen as a multidimensional concept [1,2]. It can also be seen as encompassing other forms of social disadvantages such as lack of regular and equal access to education, health care, social care and housing. Causes for exclusion too go beyond material poverty and encompass a wide range of reasons why individuals or groups might be excluded, such as discrimination against immigrants, ethnic minorities, the disabled, the elderly or ex-offenders [3]. In short one can be socially excluded in a multitude of ways, for a multitude of reasons.

While our focus in this project lies on actions involving those at risk of exclusion, we find it sensible to keep in mind that social exclusion can be seen as a relational. Social exclusion has two parties as it involves both the excluder as the excluded. The excluded should be guided into a better integration with mainstream society, whereas external

factors, such as monopolisation of jobs, restrictive access to certain sectors should be taken on as well [2].

Lastly, taking on social exclusion requires an approach that keeps in mind that most nations have different interpretations of what it means to be socially excluded. Even within the EU, social exclusion has many definitions based on national and ideological notions of what it means to belong to society [1]. These notions often differ from region to region, neighbourhood to neighbourhood and on an individual level as well. Even though overarching definitions of what social exclusion means and how it should be taken on are necessary to coordinate actions on a European level, sufficient freedom in this approach on various local levels remains important [4].

1.3. The Specific Case of Youngsters

Although the grounds for social exclusion of adults and youngsters are largely the same, it is worthwhile to go deeper into the specific case of the latter. Youngsters find themselves in a crucial stage of their life where one mistake can often be paid for repeatedly, well into adulthood. Personal characteristics such as parental socio-economical status, gender, disablity, health, ethnicity, religion, place of residence and geographical mobility are among the factors that may have an impact on future unemployment or low wages. A good education, training, good health and similar productivity enhancing investments during one's younger years will often pay off later in life.

Especially in a multi-cultural society such as Europe, it is also important to note that many of the roles we take on throughout life are often socially constructed and thus different from culture to culture and nation to nation. Youth is such a socially constructed age category, with variable expectations attached to it depending one's perspective or background.

With the transition to adulthood roles in mind, youngsters today are in need of ample experimentation with their identities and how they see themselves in the future. Yet this experimentation with various identities and rebellion against older generations is less straightfoward for those growing up in poorer circles and socio-economically homogenous neighbourhoods. Firstly, being able to socialize with others through shared consumption, such as sports, going out and other social activities often requires money, denying or at least limiting the choice of outlets to do so for those with less financial means [2]. When youth rebellion and experimentation has no constructive outlet, peer group relations can lead youngsters into a negative spiral of social exclusion. Secondly, research is increasingly taking neighbourhood effects into account in predicting the individual disadvantage of youth [5]. Too much internal interaction in socio-economically homogenous neigbourhoods may socially isolate residents and limit information networks [6].

1.4. e-Inclusion and the Evolving Face of the Digital Divide

Even though the INCLUSO project goes beyond bridging the digital divide, our focus on the use of ICT and social software to aleviate the issue of social exclusion of youngsters inevitably brings us to the issue of e-Inclusion, one of the current priorities for Europe [7]. 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.

Even though access to 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 deprived socially are least likely to have access to digital resources such as online services [8], which could result in a 'rich getting richer' scenario, if the issue is not handled properly.

Recent literature also makes note of an evolution in the nature of the digital divide. While the digital divide, separating those with access to ICT and the Internet from those without, might be narrowing a digital divide of the 'second degree' is emerging and focuses on having the skills needed for basic computer and Internet use, as opposed to having physical access to the internet [9]. When we distinguish various levels of complexity in how one can use the internet, a digital divide of a 'third degree' becomes apparent which focuses on the divide between those who make more advanced use of the internet and those who do not [8]. Advanced use of the Internet encompasses such activities as making use of eGovernment or online financial services, civic engagement through online media and social networking. We see that as the level of complexity of Internet use rises, the participation in such activities by those people with low levels of education or income is considerably lower as compared to those with higher levels of education or income.

This stresses the need for proper training and guidance regarding the use of ICT and Internet for those at risk of social exclusion. Yet when observing how those at risk of social exclusion make use of the Internet, we should also look beyond skill and training alone, as what people expect, want and 'consume' on the Internet is also related to socio-economical status. Research by Bonfadelli among Swiss households [10] 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. Another study by Valentine et al. [11] finds that students using ICT for educational purposes had higher educational attainment than those using ICT solely for entertainment purposes. In other words, not only access to ICT but also how we use ICT matters.

2. What we know: Social software and Social Inclusion

2.1. Social Software

Since its conception by social media consultant and writer Clay Shirky in 2002 the term 'Social Software' has been adopted and interpreted by many in different ways. Shirky used the term to encompass all uses of software that supported interacting groups, even if the interaction was offline. Many argue that the term 'social software' is just another way to describe tools that support social interaction between people that already existed for much longer. Tools like e-mail and message boards are decades old, after all.

Then what makes these tools today so different from their predecessors? Boyd argues that as more and more people found their way to the Internet, the classical ways of grouping people online simply around subjects proved less scalable and more sofisticated ways were needed to allow people to find their place online. Just as in the real world, where we do not flock together simply based on 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 a same taste, way of communicating or style [12]. The internet is not just a repository for information and services anymore, but is also growing, more and more into a virtual representation of the real world; a public space in which we have the need to identify ourselves as well as possible and interact with others in the same nuanced way as we are used to do offline.

Central to this evolution are the social network(ing) sites such as Facebook, Bebo or Netlog. By being present on such networks and sharing particular information and media with others, users of these systems identify themselves and associate themselves with particular groups or (sub) cultures [13]. What makes social network sites so important today is the fact that they combine many of the functions of other social software tools such as blogging, chatting and messaging into the same platform in a network-centric way, enabling us to share these functions with exactly those people that we think that matter to us.

2.2. Social Software and Youngsters

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, experiment with different identities under the guise of different pseudonyms and interact with peers [14,15], be it for entertainment purposes (hanging out) or educational purposes. Whereas early studies on the potential of ICT to support social interactions, 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 [16-18]. Youngsters use new media as an almost natural extension of offline interactions bridging the gaps between moments of face-to-face contact (friendship-based network interactions).

When youngsters do engage in interactions with people that they do not already know in an offline context, they do so mainly in online communities around specific topics of interest. Interest-based network interactions are worthy of note, because they allow for social interactions with and new connections to contacts beyond the direct neighbourhood of these youngsters [17].

2.3. Potential Benefits of Social Software

We see the potential of social software as a tool to aleviate the social exclusion of marginalised youngsters as twofold. Firstly, our literature study leads us to conclude that proper use of social software can have beneficial effects on one's social capital [19], increasing the amount of benefits one might gain from having social ties to other people. Many of the benefits we gain from an increase in social capital can be connected to reasons why one might be more or less socially included [20].

The literature on social capital is extensive and many dimensions are introduced. Putnam [21] describes two forms of social capital: bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital, being the benefits we receive by being a part of closely knit networks held together by strong ties, amongst which we find emotional support, financial support and the swift flow of (reduntant) information. Bridging social capital encompasses those benefits we receive from being connected to networks outside of our regular networks, usually through people we don't know so well. Granovetter [22,23] elaborates on the notion of bridging social capital by describing the benefits we may gain from the weak ties in our networks and states that it is especially through these weak ties that we are most likely to gain access to new and useful information or jobs for example. This is especially interesting for the specific case of marginalised young people as a means to lift them out of their socio-economically homogenous network and bring them in touch with others [24].

Secondly, we can also look at social software as a way to supplement the approach taken by welfare organisations already working with marginalised youngsters. Certain activities between these organisations and their target groups that are already done offline today could benefit from being supplemented via online as online interactions can be briefer and more efficient due to the fact that participants do not need to participate at the same time or be present at a certain location media [25].

Youngsters in need of help could benefit from working with organisations that employ social software as a tool to interact with them. The online medium is a medium these youngsters often feel at home at. Different studies mention the fact that such tools lower not only the physical barrier for approaching an organisation that could help them (less transport is required) but also the psychological barriers for interacting with welfare organisations in face-to-face contact due to the online disinhibition effect [26].

3. The Use of Social Software by Welfare Organisations

3.1. Approach of the INCLUSO project

The multidimensional nature of social exclusion and the fact that the specific face of social exclusion is so different from place to place has led us to conclude that the best approach in this project would be one that places the organisations working with marginalised youngsters in the center of our study. Rather than deciding upon a number of actions from the top down and forcing these organisations and their youngsters to partake in activities we define, we asked our partner organisations to look at their current activities and defined, together with them, different strategies to support these activities via a wide range of different social software tools.

To help us connect these actions to how they contribute to social inclusion and to enable us to better evaluate and compare the different actions undertaken in the 4 partner countries, we constructed the model shown in figure 1 based on our literature study and focus group interviews.
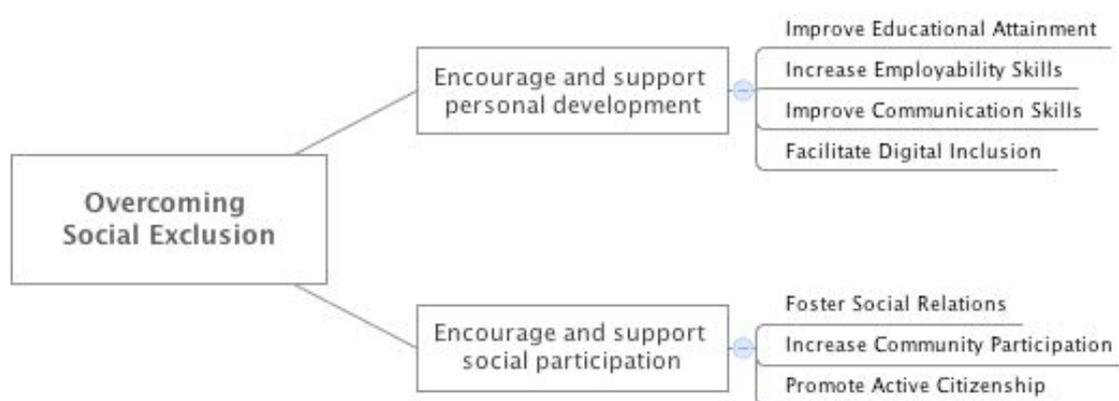

Figure 1 - Aligning the pilot actions with the theory on overcoming social exclusion

Actvities towards aleviating social exclusion of marginalised youth within most welfare organisations can be placed within this model. The model also connects well with strategies on social inclusion as defined by the EU [4]. By employing different social software tools in a variety of activities placed within this model, we hope to be able to create the basis for a useful matrix of which tools can best be implemented for which purpose and what the critical success factors are for their use in that particular case.

So far a number of challenges have been identified while setting up the different pilot projects, which we find of interest to publish even though this is just a preliminary summary.

3.2. Challenges for the Welfare Organisations

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.

Availability of computers and Internet access throughout Europe is growing. Yet, when extending welfare services towards marginalised young people onto digital media, 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. The focus should remain on supplementing, rather than replacing existing services with ICT solutions making sure that no part of the intended target group is left behind. In the meanwhile initiatives, aimed at increasing access to ICT and digital literacy, remain important.

3.3. Challenges for the Youngsters at Risk of Social Exclusion

As we have seen, bridging the digital divide is not just a matter of providing youngsters with computers and Internet access. The right steps need to be taken in order to guide youngsters in acquiring the proper skills to make use of this increasingly complex medium. Yet even when these skills are available, marginalised youngsters often find themselves making use of these skills for activities that aren't always beneficial to them [8,27]. Steyaert and Gould [9] raise a valid point when they question whose responsibility it is to define what people should and are allowed to do once they are connected to the Internet and trained in using it. We thread on unsteady moral grounds when we start thinking about forcing people's behaviour into one way or another. Maybe, rather than restricting certain forms of internet use, a role is laid out here for the organisations working with marginalised youngsters to motivate them and make them aware of the benefits proper use of various tools can have.

3.4. Challenges for Policy Makers

When youngsters interact with peers via online social media, they effectively place personal information about themselves online in semi-public spaces. For organisations working with marginalised youngsters this creates an extra challenge as ethical, legal and privacy issues arise. Who stores and owns this personal information and how can it be shielded from the wrong eyes? Furthermore different countries have different regulations on what is allowed and what is not and many of these current laws are not adjusted to an age where media flows so richly on the Internet. This calls for an update of laws and regulations on this matter resulting in an Internet that does not limit youngsters and the organisations working with them in being able to interact with eachother in a way that is beneficial to them, while keeping the digital environment in which they interact a safe place.

3.5. Challenges for Social Software Developers

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 [28]. 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 [29]. 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.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we summarised the current view on social inclusion, and of youngsters in specific, from a European point of view. We have seen that social inclusion is a multidimensional concept with many causes and effects. This multidimensionality, combined with a localised interpretation of this concept, underlines the importance of localised approaches towards aleviating the social exclusion of a particular target group. This is no different for using ICT and social software in specific in order to support the social inclusion of marginalised youngsters, be it through building social capital or as tools to interact with welfare organisations. Even though the Internet is technically a non-local medium potentially lifting its users across geographical borders, the way in which the needs of different groups of youngsters differ from place to place and situation to situation, still warants a local approach when it comes to the use of this medium.

Hence we place the welfare organisations working with marginalised youngsters at the center of our approach and trust on their expertise to make sure that these social software tools are used in such a way and in such situations where they can be best of use. However, making informed decisions about this requires them to be continuously up to date on the various tools available, the way youngsters are using them and the way they can be adapted to use within the organisation.

Not only the youngsters and the organisations play a role here, but also policy makers who need to make sure that laws and regulations regarding the ethical, privacy and legal aspects of internet use by youngsters and the organisations working with them are updated in such a way that these youngsters are sufficiently protected only, whilst making sure they can reap the benefits of interacting with eachother and online welfare services.

Lastly, we should involve the developers of social software to make sure that social software is constructed in such a way that it answers to the social needs of youngsters, the specific demands of welfare organisations and policy makers.

Hence it becomes clear that a continuous dialogue between these partners is in order. It is the aim of this paper to contribute to such a dialogue. The Internet is a fast evolving medium and youngsters are often apt at coping with this change. The time is ripe for welfare organisations and policiy makers to develop the same aptitude.

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