# "Online tools and their impact on Young People."

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## Abstract

*The emergence of social media tools and the enthusiasm by which young people have embraced theses tools as one of their primary modes of interaction is well documented in many current studies. One side effect of this growth is recognition that there is a need for youth workers to re-evaluate their existing methods by which they carry out their work and specifically how they engage with, empower and seek to educate young people.*

*This paper contends that the process of re-evaluation is integral to the future development of the youth sector, where youth work strives to maintain pace with the fast moving technological developments, readily being utilised by young people. Furthermore, the process has to be embraced at three distinct levels: Policy; Training and Education; and Implementation. Clear appreciation of internet usage trends of the young people and the requirement to develop and maintain the necessary policy documents is intrinsic to the sector. Consistent, understandable and actionable policies are required to guide the work in this new direction, which incorporates compulsory training modules, and where youth workers are supported by appropriate resources.*

*This research employs a hybrid methodology combining analysis of data collected from in-depth interviews, focus groups involving young people, youth workers and their managers, and analysis of International statistics concerning the internet usage rates and reported behaviour patterns of young people in Ireland .*

*This paper concludes by identifying some of the challenges facing the youth sector in relation to embracing the internet in their day to day work. These issues range from the mundane such having enough internet points to satisfy demand to the more complex and problematic such as child protection issues, staff training and education and policy development and implementation. The need for a clear policy framework is also highlighted.*

   ***Key Words: Social media tools; interaction; youthwork; policy.***

The term 'online tools', has become a generic term used in reference to applications designed to utilise and exploit the benefits brought forward by internet connectivity. In the era that has brought us powerful web browsers, fast internet connection speeds and the latest in mobile technology, such as Apple's I Phone, there appears to be an unlimited array of applications and tools that depend on an internet connection for their existence. This phenomenon has resulted in difficulty to clearly define what is meant by online tools.

The Youth work sector has been somewhat, loosely aligned to formal mainstream education, providing valuable developmental education to our young people in a distinctly informal manner. Compared to the formal education sector, youth work operates within a series of systems that are quite ad-hoc and fluid in nature, whereby workers benefit from a system that is not curriculum based and leaves more room for flexibility in service provision.

The absence of firm regulation to cover all youth work has resulted in the sector developing in somewhat of a funding lead basis as opposed to needs lead. However, it could be argued that regulation could hamper the sector that is based on a foundation that permits a flexible approach, sensitive to the diverse and specific circumstances in any given geographic location.

Furthermore, this has created a differentiation among service providers, as developments appear to be regionalised, sporadic and reactionary.  Nevertheless, the sector has flourished due to its traditional interactive engagement procedures, which have underpinned this valuable contribution to youth development.

Youth Culture by its nature, leads young people to be explorative and investigative in how they communicate and interact. The internet and associated social media tools have become an important aspect of youth culture.  According to Liner et al. (cited in McMillan & Morrison 2006) during the 1990's the internet experienced a continual growth away from its origins in research and into wide stream public access through worldwide browsing.  In this same period a generation was coming of age, leading to the young people of today being the first generation not to have an experience of life without an online dimension. This position is endorsed Hodkinson and Lincoln, (2008) who contend that with regard to the use of new interactive social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace, it is the youth population who dominate their use.

Jordon (1999) suggest that Cyberspace now impacts everyone. For some the impact will be minimal, however for others, such as today's teenagers it will be comprehensive.

> It's as always a question of balance, but too often in today's society children are left unsupervised with unrestricted access to the internet, as well as access via the latest mobile devices. (YW: 1)

Therefore, the service providers intrinsic to the development of young people need to recognise the technological shift in behaviour and subsequently re-evaluate their existing methods by which they carry out their work and specifically how they engage with, empower, and seek to educate young people.  Youth Workers have

had success where others haven't due to the nature of their approach, which for many has incorporated a flexibility and openness, contributing to the development of relationships with young people on a level that can be difficult if not impossible to achieve within the constraints of formal education. It is this approach that can easily be transferred into the re-evaluated methods, resulting in youth workers successfully engaging young people with the same, tried and tested approach, but, within a new modernised realm: "the online world".

The primary aim of this paper is to move away from the limitations of traditional interaction methods associated with youth work and embrace the new technologies open to the sector already widely adopted by the youth population. The extent of the gap between youth participation in social media activity and the integration of these technologies by youth workers is a digital divide in its own right which will run the risk of becoming unbridgeable if current practices continue. In particular, this paper focuses on the organisational change processes required and although it is outside the scope of the paper to present a change model, at the very least this process must incorporate an analysis of current policies and procedures which serve to limit the engagement of youth workers with online technologies. The identification and careful considerations of barriers or potential barriers is the first step in developing a workable strategy that provides a useful policy framework and a work environment where youth workers feel protected at a professional level. Furthermore, for any shift in organisational direction to be effective and meaningful, current training/education and implementation methods will also require restructuring.

Clear appreciation of internet usage trends of the young people and the requirement to develop and maintain the necessary policy documents is intrinsic to the sector. Consistent, understandable and actionable policies are required to guide the work in this new direction, which incorporates compulsory training modules, and where youth workers are supported by appropriate resources such as access to information officers who have specific responsibility and knowledge of policy development. McMillan & Morrison (2006) argue that an in-depth appreciation of how young people's lives are being influenced by new technologies provides an insight to the

internet usage trends of future generations.  Moreover, the opportunity exists for youth work professionals to update their policies and procedures in order to maintain pace with youth internet trends.

> There can be no doubt that the use of SNWs has been integrated in to the lives of young people in Ireland. Up from 69% in 2007, 72% of young people with profiles on social networking websites surveyed were accessing them more than 3 times a week, 37% (+3 from 2007) were doing this on a daily basis.

<div align="right">[National Centre for Technology in Education, 2008]</div>

> The home is by far the most popular place for accessing social networking websites with 87% saying this is where they accessed these sites most often. An increased number of teens (42% up from 36% in 2007) were doing this from their bedrooms.

<div align="right">[National Centre for Technology in Education, 2008]</div>

Danah Boyd an expert on social networking (cited in Glaser 2006) is of the opinion that "kids and teenagers have very little freedom in the real world.  It's not like back in the day.  They used to bike places on their own--now it's all controlled and sanitized."

Boyd's argument suggest that a systematic change has and is occurring in young people's interaction within society.  Perhaps it is society that is the catalyst for the change.  Moreover, in order to work as youth workers within a society that is changing, it would appear logical that methods and tools used to engage and interact with young people will need to be adapted.

Anderson (cited in Berson 2005) argues that Young People are surrounded with advanced technological devices that communicate via a combination of words, graphics and audio.  However, cognitive resources are challenged by the pressure of a variety of sensory inputs, which can detrimentally affect young people's ability to make calculated decision.  According to Berson, (cited in Berson 2005)as the internet embeds itself into the lives of young people, it can bring them into contact with unsuitable information, notions that defy positive behaviours and suggestions that are aimed at infiltrating their thoughts and actions.  The internet is not restricted by time or space and therefore, requires the constant development of skills necessary to enable young people to embrace the technology.  This is where youth work professionals can continue to empower young people, by further developing service

provision to incorporate a post modern technological element.  Recently, progress has been made with many of the main youth organisations striving to bring a documented professionalism to their work, in a bid to gain national recognition for the sector.  Youth Work Ireland for example has developed an internal "Quality Standards".  A similar development has occurred within Government with the Youth Affairs Unit's work on a Quality Standards framework.  Such developments are welcomed within the sector and seen as a direction that is required in order to regulate youth work.

According to The Office of The Minister of Children and Youth Affairs Youth Work is defined as:

*"a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations." (Youth Work Act, 2001)*
http://www.omc.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2Fyouthaffairs%2Fwhatisyouthwork.htm *22/01/10*

With this definition in mind, the Youth sector appears to be committed to the personal and social development of young people.  Therefore, as the internet continues to feature as the prominent vehicle for the personal and social interaction of youth, the Youth Sector must adapt procedures in order to successfully uphold its commitment.  The previously mentioned Quality Standards Framework is an example of where the sector needs to go.  Nevertheless, the provision of a method of assessing performance is meaningless unless a similar structured uniformity is brought to the policy formulation and direction given to the service providers.

Evidence gathered suggests that as the capabilities of the internet developed, particularly the social networking technology, youth work professionals became increasingly concerned by the perceived negative connotations of such technology.  This position is identified by McMillan & Morrison (2006) who suggest that much research has focused on the search for the negative effects of the Internet.  It could be argued that any negative viewpoint and lack of acceptance of the virtual

opportunities can be attributed to the vacuum that exists as a result of the absence of a nationally accepted directive or policy on the use of online tools.  Therefore, youth workers are left to devise their action plans and work strategies in line with their own perceptions of what online tools have to offer.

However, Tynes (2007) contends that the potential benefits associated with the use of social networking sites outweigh any negative aspects and that in order to keep young people safe online, there are alternative methods.  According to Tynes (2007) young people who participate in social networking arenas can experience learning that will compliment and add to what is currently taught in mainstream school.

As Youth Work has embraced the need for a professionalization of service provision, the need for comprehensive policy formulation was identified.  Youth Work Ireland for example has developed policies, including, internet use and social networking, which have begun to embrace the new technologies that are so readily utilised by young people.  Youth Work Ireland, whilst being a major player in the delivery of Youth Work in Ireland, is only one of many.  These developments require continual attention, in relation to training and education and implementation, which will help to diminish the fear culture that presently exists.  Furthermore, whilst the development of policy among service providers is welcomed, a system is required that will allow for policy formulation that is accepted and implementable across the entire sector.  Ultimately, this will allow the sector to progress in a consistent manner.

**<u>Adaptation</u>**

Since the emergence of new technologies, particularly the internet and all that is possible with an internet connection, the youth work sector would appear to be playing catch up.  Traditional methods of interaction with young people were no longer the only avenue.

> ... the use of such sites, as well as online tools like twitter, are excellent as a means of informing young people of our service, events and suchlike.  I think that there is a huge piece of work to be done in developing such networks as safe places for young people.  (YW: 2)

The World Wide Web and specifically the advent of broadband opened the doors to a high-tech, high-speed global village that while offering so much potential, it also harbours potential danger.  The huge challenge that the youth work sector was, is and will be facing is the necessity to attempt to understand that which essentially changes the way things are done.   Rich (cited in Malone, 2000) suggests that: "the power of the 'way things are' can keep us trapped in ways of seeing that obscure the significance of larger changes, even as they are occurring."

"The ways things are" would appear to be an issue in the development of youth work over recent years.  Often youth work organisations adapted to the perceived needs of young people on an ad-hoc basis, whether that be over a game of pool or free internet access.  In many circumstances the developments, with particular reference to the internet, where unstructured.  For example, as the popularity and speed of the internet grew, many youth drop-in facilities installed computers.  This may have appeared to be innovative and forward thinking in terms of service provision, however, a common factor was that most initial thought was given to the hard ware and the necessary safety software was overlooked.   Furthermore, the level of adaptation towards Information Technology was primarily driven by the personal interest, ability and understanding of individual staff members.  The trend in relation to how youth work service providers, particularly those with a drop-in facility shows an initial welcoming approach to the Internet during the early years.  However as the technology developed, the fear culture also developed and the initial welcome approach was demoted.  Ultimately, this reactionary developmental phase lacked any formalised national structure or policy and procedures.

This lack of recognition, structure and direction was the catalyst for a fragmented approach to the development of the sector.  This resulted in a mixed approach to how different providers embraced the internet.  For example, in some locations the use of social networking sites was welcomed and in others it was banned, and many facilities lacked sufficient internet security systems.   The diversity that is present within the Youth Work Sector in Ireland on one hand is most welcomed, but on the other creates complexity.  Provision ranges from the professional organisations to

the community and church groups, which highlights the difficulty that exist in the creation of suitable governance structure that can readily be adapted in a diverse dichotomy.

> "As a result of new technological developments, social convergence is becoming the norm online, but people are still uncomfortable with the changes"  (Boyd, 2008:14)

Unfortunately, the unwillingness to embrace new technologies is related in some instances to the lack of knowledge and awareness on the part of the service provider.  In addition, even where there is a willingness to make progress with regard to the Internet, a stark funding deficit exists. This sparks associated debates, whereby for the governments which have a desire to promote and encourage safer use of online technologies; this cannot be achieved without the necessary influx of investment.

In the absence of clear direction and strategic planning, 'to ban or not to ban' is the question faced by many service providers.  This too has been high on the agenda for parents.  Tynes (2007) argues that:

> "Whatever the reason for parental concern, I argue that banning adolescents from social networking sites - if this were even feasible - as well as monitoring too closely might close off avenues for beneficial cognitive and psychosocial development that are available to young people in the online social world." (Tynes 2007:576)

It is, however, these same providers who for many are masters of the traditional procedures utilised in the engagement of young people.  Therefore, it would appear that 'fear' exists within the sector.   Evidence suggests that the fears associated with the use of online tools are similar to the concerns for the safety of young people in the public domain.  Youth workers comment on the concerns they have for online bullying, grooming and exposure to unsuitable material for example.

> People are worried about the level of risk associated with certain website and the potential for harm to young people. (YW: 3)

However, are young people not exposed to these dangers, albeit to a lesser extent, in the offline world?  Therefore, it is potentially not the technology that holds the dangers but rather the way in which it is used.  Indeed, youth workers have vast experience of dealing with these dangers and empowering young people to behave responsibly in an offline context, however, it is the difference between how young people and youth workers accept and work within the virtual realm that holds the key.

> It's a technology that can be embraced. Young people are accessing information online and look online more than ever for support. So that's where youth workers/youth information assistants could be also.  (YW: 4)

The internet can be embraced in such a way that young people can be prepared for the positive and negative aspects.  Moreover, this can be achieved by the development of programmes and interventions that aim to generate awareness in the mind of adolescents, that the internet is real and presents risks and consequences.

> There is also the danger associated with building a 'virtual' personality through one's homepage, which may be impossible to live up to in real life.  On a more traditionalist note, people are losing the ability to converse, spell and use grammatically correct language, and the ability to read body language, as so much communication is screen based rather than face to face.  It is these abilities (or rather the lack thereof) that we are seeing in our work with young people as a need that we must address. (YW: 5)

Many providers have in the past facilitated personal development programmes for young people, incorporating effective decision making.  This same approach is still relevant, but it is essential that the online realm is incorporated into future strategies.

The online aspect of the lives of young people represents a conveyor belt moving swiftly along. In order for the negative impact on our young people's lives to be minimal and even positive youth work can play a pivotal role.  However, it would

appear that the sector requires a strategic vision to incorporate measurable outcomes, based on a commitment to adapt work practices, policies and procedures to reflect a 21$^{st}$ Century IT hungry society.  Difficulties exist, whereby individual organisation and federations are formulating their own policies and procedures to deal with issues of an online nature.  The problem is that for any innovative policy statement to be effective and meaningful, it would be necessary for the entire sector to accept it and implement it, within a uniform structure supported and endorsed by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, who are responsible for the monitoring and funding of youth work in Ireland.  Under existing structures there is a lack of commonality and consensus on such matters.  Moreover the professionalism of the sector would be enhanced as a result.  From the research to date, frontline youth workers are of the opinion that as a direct consequence of the lack of national uniformed vision and direction on youth work in general and the use of online tools in particular, youth workers are quite resistant to using online tools in their work.  Much of this perceived resistance steams from individual's limited or complete lack of knowledge and awareness of the technology, and concerns are held that to embrace the technology will result in increased workload.  Nevertheless, respondents identified that there is a need to engage with young people via online tools, and that these young people are quite experienced in the use of such tools.  Therefore the sector would need to adapt and provide training and support for workers in the use of these new technologies.

The pace of change has never been faster and more notable than it is at present with regard to the technological developments on what seems to be a daily basis, and the way in which the developments are quickly accepted into normal daily live is important.  This acceptance is particularly swift among the younger population.  Therefore with most professionals in the youth work sector, particularly at management and decision-making level being older and apparently more conservative than the young people they seek to serve, it could be suggested that a shift in the behaviour and ideals of the professionals is required if the sector is to remain as relevant to young people in the future as it has been in the past.

The challenges identified in this paper, namely: internet provision; policy development and implementation; staff training and education will evidently require considerable investment in terms of both finance and commitment.  The research has unearthed a belief that for the youth work sector to flourish and be a force into the future a consensus is required across the sector as to how to embrace what the future holds and for this to be supported and directed from a central source who can monitor service provision to ensure consistency and quality.

The concern is present that for the youth work sector to morph into an entity that receives direction and is under the control of a central governmental body would hold tribulation.  Such a development, regardless of the perceived benefits of potential regulation could result in the loss of the individual dynamism that youth work utilises to its advantage.  Therefore the challenge exists for the youth work sector to assume the characteristics of what can only be described as a statutory sphere of activity, whilst preserving the traits that have become synonymous with the community and voluntary nature of youth work.

Further research will be required to ascertain the feasibility and viability of how a uniformly accepted directive on the provision of a single vision for youth work can be implemented.  It is apparent from the research to date that there is an acknowledgement and disappointment among youth work professionals that the sector is underfunded and under resourced. An opinion also exists that considerable value for money is being delivered by the sector, and that this can be multiplied if adequate resources were to be directed and invested into youth work.  This opinion is support by the suggestion that traditional educational methods to date have had little or no effect on changing the online behaviours of young people. Moreover, the youth work sector is better placed and equipped to implement a strategy that would allow for young people to be engaged in an environment that enables them to reflect on their actions and be empowered with the necessary skills to adapt a safer approach to their own online involvement.  The question with regard to this strategy is: How can it be formulated and implemented in order to have a professional process for the youth sector to match the professional approach of the workforce?

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