HORIZONS
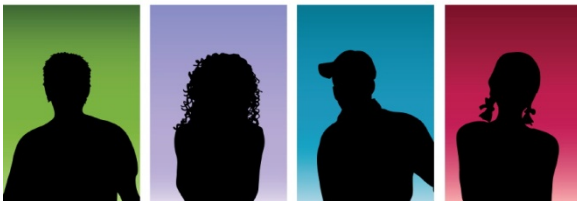
Social Media as a Part of the Solution

Can social media support the social inclusion of youth-at-risk?

The Issue through Falcon Eyes

- Digital exclusion will likely affect youth more than other marginalized groups (such as seniors, immigrants, and people with disabilities);
- How youth use the Internet is more important than access – the use of social networking sites, for example, was found to improve several indicators of social inclusion;
- Face-to-face meetings are critical to the success of initiatives driven by information and communications technologies;
- In Canada, reshaping existing programs aimed at the inclusion of youth at risk around social media can bring better results and help reach a larger crowd.

The Situation in Canada

Current projects focusing on the social inclusion of youth-at-risk in Canada function in part through governmental and charitable programs. Even though these programs have proven their usefulness,[1] a limited number of youngsters can access them and the priority is put on high-risk youth and young offenders. CanAdventure Education – an organization helping youth to become an active part of society through diverse outdoors programs – believes that "there are many youth at risk in Canada who do not fit eligibility requirements to access the limited programs funded by governments and not-for-profit groups. As a result, families of youth-at-risk can be left with

> *Youth-at-risk* of exclusion is an accepted term that defines a non-homogeneous group. They are: marginalized youth, young offenders, long-term unemployed youth and NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).
>
> *Different factors and situations put them at risk: dropping out of school, dysfunctional family, being in care, drug abuse, homelessness.*
>
> *ICT and Youth at Risk (JRC, 2010)*

few options for early intervention."[2] Also, youth-at-risk often originate from low-income families and some studies have shown that the penetration rate of the Internet is slower for "have-less groups".[3] Digital exclusion may marginalize youth-at-risk even further.

Reaching across the Atlantic

The European Commission's Joint Research Centre's Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (JRC-IPTS)[4] has launched projects to help young people at risk find their place in society. They chose a new angle to accomplish this. By harnessing the potential of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), they hope "to achieve wider inclusion objectives[5]". Below, you will find a brief description of two projects funded under European Commission's 7th framework programme (FP7) to develop ICT-based solutions for youth at risk and marginalized young people.

## Digital Exclusion – A Special Focus on Youth-at-Risk

Many marginalized groups are at risk of digital exclusion; however, the digital exclusion of youth-at-risk and marginalized young people is particularly worrying when compared to, for example, the elderly. Today's young people are growing up surrounded by digital media which is changing learning behaviours and cognitive patterns – a shift that educators are starting to respond to.[6] While many youth have come to have a natural affinity for ICTs, the reality is that not all young people have equal access to quality ICTs and there is a concern that non-users will get left behind not having an opportunity to develop the skills that are shaping the "knowledge revolution",[7] thus further marginalizing youth-at-risk and marginalized young people. Evidence also points to the concerning 'unsuitable and harmful online experiences' (e.g., pornographic, racist, violent or abusive) of socio-economically disadvantaged youth. Enabling access to the Internet for everyone does not, on its own, promote social inclusion.

Early Signs of Success

The INCLUSO project,[8] funded by FP7, conducted four pilots in Poland, Belgium, Scotland and Austria with the aim of finding 'proof of concept'[9] on whether digital inclusion fosters social inclusion and in what ways. The project laid out seven goals to encourage and support personal development and social participation of its participants (see figure 1).

Positive relationships between digital inclusion and social inclusion (e.g., becoming more active within society) were found. Digital inclusion relates to better offline communication skills, more active citizenship (following the news), and increased social capital (both bridging and bonding)[10] through social software (e.g. Facebook or Netlog). It is important to note that Internet use alone, and frequency of use, are not sufficient to explain positive outcomes. The use of social software seems to be critical in meeting social inclusion goals and building trust. Of those seven goals, no relationship was found between digital inclusion and the goals of employability and social relations.

Figure 1 - INCLUSO goals (INCLUSO Impact Results, p.6)
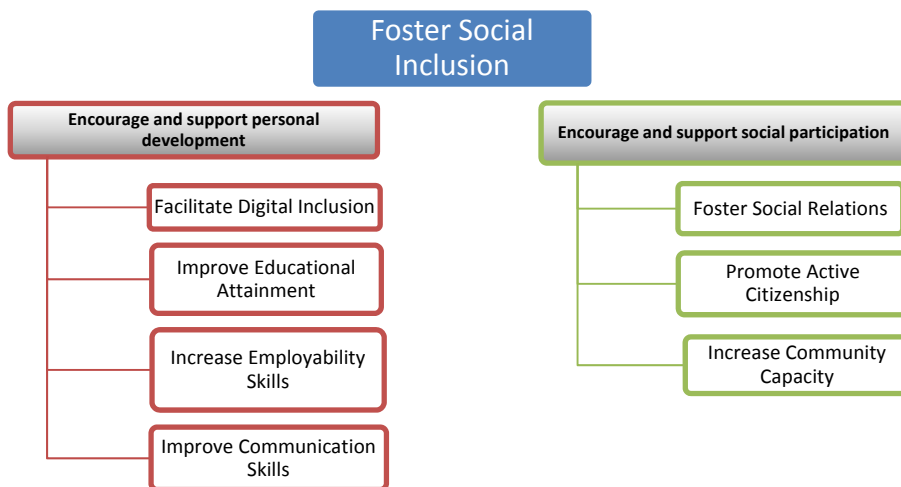
The only negative correlation between digital inclusion and indicators of social inclusion is that increased use of the internet leads to a lack of motivation at school. This causal relationship pertains solely to Internet use, and similar correlations were not found for frequency of use and the use of social software (e.g. Facebook or Netlog).[11] This suggests a need for more research to better understand positive and negative impacts of ICTs concerning behaviours (Internet addiction, multi-tasking) and brain development.

Building Trust through Gamification

"Gamification is the concept that you can apply the basic elements that make games fun and engaging to things that typically aren't considered a game. In theory you can apply game design to almost anything including education, health, work and more."[12] REPLAY is a European Commission-funded interactive video game that facilitates communication between professionals and marginalized or at risk of exclusion youth aged 10 to 14. Gaming is thought to be a particularly effective tool for youth as it is a platform with which many youth are comfortable. Within an engaging and highly-interactive environment, the player is confronted with a series of behavioural questions that create a space for discussion with the attending expert. The content and activities of the game can be tailored to specific needs and REPLAY is beginning to be used not only as a rehabilitation tool, but as a preventative tool in schools across Europe.[13]

ICTs cannot replace face-to-face communication

Stemming from their consultations and literature reviews on ICTs and youth, the European study concludes that ICTs can be an important tool in re-engaging youth-at-risk and marginalized young people and preventing their exclusion. Their findings stress that ICT strategies are significantly more

effective when paired with regular human interaction. Both intermediaries (e.g. social workers) and multipliers (e.g. family members) have important roles in enabling positive outcomes. Flexibility is another key consideration. Given the range of socio-economic and socio-cultural risk factors that lead to exclusion, a suite of ICT-based solutions is necessary to ensure that intermediaries are able to engage specific groups of youth-at-risk and marginalized young people in the appropriate way.

Using Social Media for a Better Inclusion of Canadian Marginalized Groups

In Europe, the focus has been on youth-at-risk, although the European Commission's e-inclusion agenda will soon explore the applicability of this kind of project to other marginalized groups such as the elderly, the physically disabled, those with autism and immigrants.[14]

In Canada, initiatives using ICTs for social inclusion already exist. At the tip of the spear, the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC) and Assisting Local Leaders with Immigrant Employment Strategies (ALLIES) are using the Internet to create networks of professional immigrants so they can share experiences, find a mentor, and get in touch with potential employers.[15]

Such an initiative could be transposed to a project aimed at youth at risk and marginalized young people. The Ottawa Participate and Learn Skills (PALS) Project – which introduced in the 1980s 40 different programs to engage children and adolescents-at-risk in their community and have them develop socioeconomic skills – proved that social inclusion initiatives bring good results; housing authority and city expenditures showed that the savings far exceeded the cost of the program.[16] Governments at all levels and charitable organizations have responded over the years with a suite of programs to reach youth-at-risk across the country. Today, as demonstrated in the European Union, we have in social media a new tool that could help these projects achieve better results and reach a broader audience.

Notes

1 Preliminary results demonstrated that Youth at Risk Development Program (YARD) has referred participants to a wide range of programs from 24 different agencies and that these referrals assist participants with education and learning issues, employment and housing.
2 Greg Stevenson, CanAdventure Education.
3 Statistics Canada. 2002. The Digital Divide in Canada and The Globe and Mail, April 3rd, 2010. Canada's Digital Divide.
4 Joint Research Centre's Institute for Prospective Technological Studies
5 2006 Riga declaration on ICT for an Inclusive Society
6 Hache, A. and J. Cullen, ICT and Youth at risk: How ICT-driven initiatives can contribute to their socio-economic inclusion and how to measure it. EUR 24430 EN – 2010.
7 Ibid.
8 INCLUSO.
9 "Proof of concept examines whether core ideas are functional and feasible prior to proceeding further. It helps to establish viability and overall direction and does not constitute scientific proof" INCLUSO Impact Results p.34.
10 Bonding ties are those created between individuals of more or less the same background and bridging ties are with people of different economic or cultural backgrounds. INCLUSO Impact Results.
11 INCLUSO Impact Results
12 Gamification Wiki
13 Project rePlay
14 Europe's Information Society's Overview of ongoing projects
15 Triec – Immigrant Networks and Allies - Toolkits
16 Pender, M., McCart S, 2007. Youth Engagement and Youth at risk, a Literature Review.