



by Leo Kaserer

Facebook and Co. connects people! A laptop or a perfect computer instead of an old fashioned youth centre?

► The use of social networks by young people: the advantages and the risks

Social networks have become a recognized medium of communication and information. They help people from all around world, from different cultures and backgrounds to communicate easily, to keep in touch and to share information and data (pictures, movies...). What started with an experiment in the United States went on to become the most known social network. Individuals started it but then companies, political parties, groups... jumped in to use it to spread their purpose. And now it is part of the communication of modern society. There are many advantages to this; old friendships can be found again, you can keep in touch, be informed regularly, easily, quickly, you can share, ideas, pictures,... and you can do it for free or little cost.

It has its advantages but as with all internet services it comes with some risks. This would include the creation of false identities. Some do it just for fun, but also to leave their real identity aside; maybe because of a challenging background, a partner or friendship or because they can describe themselves in an ideal way as humans tend to do when given the chance.

A challenge as well is identity theft (hacking); invading people's privacy and widening the opportunity to harass others. Because of the size of networking sites there is easy access to personal information with the risk of misuse. It opens up gateways for paedophiles and stalkers. This is one of the dangers that we as social and youth workers have to educate the youth of modern society about. The information and communication we deliver should follow a high standard of pedagogical work. Values should be addressed and respected.

Social networking sites can give an illusion of reality. Humans have the tendency to present their best side and not expose their weakness which might affect real relationships and cause individuals to become anti-social. Young people might spend a lot of their time in the virtual world which could cause damage in the form of addiction, diminished language skills and other health issues.

By the time adults get involved more and more in Facebook, Twitter and the like, youngsters and especially children are getting into something which might become the more popular use of new media: it seems that the booming sites for youngsters are a mix of social networking with online gaming (Club Penguin, Habbo Hotel, Stardoll, Poptropica...).

► Why not use a social network to get in contact with young people also at a local level?

I have the impression that a youth centre, a youth club or youth NGO addresses the interest and attention towards youngsters at a limited level. As social networks are so popular nowadays you are able to reach more of the young population at a lower cost.



Your organisation could offer up-dated information about their aims and activities, invitations and advertising can be forwarded easily. Access to videos, pictures and other material can be made to attract youngsters. Networks can also be used to educate the youth on values, opinions and concepts of living together. Sites, articles, communications and information with a doubtful content have to be detected as such.

Networking sites help people with the same interests and views to become part of a group or movement which could help with communications between different cultures. Some of the most important movements include anti-racism and environmental protection issues.

► **The role of social network in the daily working life of a social or youth worker**

Beside the points on information and updates we already mentioned, there are other important qualities of social networks for daily work.

I presume that some of the profound desires of young people (the pursuit of a successful life, together with others, the quest for success and acceptance, the aspiration for recognition and the feeling of being important and valuable, the longing for a positive future) haven't changed.

The virtual world might offer to satisfy some of these needs. Very easily you can become part of a group; you can find people with the same interest or opinion and have the chance to find someone with whom to talk. This is very interesting. But is it a true group? Or is it still virtual?

It also makes it easier to establish contact between youngsters and social services and helps to reduce the barriers between them. Youngsters would not have to be there physically in the first place and would not have to reveal their identity. You could keep the counselling anonymous.

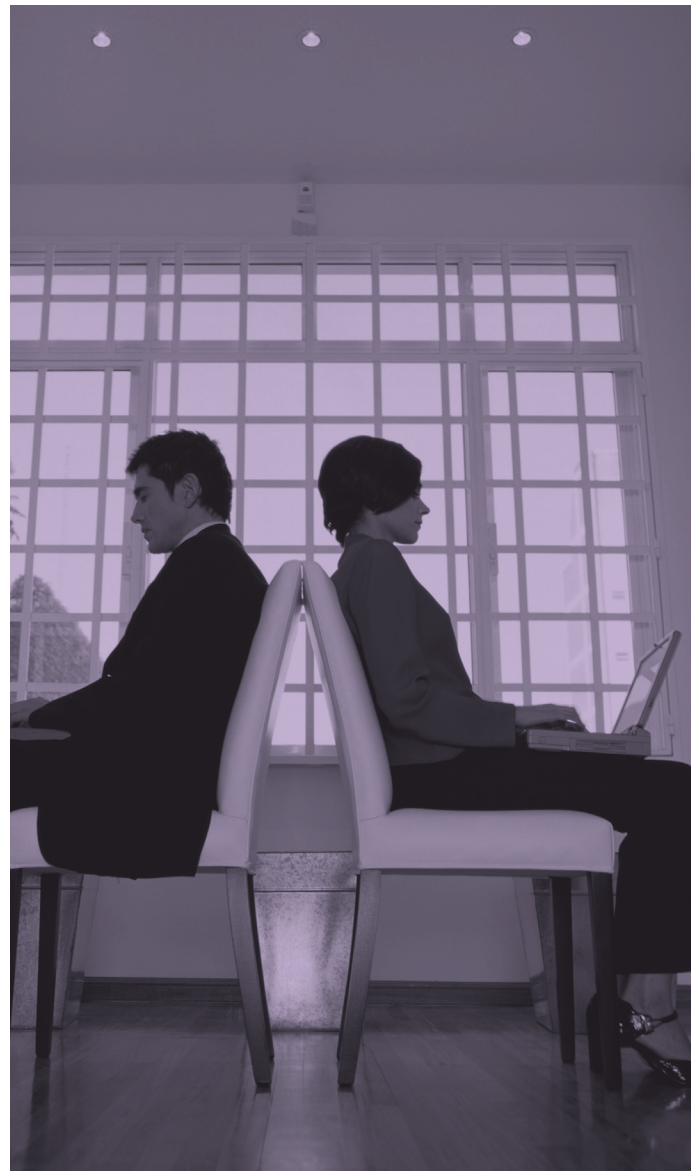
What do you think about that idea?

There is the challenge that in times of an information society the ones with less access and the capacity to use new media and not having the knowledge to use them may become more excluded. In our work we have to guarantee to have methods and facilities to close this growing gap.

► **Did the use of the social network change the relationship with your target group?**

Social networks could reveal a lot about your organisation, but also about yourself. Sometimes it could reveal more than you would like to share with your youngsters and clients.

While Facebook for example, offers to the opportunity to "become a friend" of someone; your relationship is automatically



defined through this pattern. I see two important aspects in this. The first one is the relationship between youth workers and youngsters. By this process the relationship which is a professional one, changes from «youthworker and client» to «friends». It could mislead the youngster or client in relation to what you offer as an organisation and/or youth worker. It is not friendship in the first place we offer, it is professional support and advice. I believe it has to be pointed out very clearly what we are offering and what the individual roles are.

The second one is the meaning and quality of friendship. In Facebook you have just to click and to accept a "friend" and you are in a friendship. But this has nothing to do with the appropriate meaning and values of friendship. Youngsters will tell you in your work, how many friends they have. You know their background and you understand that they count their networking friends. Friendship means to have time, to make an effort, you have to meet, to share, to work on the relationship. A friend stands beside you when things are difficult. It is not just to be online or not, sharing pictures and stories.

• Wide Angle



► **The kind of social network used by young people in your experience**

There is a huge variety of social networks in Europe and the world. Some of them are more regionally or used in language areas, some are used by different groups and ages (netlog, tuenti, bebo). And there are worldwide ones, like msn, hi 5 and myspace. Facebook seemed to be used by certain types of people, but lately it seems to be spreading into all age groups and social groups. It has become the most important social network. It is a very important player in opinion making and communication of daily life of millions of (young) people around the globe.

► **Experiences to share...**

It is not always true what you read!

Sometimes youngsters have competitions to see who can fool the most people.

They like to create false identities, movements and groups. They sell none existent goods, announce and invite people to events which do not exist or offer relationships with virtual created identities. The more people they get to believe in their created idea or false identity the better fun it is for them.

Responsibility of youth workers

The huge potential and capacity of social networking ideas has to be recognised by social and youth workers. We have to learn to use them in an efficient and effective way. We have to be aware and to learn about the possible impact in our society and the lives of our young people. We still do not know enough about the effect of new media and how they influence our social behaviour. We can see or imagine the financial, individual and political benefit for some of the providers. But we can't detect if there are any other hidden plans or purposes set by the ones who offer these services.

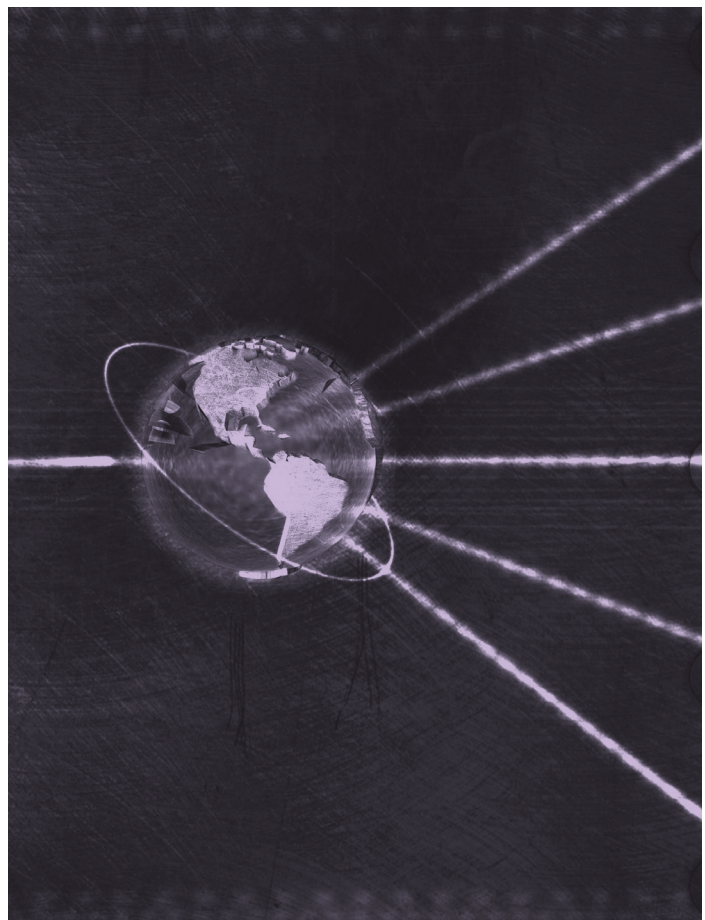
It seems to be scary if we think about the deeper impact of social networks. New ways of being and communicating are created. As already mentioned you have to have a certain capacity of using the sites properly. The fast, outgoing and smart ones are "in".

As it was years ago when cell phones stepped into our lives, then the internet and some years ago social networks, now new technical devices make it possible to have access to our messages and communication any time. For many youngsters life is...well have you seen the movie Matrix? Scary, isn't it?

Social networks attract hundreds of millions of people. The rules, the content and ways of communication are arranged and controlled by a few companies. Wikipaedia, Google search and the social networks are telling us what is right, in and appropriate. The content of user's pages, groups and

forums promoting controversial topics such as pro-anorexia and holocaust denial are not detected and removed easily.

Even though social networking seems to connect and have a relational spark, the virtual world never could replace the quality of personal face-to-face interaction. Personal contact with young people is vital for functioning youth and social work. For this reason we also have to continue to work on the intellectual and physical mobility of our society. Our quality work should fill the gaps, questions and orientation young people are looking for. Social networking for sure can't! ■



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