# Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth

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# A modest proposal

*Is it time to develop digital and smart youth work strategies?*

*A youth worker's perspective*

*Michele Di Paola*

Digital youth work, smart youth work and digitalisation have been the subject of an ongoing debate within small circles and groups of institutions or experts. In recent years, we have been witnessing a new momentum and energy invested in this topic, with many diverse voices joining this conversation. As the use of digital youth work dramatically increased in 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and as the discussions about it are becoming more prominent, we have to ask if this is the right time to call for a digital and smart youth work strategy guiding a concerted approach in this area.

Approaching this topic from the perspective of a youth worker with several years of experience in the youth field and technology, I would agree with this call to action: we need a strategy. But what should be the elements of such a strategy, what should be its main focus and who should be responsible for it?

**PRECONDITIONS FOR SETTING UP A STRATEGY FOR SMART AND DIGITAL YOUTH WORK**

How does technology shape our values, choices and behaviour? Answering this question should be understood as a precondition for developing a strategy about digital youth work and/or youth work involving digital environments, tools and media. Before imagining the development of such a strategy, we also need to consider and understand the internet of platforms and the current safety regulations. For this reason, let's start our analysis from these two elements.

**Understanding the internet of platforms**

The recent Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma*, which we could generically describe as a work about social media, fake news and education, had quite an important impact on educational environments and on the youth sector, but also beyond it. It reignited the ongoing debate about the impact of social media platforms on our lives, and especially on young people. Yet there is still something missing from this debate that needs to guide the design of youth work activities, both online and offline: values. Values play a particularly important role within the context of digital transformation. While the internet was built with the purpose of sharing knowledge and tools, this is no longer its main objective. Online services and platforms are now developed by private companies in order to achieve their own aims. This transformation of the digital sphere needs to be understood,[1] and we should examine how it impacts the values we are promoting in youth work.

But do we ever ask ourselves which values we are promoting in youth work? And which values are social media platforms promoting? Are we able, as youth workers, to help young people ask themselves this question, and provide them with knowledge and skills to compare their own values with the ones promoted by the platforms they use?

In *The social dilemma* a group of tech developers in their 20s or 30s explain how they designed the platforms to catch the users' attention for the longest time possible, in order to feed them with advertisements, and how some of these techniques are somehow inherited from gambling. As youth workers, we can be concerned and worried about it, and question the connection between ethics and tech industries. Yet, we can also wonder if and to what extent the youth work could reach out to the young tech developers and shape their attitudes, and the platforms they have designed, in a different way. Shoshana Zuboff[2] in her research on the impact of technology on our lives adds that, while struggling to get our undivided attention, platforms are extracting value from our online behaviour, through profiling and aggregating them into huge databases, to then feed these data to artificial intelligence (AI) and learn about our behaviour, to be able to foresee our possible choices and offer them to us *in advance*. This means that we are in fact choosing from a closed number of possibilities that someone else has defined for us. While it might be useful and even comfortable to narrow our choices when shopping, the same principle applied to more meaningful and relevant choices, or to the process of development of our ideas, that will then lead us to our choices, is quite problematic.

The growing technological advances are also impacting the political and civil society spheres. Considering the growing use of technology and social media in this context, the question arises if the

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1. For a quick example, see for instance the brochure produced by the European Commission – DG Connect: *How do Online platforms shape our lives and businesses?*, 2019 , with a list of specific issues regarding online platforms. Some specific EU regulations (for instance, the General Data Protection Regulation, or GDPR) were created exactly to tackle these issues: https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/how-do-online-platforms-shape-our-lives-and-businesses-brochure
2. You can learn more about her work on her official website https://shoshanazuboff.com/ or read her most influential book: *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Profile Books, 2019.

fast-developing technology and social media can be a potential threat to democracy, because it undermines the real ability to choose freely. Journalistic inquiries about the Cambridge Analytica affair[3] hint at the possibility that this mechanism already affected crucial votes, such as the one for Brexit.

**Advocating for a more secure regulation**

As a youth worker, educator, parent and citizen, I feel an urge to know more about the use of data by social media and technology platforms and their impact on our life and choices. There is clearly a need to have a more secure regulation about the use and exploitation of our behavioural data and the ways in which data and algorithms are used to shape our values, choices and subsequent behaviour.

Meanwhile, a debate about understanding platforms' priorities, compared to our own priorities, is completely absent from the youth work field. Even when national and European authorities have the chance to discuss complex aspects, as for instance the impact of artificial intelligence, with the tech giants, the educational and youth fields are insufficiently present or represented in this debate. While youth work may have a limited advocacy role in this area, it is still important to consider how to contribute to these discussions and keep in mind these considerations when implementing youth work in the digital context.
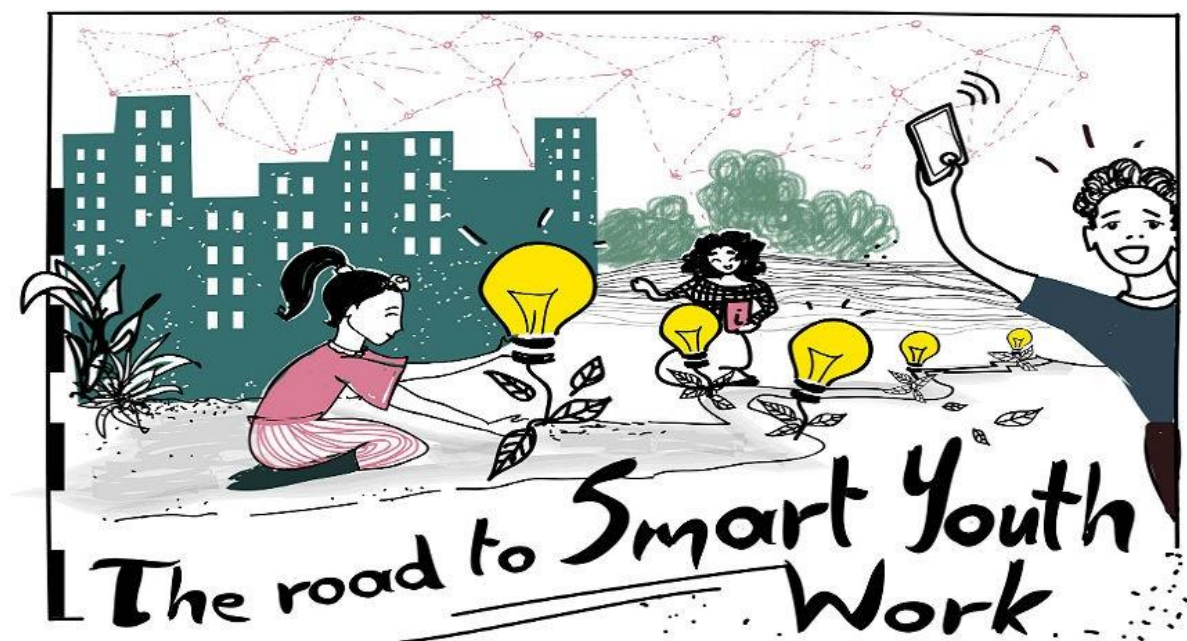


**ELEMENTS FOR A SMART AND DIGITAL YOUTH WORK STRATEGY**

**1.   TRAINING OF YOUTH WORKERS**

A possible reason why we, as the youth work sector, are quite removed from these topics, is that they are indeed not within the learning path of most youth workers. While we have many years of

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3. *The Guardian* reporter Carole Cadwalladr has written extensively about this for many years, for example in this article in 2017: www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/may/07/the-great-british-brexit-robbery-hijacked-democracy.

practice and the development of official documents[4] defining digital youth work, the implementation of blended offline and online approaches, particularly as a result of the pandemic, it is only recently that the youth work has started using digital tools and environments. This development indicates a need for digital youth work training for youth workers, which should be the first element of the digital youth work strategy.

Although in-presence youth work will slowly return after the pandemic, the smart and digital youth work and blended approaches should remain high on our agenda. Therefore, the strategy should keep in mind the following elements:

### Existing materials and experiences

In recent years, numerous materials, tools, good practices, training courses and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Course), research and experiences from all over Europe have been collected about digital and smart youth work.[5] For example, *Developing digital youth work* includes a list of training materials and good practices. The SALTO European Training Strategy in the field of Youth[6] is currently updating its Youth Workers' model to include the digital dimension in the list of required competences; a research of the RAY Network identified issues and opportunities for youth work coming from the Corona pandemic;[7] the EU–Council of Europe Youth Partnership published a research study and a Youth Knowledge Book about social inclusion, digitalisation and young people.[8] Grass-roots youth organisations and European institutions and agencies are also continuously developing further resources. Digital youth work strategy and its focus on the training of youth workers should therefore also focus on defining which platforms should be used for compiling and making available all the materials with a curated, relational and effective retrieving system.

### Digital youth work training and the Bonn process

The European youth work field reunited and met online for the European Youth Work Convention[9] (EYWC) in December 2020, which was the biggest ever online event in this field. This is another relevant source for defining youth work training. The EYWC started the Bonn process, and the Final Declaration gives some relevant guidelines for the future and potential training of youth workers on smart and digital youth work.

EYWC's Final Declaration[10] first of all helps us improve and update the general definition and role of youth work, saying that it is "not to be identical in every place"[11] and that we should "build on

4. The first official "working" definition of digital youth work is included in *Developing digital youth work – policies recommendations, training needs and good practice examples for youth workers and decision makers:* https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/fbc18822-07cb-11e8-b8f5-01aa75ed71a1.
5. Coyote magazine curated this collection of resources about smart and digital youth work: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/coyote-magazine/smart-and-digital-youth-work-resources-where-to-find-more.
6. See the official website: www.salto-youth.net/rc/training-and-cooperation/tc-rc-nanetworktcs/youthworkers-competence-model/.
7. See RAY Network initial survey findings: *Research project on the impact of the Corona pandemic on youth work in Europe (RAY-COR),* 2020: www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/RAY-COR_Initial-Survey_Key-Findings_20200814.pdf.
8. You can download the research from here: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47261953/053120+Study+on+SID+Web.pdf.
9. See the official website: www.eywc2020.eu/.
10. You can find the final declaration on the EYWC website or download it directly from here: www.eywc2020.eu/downloads/doctrine/WebforumVeranstaltungenWebsiteBundle:Media-file-54/3rdEYWC_finaldeclaration.pdf.
11. EYWC final declaration, p. 6.

examples of good practices across different styles of practice, via (digital) networks":[12] hinting on the blended approach.

The declaration also highlights the importance of innovating youth work, which is relevant for digital and smart youth work in particular. Some of the points raised by the convention include fostering the culture of innovation; putting a greater focus on developing digital competences of young people and youth workers and technological infrastructure, in order to overcome the digital divide; greening youth work and promoting environmentally friendly practices; strengthening the capacity of youth work to navigate the transformations by developing youth policies which support youth work practice in times of uncertainty and advocating for youth work in Europe and globally; developing practices and strategies for youth work to enable young people to engage in a democratic society; and "creating spaces, both online and offline, for co-operation and exchange at interregional and global level to allow the youth work community of practice to look beyond the European context."[13]

It is a very ambitious plan, and its implementation through the Bonn process will be up to us youth workers, as a community of practice.

**No division between online and offline experiences**

The European Youth Work Declaration highlights that "even though digital youth work is important, not all needs of young people can be addressed by it". One could see here a concern among youth workers about digital youth work, and think that the youth work community needs to understand better the interconnection between online and offline, as both are parts of the living and learning experience. Youth workers should focus more on bridging these two realities, instead of thinking about them as two separate (or even worse: opposing) youth work environments, that one needs to choose from. This will be even more important to remember when designing blended activities, where this relationship between online and offline should be the main aspect to focus on.

## 2. ACCESS TO DEVICES AND CONNECTIVITY

The European Youth Work Declaration calls not only for innovation, but also for making youth work greener.[14] There are many ways to achieve this aim, but when talking about smart and youth work, one of the ways to cross the bridge between sustainability and technological development is to underline that the right to repair devices, to tinker with technologies as a way to learn more about them, and to extend their lifespan (thus lowering their ecological impact), or in a word the *makers* approach, should be a part of digital youth work as a matter of fact.

Therefore, the second element of the strategy should be an effort to widen the access to devices and connectivity, for instance with policies providing free connectivity in public spaces (or in youth centres) and affordable hardware and software for young people. Many major tech firms have their own programmes of discounts or donations for NGOs worldwide, so this should also be something to keep in mind[15] across the youth work sector. The right to repair and reuse devices and technology,

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12. EYWC final declaration, p. 10.
13. EYWC final declaration, p. 15.
14. For sustainability in youth work, have a look at T-kit 13 of the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/t-kit-13-sustainability-and-youth-work.
15. See www.techsoup.org and then find your national page, to learn about software and hardware donations to eligible NGOs in your country.

to allow a greater number of young people to have access to them, should be another topic for new policies, as is the part of the advocacy efforts of the Right to Repair world-wide campaign.[16]

We should always remember that technology is the fastest changing reality in the world nowadays, so this approach would not always be able to solve the issue of access, but at least in some cases, it could help youth work to provide devices and digital tools to young people, thus increasing inclusion in digital youth work activities.

## 3.  FULL RECOGNITION OF YOUTH WORK

The recognition of youth work is an important starting point for the strategy, as some countries fully recognise and even define and categorise youth work (sometimes, even too much or in a very strict way), while in other countries this recognition is still something to advocate for.[17]

As the recognition of youth work varies across countries, it is difficult to advocate for youth work at the European level, especially taking into consideration who could represent the youth sector in such a context, and how to involve other stakeholders, such as big tech companies.

Therefore, recognition of youth work, inclusive of digital youth work, is an urgent and crucial step for ensuring that the youth sector is recognised as a relevant stakeholder in the debate about the impact of technology on our everyday lives.

## 4.  TACKLING INCLUSION AND DIGITAL DIVIDE

A digital youth work strategy needs to consider the development of practices, policies and recommendations which would help tackle digital divide and inclusion issues.

This can be achieved in a number of ways: learning how to design inclusive activities in digital environments (and so we fall back to the first element: training of youth workers), boosting local infrastructures and granting access to connectivity and connected devices to a wider number of youngsters (second element of the strategy), and offering recognised quality youth work to identify and support young people in need (third element).



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16. See www.repair.eu for more information on the European campaign about the right to repair.

17. For a review of the status of youth work recognition, a good starting point would be the EU–Council of Europe youth partnership web page about *Recognition of Youth Work and non formal learning*: https://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/recognition and the SALTO Training and Co-operation Resource Centre web page about *Recognition of Youth Work and non-formal/informal learning*: www.salto-youth.net/rc/training-and-cooperation/recognition/. See also the recent pre-study by RAY Network: *Thematic pre-study on country-specific characteristics related to youth and youth work*, 2020: www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Country-characteristics_final-links_20200629.pdf.

This last one in particular could be directly connected to inclusion: it might seem a technical issue, but in times when (private) digital spaces are generally perceived more and more as public spaces, to simply grant to everybody the possibility to be there and participate is a relevant element of inclusion.

Inclusion also needs to be connected to teaching everybody – not only youth, but adults and elderly people too, and sometimes even before and even more than youth! – about the responsible behaviour in a digital environment. This should be achieved in order to safeguard themselves, their personal data, digital reputation, public image etc., and not to harm others with irresponsible behaviours or disrespectful treatment of personal data, videos or photos.

## 5. DEVELOPING OUR OWN TOOLS AND PLATFORMS

Most of the tools and platforms we use now in smart and digital youth work are simply not designed for this purpose.

Some digital pioneers in the youth work sector have worked on developing a set of approaches, activities and methodologies that could now be defined as a core toolkit for digital youth work. The platforms' developers, on the other hand, are always trying to find new needs to be matched with new products, and after one year of lockdown due to the pandemic, new platforms and tools dedicated to collaborative experiences are slowly emerging. But we need to ensure that the youth sector will contribute to shape the internet as a place for learning and sharing, and move it further forward in this direction, while keeping it inclusive and open.
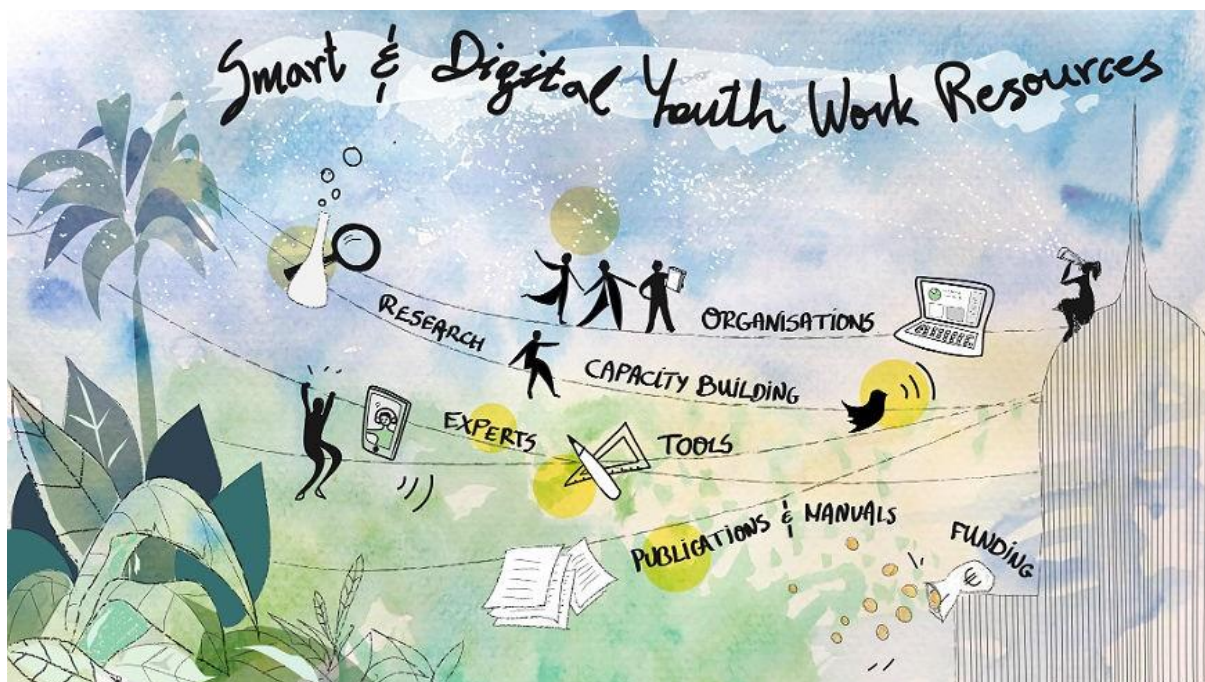


**Back to a universal access internet**

During the 1980s, most of the online tools or platforms were developed by universities and educational institutions, and freely distributed as open source, to allow the users' communities to build more services. The world wide web itself was developed by the CERN research centre in Geneva as a "wide-area hypermedia information retrieval initiative aiming to give universal access to

a large universe of documents".[18] Decades before the tech platform giants would find ways to monetise every aspect of our being connected online, the internet was there already, as a place for learning.

In order to reclaim the spirit of learning online, the digital youth work strategy should also include the need for developing free and open-source platforms, which would again enable us, as users' communities, to develop and upgrade these platforms further. To be clear: youth workers do not need yet-another-official-website with poor, cheap replicas of commercial and paid internet services, designed with poor user interfaces. We need the real deal to be able to be as interesting (and effective!) as the big platforms are. We have seen a lot of board games and card games being developed in the last 10 years as outcomes of European projects and partnerships, but only a few of them could really be adopted as widespread tools. Nevertheless, this is what we should aim for, when thinking about digital platforms and tools designed specifically *from* the youth sector, *for* the youth sector.

This is probably the most ambitious point in this strategy. The expertise needed to reach is hard to be found in the youth work field. It is, however, well established in the tech sector, or in the formal education circuits (for instance in universities), so it is a very concrete and relevant possibility for the cross-sectoral approach so many official documents call for. During the last few years, open-source developer communities worldwide often took the place of universities, and organised themselves in ways that sometimes are directly recalling the ways of working of the NGOs. This could be another interesting space for collaboration, and youth workers are usually very good at co-ordinating group work and collaborative efforts to reach a common goal.

## 6.   DEFINE FUNDING AND INVESTMENTS

The last element of this list of proposals to build a development strategy for smart and digital youth work should probably be the first, in terms of long-term needs. Indeed, we still have to talk about the economic resources to make this strategy possible.

We learned the hard way during the first year of the pandemic that it is simply not possible to just move our offline activities online without a serious and dedicated transformation, redesign and preparation, to take full advantage of online environments' specificities, while avoiding the negative effects of something that is not meant to happen online, and so should simply not be there. While the move from the physical to digital space requires change in the ways of working, it is important to highlight that it still requires adequate funding and resources.

Quality youth work in digital environments requires detailed planning, communication and follow-up with participants. Moreover, after the pandemic there will be no simple turning back to "the usual way": what we have learned will stay, and we will have to further develop blended approaches to build bridges between offline and online youth work. This will need an investment in research, planning and proof-testing that we should already take into account.

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[18] As stated in the first line of the first web page ever, still hosted at the CERN website:
http://info.cern.ch/hypertext/WWW/TheProject.html.

**HOW TO GET THERE**

Giving a list of objectives without reasoning about how to fulfil them would not be fair. This is – hence the title – a modest proposal for a possible strategy, but anyway something that would need a common and joint effort by many different actors in order to be achieved.

**Co-creating a digital youth work strategy.** The youth field involves various actors, which should take part in the development of a digital youth work strategy. Youth workers should be at the centre of this work: as active stakeholders, and also as beneficiaries of digital youth work training.

In order to ensure that their involvement is meaningful, the two preconditions mentioned at the beginning should be considered: first, understanding digital environments – and specifically the internet of platforms all around us – and second, advocating for a more secure regulation. This does not mean that everybody will have to work in digital environments, just as not everybody feels comfortable working in some other setting (outdoor wilderness, for example ...). But we all should be part of a common effort to build an expertise about smart and digital youth work. For instance, continuing the discussion about a possible strategy and improving this proposal would be a step in this direction.

The most effective way to support this common effort is to share any relevant experience, activities or success stories about digital youth work. This information should then be stored and made accessible by institutions who oversee and support youth work. There are now a number of websites and portals collecting best practices and examples, and it is in the nature of the internet that this kind of repository will always be multiplied, so the idea to create the ultimate repository is bound to fail.

One way to address this issue might be to build and promote something similar to a webring,[19] curated by some international institution, which would check that all websites and repositories joining would have at least some basic common characteristics.

In my opinion these characteristics should be the same set of keywords to classify the content, or at least, as already mentioned, a good relational search system, which would allow retrieval of other content related to what one would be searching for.

Youth agencies and institutions should also continue promoting research, study and training about smart and digital youth work, in collaboration with decision makers and policy makers. Sharing the knowledge and research about digital youth work with all stakeholders is key to ensuring informed policy making and the allocation of resources towards the strategy. Linking the new generation of European programmes to the strategy would be an interesting chance for youth field actors to collaborate in youth work.

**Involving young people.** It is clear that young people should be involved in every process that will eventually affect them. Young people should then be surely involved as co-creators of the strategy and digital youth work programmes, but there is much more that could be done.

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[19] A webring was a subnetwork of websites, usually sharing the same main topic or interest. It was a popular way to connect websites with similar content during the first 15 years of life of the web, before the advent of search engines (so during the late 1990s and early 2000s). Every member site would have a badge on the home page, with the possibility of showing the entire list of other member sites, or to jump to the previous/next in the list, or just to another random one. See the Wikipedia entry to learn more about webrings: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Webring.

Since youth workers have always involved young people and learned from their experience and feedback, digital youth work can also benefit from such inclusion of young people in the process of designing digital activities. This would help youth workers active in the digital field to learn about common online behaviours or uses of platforms and tools.

The online places young people inhabit change very quickly, and so do the habits and the ways of being in touch with each other in those places. Giving young people the responsibility to keep youth workers up to date about digital topics would be a very interesting learning experience for both sides, and there would be space for developing and co-designing new approaches.

On the other hand, the metaphor of young people as digital natives, defined by Marc Prensky in a famous article[20] 20 years ago, has had its day: we should always consider that young people may be more keen on adopting and experimenting with new digital tools and media, but they need adults beside them, to help them discuss the experiences they are having, and learn from them. In this perspective, an alliance between young people and youth workers exploring digitalisation together could be a pillar to build the strategy.

## CONCLUSION

**We need a strategy to further develop smart and digital youth work in a meaningful way.** A modest proposal has been described in these pages to reach this.

We can do it by learning from all the studies, researches and experiences that are ongoing during the last few years and have increased impressively during the pandemic and the consequent lockdown. But first of all, we need to understand how today's internet of platforms works at its core, and which could be a better safe regulation for it.

That said, there are a few steps that could be identified as part of the strategy, and most of them deal with the profile and skills of youth workers. They will need specific training, based for instance on the many aspects I outlined. There is also a more concrete need for affordable connectivity and devices which can be long lasting, repairable and with lower environmental impact.

To be able to achieve this, youth work should be fully recognised everywhere as a positive resource, and youth workers should be among the stakeholders in the current debate about digitalisation. The issue of inclusion in activities occurring in digital environments should be tackled *by the design phase*, and the digital divide should be taken into account as a major obstacle to the personal development of young people.

Since the online platforms we use are not neutral, and legitimately pursue their own goals, youth workers should consider starting building their own tools in digital environments too, creating or tweaking platforms, tools and media specifically addressed to youth work and fully safe, secure and aligned with youth work values. In order to achieve all this, smart and digital youth work should count on adequate funding and investment.

This strategy could be achieved with a joint cross-sectoral effort, but it should surely be defined by involving young people and building an alliance between them and the youth work field to explore digitalisation together.

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20. Marc Prensky: "Digital natives, digital immigrants", 2001. The article is available on the author's website: www.marcprensky.com/writing/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.pdf.

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