The Roles of Digital Literacy in Social Life of Youth

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains updated findings related to social aspects of digital activities of youth (Martinovic, Freiman, Lekule, & Yang, 2014). Computers, mobile devices, and the Internet are increasingly used in everyday social practices of youth. Recent statistics reveal that in September 2015, there were 1.01 billion daily active users and on average 894 million mobile daily active users of Facebook (Facebook, 2015). To be successful in school, work, and in socializing, youth need to competently use digital tools and define, access, understand, create, and communicate digital information. Being able to evaluate digital information, develop perceptions of, and respect for, social norms and values for functioning in the digital world, without compromising one's own privacy, safety, or integrity is also important. The competencies and skills that new generations require to be successful in the digital era are largely still not being taught in schools. Results of this chapter will provide the following:

- Address the social prospects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use among youth;

- Describe the online behavior of young people through the paradoxical nature of the Internet that provides opportunities for social development but introduces risks;
- Inform educators and youth services about which factors to consider in designing flexible, innovative, and inclusive programs for young people to enable them to successfully function in the era of the Internet, new media, and computer technologies.

BACKGROUND

In the past 15 years or so, ICTs became increasingly accessible in most countries. The ICTs like personal computers, cell phones, and the Internet can be used for both in-school and out-of-school activities, and are particularly suitable for connecting individuals and communities globally (Beetham, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2009). Using these tools appropriately so that one can live, learn, and work in a digital society, is broadly defined as being digitally literate (Beetham, 2010). However, by and large, these competencies and skills are not being taught in schools (Martinovic, Freiman, & Karadag, 2011). For

example, Jenkins (2006) finds that youth are not taught how to participate in social online practices (e.g., in information sharing and collaboration) despite dangers for unskilled users, whereas some authors (Martinovic & Magliaro, 2007; Noveck, 2000) emphasize importance of understanding a paradoxical nature of the Internet, where one can be confronted with limitless information, while obtaining less knowledge; where access is relatively cheap, but the environment is increasingly commercialized; and where communities do form, but atomization prevails.

Livingstone (2008) describes the dichotomy of optimistic and pessimistic opinions coming from academics and media on how ICTs affect young people:

- Optimists emphasize the new opportunities for self-expression, sociability, community engagement, creativity, and new literacies. They envision change in social dynamics, with youth involvement in the co-creation of innovative and counter-consumerist cultures both locally and globally. Public policy makers and educators see opportunities for engagement in collaborative learning and various online government services. Xie (2014), for example found that mobile communication through social networking sites, amplifies social capital of teenagers.
- Pessimists associate the behavior of youth on social networking sites with loss of privacy and lack of shame. They look at social networking as time-wasting and socially isolating activities that may have far-reaching negative effects on the safety of youth. Others fear that youth growing up in the digital age may be barren of understanding emotional nuances and reading social cues, and may lack empathy (Stout, 2010). They note that cyberbullying results in changes in behavior and deep emotional problems among its victims (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Finkelhor, 2007; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007), and that the effects of Internet

communication both with peers and with strangers on well-being may be particularly adverse for lonely adolescents (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Patton et al. (2014) warns against increase of youth violence in online space, which includes cyber-bullying, -gangs, -stalking, and -suicide. Moreover, young people recognize that using the Internet for schoolwork may encourage taking shortcuts, cheating, laziness, low school morale, and may hinder development of study skills (Ben-David Kolikant, 2010).

Based on these examples, a digitally literate person should be able to navigate between opportunities and traps created by introducing different ICTs in one's everyday social life.

SOCIAL ONLINE PRACTICES OF YOUTH

Issues, Controversies, Problems

Current international statistics reveal that about 87.9% of North Americans, together with 73.5% Europeans use the Internet (Internet World Stats, 2014). Extreme growth in Internet use in Africa, Middle East, and Latin America in the last 15 years is measured in thousands of percent. Young Canadians seem to follow such common worldwide trends. One Canadian study, Young Canadians in a Wired World (Media Awareness Network, 2001-2012) looked at the online behavior, attitudes, and opinions of more than 5,200 children and youth from grades 4 to 11 in French- and English-language schools in every province and territory. The report revealed that in 2005, young Canadians were almost universally connected to the Internet through the household computer, personal computer, and/or cell phone, and were active users of the ICTs. While the participants in this study described their online experiences as generally positive and socially rewarding, they also reported being exposed to inappropri-

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