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USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN YOUTH WORK COMMUNICATIONS

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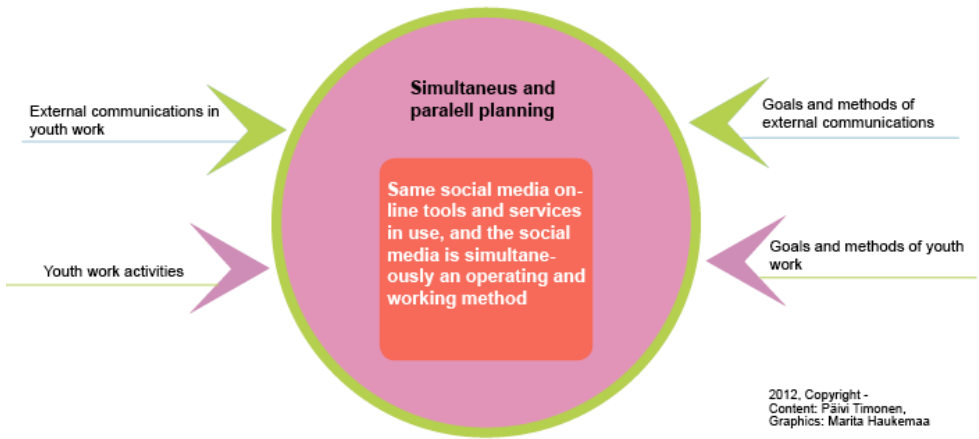
Social Media and External Communications

Non-profit organizations can use social media to increase awareness about their services and to organize their communications.[1] In youth work organizations, such as open youth centres, youth information and counselling services, youth centres and youth organizations, social media tools are used in the planning of external communications. External communication refers to communication measures aimed at increasing awareness about the work carried out by an organization, as well as about the contents of the work, among different target groups. Social media refers to social interaction services in which users create and exchange content and network with one another (Finnish Terminology Centre TSK 2010, 14).

In social media, people create and edit content, create links and groups, distribute information, network with other people, stream videos, create event advertisements, sign up for events, and carry out citizen journalism in a real- time environment. Social networking websites are developing into comprehensive event databases. At the same time, these websites and services have changed communication approaches and practices, because they influence the rhythm, direction, structure and resources of an organization's external communications. The changes in rhythm and structure include, for example, cutting messages into smaller pieces and reducing the time between messages. The objective is to build a dialogue with customers (Soininen, Wasenius & Leponiemi 2010, 17, 110).

Social media allows messages to be sent to recipients as easily as possible. It has already caused a change in the direction of communications. In social media, the objective is to deliver content to the recipient openly, using mass collaboration. According to Tapscott and Williams (2006), next to the hierarchical and authoritarian system has risen a culture of community, collaboration and self-organization. An organization's communication in social media should be the responsibility of a team, even though individual employees also visibly represent their organization.

The objective of external communications in youth work can be, for example, to increase awareness about a new or existing service or event. Due to the nature of social media, it is useful to think about the goals of online communications. External communications are related to the organization's activities on social networking websites. For example, youth work can be carried out on the Facebook page of a youth centre. This work includes the simultaneous use of an external communication tool (Facebook page) and a working method (communication with young people) for distributing information about, for example, youth services and municipal activities.

In other words, the activities on the Facebook like page of a youth centre represent two parallel processes: youth work and a communication process. By operating in social media communities, youth workers unintentionally exercise external, goal-oriented communication aimed at promoting, for example, a sense of community, interaction, active participation, agency, fun or online dialogue (see Figure 1). Since Web-based youth work is often carried out on social networking websites, operating on the websites already represents one type of external communication. On the other hand, external communications are a part of youth work activity. Both aspects should be taken into consideration when planning external communications in youth work. Also Hintikka (2010, 7) has argued that social media represents both a group of online services and tools, as well as an operating and working method.

Simultaneus and paralell planning

External communications in youth work

Youth work activities

Goals and methods of external communications

Goals and methods of youth work

Same social media on-line tools and services in use, and the social media is simultane-ously an operating and working method

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FIGURE 1. Parallel planning of activities and external communications of a youth work organization, Päivi Timonen 2011.
Published in the Book Charged Up and Online: Advances in Youth Work, 2011. Finland

Analysis of Operating Environment for Communications Planning

When social media is incorporated into an organization's external communications plan, it is important to consider which social networking services the organization is planning to use in, for example, external and internal communications, or marketing. At this point, it is useful to consider how the organization could integrate collaborative content creation, development, sharing, interaction and networking into the targeted process of external communications. All of the above requires active participation from employees. In addition, the organization needs to develop social media guidelines in order to control activities in social media. The planning of external communications involves an analysis of the social media environment. The objective of the analysis is to determine which social networking websites the organization's customers use. The analysis focuses on assessing the target group of each examined social networking website, the

targeted number of users, the updating frequency, key contents, as well as a description of the types of applications best and worst suited for each social networking website (see Table 1).

Table 1. Form for analysing the operating environment of external communications (Timonen 2010).[2]

Social media service	Target group	Targeted number of users	Updating frequency	Contents	Best suited for	Worst suited for	Other remarks	Priority/order

An external communications plan should include measures selected based on the analysis of the operating environment. The communications plan provides answers to, for example, the following questions related to youth work communications in social media: Which social networking services are to be used for communications? What should be communicated? How, for whom and how often should the organization communicate? Who is responsible for social media communications? What if something goes wrong? It should be noted that different target groups use different social networking websites. Therefore, content should be targeted differently depending on the target group. Furthermore, the target groups of external communications in youth work consist of different types of stakeholders, such as youth organizations, sponsors, the media, parents and press officers from other branches of administration. Communication measures can be executed gradually, by testing what works in practice and what does not. (Timonen 2009.) According to Soininen, Wasenius & Leponiemi (2010, 110–111), a rather new element is transparency in communications planning: communicating the organization's communication goals and strategy to all members of the organization. With agile, iterative[3] planning, it is possible to advance by testing and adjusting the communications plan where necessary.

Good examples of the diverse use of social media in communications are the solutions adopted by the youth departments of the cities of Pori and Helsinki. In its external communications, the Youth Department of the City of Pori uses a website, www.tiäksää.fi[4] ("You know"), which the organization has linked to key social networking websites favoured by its target group. The Youth Department has profiled itself as a single entity, and has developed its online identity using the www.tiäksää.fi brand. The Youth Department of the City of Helsinki appears to have adopted the opposite approach. Different functions of the organization (open youth centre, targeted youth work, cultural youth work and so on) have established their separate online identities and communicate almost as independent bodies in social media.

Digital Natives as the Target Group of External Communications in Youth Work

The planning of an organization's external communications begins with defining target groups and studying their preferred social media services and online identity. In the Youth Act (72/2006), the term *young people* refers to persons under the age of 29 years. Tapscott defines *digital natives* as the first generation to have grown up in the digital age, for whom digital media is part of the growth environment (Tapscott 2010, 14). This generation values the *experience* created by products and services. They are *prosumers*, who collaborate with the producer of the goods in their development. The talented, curious and innovative generation of digital natives brings new approaches to collaboration, influences one another through networks, and expects quick response from one another, for example, through instant messaging. They emphasize freedom and openness, and are able to find the content they need. According to Tapscott, interactive experience is essential in the education of digital natives. (Ibid 49–51.) As a youth work target group, digital natives should be assumed to be very familiar with different functions of social media. However, others have argued that young people are not automatically digital natives or familiar with the tools of the digital age (Dworschak 2010).

External Communication Tools and Methods for Social Media

Social media tools are used in the planning of external communications in youth work. Analyzing the organization's visibility is one part of communications planning. Social media tools can be used to study the organization's online presence and the use of its services. The simplest way to examine an organization's online identity, or online presence, is to gather information using Web search engines or social networking services. Additional information, such as user statistics, can be obtained through Web analytics tools like Google Analytics, which allows an organization to track, for example, the number of visitors, time spent on the website, and the bounce rate (Google Analytics 2010).

In social media, the communicator (i.e. the organization) should ensure that the information content, such as news, published on its social networking pages and traditional websites are available and can be forwarded to different destinations using Web feeds (RSS). In other words, contents should be syndicated, or allowed to be published elsewhere (Finnish Terminology Centre TSK 2010, 18; Korpi 2010, 158).

Examples of syndication include bookmarks and Web feeds. Social bookmarks allow content such as news and updates published in social media and on traditional websites to be linked and published directly on the personal profiles of users in social networking services, or social bookmarking web services such as Delicious or Diigo[6] (Finnish Terminology Centre TSK 2010, 32).

Web feeds (RSS) allow users to subscribe to news and posts, which are then delivered to their own feed reader. Web feeds enable news feeds to be aggregated automatically into a single location. Feed readers include, for example, Google Reader[7] and Bloglines[8]. (Finnish Terminology Centre TSK 2010, 37.) The contents of a young person's feed reader can thus consist of news feeds related to his or her hobbies, news from an open youth centre, news feeds of a youth information and counselling service, feeds of a blog at an educational institution, and the feeds of news agencies from different countries. Young people and youth workers can main-

tain a shared feed reader, which makes the process a collaborative activity. Aggregated contents can also be followed using mobile devices.

In accordance with the organization's communications plan, new communities, fan pages, groups and contents can be created – or existing ones strengthened (Twitter[9], Facebook[10], IRC-Galleria[11]). Information content can be cut into smaller pieces, and nearly identical information can be published via different channels (websites, blogs, RSS feeds, wikis, Twitter, Qaiku[12], Facebook, IRC-Galleria). Each organization should think about using keywords, or tags, and define the tags it wants employees to use in the organization's external communications. One tool for creating such tags is the Finnish Web Thesaurus (VESA)[13]. (Timonen 2009.)

The operating environment of social media[14] offers almost free software for the external communications of a network, organization or group. In addition, it enables collaborative content creation and easy scheduling of meetings. A common feature of social networking services is that they offer a relatively cost-effective platform for an organization's external or internal communications, as well as for maintaining a social media website[15] for one's network. Usually it is possible to choose the appearance of the website from a range of ready templates, and then adjust it to fit one's communicational image by adding, for example, a discussion forum, a blog, videos, photos, podcasts (audio broadcasts), RSS feeds, a chat room, as well as subgroups. The website can be public or open only to invited users.

Building a social media website is a relatively quick and easy process, which requires no particular IT expertise. Text can be produced and edited together using, for example, social media and document collaboration software or wikis by the members of the project, the communications planning team or the members of the organization. Text content can be created using an online editor[16], and other users can be invited to collaborate on text production. A document collaboration application can be used to create documents, spreadsheets, presentations and forms. In order to determine the application best suited for the purpose, the application should be tested with a small group. A communications plan can be prepared as a spreadsheet in a document collaboration application, where

it can also be edited later on. The spreadsheet can also include historical and monitoring data on communications. For example, the editors of this book *The Charged Up and Online: Advances in Youth Work, 2011* used Google Docs to follow the editorial process and as a project management tool.

A wiki[17] is a tool for collaborative content creation. Its use for external and stakeholder communications has spread in the online operating environments of organizations, civic activities and youth work. A wiki platform allows content to be edited in an open, collaborative and equal manner (Muukkonen & Vilhula 2010, 5, 9). Wikis are used as a platform for an organization's internal or external network, an open organization wiki, a storage for instructions or an online platform of several parties (ibid, 11). For example, Youth Activity Centre Happi of the Youth Department of the City of Helsinki maintains the HappiWiki[18] as an open organization wiki for the organization's internal and external communications. Young people and youth workers have shared their ideas in the HappiWiki right from the beginning.

Finding suitable times for meetings can easily take dozens of e-mail messages in an organization and in the communications planning process. Social networking services make it easy to agree on the time and location of a meeting. At the end of 2010, two popular scheduling services included Doodle[21] (Forsgård & Frey 2010, 34) and Sumpli[19]. Possible dates and times are entered in the scheduling service. Then, the delivery method is selected either by notifying the desired people about an URL provided by the service, or by having the service send an e-mail message directly to these people. The Sumpli service requires the e-mail addresses of participants, because the scheduling takes place via e-mail. These services can also be used to conduct small-scale surveys.

Microblogs, which allow the use of short messages of up to about 140 characters, have not yet been broadly adopted in external communications by youth work organizations. Some of the best-known microblogging services include Twitter and Qaiku. In these services, it is possible to follow the posts of other persons. Microblogging can be used for sending, sharing and receiving real-time messages from events or seminars. In Twitter,

this is called live-tweeting. A hashtag is assigned for the event (e.g. #coordinate), which can then be added by microbloggers to their messages. In Twitter, the hashtag can be used to retrieve all live tweets concerning an event as a chronological message thread. In youth work communications, social media can be used in various ways, ranging from YouTube[21] videos to blogs. One approach is to prepare press releases, event posters and youth centre presentations in PowerPoint format and share them using the Slideshare[22] slide hosting service. It is possible to look for interesting content from the service using keywords.

Announce Your Social Media Presence in Traditional Media

From the perspective of external communications in youth work, it would be useful to include the organization's Internet addresses on all social media websites and in traditional media publications. In traditional communication materials, such as business cards, posters and brochures, it would be useful to describe and advertise where the organization can be found in social networking services. The information may include, for example, the name of the Facebook group or fan page, the Twitter user name (@humak), and the event hashtag on Twitter (#humak). These social media codes should also be mentioned in the contact details provided on the organization's website, as well as in e-mail signatures and event press releases. (Haavisto 2009, 49; Timonen 2009.) The goal is to make it as easy as possible for customers to find the youth work service they are looking for among the broad range of social media communities and services.

Not receiving e-mail anymore? It is time to embrace tomorrow by starting to communicate in social media – today.

Notes

1   While the article focuses on external communications, the viewpoints presented also apply to the internal communications of an organization or network.

2   The description of the operating environment is based on the *The Balearic Youth Information and Counselling network* form prepared by Ajo Monzo (Xarxa Infojove, Spain, 2 September 2009).

3   In the book *Yhteisöllinen media osana yrityksen arkea* (Social media as part of the day-to-day business of an enterprise) by Soininen, Wasenius & Leponiemi (2010, 111), Soininen presents the shift of the planning process from a traditional to an agile model. An agile planning model focuses on an iterative process. An agile model begins from expanded, participatory planning, where the target groups include stakeholders, employees and customer activists. Directed by an agile strategy, the iterative process focuses on a plan, a design, actions and measurement. Based on community feedback, the agile strategy is updated and adjusted, and the iterative process continues – as does the updating and adjusting of the strategy, based on further feedback. In other words, the traditional design model is as follows: corporate vision > strategy > consumer testing > fine-tuning > campaigns, print/television/online media > measurement > new strategy. (Soininen, Wasenius & Leponiemi 2010, 111) Turkki (in Nurmio & Turkki 2010, 68–69) emphasizes the goal of a responsive and agile organization.

4   http://www.tiaksaa.fi

5   http:www.delicious.com

6   http://www.diigo.com/

7   http://www.google.com/reader

8   http://www.bloglines.com

9   http://www.twitter.com

10 http://www.facebook.com

11 http://irc-galleria.net/

12 http://www.qaiku.com/

13 http://vesa.lib.helsinki.fi

14 HUMAK Nurmijärvi Campus, social media links, https://docs.google.com/document/d/1yy-vcEWT07m7jCzW9EoaOtVss8lIqYIkEUhO3fPJg7w/edit?hl=fi&authkey=CM7E17EI.

15 These social media websites include, for example, Ning and SocialGO.

16 E.g. http://muistio.tieke.fi, http://docs.google.com

17 The Department of Information Studies and Interactive Media at the University of Tampere has published a guide for building a wiki called *Viisautta wikin tekoon. Opas wikien käytöstä kiinnostuneille, niitä käyttäville tai niiden käyttöä suunnitteleville* (Wisdom to building a wiki. Guide for those interested in the use of wikis, those using wikis and those planning their use). (5 July 2010) The guide presents instructions for

starting a wiki, different ways of using wikis, different wiki target groups, as well as the launch and content production process.

18 http://happi.nettiareena.fi/wiki/index.php/Etusivu
19 http://www.doodle.com
20 http://www.sumpli.com
21 http://www.youtube.com
22 http://www.slideshare.net

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Charged up and Online: Advances in Youth Work
Abstract

Finnish youth work online has recently been attracting wide-spread interest. Youth work can be done using the tools of information technology, and it has been shown possible to successfully reach, meet and support youths through the internet. In recent years, developments in youth work methods have been made on both theoretical and practical levels. Charged up and Online: Advances in Youth Work, written as a joint project by the Finnish Youth Research Society, the University of Applied Sciences (HUMAK) and City of Helsinki Youth Department, is the first survey of youth work on the Internet that knits practical cases and theoretical articles closely together into a rich dialogue that paints a comprehensive picture of the existing operating models. The book describes the ever-changing job of the youth worker and encourages readers to discuss strategic guidelines and directions of youth work online. **Charged up and Online: Advances in Youth Work** is well-suited as a youth and social studies textbook for methodology courses as well as supplementary reading for all youth workers who want to extend their professional know-how.