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***The Information Superhighway:
Opportunities and Challenges for Young People***

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Today we are living in what can only be called the “Age of the Information Superhighway” – an age when access to information is extremely fast and immediate, with little or few traffic signals or signs to slow down. For those on the information highway, as on a motor highway, the responsibility to be safe and carefully navigate the road rests on each individual’s ability.

Access to information was not always so fraught. In 1837, Samuel Morse invented the original telegraph transmitter and receiver. At the time, this was considered revolutionary, for it was the first instrument to transform information into an electrical form and transmit it reliably over long distances. Thomas Edison followed with his electric telegraph, as did the Atlantic Cable of 1858, which was established to carry instant communication across the ocean.

No one thinks of Mr. Morse or Mr. Edison or the Atlantic Cable anymore. Perhaps we have also forgotten about Alexander Graham Bell and his telephone, or the Electrical Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC) developed by the US Army late in World War II.

But why, I am sure you are asking yourselves, do I even bring up these historic relics? This is the age of Gates and Jobs, and other analogue and digital inventors and visionaries. This is the age of Google and many other search engines. This is

the age of “hotmail” and “yahoo mail” and “g-mail”. This is the age of chat rooms and instant messaging.

I bring up these “information dinosaurs” as a sort of reminder to all of us. To remind us that today’s immediate access to information and communication is not something that we should simply take for granted. Everyday things are changing and what may be cutting edge today, may very well be obsolete tomorrow.

What characterises today’s digital age from past?

The first is obviously speed. Today, we realise that any amount of information is readily available at the click of a finger – or a mouse. The second difference is that of access. Today, you do not have to be an engineer, a technology expert or even an inventor to master and use the computer. Third, being interactive. Today, anyone can – and does – respond in real time to communications and events.

Finally, the most important difference between the past and present is – and let us be very honest with our selves – is that young people have more knowledge than we – the generation of teachers, youth workers, parents and even politicians – have. Today’s digital age is the hallmark of youth participation and involvement in the world of knowledge. The truth is, that information and communication technology has created an unprecedented and unifying global culture that is particularly attractive to young people.

A survey, conducted by the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA) International Institute on the World Internet Project¹ last year, found that there has always been a disproportionate number of young people who use the Internet, as

¹ University of California in Los Angeles, World Internet Project. Found at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=7488>

compared to total usage. Just to cite a few examples, in the United States, where total usage is about 71.1 per cent of the population, among young people (in the 16-24 age group), this number jumps to 90.8 per cent. More dramatically, in South Korea, the total usage is 60.9 per cent, while those in the youth group account for more than 95.2 per cent of users.

In fact, the United Nations' World Youth Report 2005² clearly stated that this is an area "where young people have an edge..." They are "often the leading innovators in the use and spread of information and communications technology. They adapt quickly and are generally quite hungry for the great quantities of information, locally and globally, that can be provided through emerging information and communication technologies."

And this is what I wish to talk about today – The Information Superhighway: Opportunities and Challenges Facing Young People. But I would like to go one step further, and ask, how do we, especially those who work with youth, face this issue? Have we revved up our engines and joined young people on the highway? Or are we merely the pit-stops, responding only when young people pull in with a problem? Today I would like to focus on characteristics within the discourse of "Opportunities and Challenges for Young People", so that we might be able to go one step further and see how the information superhighway can also become foster new approaches to youth work in the 21st Century.

The Characteristics of Challenges and Opportunities to Young People

Let me begin with a, let us call it 'generic' profile of today's young person. A young man, I know, just out of his teens, lives what I think to be quite a common

² Youth at the United Nations. Information and Communication Technologies. *World Youth Report 2005*. Point 9. Found at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wpayinformation.htm#WYR2005>

routine to many young people. On waking, he switches on his computer. Throughout the day, it seems that he is glued to the screen and keyboard, whether communicating with friends through emails or messaging, reading the news, listening to music, watching videos, learning or playing or working. He can even pay his bills and make purchases through his computer! Before retiring for the night, there is one last check, and while the light goes off, the computer is still running!

Does this sound familiar? What is in fact happening, is that in today's world, technologies are causing rapid transformation in all areas of life. From education and communication, to interpersonal relations, young people must learn multiple ways of interacting with social reality.³

As a result of this multiplicity of required skills, is it no wonder that the behaviour and characteristics of young people speeding on the superhighway of information has both positive and negative aspects.

Positively, we can highlight three major characteristics. They are: Participation, Connectivity and Creativity. Just briefly, let me explain.

Participation

The first, is that of Participation. The information superhighway provides young people around the world the potential towards social action and community involvement. Young people are not just becoming more aware of issues and problems, whether at home or abroad, they are learning the details – the causes and effects – of the issues in their totality.

³ From D. Kellner, "Multiple literacies and critical pedagogy in a multicultural society" in *Educational Theory*, vol. 48, No. 1 (1998), p. 122 quoted in *Youth Information and Communication Technologies*. UN and Youth document, p. 313 found at www.u.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch12.pdf

As a result, young people today are far more knowledgeable in political, social and economic affairs than even a generation ago. They know the headlines, but they also have a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the news behind the headlines – whether it is riots in Paris, militancy in Iraq or a public demonstration in Hong Kong.

And with this greater knowledge of current and global issues, comes a greater desire to participate. Today, as the UN reports, “information and communication technologies ... are becoming core components of youth civic engagement”.⁴ I believe that the form of participation can be passive, through the support of various NGOs or ‘rights’ groups, or more active through volunteerism and direct involvement in civil society movements.

Connectivity

The second characteristic that I would emphasize, is that of Connectivity. No longer curtailed by the confines of physical travel and geographical boundaries, young people have access to the cultures, traditions, history and language of any nation or peoples in the world.

In my day, the study or knowledge of different cultures was limited to those who perhaps read National Geographic magazine, or who had had the privilege of travelling! Now, any young person, with an interest and curiosity, can become informed about, for example, the Marsh Arabs, the Incas, the aborigines, or any other more modern civilization.

Creativity

⁴ Youth at the United Nations. Information and Communication Technologies. *World Youth Report 2005*. Point 9. Found at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wpayinformation.htm#WYR2005>

The third characteristic is that of Creativity. Information technology has allowed young people, especially in schools, to develop their abilities in creative education. It has broadened horizons and introduced them to the potential of engineering, art and design for example, in how to solve puzzles, improve their critical and lateral thinking, and letting their imaginations soar.

We are living in an age when conventional text book learning can be brought alive by on-line travel or first person accounts. We are living in an age where interdisciplinary study is a matter of course. These are wonderful opportunities in the field of education today and something that I whole-heartedly endorse and support.

But these characteristics only tell half the story of young people and the information superhighway. And I would like to draw your attention to four characteristics that are more challenging to us. These are Insularity, Information Management, Addiction and Honesty.

Insularity

First, insularity. The computer, and through it access to the Information Superhighway has become a lifeline to information, communication and entertainment. This in itself is not a bad thing, but we have to be wary of the computer becoming the sole lifeline to a young person's mind and heart, to the point that he or she prefers to work and be entertained and communicate in isolation, only with a screen for company, rather than in the real and physical company of others.

This is a potential challenge to all youth workers: when a computer can make more and more young people insular. The isolation that keeps them indoors, alone, without physical activity, communicating with people through type scripts and perhaps web-cams and headphones. The insularity that distances themselves from

direct human contact or touch. The propensity to hide behind technological infrastructure to the extent of diminishing potential for real intellectual, emotional, psychological, physical – and even spiritual – growth through interaction with their peers and even families.

Sociologists⁵ have called this “network sociality”, based on “mutual experience or common history, but primarily on an exchange of data.”⁶ This is a very real challenge and one that we should not take lightly.

Information Management

The second characteristic that I would emphasize as a challenge is Information Management. With so much information available on the Internet, there is always the danger of not knowing how to manage that information.

Young people need direction – that is a fact. They need the experience and – if you will – intellectual maturity – of those older and wiser to help guide them in the right direction. I mean, that is the classical understanding of schooling and education. So then, why would gathering and using information from a technological source be any different?

The potential for danger in not managing information are obvious. Web sites that preach hate or extremism, web sites that promote pornography, web sites that are devious and dishonest are as easily accessible as web sites that offer real and genuine information and knowledge.

⁵ See particularly, P. Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty and the Internet Worldwide*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) R. Sennett, *Corrosion of the Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. (New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1998) and A. Wittle, “Towards a network sociality”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 18, no. 6 (2001), p. 51

⁶ A. Wittle, “Towards a network sociality”, *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 18, no. 6 (2001), p. 51 quoted in *Youth Information and Communication Technologies*. UN and Youth document, p. 313 found at www.u.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch12.pdf

There are those who would respond that blocking access to such websites is the answer to this challenge. But I would argue that this might be possible in the home or school with vigilant parents and teachers, but it does not insulate a young person from logging on to these sites in other venues.

Addiction

The third characteristic that I would emphasize as a challenge is Addiction. This is perhaps one of the most tragic consequences for young people and their access to the information superhighway.

Enticed by the thrill of winning computer games – easy to download – and to be a victor in cyberspace, when the harsh realities of life become too much to bear, we all know stories of young people who spend every waking hour playing games. We also know of extreme situations of sleep deprivation, of not eating or washing, of complete isolation that these gaming rooms have. Resulting sometimes in nervous breakdowns, illnesses and more extremely, in death.

Addiction might also be to gambling sites. To adult and pornographic sites. Even to shopping websites. It does not really matter, the lists we make can be endless. What we must be alert to, is the fact that addiction is the compulsive viewing and interacting with sites that are detrimental to growth and development.

Honesty

Finally, the fourth characteristic that I would emphasize as a challenge is more controversial – that of Honesty. As someone who gives speeches or writes papers that are sometimes published; as a mother of a university student, one of my greatest concerns is that of plagiarism.

With so much information at our disposal, with so much information from such a rich variety of sources from around the world, the stealing of ideas – if not direct passages and quotations – is all too tempting.

Imagine a young person asked to research a paper for their school or university. Using one of the easiest tools available, the search engine, this person will find him or herself inundated with information on that particular topic.

We all treasure access to this instant ‘library’ without closing hours. We are, in fact, encouraged to use the information superhighway as a source of research to glean ideas and learn about the arguments for and against a certain issue. However, there is the danger that wilfully or otherwise, ideas are stolen without due acknowledgement or reference and whole passages are lifted and reproduced. It has been known to happen. Not just in schools and universities. It has even happened in major newspapers, the example of Jayson Blair and the hallowed New York Times comes to mind. In all these cases, students (or other plagiarisers) believe their teachers (or bosses) will never discover their duplicity and dishonesty. But in the end, most are found out.

New Approaches to Youth Work

Given all these seven characteristics of young people in the digital age, both positive and negative in terms of Participation, Connectivity, Creativity, Insularity, Information Management, Addiction and Honesty – what are the implications for youth work in the 21st Century?

What immediately strikes me is that given the rapidity of societal changes in this age of information technology, the way that young people are forced to cope with profound transformations in all areas of their lives, the approach to youth work

must also change. We must acknowledge that because the Internet is the most popular medium for young people today, we cannot be left on the sidelines of the information superhighway just because of intransigence and tradition. Just as young people are at the vanguard of progress and development as a result of this technology, it would be irresponsible to not look at how youth work might respond in a new way.

With this conviction in mind, might I suggest four new approaches to youth work, which I see as being particularly relevant if we are to be able to pertinently deal with the characteristics of today's young people?

First, a *New Orientation for Youth Workers*. From the re-training of current staff, to the educating of new employees, youth workers must be trained to deal with the information superhighway. Just as young people are now required to have what has been called, “multiple literacies to enable them to develop their identities, social relationships and communities, whether material, virtual or a combination of the two,”⁷ youth workers must also have this competency. Of course, conventional training in counselling, psychology and social work must continue. But this cannot be done so in isolation from the reality that faces young people: the increased use of information technology.

Second, a *New Foundation of Values*. We know that this digital age has resulted in an erosion of what might be called basic standards in ethics and values. Tempted by unhealthy websites, enticed into to addictive behaviour, susceptible to plagiarism, infringement of copy right and intellectual property rights, and even drawn into greater and greater insularity and isolation, a new approach to youth work must include the laying of new values and education relevant to digital age.

⁷ From D. Kellner, “Multiple literacies and critical pedagogy in a multicultural society” in *Educational Theory*, vol. 48, No. 1 (1998), p. 122 quoted in *Youth Information and Communication Technologies*. UN and Youth document, p. 313 found at www.u.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch12.pdf

We need to find a new approach to manage information that inculcates values in learning and education. Internet values that allows for a genuine process of acquiring knowledge, without either being harmed or harming others.

Internet values that teach honesty and respect, but also discretion in not arbitrarily giving out information, and critical thinking to understand that not everything on the Internet is authentic. Internet values that encourage discipline in information acquisition, rather than shoddy research. Internet values that encourage what might be called “cyber-participation” and “e-citizenship”⁸, by learning about issues on line and then taking a stand, on line.

Third, a *New Reference for Interaction*. Instead of the traditional method of providing services, where convention saw youth work more re-active to issues and where professionals administered advice and counsel, Interactive channels through the web allow for greater two-way dialogue between youth and youth worker. Young people can be engaged and encouraged to be more responsive. To be more participatory. To not be afraid to contribute to debates on issues that affect them.

Finally, a *New Platform for Service Provision*. A new approach to youth work must seek ways to incorporate the platform of the Internet with ground services. Perhaps by setting up of specific websites,⁹ services like counselling to general information, from care and guidance to chat rooms, from music and games to study aides, exchanges and competitions, a cohesive integration of ground and cyber services can be attained. By reaching out through the Internet, the speed and coverage of service provision grows more rapid and more extensive, allowing greater possibility of service provision.

⁸ Youth at the United Nations. Information and Communication Technologies. *World Youth Report 2005*. Point 14. Found at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/wpayinformation.htm#WYR2005>

⁹ See the example of The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups u21 website at www.u21.org.hk

In Hong Kong, I am very pleased to say that these new approaches are currently being implemented by The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups. While still at an early stage in this evolution of youth services, I do believe that we are making progress.

This is a world that is dominated by information technology. As with all great inventions, there are both positive and negative attributes. However, what is our concern is how such an invention – ever changing – has such a great impact on the lives of young people. We know what the challenges are. We also know where the opportunities lie. What I believe we should be able to accomplish, is identify the characteristics of both, and see how, as youth workers and educators, we can enhance our professional capacities, using the very same technology, for the benefit of young people.

This will require discarding old disciplines for new orientations. Enhancing old values with new. Breaking down old doors of isolation to build up new interactivity. Building up new forms of service provision.

We need to teach our young people how to access information from the superhighway wisely and responsibly. But we also need to keep in mind the wisdom of the former CEO of IBM,

*Computers are magnificent tools for the realisation of our dreams; but no machine can replace the human spark of spirit, compassion, love and understanding.*¹⁰

Thank you.

¹⁰ Louis Gerstner found at http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/0,,sid9_gci534467,00.html