

THE USAGE OF A SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK TO CREATE A “COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE”

The potentialities of using Reddit as a digital tool for a project about European young learners with Down syndrome

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ABSTRACT

The present work consists in demonstrating the usage of a social media network as a digital solution for the development of a community of practice. Based on this idea it is important to understand the concepts of “social media network” and “community of practice” and how can these two be merged into a result. This community of practice was based in a set of activities that were under a European Project. This project aimed at providing e-skills for European young citizens with down syndrome promoting cultural and touristic activities. The social media network in use was Reddit since it was the best online digital solution to create, operate and establish a community of practice for a broad target audience. Thus, it will be presented, through an analytic description, the different elements that composed this community of practice.

Keywords: community, social media, network, European project

1 A SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET OVERVIEW

The use of online social networks or virtual communities has become, nowadays, a viral practice among citizens of the world. Internet access has become a globalized and shared activity among many, and this is common among those who are most predisposed digitally and those who are only holders of basic digital literacy. In fact, having a Facebook account, Twitter, Instagram or another online social network is something so common that it practically defines a trend of the contemporary era. In fact, the use of online social networks and content sharing tools like YouTube or Flickr have become so massive that in January 2009 there were more than 175 million active users via the Facebook platform (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). If we are to compare these numbers with something that resembles a tangible prospect we would say that the indicated amount represents the population of Portugal (10 million) seventeen times more, quite considerable numbers. Beyond this framework on the use of online social networks, it is also important to realize that the use of the Internet is increasingly high and widespread. In fact, this growth is similar among young people, young adults, adults and older individuals. According to an American study - Pew Internet & American Life Project - about the use of social networks and the use of mobile Internet among adolescents and young adults, 93% of adolescents go online, as well as 93% of young people adults will also. As for adults, over 18 years, only a quarter (74%) went online. Concerning older people, results continue to show exponential growth, reaching 38% (Lenhart .et al, 2010).

So, since the purpose of this research was to understand how a community of practice could be created using a social media network, we realized that the solution was to use two networks, in this case online social communities, allowing interoperability between platforms. In this way, the networks used for the development of a community of practice were Reddit and YouTube. In the following chapters we will go on to a more detailed explanation of how they fit into our strategy and would allow the creation of the digital solution envisioned in the “T21 Community” project. Finally, it is still important to situate this project before this solution of social media network, that is, how it integrates the development of this activity as an intellectual product. To that end, the next chapter will briefly describe the focus of the project and its aims to clarify its framework for the use of social networks as enablers for the creation of a community of practice.

2 ABOUT THE EUROPEAN PROJECT – “T21 COMMUNITY”

In order to understand the “T21 Community” project it is important, in first place, to know in which context this type of initiatives are held. Therefore, until 2020 the European Commission has set a Europe 2020 strategy which addresses several priorities according to employment, research and development (R&D), climate change and energy, education and poverty and social exclusion. This said, the EC sets strategic funding programs to help institutions, companies and other organizations to obtain funding for the development of projects and sharing of good practices. In this sense, this project is under the Erasmus + funding scheme, specifically, in the call related to strategic partnerships for youth and innovation. Thus, this project had a case scenario since the target group were European young citizens with disabilities, namely, down syndrome. This is a relevant aspect because the European Commission is gathering efforts to fight social exclusion on this type of citizens, for them to be included in the job market and become competitive. Still, this project is innovative and, on the vanguard, because is in line with the identified needs on the World Report on Disability done by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2011). Some of these needs are “barriers to education” and “barriers to employment” and they are due to a lack of proper, adapted and flexible training in electronic skills and upcoming technologies. Nowadays job market is filled with technology and most of these citizens with disabilities do not own the abilities or competencies to work and become autonomous towards these e-skills. In addition, the awareness for the Trisomy 21 citizen’s inclusion has been slowly increasing thanks to several measures and actions adopted at both National and European levels. The European Parliament adopted a declaration on children with Down syndrome in 2012 urging the Commission, the Council and the Member States to contribute to their social inclusion though awareness-raising campaigns. The EU also promotes their inclusion in society through the European Disability Strategy but much more can and be done. Non-profit organizations and associations in the civil society with very few resources

are still doing work in this area. Therefore, this project aims at making a positive difference in Down syndrome children's support.

Thus, this project aims at promoting and facilitating the social inclusion and the employability of European Down Syndrome youth citizens through Tourism and e-skills. The project also aims to foster, safeguard and promote European Cultural Heritage (via the promotion of Touristic and Artistic activities), as well as requalification in terms of cultural, audio-visual and e-Skills diversity in cross-sectorial areas.

In addition to this identified need, there is also a major concern about the needs of the participants, organisations and stakeholders towards Down syndrome:

- Regarding the participants, this project not only concerns about their social integration but also, for the inclusion of these citizens in the labour market or towards other employability activities.
- Concerning the organisations, and since this project team will directly cooperate and collaborate with key institutions focused on intellectual disabilities citizens, it will enhance their apprenticeship in e-skills, towards a specific learning and adapted teaching/learning scenario.
- As for stakeholders, particularly those who share a connection with these fields of impact (social inclusion and integration of citizens with intellectual disabilities) will be able of acquire a set of good practices through the cooperation in the project activities and methodology.

This said, the “T21 Community project” was the initial point to the development of this work on how social media could be effective digital media to establish an enriching environment as the community of practice.

3 INITIAL METHODOLOGY AND UNDERSTANDING “COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE”

It is important to mention that before of reaching the desired context of “community of practice” through the usage of social media networks, this project had outlined an initial methodology to implement the required digital solution. This said, we think that it is relevant, to extensively understand the aim of tackling this challenge, of introducing the starting point of this digital media. From now on we will name it “output” to facilitate the explanation and chain of process that lead this idea to be replaced with a better solution. Therefore, this output was mainly associated with the technological component of the “T21 Community” project. It was supposed to be represented as a software web platform which constituted the technological medium for the developed contents to be presented to the young learners with down syndrome by physical and virtual teachers. This platform would also include interaction moments, supposedly, like during e-learning sessions. It was envisioned that this platform would be redefined during its usage and adapted to the needs of the disabled participants, specifically, with accessibility standards like font size, image size, understandable and readable icons and a smooth interoperability with other external sites.

In addition, the contents were supposed to be supported by a methodology of video integration components, including a small tutorial on basic digital skills for each module about technological aspects, (e.g. “on how to read an electronic message” or “how to navigate in the interface” or even “how to log out from a web site”). So, this seemed to be a foreseen good technological approach in which the developed contents of the project could be supported. However, this platform showed too many complexity issues. For starts it would need to integrate a CMS methodology, that is, a server-side software that is designed to simplify the creation and maintenance of web sites and apps. These systems manage online content, generate web pages or deliver data to apps, and allow users to upload and change content without requiring technical expertise. In short, it would mean that the content would be “separated” from “presentation” which would be a negative factor. The following problems were: “In what way could we include the community and social practices?” of course that there are digital solutions for doing that. For example, blogs like *WordPress*, *MovableType* or *ExpressionEngine*, however it would again generate the “dispersion issue” once more. On top of that

we searched for other solutions that were able to integrate the social media component like *Dolphin*, *Elgg* or *PhpFox*, but again now we had another complication, the technological know-how and management to keep a system like this running. So, despite all these alternatives there was still missing a key factor, the “community of practice” one. Because, all that the project needed was a digital media or solution that could include the following elements: storytelling, community, social approaches, content managing, sharable outputs, interaction and metrics. Thankfully, the answer was lie ahead, it was *Reddit*. The social media network, *Reddit*, was the most adapted platform to reach our concept of “community of practice”. This means, a place somehow connected with a community in which interconnects social, sociolinguistics and practical competencies into one or several assumptions of communities. In detail, the desired aim of “community of practice” was an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavour. Ways of doing things, exploring, thinking, talking, sharing and relating with other experiences (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). In conclusion, this “community of practice” was specially focused on disabilities and down syndrome channels of interest in order to relate with the aims of the “T21 Community” project.

4 TACKLING THE CHALLENGE – THE SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORK

As it said before, the “T21 Community” project aims to promote and contribute to ease the social inclusion and the employability of European Down Syndrome youth citizens through e-skills. Further, the project also aims to foster, safeguard and promote European Cultural Heritage (via the promotion of Touristic activities), as well as requalification in terms of cultural, audio-visual and e-skills diversity in cross-sectorial areas.

Under the activities plan, and as a supporting way to achieve this, it was planned to use a platform, namely a web TV platform, as an online learning environment to ease the knowledge transfer, displaying the educational contents produced. Nevertheless, the development of a community related and interested in employability and inclusion subjects of T21 children and youngsters must lead the dissemination and follow up of this project aims and results.

Both the technological approach and solution for the supporting platform(s) have been drafted from the work conducted by the project team with actual T21 communities. The importance of strengthening the relationships within T21 related communities was underlined after multiple interactions between project partners, and reinforced with the availability of project’s initial deliverables, which quality was well recognized after its pilot application.

Therefore, seven main pillars have been defined as guidelines for the platforms to be used, which at the same time demonstrate their key potentialities:

- **Community** – a solution to support a specific community related with T21 children and youngsters, thus focused on a very specific theme;
- **Knowledge** – the project team is humble to understand that other people (external to the project) could bring an enormous contribution to the project due to its practical knowledge. Thus, the solution should try to involve / capture these “experts” in the social communities they are already present (and where they have made important contributions) instead of creating a “new” community on a “new” platform and try to convince them to adopt and migrate to it;
- **Involvement** - A solution where users can discuss, provide feedback and ask for help on transversal or daily issues with respect, moderation and accepting different opinions and views;
- **Simplicity** – a solution simple and direct because the most import aspect is the content / contributions performed by the different actors and not the technological solution by itself;
- **Usability** – an inclusive solution also suitable for those that are physical impaired;
- **Share** – a solution where each community member can share both their vision and contents / contributions either as text, links, video or documents;

- **Evolution** – a solution broadly accepted by existing communities that would be easy (and free) to maintain and evolve in the future (post-project) not only by the “T21 Community” project promoters but mainly by the community itself

After an analysis on the existing solutions, the project team decided that the best technological approach would be twofold: to combine (i) existent solutions with a strong global adherence for the dissemination and follow-up of the project aims and results, with (ii) an existent solution of a web TV platform - Future Box, from Viatecla, a Portuguese software house, to support the online learning environment with the educational contents produced.

In terms of project’s dissemination and its focus on developing “T21 Community” with global adherence, a foreseen activity was carried out since the initial implementation of the project plan, and two strong social media solutions were selected. A communication strategy is being defined in order to develop and sustain the use of the referred solutions, namely YouTube and Reddit.

YouTube is the 2nd most used global website (average use of 8 daily minutes per user) while Reddit is at rank 6 (average usage of 16 daily minutes per user). Further the software solution comprises the usage of online libraries DocDroid for document management and Imgur for image management.

The “T21 Community” sub reddit will be the main channel for content sharing and discussion and the main area to capture users and “experts” in the subject. The project team has identified four existing sub Reddit communities (namely /downsyndrome, /disability, /autism, /Autistic) which combined have a community of 36.000 people, where contacts have been established for capturing these members also to the “T21 Community” sub reddit for specifically discussing the project rational and outputs.

Video content (also referenced on Reddit) will be placed on YouTube. By this way the project team expects to capture both traffic and users from both communities.

Reddit based communities are extremely strong, cohesive and faithful to the topics they have interest. Thus, the selection of Reddit based technology for supporting the “T21 Community” software solution is a strategic move already thinking on the project’s sustainability (beyond the project promoters) in a post-project period.

As mentioned, the web TV platform is also considered to be used to support the online learning environments with the outputs produced under the project and so, at the later stages of the project.

5 CONCLUSION

From this project, specifically, the implementation of the output related to the creation of a community of practice based on a social media network, we conclude that the use of online social networks establishes a new paradigm of communication, based on several agents of intervention and the integration of technological components that promote interaction, discussion and sharing (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Through this project, we realize that some digital media are “saturated” because the idea of creating a dispersed web platform and weak interoperability with other external systems, ends up harming the concept of accessibility, flexibility and creativity, moving away users and interested parties on participating actively in a “community of practice”. Another factor that led this idea to its implementation was that it is based on seven key principles: community; knowledge; involvement; simplicity; usability; sharing and evolution. These were the pillars that supported the use of Reddit as the mediating platform and the enabler of creating a practical and interactive community focused on disabilities, especially trisomy 21 or Down syndrome.

As a positive aspect, we believe that this process has outlined an innovative and adapted learning strategy. Innovative because it allowed us greater reach and compatibility with other web tools, such as *DocDroid* and *Imgur*. These tools have contributed to the smooth operation of interoperability among the various social media networks, allowing the use of multimedia content (images, videos, links, flashcards, presentations, etc.). It is also important to mention that using Reddit allowed, under the T21 Community project, that become an added value. That is, the possibility of creating communities and joining other existing communities, grounding the concept of “community of practice”. In addition, one of the beneficial factors that this social media network solution brought

was the fact that quantitative data, (i.e. metrics and analytical data), were visible and obtained. In this case, these would later be analysed and interpreted in future works of this nature.

Regarding the negative aspects, we consider that one of the reasons that may cause some dislocation in this process is the issue of resources, that is, physical and digital. Concerning the physical resources, it would be problematic because moderators and community managers are needed, and these are tasks that require time and some dedication to ensure that the community has quality, diversity, time management and some control. As for the digital resources, these types of solutions are always dependent on technological means. That is, for specific target audience or info-exclusion citizens these features lack forms to provide access to the contents of a community of practice based on *Reddit* or another similar platform.

In the future, we intend to extend the concept of “community of practice” among other communities and digital social circles. Whereas, it would be a good idea to incorporate this process using other networks such as *Facebook* or *Google +* which also includes the option of creating communities, circles or pages.

Finally, and in an area of constant change and evolution like this one, it is important to ensure that this concept brought by the T21 Community project adapts to the circumstances and digital paradigms that will succeed the current ones. That said, it is important to establish more partnerships and stakeholders to ensure the sustainability of the project and the concept of “community of practice”.

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