Offline Youth and the Digital Divide: Revisiting the Concept of “Digital Natives”

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Introduction

• In 2009 FTU was asked to do research on the e-competencies of young people between the age of 16 and 25 years.

• Particular for young people this age, is that they are expected to transit from “adolescent” to “adult” e-practices.
Introduction

• According to Statbel 9% of these young people are non or rare users. They are the so-called Offline youth.

• 16% are irregular users.
False Preconceptions

• The research started with the preconception that offline young people would be more easily found in economically and socially underprivileged households.

• Offline young people this age are not a homogeneous group.
False Preconceptions

• A diversity of circumstances lay at the origin of the e-exclusion of young people this age.
False Preconceptions

– The diverse reasons for being (quasi) offline

- Quality of housing
- Offline families without online environment
- Family structures and relationships
- Parents without e-culture
- Disability without assistive ICT
- Street youth

(Quasi) offline youth
False Preconceptions

• There is no direct relationship between having access to the internet at home and the e-competencies of young people.

• Since the internet is part of their youth culture, they find access to the internet on other locations.
False Preconceptions

• Almost all young people this age are in some way or another familiar with the computer and the internet.

• The discontinuity between their e-practices and the e-practices expected by adult society is a strong explanatory factor their e-exclusion.
Different worlds of Internet usage

• The e-world of young people (16-24) differs radically from the e-practices of older age groups.
Different worlds of Internet usage

- Usage of online services according to age groups

% of Internet users within each age group
Source: Statbel 2008
Different worlds of Internet usage

• Young people’s usage of the internet is very leisure-oriented.

• They consider the internet as an extended chat room.
Different worlds of Internet usage

- Preferred uses by the youth
  - office software
  - e-learning
  - e-government
  - e-commerce
  - facebook, netlog
  - music, photo & video
  - chat & online messaging
  - e-mail
  - online gaming
  - ambient intelligence
  - second life

- Expected uses by the socio-economic world
  - office software
  - e-learning
  - e-government
  - e-commerce
  - facebook, netlog
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Different worlds of Internet usage

• For young people this age, e-exclusion means not being able to share their experiences with their peers and to participate in e-youth culture.

• The way policymakers and society consider e-exclusion is most often a lesser concern for them.
How to bridge the gap

• For grown-ups the e-world of young people still appears to be a foreign and ill-known territory.

• If Prensky considers young people to be e-experts, it must be because their expertise is restricted to this territory.
How to bridge the gap

• Which means that young people will have to cope with the existence of double and conflicting norms, if they want to respond to the expectations of society and economy.

• Many young people avow their lack of e-competencies to access the e-world as expected by economy and society.
How to bridge the gap

• This double system of social norms should incite researchers and fieldworkers to revisit and handle with care and circumspection their concepts and instruments.

• Adequate tools to draw a more balanced picture of their e-knowledge remain absent.
How to bridge the gap

• Schools and youth organisations still have little knowledge of the youth e-world.
• They are poorly aware of the effects of the Internet on their socialising process and on the construction of their identity.
• They do not take measures to facilitate the migration from their e-world to the expectations of the economy and society.
Conclusions

• Offline young people are not necessarily to be found in underprivileged households.

• This very small group of young people call for an individual approach that takes into account the particular context of their e-exclusion.
Conclusions

• The large majority of young people need assistance to migrate to the e-world of adult society.

• Throughout Europe there are very few policies and measures that sustain this “migration” process.