Danuta Baraniewicz

What Do Young People with Intellectual Disabilities Write about in their Blogs

Abstract

The article presents the nature of the Internet as a new form of communication and a new social space. Unlimited number of contacts that can be established in the network and a specific language of the computer-mediated communication make it a successful form of contact. The number of Internet users is constantly increasing. The article puts particular emphasis on weblogs as one of the ways of communication and self-promotion. The authors (or co-authors) of the presented blogs are people with intellectual disabilities. Hence the conclusion that the common presence of the Internet should set new goals in the education of young people, including the search of optimal ways to make use of the state-of-the-art media. These tasks are also relevant in regard to people with intellectual disabilities who remain a specific group of the Internet users.

Introduction

One of the distinctive features of the present day is a dynamic development of principally all areas of life. Due to its intensity a special emphasis is deserved by the development of information technology, which results in the growing simplicity and effectiveness of information transfer. Beside the traditional media i.e.: press, television, telephone, new improved media develop very rapidly. Features of the new media such as: digitization (images and words are converted into a string of digits), easiness of material modification (made possible by digitization) as well as interactivity (a recipient can be/is active)

(Pyżalski, 2012) make their use become more and more common on the one hand, and more advanced and specialized on the other.

Among the state-of-the-art mass media a special place is taken undoubtedly by the Internet. This is confirmed by the results of "Internet diagnosis 2009" (Krejtz, 2009) indicating the Internet (beside conversations with other people) as the most important source of information.

Internet – the new communication and social space

Internet is not only a source of information. It has become "a new social space, where the majority of human needs are realized." (Juszczyk, 2011) Trends of the Internet development are fully illustrated by the terms with which it was defined. The term „Internet as a wonder" (Juszczyk, 2011, p. 134) is typical for the first period of the use of the Internet, i.e. the beginning of the 90s, when the network was reserved for a small, elite group of users. Currently, the Internet has become commonly available, broadening its use (to prosaic, ordinary matters such as shopping), hence the term – "the Internet as a part of everyday life" (Juszczyk, 2011, p. 135). „Virtualization of everyday life is about a complex interweaving of the Internet and the out of Internet reality.

"Realization of many activities necessary for efficient and full functioning of a human becomes completely dependent on the access to the Internet" (Krejtz & Nowak, 2009, p. 14) This medium, „like no other in the history, has significant influence on most areas of human life" (Krejtz & Nowak, 2009, p. 7).

The phenomenon of the Internet is in a large measure due to a merit of specific communication, simple and convenient, essentially different from traditional communication. Describing the communication by means of the computer, so called "computer-mediated communication", Pyżalski (2012, p. 25) mentions text communication as first. Among its features he enumerates: dialogism, spontaneity, colloquialness, situationality, multimediality, hypertextuality, hierarchism, automation, dynamism, range and strength.

As the second in the computer-mediated communication appears the visual and audio communication, since "today's culture, often referred to as visual, made the image an element equivalent to word in the communicational discourse." (Pater-Ejgierd, 2008, p. 33). Additional features completing the full characteristics of online communication are: the reduction of information transferred by non-verbal channel (lack of body language), anonymity, network audience, synchrony/asynchrony.

The described features of the computer-mediated communication emphasize its versatile capabilities. However, the way they are used arises a discussion and a dichotomous division to *positive*/*negative* properties is not possible, since they can be perceived as limitations by some people while others will treat them as beneficial properties facilitating communication" (Pyżalski, 2012, p. 38).

The specificity of network communication implies specific behaviours of virtual interlocutors. The research results show that the mediated communication favours the increase of openness. It is so, among other things, because the interlocutors do not get distracted by the external appearance, body language, they focus on the subject of the conversation. Mediated communication allows for better concentration on inner experiences, values and feelings. Finally "mediated communication creates an environment prone to asking questions directly related to the communication partner. In this context it is the most appropriate way to reduce uncertainty in interaction. This way of asking questions is usually not socially acceptable in the face to face communication, yet in case of mediated communication it is natural and leads to increased openness" (Pyżalski, 2012, p. 42).

The openness considered as the basis for successful contacts between people may also take a negative, dysfunctional form. Joinson (after Pyżalski, 2012) uses the term – "unrestrainedness", to describe such a behaviour of the user in the world of media, which he would never have undertaken in a real situation. It should be emphasized though, that the author, analysing negative effects of the unrestrainedness, does not deny the existence of positive ones.

Krejtz and Cypriańska (2009), based on extensive nation-wide research, made a categorization of purposes for which the Internet is used, specifying the following: practical, social, computer, creative, financial and informational. This categorization of purposes not only answers the question about the goals users realize using the Internet, but also illustrates the variety of roles they can take – from a passive recipient of information to an active sender – a creator. A special group of Internet users, who realize (according to the above classification) the creative purposes in the network, are the authors of internet blogs.

Blogs – the web logs

"Internet blogs, for a few years, have been a common form of communication and a way of promoting oneself, one's thoughts, and showing various social problems. They are also a kind of emergence from underground. In the past, people used to write diaries and hid them in a drawer. Today they no longer have to do that – they can immediately share their thoughts with others and remain anonymous" (retrieved April 2, 2013, from http://www.konektia.pl/artykuly/207).

"The name *blog* stems from the English word *weblog*, which means a web record or a web log, which expresses the essence of this form of electronic publishing of information" (Zielińska, 2011, p. 414). The onset of blogging in Poland dates back to years 2000–2001, it is the time of appearance of the nlog.org service. Further services include, among others: "blog.pl, blox.pl, blog.onet.pl, salon24.pl, blogger.com, wordpress.com, blog.interia.pl" (Grabianowska, 2008, p. 354).

Today, the definition of a blog merely as a web diary is incomplete. Nowadays, more and more often, blogs contain not only text but also images or audio-visual materials and tend to be used for instance in journalism, politics or marketing" (Zielińska, 2011, p. 414). At the beginning, mainly young people busied themselves with creating blogs; currently this activity is also taken up by adults. Authors of blogs are both private individuals as well as public figures (politicians, actors). The diversity of bloggers and the popularity of the phenomenon caused the variety of created blogs including: private diaries, artistic blogs, political blogs, literary blogs, commercial blogs, professional blogs, travel blogs, etc. (Grabianowska, 2008).

Limitation of blogging and reading blogs is not only technical access to network, since "the causes of Internet inequalities may be found among technical aspects of the Internet use as well as social and psychological aspects". Therefore, besides the access to the network, skills of users are also important, social support and purposes of Internet use (Krejtz & Nowak, 2009, pp. 8–9).

Yet, what is a difficulty for some may be a chance of activity for others. Such a possibility has certainly appeared for people with disabilities. This is confirmed by the network presence and activity of people with different types and degrees of disability. Active network users are people with mobility impairment, those chronically ill, with hearing or visual impairment, deaf-mute

persons and people with intellectual disabilities. Theoretical and research works handling the debated issue are represented in an increasing number of publications (Czerwińska, 2005; Bartnikowska & Żyta, 2006; Żyta, 2008; Plutecka, 2011).

Among the blogs whose authors are people with intellectual disabilities personal/private blogs can be distinguished, presenting, among other things, the interests of their authors.

"Welcome! My name is Kamil. I am 17 years old and I have broad interests. On my blog you will listen to conversations with different people. These people previously gave their consent to the interview and its publication in the form of audio files. I will post the interviews on my blog" (retrieved April 10, 2013, from http://u-kamila.blogspot.com).

Another presented blog can be described as an artistic blog. It presents Victor, an author of lyrics and music; it contains his numerous works.

> I want to enjoy the life
> Its every minute
> Not to be afraid of tomorrow anymore
> Just live normally
> Just live normally
> I don't want complaints
> To my life, not again
> That some matters go wrong
> It's better to seize the day
> Enjoy every little moment again
> It's just a waste of time
> To worry any longer,
> After all life is beautiful [retrieved April 6, 2013, from http://www.w-okroj.pl/dostęp 6.04.2013].

In the web also blogs written by students with intellectual disabilities can be found, created with assistance of teachers as a part of school classes.

> Nicholas's blog is created during individual classes that take place once a week. During the classes Nicholas improves his skills of communication by using the supporting communication (AAC). Nicholas communicates by pointing graphical symbols (PCS). Each symbol has an assigned meaning that Nicholas learns in the way similar to learning a foreign language. Writing the blog from technical point of view looks so that Nicholas speaks and I write his statements on the computer. (…) What is recorded is entirely of Nicholas authorship, considering both the contents and the way of building the sentence.

Writing this blog is a very important task for Nicholas, for the sake of learning the language, improving the correctness of building the statements, broadening the scope of subjects that he would like to and could talk about, as well as increasing his self-esteem. Nicholas is very proud of the fact that he is a blogger and can read his own texts on the Internet.

Hence, writing a blog has become a therapeutic activity on many levels, which he approaches with motivation of the highest value – because it is coming from the inside" [retrieved April 27, 2013, from www.zss11.krakow.pl/blog Mikołaja].

My Tech-Touch

I am a mute person, I cannot speak, but I understand everything. Have you ever heard that some people can't speak? Do you know how the mute people communicate? I have my pictograms book and the Tech-Touch 2. My grandmother – Eva – she called Mrs. Ann and bought it in September and we got it in January 2013. The Tech-Touch has a voice – Agata. It's really awesome! [retrieved April 24, 2013, from http://www.zss11.krakow.pl/blog Mikołaja].

School blogs/magazines, administered by students with intellectual disabilities, are also worth your attention. The blog/magazine presented below shows the broadness of interests and height of activity of the students. This is a "magazine of the students of a trade school and lower secondary school. Categories: All | Events | Poems and stories | Interviews | Discussions | They wrote about us | Productions gallery | TV | About school | Contact | Redaction | Discussions.

What does it mean to be a good man? To be good means to help other people when they need our help. For example, giving up one's seat in a bus or a tram to an older person.
We want to live normally.
It means going out to the discos, functioning normally, so that nothing hurts [Magda – a student of SJTS school, i.e. Special Job Training School, 22 years old].
So that girls don't look only on my wheelchair but on my character as well [Victor – student of SJTS school, 21 years old].

Interview:

K.K.: What is people's reaction when they see a person on a wheelchair who writes poems?
W.O. The reaction is rather positive.
K.K.: What are your dreams?
W.O.: To record a long play with my lyrics.
K.K. Do you have a goal in your life?
W.O. To be myself. Not to pretend anyone. To write more.

About school:

I think that if there was not a school like ours, I would be very bored at home. I like the classes at our school very much. We learn many interesting things. We have informatics classes, housekeeping, some sports. We spend a lot of time together. I am a student of this school and I recommend it to those who are looking for their place in life [retrieved April 9, 2013, from http://dobczycka.blox.pl/html].

The last of the presented blogs is a blog of people with intellectual disability – the participants of the Occupational Therapy Workshops.

We were at the opera.
Our Occupational Therapy Workshop spent last Monday at the opera. (…) For us, the participants of the workshop, that day, thanks to the superb artists, was full of impressions and we would like to thank them wholeheartedly" [retrieved April 20, 2013, from http://www.blog.spdst.org.pl; Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Dzieci Specjalnej Troski – blog].

People with intellectual disability write in their blogs about their own interests/passions, they present their works, take part in discussions, describe the school/workshop events. Among the bloggers are students of primary schools, youth educating in vocational schools/preparing for work, as well as people who graduated from school education. Bloggers create their blogs on their own or with the assistance of other people (e.g. teachers). Blogging as a form of existence on the web is becoming more and more popular, also among people with intellectual disability, among other things, because it is available (especially for people with complex disability, moving on wheelchairs, using supporting methods of communication), which facilitates contact as well as:

1. Writing a blog allows to gather thoughts, since it requires from their author to reflect on various issues and pass it on to a reader in a comprehensible way;
2. It allows thinking everything over peacefully.
3. It also makes it possible to educate the society about the illness, problems connected with it. Maybe it's even possible to make more people take note of the needs of people with disabilities in their neighborhood?
4. It allows meeting other people afflicted with the same or another illness, exchanging useful information or even creating a virtual supporting group
   [retrieved April 2, 2013, from http://www.konektia.pl/artykuly/207].

Blogs provide a possibility of broad, specific communication, rich and open. They allow contacting with people one already knows as well as provide an opportunity to meet new people with similar interests. They also perform an educational and informative function, develop hobbies. Furthermore, opinions which are not always kind allow to "get used to unfavourable opinions, teaching

to keep one's distance from them (Grabianowska, 2008, p. 360). Keeping a virtual diary may also have a therapeutic role (Żyta, 2008; Zielińska, 2011).

With reference to people with intellectual disability (especially complex disability) a blog remains an attractive, modern form of presenting themselves, their passions, thoughts and beliefs. This group of users present themselves on the network not only to a broad, anonymous audience but also to their closest – their friends, family, with whom traditional contact is difficult (an obstacle may be a physical disability) or impossible (in case of the users of supporting communication). A special emphasis should be put on the fact that persons with intellectual disability (often perceived stereotypically as the passive recipients) by blogging realize the creative purposes, thus becoming creators/authors.

Yet, if the blog becomes the only or the leading medium of contacts with others, which in case of people with intellectual disability is very probable, there is a great danger of losing (by its author) the authenticity, blurring the boundary between the real and virtual worlds, minimizing the encounters in reality (which are sometimes difficult to realize) for the sake of activity on the network.

Conclusions

The Internet creates broad possibilities, it is a space of unlimited contacts, it breaks the barriers of distance and time, is a source of fast and current information, allows to be not only a passive recipient, but also an active author. People predisposed to making new contacts use the Internet to intensify them and make new friends. "Special attention should be paid to a significant threat that is posed by the virtual world to people having difficulties in making virtual contacts. The increase in their activity in communicating by means of network very often is not followed by similar fact in the real world. (…) It can result in a social isolation of such people that will not be compensated by any virtual relations" (Ilciów, 2008, s. 278).

The common presence of the Internet sets new tasks for the education of young people, requiring finding optimal ways of using the most modern media. These tasks become also relevant in reference to people with intellectual disabilities, who remain a specific group of Internet users.

The phenomena touched upon here are an attempt to accentuate some new problems in the broad issues of rehabilitation of people with intellectual disabilities.

References

Bartnikowska, U., & Żyta, A. (2006). Internet w procesie edukacji i rehabilitacji osób głuchoniewidomych. *Szkoła Specjalna*, *67*(5), 338–343.

Czerwińska, M. (2005). Osoba niewidząca w społeczeństwie informatycznym – uwarunkowania i możliwości normalizacji. In C. Kosakowski & A. Krause (Eds.), *Normalizacja środowisk życia osób niepełnosprawnych*. Olsztyn: Wydaw. Uniwersytetu Warmińsko-Mazurskiego w Olsztynie.

Grabianowska, K. (2008). Rodzaje blogów internetowych. In M. Sokołowski (Ed.), *Media i społeczeństwo. Nowe strategie komunikacyjne*. Toruń: Wydaw. Adam Marszałek.

Ilciów, A. (2008). Internet. Przemiany społeczne i ich konsekwencje. In M. Sokołowski (Ed.), *Media i społeczeństwo. Nowe strategie komunikacyjne*. Toruń: Wydaw. Adam Marszałek.

Juszczyk, S. (2011). Internet – współczesne medium komunikacji społecznej. In E. Musiał & I. Pulak (Eds.), *Człowiek, media, edukacja*. Kraków: Wydaw. Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego.

Krejtz, K. (Ed.). (2009). *Diagnoza internetu 2009*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne.

Krejtz, K., & Cypriańska, M. (2009). Dlaczego korzystamy z internetu? Determinanty psychologiczne i społeczne. In K. Krejtz (Ed.), *Diagnoza internetu 2009*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne.

Krejtz, K., & Nowak, A. (2009). Znaczenie internetu dla funkcjonowania jednostki w społeczeństwie informacyjnym. In K. Krejtz (Ed.), *Diagnoza internetu 2009*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne.

Pater-Ejgierd, N. (2008). Dlaczego sieć przemawia obrazem. In T. Ferenck & K. Olechnicki (Eds.), *Obrazy w sieci. Socjologia i antropologia ikonosfery Internetu*, Toruń: Wydaw. Naukowe Mikołaja Kopernika.

Plutecka, K. (2011), *Aktywność społeczna młodzieży niesłyszącej w Internecie. Rocznik Komisji Nauk Pedagogicznych*, *64*, Kraków: Wydaw. Oddziału Polskiej Akademii Nauk.

Pyżalski, J. (2012), *Agresja elektroniczna i cyberbullying jako nowe ryzykowne zachowania młodzieży*. Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls".

Sienkiewicz, P., & Świeboda, H. (2006). Niebezpieczna przestrzeń cybernetyczna. *Transformacje*, *1–4*, 47–50.

Zielińska, J. (2011). Internet jako medium wspierające rodzinę dziecka niepełnosprawnego. In E. Musiał & I. Pulak (Eds.), *Człowiek, media, edukacja*. Kraków: Wydaw. Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego.

Żyta, A. (2008). Niepełnosprawni oraz członkowie ich rodzin o sobie – blogi i fora internetowe drogą ku normalności. In T. Żółkowska & M. Wlazło (Eds.), *Pedagogika specjalna – koncepcje i rzeczywistość. Socjopedagogiczne aspekty rehabilitacji osób niepełnosprawnych*. Szczecin: ZAPOL.

http://u-kamila.blogspot.com, retrieved April 10, 2013.

http://www.blog.spdst.org.pl/Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół dzieci Specjalnej Troski – blog, retrieved April 20, 2013.

http://www.konektia.pl/artykuly/207-niepelnosprawni-w-internecie-blog-jako-forma-terapeutyczna, retrieved April 24, 2013.

http://www.w-okroj.pl, retrieved April 24, 2013.

http://www.zss11.krakow.pl/blog Mikołaja, retrieved April 24, 2013.