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The Internet – Supporting of Normalization of People With Disabilities

The Internet has become the most popular way of international communication between people. It's used by disabled people and their families to search useful information, have a contact with other people in similar situation, find web sites of associations, rehabilitation and education centers etc. The Internet hold great promise for individuals with disabilities and their families, allowing communication with people around the globe, the conduct of work at home during flexible hours, effective organization and retrieval of information, and access to mainstream culture.

The Internet also called Cyberspace, Information highway or the Web has brought about technological revolution in acquiring and sending information as well as in communication among people from various parts of the world. Thanks to the Internet, million of people have easy access to all sorts of information. This tool, which does not belong to anybody, has become the "global multimedia archive" and allows people to gain access to current information and events (Giddens, 2004, s. 493). Through the Internet people are able to do a lot of things, for example: use email, do the shopping, handle bank accounts, take care of official matters as well as gain needed information. What is more, the Web gives access to free computer programs, it also enables to establish new acquaintances and exchange views as a part of discussion groups with people from all over the world (Bartnikowska, Żyta 2006). More and more people create their own websites and place their reflections on the weblogs. The Internet is also a place where people try to find life partners, flirt and even cheat. It can be said that economic, cultural, social and emotional life is realized via the Internet. During the last year the number of people who use the Internet increased from 9,6 to 13 million. Moreover, Polish e-market is an economic sector which develops fastest of all (Zdziechowska, 2007).

An overwhelming power of the Internet and relatively easy and cheap access to it cause a lot of threats. They are as follows: addiction to Information highway, harmful and dangerous websites (especially for children) and viruses which spread and destroy computers which are connected to the Web and in consequence the database on these computers. The Internet is also used in criminal activities (thefts, frauds, pornography, propagating the fascist

or anti - Semitic slogans, etc). Giddens (2004) draws our attention to another risk which is weakening traditional relationships both social and family, which leads to isolation and atomization of the society. Some people, among them, Andre Keen emphasises that the Internet kills the development of knowledge, promotes mediocrities and destroys the economy. He justifies his expressive and controversial charges with a claim that the democratization of the Web and an easy access to public debate, which many people consider as an advantage, leads to the fact that a huge per cent of pieces of information which are placed on the Internet may be called worthless junk, “millions of pointless weblogs and silly movies which promote their authors, embarrassing political comments as well as publications put by people who have never read any book” (Rosiak, 2007).

Websites which were created for disabled people and their families may fulfil several functions. Such as:

- information function (information about etiology, epidemiology, rehabilitation of mentally disabled people, genetic syndromes, accompanying illnesses, details about current therapies and methods of work, acts, the educational and rehabilitation system, reviews of specialist literature)
- communicative function (establishing contacts with other families who have disabled children as well as with specialist in order to exchange views and experiences, obtain advice and form some social contacts)
- therapeutic function (parents and siblings write their reflections on the discussion forum, private websites and weblogs which are kinds of diaries; they share their joy and problems with others what may work as a kind of therapy)
- rehabilitation function (some websites include exercises and diagnostic tests, examples of games and teaching materials and they can be used during the therapy of mentally handicapped people)

The research which I carried out among 56 adults with intellectual disability in north – east Poland at the turn of 2007 and 2008 enable to state that more and more disabled people use computers and the Internet (Żyta, 2008).

The majority of respondents with intellectual disability constituted young people under 25 (62,4%), 30,4 % of respondents were in the 26 – 35 age bracket, the others 7,2 % were women and men over 36. 46,4% (26 people) were women and 53,6% (30 people) men. Among the respondents the majority constituted people with mild intellectual disability (46,4%) and moderate intellectual disability (42,9%). Only 10,7% of respondents were

diagnosed with severe intellectual disability. None of the respondents was diagnosed with profound intellectual disability.

Majority of respondents were brought up in two – parents families (66,1%) and they have at least one brother or sister (91,1%). All respondents attended various kinds of educational and rehabilitation institutions including:

- occupational therapy workshops – 25 people (44,6%)
- educational and childcare centres – 12 people (21,3%)
- local self – help basis centres – 10 people (17,9%)
- special vocational schools – 3 people (5,4%)
- welfare institution, educational and rehabilitation centres – 6 people (10,8%)

Respondents live in small towns below 100 thousand citizens (50%), villages (41,1%) and big cities above 100 thousand citizens (8,9%).

The majority of respondents with intellectual disability (48 people, 87,5%) can use the computer in various scopes. What is characteristic is the fact that the ability to use the computer is directly proportional to respondents' age and degree of their disability. The interest in using the computer is smaller among older people, especially women. Moreover, the deeper degree of disability is, the weaker the ability to cope with computer issues is. Also the number and structure of activities connected with computer is limited.

Among the respondents 32 people (57,1% of all respondents) use the Internet.

The most often respondents use the computers in institutions which they attend (89,%) as well as at homes (56,2%). Some of them use the computer at their friends' houses or in internet cafes or library (24,3%). A range of activities connected with using the computer is quite wide. It includes: computer games, writing and copying texts, using email, drawing, searching the Internet, using communication tools, listening to music, doing shopping, downloading music and film, etc.

The most popular activities which are carried out with the computer and the Internet are different kinds of games. Unfortunately, educational programmes are not very popular, although writing and copying as well as some part of games are probably connected with educational and rehabilitation activities.

36 people (64,3%) think that operating the computer is difficult. Here are some utterances: *“Everything is difficult for me. I have problems with reading, I read individual words very slowly. I don't understand commands. Sometimes I don't know what to do and where to “enter”. I'm afraid that I break the computer.”* , *“It is difficult to write on the computer and it is difficult to operate the mouse. Moreover, there are too many keys and*

pictures (icons) on the desktop. Generally speaking, everything is complicated and I don't have a computer at home. You need to remember a lot.”, “ I often feel lost when I use new programmes. I don't know many functions and I need somebody to help me – explain or repair if something is broken.”

31 people require help when they use the computer, the other 25 among people who operate the computer declare independence in carrying out majority of tasks. Help is needed with explaining commands and repairing operating system.

People who use the computer have gained computer skills at school/institution they attended (75%), or have learnt it from their siblings (18,7%), friends (14,6%) or parents (4,2%). 12,4% claim that they have learnt how to operate the computer by themselves, by reading only computer journals (2,1%).

The majority of respondents use the computer several times a week (27 people, 48.2%) or even everyday (13 people, 23,2%).

The majority of people who use the computer enjoy this activity (37 people – 77%). They like playing computer games, watching films and photos. They perceive the computer as an entertainment, but they also notice that it helps them during learning and in contacts with others, and maybe – as one of respondents remarks – “it will help to find a job in the future”. The other 11 people (23%) are not very fond of computer. They prefer other activities (writing, drawing on the piece of paper, embroidering). They claim that operating the computer is too difficult and tiring for them (they complain of headache and eyes ache).

People with intellectual disability show big interest in modern means of communication and information. Their advantages and services for rehabilitation, normalization and improvement of life quality outweigh disadvantages and some inconvenience. It seems crucial to draw up ways of supporting handicapped people in using them. It is also important to adjust devices to disabled people's capabilities.

R. Zubal – Ruggieri (2007) lists advantages of using the Internet by disabled people. Here are some of them:

- getting “visibility” and “invisibility” at the same time

On the one hand, disabled users of the Internet feel like other surfers, they are not exposed to unpleasant reactions from their surrounding, which are caused by the fact they are physically different. People cannot judge them by their appearance because they do not see them. They are invisible for them from the physical point of view, they do not differ from other users of the Web. Secondly – some people seek contact with other disabled people, in order to look for similarities and share their experiences with people who are in similar

situation. This group of surfers wants to be visible for a specific group of people because it gives them a chance for identification with this group and enables to build the sense of pride and dignity of being a disabled person.

- strengthen of power, independence and subjectivity

While using the Internet disabled people have the chance to express themselves , they get the same possibilities as others. They can do shopping on – line, use educational materials, work from a distance. All these things cause that disabled people are surer of themselves, more assertive, their sense of self – control is bigger and their self –esteem boosts.

- elimination of barriers

Unrestricted access to information, the possibility of corresponding with others, reading the press and establishing relationships enable disabled people to feel like a legitimate member of society.

- travelling without moving

Lack of money, limitations connected with disability or other reasons often restrict possibility of travelling and exploring the world. The Internet enables disabled people to get to know people and places which they could never visit.

- acquiring knowledge, building up contacts with other people, entertainment

Some websites, thematic forum or weblogs are very valuable, and give a lot of specialist pieces of advice. Others only repeat information which were placed somewhere else and are not updated and they “die of natural causes”. Undoubtedly they are valuable tool in rehabilitation and normalization of disabled people especially in the era of development of information technology as well as easier and cheaper access to it. Technological progress and social reforms cause that the world of able and disabled people changes. One can tell about new window on the world as the Internet enables to establish new contacts, eliminate barriers both physical and intellectual and transmit information for everybody who has access to the Web. It is another way to deal with normalization of disabled people’s life. Many of them appreciate the possibilities which the Web gives them and they create their own websites. As one of them has said: “ *In the Web nobody knows that I’m disabled...It really doesn’t matter. There we don’t recognize people by the race, disability or appearance. None of these things has an influence on communication*” (Ibidem, p.210).

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