



**Social Networks for Social Change: YAHAnet Goes Live**  
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**Abstract**

Research points to the need for youth participation and leadership in HIV and AIDS prevention and education strategies. Internationally, youth-based organisations are drawing on the creativity and expertise of young people in arts-based initiatives aimed at promoting awareness, opening dialogue on issues such as on gender and sexuality, and discouraging stigma. YAHAnet is a webtool that supports and creates a virtual community of youth organisations around the world dedicated to using the arts and popular culture to address HIV and AIDS; it uses the internet's capacities to disseminate information, but also the emerging social networking aspects of the "Web 2.0" online environment.



**Key words**

arts, HIV/AIDS, technology, youth

"WE have to be the change we want to see in the world:' Young people should develop a global campaign for a culture of peace through their organisations and networks and use all forms of the Media to promote human rights and the respect for human dignity as fundamental values of the dialogue and establish a joint project of 'MEDIA FOR YOUTH.'" (UNESCO General Conference Youth Forum 2005)

Nowhere are these words from the fourth UNESCO youth forum more pertinent than in relation to the ways in which young people can be positioned as protagonists

in addressing issues of HIV and AIDS. HIV and AIDS is recognised as a global crisis, particularly among youth, with half of all new infections world-wide affecting young people between the ages of 15 and 24 (UNAIDS 2006). Concomitantly, especially in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, there is often an overarching sense of AIDS fatigue. As one group of disadvantaged black youth just outside of Johannesburg expressed a few years ago, "AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, that's all we ever hear---we are sick of AIDS." Testament to how distinctly situated people's relationships are to the disease, another group from a more privileged private school about 20 km away

lamented, "AIDS, it has nothing to do with us. We are sick of AIDS" (Mitchell & Smith 2003).

Recent work on health promotion in the area of HIV and AIDS suggests the following. Unless youth are given a more significant voice in participating in policy dialogue about their own health and sexuality, and in producing and disseminating locally relevant and gender sensitive messages, prevention and awareness programmes organised "from the outside" (i.e., by adults, donors and so on) are doomed to failure (see, for example Ford, Oddalo & Chorlton 2003). Thus, an overarching concern is the place of youth engagement in keeping young people hopeful and "alive and on board" as a strategy to ongoing involvement and awareness of prevention, treatment and care.

Such a position recognises that although young people are prone to risk behaviour and may fall victim to an invincible attitude that says, "it can never happen to me," they are simultaneously more likely to believe that *they* alone can make the change that will make a difference. Given the context, audience, and tools to communicate with, young people have proven over time the capacity and determination to speak out and make change (Hoechsmann & Low 2008). A vital alternative, then, to adults developing messages, campaigns, and prevention programmes directed at youth is to tap into the "let's do something" creativity of young people themselves through drama, drumming, chanting, forum theatre, hip hop, storytelling, puppetry, collage, graffiti, photography, video documentary, radio, writing, new media and so on (Gould 2004). As Eli Demanya of Salvage International (a Ghanaian non-governmental organisation that responded to the survey described below) argues, "We believe that the youth are not so ignorant. They know their problems and even have innovative ways of solving their problems. The challenge is that there have not been avenues for them to express these things." Critical across these various interventions is the engagement of young people as cultural producers in one way or another: whether writing their own prevention messages through graffiti, using photo-voice to tell their own stories of stigma, producing documentaries about getting tested, or performing their own dramas about sexuality and relationships.

As cultural producers, working to be directors of their own stories and destinies, youth have the potential to create an international community of youth activists with a tremendous capacity to address HIV and AIDS as a global phenomenon. At the same time, recent developments of the participatory functions of the Web 2.0 (the newer, more interactive functionalities of the internet) and its social networking functions can harness this energy and create forums for the sharing of information, tools, and experiences. In recognition of this vast potential, a network of educators has responded with the creation of YAHANet ([www.yahanet.org](http://www.yahanet.org)), a webtool designed to draw together and support youth organisations around the world dedicated to using some form of the arts to address HIV and AIDS. Funded in part through the Culture and HIV Division of UNESCO, YAHANet is a partnership involving McGill University, the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change, University of Kwazulu Natal, and GAAP (the Gendering Adolescence and Aids Prevention project), University of Toronto.

### Tapping the Potentials of the Web 2.0

It might be said that the World Wide Web came of age when the social networking and data aggregating functionalities of the Web 2.0 platforms came into widespread use early in this new century. Naming "you" the Person of the Year for 2006, *TIME* magazine expressed the significance of the transformations to culture enabled by these new technologies and afforded by new creative uses of these tools:

It's [2006] a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before... It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes... We're looking at an explosion of productivity and innovation, and it's just getting started, as millions of minds that would otherwise have drowned in obscurity get backhauled into the global intellectual economy... (Grossman 2006, 14).



Youth produced media, such as photography, enables young people to share their own stories.

*Credit: Centre for Visual Methodologies*

Prior to the Web 2.0 innovations, the internet was an effective multimodal communications vehicle, but not yet a revolutionary new vehicle for the collaborative production and dissemination of cultural products and forms. The transformation from the early versions of the Web to Web 2.0 was an evolution from a reading Web to a reading and writing Web, here understood to include all forms of multimodal cultural production. The new interactive properties of communication technology afforded by Web 2.0 innovations have enabled a corresponding shift in cultural development towards participatory forms. As Jenkins et al. (2006) point out in the MacArthur Foundation white paper, "interactivity is a property of the technology, while participation is a property of the culture."

In this new participatory environment, so-called "social networking" increasingly captures the imagination of youth worldwide. Regardless of its past in community activism, the term social networking has become the adopted and adapted term that describes web sites

where people typically post a personal profile with the goal of sharing it with others. MySpace and Facebook are basically virtual online scrapbooks, and YouTube is an online sharing site for streaming video, either home produced or media industry produced clips, old and new. While it is important to recognise the roots of social networking in other participatory forms, forums, and cultural practices, there is nothing wrong with celebrating the revitalised conditions for sharing enabled by new technological platforms. There is a tremendous range of social networking sites, some of which mobilise affinity groups and some of which enable cultural practices. Affinity groups might take the form of specific demographics (aboriginal people, women of colour, residents of a small town or village, etc.) or people with shared interests (fans of a television programme, adherents to a spiritual movement, etc.). Cultural practices sites centre on shared activities (hobby sites, activism sites, profession sites).

A common denominator across social networking



Expression comes in many forms

Credit: TIGXpress Project

sites is a commitment to connecting with others to increase a virtual sense of community. The virtual relationship is very real to the participants despite the mediation of distance and technology. While there are privacy settings on v-log and blog sites that can limit who will be able to view or read a posting, this just means the poster is selecting to “narrowcast” to a limited audience. For the most part, only the number of internet users limits the audience setting for a given post. Youth are reading widely and writing to broad, often unknown audiences. Outside of one’s local community and affinity groupings, the potential audience for a given piece can be limitless, albeit arbitrary. Moreover, many people can participate, even some who are differently abled and others without economic privilege. The learning curve involved for participation is modest. As learning economies rather than structured learning environments, social networking sites function through emulation and peer-to-peer support. There are no manuals to read, nor classes to attend. Pedagogy is just-in-time and task-oriented. Learning is networked, involving multiple learners with varying levels of expertise at multiple nodes, united by shared interests and goals.

### Enter YAHANet

YAHANet - the Youth, the Arts and HIV and AIDS Network - was officially launched at the UNICEF Unite Against AIDS Concert held in Montreal in conjunction with World Aids Day events in December 2007. The site serves a number of different functions. It is a resource of materials both on the various art forms being used in addressing

HIV and AIDS, along with areas of particular concern to organisations working in the arts (writing funding proposals, carrying out monitoring and evaluation). It also includes basic information about HIV and AIDS such as issues related to gender, stigma, and voluntary counselling and testing. Additionally, it holds a data bank on over 300 organisations with an online presence working in the area of the arts and HIV and AIDS, gallery space where individuals or groups can post their creative productions, and an interactive section called Test Your Knowledge. Under development is a section on the homepage that will feature a particular group or project. In addition, central to the focus of this article, a social networking function enables individuals and groups to become part of a virtual community of artists and activists.

YAHANet builds on research carried out between December 2005 and March 2006, by a McGill team of faculty members, interns, and graduate students. We assessed the emerging community of youth groups in the field of arts-based approaches to addressing HIV and AIDS. After studying over 300 organisations with an online presence, in 45 developing and industrialised countries, it became clear that the groups use many creative approaches to HIV and AIDS prevention and education. We developed a typology chronicling details about each organisation and the kinds of approaches used. This included drama and performing arts such as forum theatre, street theatre, puppetry, dance, and storytelling; hip-hop culture and its facets of DJing, MCing, break-dancing, and graffiti art; photo-voice; radio documentary and drama; television; collaborative video and video documentary; writing and publishing magazines, newsletters, poetry, books and novels; and, visual arts such as painting and billboards; and websites.

The original research was followed up with a survey sent to many of the groups chronicled in the typology, which elicited responses from 47 individuals and organisations (the process also benefited from conversations with participants at the “HIV and AIDS - The Creative Exchange” workshop held in Nairobi in March 2007). The main objective of the survey was to find out more about each organisation, and to assess what each might look for in a web-based tool. To meet the latter objective we asked, “What sort of web-based tool do you think

would be most useful?" and "What kinds of things would you want it to include?" Interview respondents were very enthusiastic about the idea of a web-based tool that could help support the work of youth-based and youth-serving organisations using arts-based and participatory methodologies in HIV and AIDS prevention and education. Many offered detailed feedback on what kind of tool and functions would be of use. It became evident that these groups really wanted a community forum that would help to further their work.

In general, the web resource envisioned by our informants would serve educators and community-workers looking to initiate, develop, fund, assess, and revitalise programming, as well as youth who are looking for information and a place to share thoughts and feelings. This would be a site that would inform, support, connect, encourage, and advocate. Participants variously described their ideal web tool as a multi-faceted information data-bank, a showcase, a networking space, a community centre, a curricular resource, a source of inspiration, and a site for dialogue and artistic expression. We grouped these aspirations into four categories, and YAHAnet works to reflect each one.

#### *Information data-base*

Respondents asked that a good deal of the site function be to store a range of types of information, which could be regularly (and so easily) updated. A number of respondents expressed interest in knowing more about what others were doing, and in publicising their own work. For instance, Robin Opperman at Umcebo Trust (South Africa) suggested the site might be "something that directed interested people to our projects, so that they could come to know about us, support us and work with us." This need is met in part by the site's typology of existing organisations, individuals, and projects around the world. In our plans for the site, the typology will eventually be accessed and cross-indexed by elements such as region, type of art-based methodology, and funding source. YAHAnet also works to include other information survey respondents were interested in, such as: an up to date and comprehensive list of all of the research in the area; publication of conferences, events, and education opportunities; and, media clips, relevant news and data, and regional information (for some of

this, see site's "HIV and AIDS in the news" function). Many respondents requested directories of donors with web-links, and information about funding networks and entities, given the importance and challenge of securing funding. As Blendi Dibra, coordinator of the Albanian Youth Parliament, emphatically states, "we work in North Albania and there is a lack of information and we have asked for help several times for other qualified projects and also to support our work, but due to lack of possibility to exchange information and attract potential partners we could not do more!"



Caption: Youth are a vital part of addressing HIV/AIDS

Credit: Gender Links

#### *Show case*

The site's "gallery function" is a direct response to respondents who suggested the site feature a selection of projects which demonstrate some "best practices" and/or are case studies and that include narrative accounts of the programme contexts, methodologies used, experiences, challenges and lessons learned. For instance, Opperman hoped the site would highlight "a wide variety of projects, with lots of visuals, so that people can see the work almost first hand. We need to tell people about what we are doing, and inspire them to become involved." Christian Heppinstall of the Alaskan AIDS Assistance Association uses theatre as an educational medium. He expressed an interest in seeing and sharing photos of actors working. The gallery is a repository for images, video, and music, and site members are encouraged to upload relevant materials, which are "featured" on a rotating basis.

*Educational resources*

Many respondents called for easily downloadable guides on working with youth using arts-based and participatory methodologies. Specifically requested were summaries of prevention strategies, brochures, samples of artwork, and streaming or downloadable video and audio resources. This call comes in part in response to shortages of materials in rural and developing contexts; for instance, Adaramola S. Emmanuel of the Emmanuel World Children Foundation in Nigeria highlighted the importance of resources which could be packaged into an audiovisual show for rural communities. Emmanuel Fonyuy of the TechCeFaCos Group would like information in a format one could "easily edit and develop in to a booklet to assist developing world countries such as Cameroon, which have just introduce Arts and Craft (as National Culture) in to their Basic Education School System and is on a poor stage due to lack of basic arts textbooks etc." The site's "tool kits" of facts on HIV and AIDS and on arts-based methodologies fulfil some of these needs, and can be downloaded as PDF files.

*Networking and communication space*

The YAHAnet group – especially the youth interns who have been working on the project -- had a strong sense from the beginning that the web tool could offer an important space of sharing and connection for an international collection of groups doing their work in relative isolation. The process of constructing the typology of organisations around the world confirmed the widespread, grassroots use of arts-based, participatory methods in HIV and AIDS education, and a significant number of our survey respondents expressed the need for networking, communication, and exchange through online "discussion forums," "supportive clubs," and "chats." For example, Pilar Bobadillo (Asociació'97n de Comunicadores Sociales, Calandria) said, "Of course, we are interested on sharing our experiences and methodologies. One of our goals is to promote exchange of experiences, and methodologies in order to make synergy and improve the HIV and AIDS response, using information and communication technologies." Opperman of the Umcembo Trust is also interesting in directing interested people to their project, "so that they could come to know about us, support us and work with us."

Communication spaces were seen as necessary for young people as well as those working in organisations; Demanya, for instance, hoped the site could give youth the opportunity to "express themselves freely about their thoughts, fears and hopes on HIV/AIDS. There should be room for them to seek confidential counselling on environment pressures they are facing i.e. economical, social." The argument for the inclusion of this kind of 'free expression' space in the context of HIV and AIDS is compelling, for as organisations such as Lovelife in South Africa and yfm (a kwaito radio station in Johannesburg) have found, the "space" of AIDS is not one that is easily compartmentalised. Youth-friendly arts and new media initiatives can go a long way toward serving such a function.

The intention of YAHAnet is to combine the functionalities of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 platforms, part static resource library and part dynamic social network domain. The importance of developing and augmenting the social networking functionalities of the site became increasingly clear through our user testing process. In particular, the group of student interns at McGill working on the project made a strong case for the need for greater interactivity after they tested early versions of the site. They argued that over the course of the site's development online social networking sites such as Facebook and My Space had become ubiquitous in many settings and that their interactive potential should be incorporated into the project. Ultimately, it became apparent that much of what the survey respondents were requesting could be enabled through a "social networking" function, and that the success of YAHAnet in creating an online community depended on providing members a space to mount and share distinct profiles showcasing their work and identity. This, in turn, raised further questions about access and use given the material realities of emergent digital divides.

**Bridging the Divide**

Many express concerns over digital divides that reproduce historic patterns of exclusion, concerns that we share. Furthermore, we acknowledge the challenge ushered forth by Jenkins et al. in the MacArthur white paper: Access must include instruction in the use of the new

tools and the opportunity to engage in the same type of play that the digital-haves engage in when learning a new platform or protocol. The notion that great repositories of information and knowledge should be created only to benefit those with access to digital networks and experience in their effective use, flies in the face of that which we hope to implement in this community-building exercise of developing and sustaining a network of practitioners and participants of arts-based and participatory methodologies for social change. And it is particularly troubling that one cannot advance participatory methodologies and practices without universal access to the tools that we wish to share.

As access continues to improve, we hope that resources such as YAHAnet are at the forefront of a meaningful engagement by marginalised groups with the rich potentials of the participatory Web. 2.0. Given the potential of Web 2.0 for creating meaningful international communities and partnerships, we remain committed to the possibilities of webtools such as YAHAnet, while cognisant of its current limitations, and to the need to continue working in the fight against HIV and AIDS from many fronts and places. In the words of survey respondent Okesandra Sluzhynska of the "Art anti AIDS" Foundation in the Ukraine, "There are no borders for AIDS. There are no borders for joint efforts to prevent it."

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#### Writers Bio

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