

## **Social Work and Volunteering in the Digital Age**

### **Impressions from the 8<sup>th</sup> Convention of The European University of Volunteering**

**held in Strasbourg, France 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> October, 2016**

#### **Background**

The European University of Volunteering is an “itinerant university”, modelled on the peregrinations of mediaeval itinerant universities. The institution is not tied to any single locale and has no faculty. Rather, it gathers every three years in a different European country to consider pertinent questions and developments at a university level. The issues revolve around how to involve civilian volunteers. This itinerant university was founded in 1993 by the *Association pour le Volontariat à l'Acte Gratuit en Europe (AVE)* by professors from various European countries.

EUV conventions have been held in Barcelona, Lyon, Santiago de Compostela, Freiburg, Lucerne, Basle, Rolduc (Aix la Chapelle) and just recently Strasbourg. Each meeting assembles under a unifying meme, appropriate to the further development of volunteerism in Europe.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Convention was held in 2001, during the UN International Year of Volunteers in Freiburg, Germany. Its theme was “The Theory and Practice of Collaboration Between Universities and NGOs<sup>1</sup>”. Basle welcomed the 6<sup>th</sup> Convention in 2011, where “Casual vs. Professional Volunteering<sup>2</sup>” was the underlying theme. After the conclusion of affairs in Basle, the appropriateness of founding a sponsoring EUV Society was tabled. Accordingly, that Society was founded in 2012 – in Basle, with Georg von Schnurbein presiding as its first chair<sup>3</sup>. Caritas organised the 7<sup>th</sup> Convention in Northrhine Westphalia (Germany) with the cooperation of the NRW High Schools for Social Engagement<sup>4</sup>.

#### **Strasbourg**

The gracious hosts of the 8<sup>th</sup> EUV were Strasbourg University and Caritas Alsace. The organisers included the IAVE (Worldwide Association of Volunteers), alongside Freiburg’s Catholic archdiocesan Caritas Association, and IC Volunteers of Geneva. The leitmotif for this 8<sup>th</sup> caucus was the ever-expanding digital networks and their influence on social relations. The tendrils of this digital revolution<sup>5</sup> also entwine social work and voluntary activity in major ways.

The Convention was under the honorary chairmanship of the European Parliament, whose president, Martin Schulz, stressed that voluntary service is a concrete expression of European values, like solidarity and non-discrimination. He also emphasized how volunteer engagement contributes to a participative democracy and the promotion of human rights, within and without the European Union<sup>6</sup>.

More than 100 participants from 13 countries accepted the open invitation to attend guest lectures and seminars. Among these were professors and undergraduates from universities and colleges, as well as honorary, volunteer and professional staff from social organisations. Although most attendees were European, some were from Australia and Ecuador, with online presentations from Brazil and Hong Kong. The languages of the convention were English, French and German.

### **Addresses and Discussions**

The opening lecture addressed the core theme under the rubric, "Social Media for Enterprises and Everyman – Opportunity or Risk?" It was delivered by Philippe Viallon, Unesco Chair of Journalism and Media at Strasbourg University. He stressed that not only have the social media changed the way we interact socially, but also have created new relationships. We meet variously in the digital world via images, videos, music channels, and interpersonal and family exchanges. Programmes and platforms facilitate discussion, argument and publication... the internet is also a power base for some.

The round-table panel on the podium were Ms. Kylee Bates, World President of IAVE, Mr. Laurant Hochart of Caritas Alsace, Mr. Peter Kusterer, Director of Corporate Citizenship and Corporate Affairs with IBM Germany, and Prof. Philippe Viallon. They marvelled at how quickly the digital age has affected every aspect and walk of life. Everyday business affairs, private life and even honorary and voluntary activity have been radically changed since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the advent of web2.0, and web4.0 looms large over individual and corporate interactions. If, for example, Facebook can connect more than a billion people daily and when YouTube delivers more than 300 hours of video per minute, then it follows that a study of "new things" is already long obsolete. New connections between people and entities pop up and take root ere we are even aware. Appropriately, there is an ever-increasing reliance on new technology in the voluntary services. New opportunities open up, such as cyber volunteering, a service exchange platform, and the interchange of local and international experiences. Globalisation isn't just an economic factor. Rather, it is palpably it is *the* new network. And how long must we stress that the "digital

revolution" has irreversibly changed our lives just as the industrial revolution did our forefathers' before us?

There were core lectures for all participants on both days, followed by breakout sessions and studios.

### **About the Lectures**

Hervé le Crosnier, Caen, France, wrote on the subject of the societal changes brought about by the digital revolution. One of his theories is that "common content" represents a flagship of the so-called digital Utopia which, however, is deliberately kept insignificantly small by private enterprise.

Viola Krebs of Geneva explored the question of just how people engage via social networks. She identified several ways in which social and voluntary work can be accomplished via the internet. Her intriguing lecture was titled, "Cyber Voluntarism: Socio-pragmatic Civilian Engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century". Although the appearance of new information and communication technologies explores new horizons, they nonetheless create challenges for society. Internet communication platforms influence the social awareness both of individuals and society at large. What is more, the advent of the worldwide web has created many new opportunities for voluntary service. One study attempted to establish new forms of reciprocal assistance – via so-called "cyber volunteering". That research was based upon different criteria in order to distinguish between "cyber voluntarism" and other forms of cyber activity. The results are intended to form a model through which users may come to grips with the ramifications of this phenomenal development.

Bernd Trocholepczy from Frankfurt reflected on the ethical standards that still obtain, even in this digital age. Information circulates freely on the internet, is accessible everywhere, easy to find, constantly present and available to copy at will. Digitisation makes everything universal, instant and eternal. Finality has been vanquished; mortality is conquered by immortality. The permanence, traceability, reproducibility and the vast extent of data reach surely require that it actually be legal. In essence, everything centres on accessibility – of things both past and present. Open on-line courses promote are readily accessible and promote further education. Since digitisation affects every aspect of life, knowing how to navigate the data is a vital asset; familiarity breeds competence. Digitisation has led us to the need to change our cultural skills. There are those who lack knowledge and who feign competence simply by hiding behind the veil of the internet, thus concealing their otherwise palpable

ineptitude. Virtual reality is rapidly becoming actual reality. Pope Francis stated, "The digital realm is a place where we can either embrace or hurt people, have a fruitful discussion or incite to murder. ... The internet almost allows us to build a real community. Access to the digital web brings with it a responsibility toward the unseen interlocutor, who is nonetheless real and worthy of respect. The web may be used to promote worthwhile causes and a healthy interchange, thereby developing a truly open society."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus Hernández of Spain delivered an address on how coexistence within society has been altered in the digital age and how society is increasingly inwardly globalised [?]. It may be found in this edition.<sup>8</sup>

### About the Seminars

In a seminar titled, "**Digital Changes in Social Work, in Voluntary Activity and Associated Institutions**" Miss Elaine Au of Hong Kong University presented in English on how Hong Kong students network with each other and engage in on-the-spot volunteering. Social media smooth the way toward an easy online interchange of ideas, content, thoughts and contacts. "Mainstream media" have been augmented by "everyman's homemade media" to effect far-reaching results in socially conscious voluntary service and social work.

Angela Sola of Spain introduced the "Cyber Volunteers", who seek to improve the world as "networked citizens" and bridge social gaps. Cyber Volunteers share their time, talents and experience in order to network local and global socially innovative initiatives. They utilize technology to get around social divisions.

Sabine Depew of Caritas Cologne introduced "Social Work 4.0". She has built a blog where colleagues may discuss matters and divulge how digitisation has made social work easier. Core operational areas of social charity work are increasingly carried out in the virtual realm: Facebook group discussions, online chat counselling, collecting charitable contributions, social recruiting (finding social media personnel).<sup>9</sup>

Kylee Bates of Australia, the IAVE World President, illustrated how digital means not only improve the endeavours of worldwide voluntary efforts but in many places actually make such efforts possible at all. Borderless online communication facilitates simultaneous GoToMeetings in different time zones with participants for example in Canada and New Zealand being united across 17 time zones. Online Webinar lectures and discussions are eagerly attended.

In a seminar titled **“Social Work and Education: Participating in Digital Progression”**, Diane Bäuerle of Freiburg archdiocesan Caritas kindly presented in English. She told of Flex Fernschule (Flexible Remote School) that helps young people who live far away from educational institutions graduate. However, the problem of access to digital participation persists for people in disadvantaged living circumstances.

Michael Götz and Torsten Gunnermann of Caritas in the Bishopric of Limburg introduced a project, “Digital Ways – A New, Digital Outreach to People”. Parish Caritas networks its conferences, thereby providing: improved communication, overcoming distances in country areas, and straightforward ways for youth to interact. Doménica Spooner, Ecuador, Farina Kühn, Cologne and Eugen Baldas, Freiburg summed up with how the BeSo (Encounter and Solidarity) Society organised a digitally networked volunteer initiative across the world from Ecuador in Freiburg and vice versa. Information and experiences are exchanged online and partners in both countries simply “meet” online to make their preparations. Their evaluations are also submitted digitally.

In a seminar titled, **“Digital Voluntary Service – Spontaneous, Continuous Volunteering”**, presentations were delivered as follow:

Monica Gailano of São Paulo, Brazil spoke in English online via GoToMeeting on “Digital Voluntary Activity”. In this digital age everyone is connected; Wi-Fi has become a basic necessity nowadays. The cliché, “deal locally, think globally” has been updated with “share locally, network globally”.

V. Ivanov of Moscow presented ways of quantifying voluntary engagement online. Digital research is the focus of their institute. Online surveys are the trend in Russia these days. Researchers thus have the ability to reach many people easily and get quick responses by return – all at negligible cost.

Daniel Kehne of the Augsburg Volunteer Center presented an “Everday Refugees’ Guide”, actually a smartphone and offline app for refugees. Since nearly all refugees have a smart phone, this app offers a lot of handy information to make navigating Germany easier. Local information is combined with events, various deals, directions, language training etc.

The seminar, **“Social Media and the Social Sphere”** was offered in French. Studies from France, Morocco, Senegal, Canada, India and Tunisia were the focus of break-out groups attended by professors, students and volunteers, who discussed **“New Technologies and Their Impact on Society”**.

Research projects examined included those of: Aissa Merah and Oudia Nacer, who discussed the Kabyle diaspora in Quebec and France. They still practice their ancient “thiwizi” custom of open village collaboration. Mohammed Bendahan examined the way Moroccan associations support their community activities via social media and how they promote democratic structures in their country. Jérémy Picot analysed the effect of social media on structures for social and communal outreach. Annie Lenoble-Bart summarized a book that she co-published, “Les oubliés de l’Internet” (Stepchildren of the Internet). France clearly displays evidences of the limits of digital usage among the population: poverty and deficient education are the principal causes of restricted digital usage.

In an English/French seminar **“Different Perspectives: Schools and Companies”** Marc Trestin of Strasbourg University highlighted how the digital age has just about revolutionized upbringing and education. Peter Kusterer of IBM Germany broached the subject of, “Social Work and Digital Evolution” from the standpoint of a global business. Not only do the routes plotted by refugees show just how important online data are and how extensively these are distributed and accessible globally, but they also provide for refugee aid along those routes, organized by IBM, among others. Various new technologies make corporate pro bono efforts much easier.

Round-table discussions to conclude of the 8th Convention of the European University of Volunteering were held in the Government Building of the Département Bas-Rhin. These included ethical and political dimensions as they pertain to the digital world. The interlocutors included Erny Gillen, former president of Caritas Europe, Anne-Marie Laulan of Bordeaux University, and Jerome Cottin of Strasbourg University. Philippe Viallon formally closed the 8<sup>th</sup> Convention. Thereupon, V. Ivanov invited the assembly to reconvene as the 9<sup>th</sup> Convention in Moscow, Russian in 2019.

Eugen Baldas