



BY ALISON MUTLER

WIRED IN ROMANIA: Children's Computer Clubs

"I

BUCHAREST, ROMANIA

am Gaby and I learn at school," typed Gabriel Neagu, in slow and careful English on the computer. "I write poetry for children," the 16-year-old with blonde hair and green eyes added shyly, revealing a few verses he had composed in Romanian for children and orphans.

Almost every day Gabriel spends two hours on the computer. "That makes 10 hours a week," he calculated. He wants to be an agent for artists or go into management when he leaves school, and spends his time visiting musical sites on the Internet, which has deepened his knowledge and interest.

On a Saturday morning, Gabriel was one of 10 teenage boys working on the computers at Saint Nicolae Computer Club, each delving deeper into a world of their own creation or selecting a career path for when they leave the orphanage.

Two brothers were using the Paintbrush programme. One was making abstract digital painting with little red and white squares and the other was drawing a dog that bore an uncanny resemblance to Scooby Doo. Two rows away, a 16-year-old was downloading pictures from the summer camp in the exclusive Romanian lakeside resort of Snagov. Another boy was translating from Romanian into English.

Photo: Valin Glinda/UNDP



When the computer club first opened ... many of the youngsters were reticent and even afraid of the electronic gadgets.

Children and teens learn to navigate the Web, with help from experienced Internet users, at Bucharest's Saint Nicolae Computer Club.



Photos: Valim Chinda/UNDP

"They love it," said Paul Florea, deputy head of the Andrea Foundation, a Romanian non-governmental organization (NGO) which works in child welfare and that has been instrumental in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project. "They line up and don't even look up when somebody comes into the room."

Two 21-year-old male students, who are in the last year of an electronic and telecommunications degree, instruct and supervise the 15 and 16-year-olds who were using the computers that day.

When the computer club first opened on 23 October 2000, many of the youngsters were reticent and even afraid of the electronic gadgets. Now, they have created their own Web site for the orphanage—a colourful and nifty collage of photos and descriptions of summer camp, their friends and the St. Nicolae orphanage in Bucharest's southwest fifth district.

Computers are relatively new in Romania. Recently, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Adrian Nastase was learning to work with computers in front of the television cameras, with the message: Using a computer counts. At least one minister said it was the first time he had ever used a computer.

In his inauguration speech in December, Romania's President Ion Iliescu called information and communications technology "the foundation for the modernization of the national economy."

St. Nicolae was the first computer club in Romania sponsored by UNDP. So far, 90 children have enrolled, and are receiving training from two instructors on the basic functions of computers, and on how to surf the Web. There are now six clubs in Romania under the same scheme, three of which are in Bucharest, one in Sibiu, a city in Romania's Transylvanian north-west, and two more in Braila in the east.

The idea was jointly conceived by UNDP, the Andrea Foundation, and an American NGO, Children's Help Net Foundation (CHNF). The Andrea Foundation and CHNF received 100 comput-



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UNDP's Kyoko Postill watches a student navigate the Web.



ers from AT&T and software donations from Microsoft and Symantec, which helped them realize the project. UNDP Romania offered financial help and technical assistance and helped them attract resources from other sponsors. MobiFon, a private mobile phone company, supported the initiative by donating 10 computers with licenses and two printers.

Most Romanians, children included, do not have access to computers in this Balkan country where the average monthly salary is US\$100 and inflation was more than 40 percent last year. Youngsters who are computer literate, or at least have access to computers, undoubtedly have an advantage in expanding their knowledge, while those who do not have less opportunity for learning.

Educators believe that if children are not given the same opportunity to benefit from information technology, it widens the gap in knowledge and creates inequality.

Computer clubs for children seek to bridge the digital divide, a challenge in this former communist country seeking to catch up with Western Europe after decades of communism and a painful transition period of more than a decade.

Children living in orphanages, many of whom are not actually orphans, and poor children benefit from the computer clubs which provide access to computers and the Internet. The aim is for the children to become productive, self-supporting members of society, able to fend for themselves.

Costinel Iliescu, a 16-year-old in black jeans and a white t-shirt says he likes using Power Point. "It helps me with my homework," he said with a large smile. "Since I started working with computers when the club opened, it has changed the way I think. I come in here after school."

According to Kyoko Postill, a former Programme Officer in UNDP Romania, by providing these children with access to

computers, UNDP is helping narrow the gap between richer children and the less well-off.

It's certainly widening the children's horizons beyond the dreary prefab building they call home.

Such is the success of the computer club. UNDP Romania is considering to expand this initiative and establish computer clubs for children all over Romania in cooperation with municipalities which are interested in hosting such a club.

The staff have more practical matters on their mind.

"Instead of hanging out on the street, they are occupied now," said Marian Florea, the young administrator at St. Nicolae. "It helps them with geometry, English—everything really. It is a huge advantage." ■

Alison Mutler is the chief correspondent of the Associated Press in Romania.