

Does the Internet help to overcome social exclusion?

Paul Foley

De Montfort University, UK

pdfoley@btinternet.com

Abstract: This paper describes one of the first studies to investigate the take-up and impact of ICT amongst socially excluded groups. 130 people took part in 20 focus group discussions. The study:-

- Investigated the factors that influence the adoption and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups.
- Identified tangible economic and social benefits arising from having access and making use of the Internet.
- Recommends policies and future action concerning the targeting of resources and the design and likely success of current interventions to promote Internet use.

The study shows that some clear and quantifiable benefits can arise from Internet access by socially excluded groups. If the level of use of online information is used as a surrogate for beneficial impact amongst socially excluded groups it is apparent that the Internet is not just providing wider opportunities; these opportunities are actively being seized by socially excluded groups.

Keywords: Social exclusion, digital divide, Internet use, policy impact, benefits of ICT

1. Introduction

This paper investigates the impact and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups in London. The research builds upon the previous work (*Digital Divide in a World City*, Foley et al. 2002) which found that many studies of Internet use had not adopted an overly critical perspective in evaluating the benefits of ICT by socially excluded groups. The presumption that Internet use by socially excluded groups is beneficial, without any real attempt to understand the relationship between users and ICT is widespread. This presumption is frequently fostered and maintained by the policy push from governments to encourage the adoption and use of ICT. This paper therefore:-

- Examines the characteristics of the digital divide in the UK
- Investigates the factors that influence the adoption and use of the Internet by socially excluded groups.
- Identifies tangible economic and social benefits arising from having access and making use of the Internet.
- Recommends policies and future action concerning the targeting of resources and the design and likely success of current interventions.
- Identifies avenues for future research.

Although the research focused on socially excluded groups in London the results and recommendations are pertinent to policymakers, academics and those

encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups anywhere in the UK or Europe.

2. Context

Government has set a target of ensuring access to the Internet 'for everyone who wants it by 2005' (Office of the eEnvoy, 2001). More than £6 billion will be invested in ICT over the coming years and the Prime Minister declared that 'digital transformation cannot be restricted to the few, our success depends on extending it to the many' (Blair, 2002).

Historical precedent suggests that expansion of telecommunications infrastructure focuses on the development of the most lucrative markets, thus excluding people and places that are least profitable (Graham and Marvin, 1994). Others argue that Internet content providers focus on the development of commercial sites for more affluent members of society (Golding and Murdoch, 2001).

Little research has been undertaken that examines access and use of ICTs by the wide variety of socially excluded groups that exist in the UK. Previous research has rarely examined whether access to ICT helps to overcome social exclusion, or conversely, whether a lack of access to ICT increases disadvantage and exclusion.

If ICT policies are to address social exclusion effectively much more needs to be understood about the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded individuals and communities. The study investigated many of these important issues and provides a better understanding of the role of ICT in the lives of socially excluded groups.

3. The digital divide and social exclusion

A digital divide exists, but it is not as simple as haves and have nots. There will always be a divide between high, medium, low and non-users. Disadvantaged users always have to play catch up in obtaining access and advantaged users will always leave them behind, gaining higher levels of skills and adopting newer technologies and services. Disadvantaged or socially excluded groups are often prevalent amongst those that lie at the non-users end of the digital divide continuum.

Social exclusion is a politically contentious concept. It is multi-dimensional and not simply related to income. Research has revealed a wide range of causes of social exclusion, both social and spatial. Geographical concentrations of disadvantage result from a combination of macro-structural and micro-local factors operating through labour, land and property markets.

Christie and Perry (1997) suggested that the characteristics of social exclusion, such as non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity can be exacerbated through a lack of information and communication. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to exclude individuals and groups (Phipps, 2000). However, Gibbs (2001) notes that the economic and social implications of ICT are complex and frequently contradictory.

Little research has been found that examines whether ICT helps to overcome social exclusion. Few studies investigate whether ICT can help at the margins or whether, in combination with other initiatives, it is beneficial in addressing the problems of social exclusion.

Despite this lack of information the December 2000 SOCTIM survey of local

government IT professionals found that 47 per cent of respondents felt that ICT could address problems of social exclusion by making services easier to use and access, and in assisting the process of lifelong learning. The Wired Up Communities Programme had a similar wide range of objectives to enhance social inclusion (Devins et al, 2003). Objectives of the programme included access to government services, support for learning, improvement in employment prospects and social cohesion.

Despite little supporting evidence there appears to be an increasingly accepted viewpoint that ICT has role to play in addressing social exclusion.

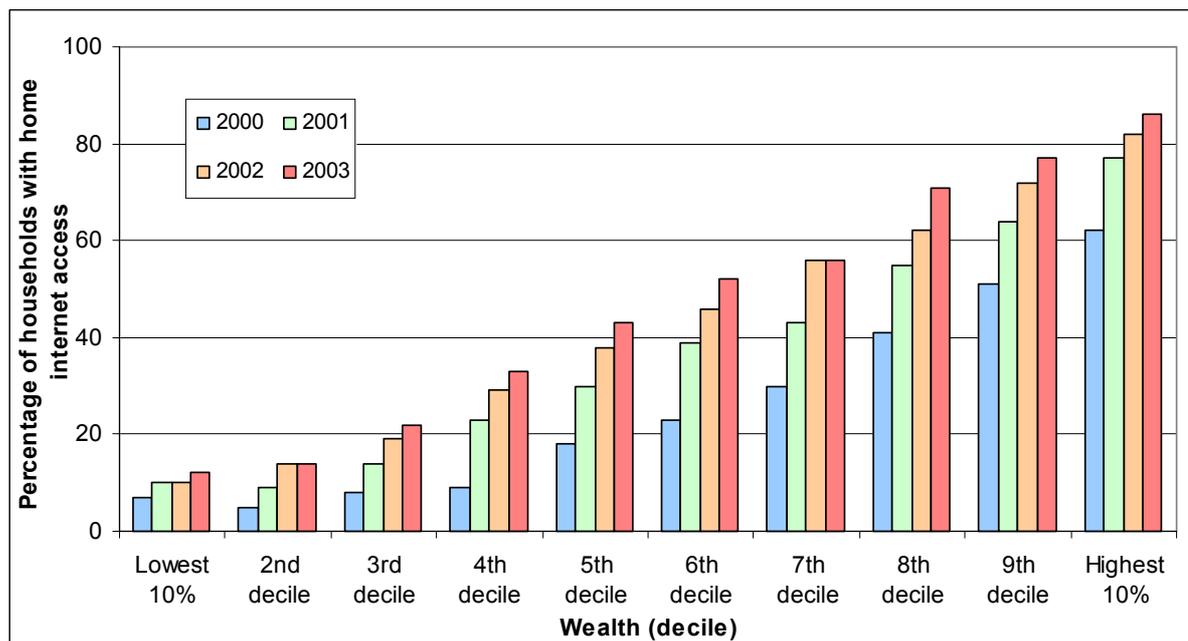
4. The digital divide in the UK

Statistics reveal that the digital divide and differentiation in ICT adoption in the UK varies by geography and socio-economic factors.

ONS statistics (2003) reveal that levels of Internet access vary greatly between different parts of the UK. Average household connectivity in the UK was 47 per cents between October 2002 and September 2003. Connectivity in London and the South East was the highest amongst UK regions at 52 and 53 per cent respectively. Northern Ireland was the least connected regions, only 37 per cent of households had Internet access.

This disparity in adoption is also evident when one examines socio economic factors. The relationship between household income and Internet access is particularly strong, see Figure 1. Cost of Internet access is a more significant factor in areas with a high proportion of socially excluded households that have lower levels of disposable income. Several commentators (Enders Analysis, 2001) have noted that computer costs, access costs and telephone call charges are a more significant barrier to low-income earners.

Other factors hindering the adoption and use of ICTs are life characteristics such as age, gender, disability and ethnicity. All these have been widely researched and are acknowledged as the barriers to the adoption and use of ICT.



Source: ONS December Internet Access Press Releases 2000 to 2003. The time period for each year is October to September of the year stated in the legend.

Figure 1: The percentage of households with home access to the Internet by gross income decile group 1999 to 2003

5. The study

The study was one of the first to investigate the take-up and impact of ICT amongst socially excluded groups (Foley et al 2003). 130 people took part in 20 focus group discussions. Confidential access to the GLA's 2002 London Household Survey enabled the selection of focus group participants on the basis of:-

- Use of the Internet
- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Disability
- Income
- Employment status
- Presence in the household of children

One element that enhanced the success of the project was the selection of suitable venues and times for focus group meetings. Neutral venues, acceptable to local people, generally not in public sector premises, were selected and sessions took place at various times throughout the day. This ensured the maximum variety of participants were able to attend. Another important component of the project was to

examine the impact of current policies to address the digital divide. Recent and longstanding users of public access points and online centres were therefore selected for the project.

Focus group participants were also asked to complete a single page questionnaire. The questions were designed to mirror those asked about Internet use and non-use in the Office for National Statistics Internet access surveys (National Statistics, 2000-2004). This enabled comparison of the socially excluded participants in this survey with the UK population.

One focus group session, towards the end of the project, was held with public access point and online centre managers. This session ensured that the results we were obtaining, and our interpretation of them, was in line with the experiences of those assisting socially excluded groups.

The study was founded on a research framework that reflects the way socially excluded groups consider and use the Internet. The Internet adoption framework is also a useful way for policymakers to

consider intervention at each stage of the

adoption process (Foley et al. 2002).



6. Key findings and analysis

Chapters in this report investigate issues and results for each of the five stages of the Internet adoption framework. Key findings are shown for each stage in the remainder of this executive summary. Key issues are highlighted in blue. *Policy implications to enhance Internet use amongst socially excluded groups are highlighted in italics*

7. ICT awareness

ONS reports suggest a considerable lack of interest in the Internet amongst non-users. This study found a high level of curiosity amongst nearly all socially excluded users before they started to use the Internet. This relatively high level of curiosity is matched by the sense of achievement when some of the basic skills have been acquired and confidence in Internet use increases. This sense of achievement and satisfaction appears to increase with age or degree of social exclusion. *Policymakers should do more to promote curiosity and provide 'Try IT' events.*

The route to obtaining home Internet access was often a two stage process. The first stage was the decision to try the Internet at a public access point, in a community group or other location. This initial 'trial' period often lasted several months. Only 26 per cent of participants using the Internet for less than twelve months had access from home.

The second stage was the decision to purchase a computer for use at home, this was generally taken by socially excluded groups several months after first trying the Internet. This decision appears to be made on predominantly economic grounds. At this point curiosity is less of an influence and better understanding of the benefits of Internet use and the real costs of getting

online are more important. Many non-users estimated the costs of purchasing computing equipment and the expenses incurred for Internet access to be more than twice the real cost incurred by the new socially excluded Internet users in this study. *There is an important role to be played by policymakers, IT and ISP providers and public access points to play in clarifying the real cost of computing equipment and Internet access.*

8. ICT access

Use of online centres and public access points by socially excluded groups is high, even amongst those that had home Internet access. There are probably two key reasons for this. The first is probably a desire to minimise access costs. The second is the low level of Internet access at work provided to socially excluded groups. Only six per cent had Internet access at work compared with 38 per cent for all UK Internet users found by an ONS study. *Initiatives to encourage employers to broaden access to the Internet and ICT training in the workplace should be encouraged, particularly in localities or amongst firms that have a high proportion of socially excluded workers*

This study has shown that online centres play a very important role in assisting socially excluded groups to get online. Whilst 'small is beautiful' and 'local is beneficial' a lack of scale or size has left some online centres with too few resources to develop their activities more fully or even to provide their current services at the level that users require. Alliances might be beneficial and *it is recommended area or regional resource centres to enhance and support the development of online centres and public access points should be developed.* These Centres should provide shared access to resources such as staff training, mentoring, equipment and the

development of an information and good practice exchange programme. As a first step towards identifying what a resource centre might provide an area or regional conference should be organised to share the results of this study and to develop new approaches to encouraging Internet use amongst socially excluded groups.

9. Skills and training

Many participants expressed the need to have a 'helping hand' to assist them when they encountered problems using the Internet. By definition many socially excluded groups, particularly the elderly, do not have access to a wide range of friends or other support to overcome computing problems. Current solutions to this problem usually focus on assistance provided at online centres. It would be useful to provide this type of general help and support for socially excluded groups through community groups, online and over the telephone.

If established a Public Access Resource Centre should act as a focus or signpost to provide telephone and online information for socially excluded groups about:-

- The location of public access and online centres.
- How to overcome computing and Internet problems.
- Times and locations for ICT training and skills development courses.

Many participants complained about the bewildering array of Internet training and skills development courses offered by ICT centres and learning centres. A Public Access Resource Centre could play a valuable role in collecting information about ICT courses and categorising and presenting them in a common, more easily understood format.

A large proportion of the research for this project focused on formal mechanisms to develop Internet skills. However, discussions identified that many new socially excluded Internet users are keen to volunteer and to assist others start using the Internet. There appear to be opportunities for the development of informal Internet support groups by community associations or neighbourhood groups. Neighbourhood support has the advantage of understanding local needs and providing role models to demonstrate the advantages of ICT.

Participants and online centre managers highlighted that people are often relaxed about saying they cannot use ICT, but they are less happy at stating they lack basic literacy skills. For some participants, particularly those with poor basic literacy skills, using the Internet and developing computing skills was a stimulus to start learning again or improving literacy. Several managers felt this opportunity was often not given enough recognition. *Considerable additional benefits in promoting literacy and skills development and perhaps economies of scale will arise from closer liaison and/or co-location of online centres with neighbourhood learning centres.*

10. ICT use

Email use amongst the socially excluded participants (89 per cent used email) in this study was higher than the level found in an ONS study of all UK users (72 per cent). Email was valued as a quick and cheap method of communication. Email provided the ability to stay in touch with friends and family in the UK and overseas at a fraction of the cost required to communicate by telephone. This was particularly important to racial or ethnic groups with strong overseas ties. For elderly and disabled groups email was particularly useful for reducing feelings of isolation, it also enhanced their ability to participate more widely in society.

The socially excluded participants in this study make far higher use of the Internet than the UK population for all information seeking and online interactive activities, except those that require monetary transactions (i.e. shopping and banking). The topic most frequently investigated by the users in this study was training and educational information. Use of this information was considerably higher by socially excluded Internet users (63 per cent) than by the UK population (ONS study 40 per cent). The second most popular topic investigated by the users in this study was healthcare information, 51 per cent of socially excluded users required this information. This information was particularly useful to the elderly and disabled groups. The ONS collect statistics about 14 online activities but regrettably healthcare is not investigated.

A methodology was developed in this study to investigate how the use of the Internet by socially excluded participants compares with the information requirements of socially excluded non-users. Using this method it was evident that higher than expected use was made of online information about all topics except one. This one exception was benefits information, this was sought by 36 per cent of Internet non-users in the last year, but it was only accessed on the Internet by 23 per cent of users in the last year. Poor levels of use confirm the views of focus group participants that *there is considerable scope for improvement in online benefits systems, they are perceived as difficult and unfriendly to use.*

Use of government web sites was higher amongst the socially excluded groups in this study (42 per cent) than amongst the UK population (17 per cent). But our methodology to investigate the real level of use of information relevant to socially excluded groups found that online information provided the second lowest added utility (after benefits information) for all of the topics investigated. Whilst levels of use appear to be high Internet access has not increased the level of use of government information to the same extent as other topics investigated.

The topics with the highest added utility (or standardised level of use) are job opportunities information (sought by 1 per cent of Internet non-users in the last year; and accessed by 41 per cent of Internet users), training and education information (sought by 29 per cent of non-users, accessed by 63 per cent of users) and healthcare information (sought by 21 per cent of non-users, accessed by 51 per cent of users).

11. ICT impact

This study has shown that Internet access can enhance participation and reduce isolation. Access to information can also provide an entrée to wider opportunities. These benefits should help to overcome some aspect of social exclusion. However, the limited scope of this study makes it impossible to know if benefits derived from Internet use only help at the margins or whether they might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

The easiest method to investigate the impact or value of the Internet to socially excluded users was to ask whether or not they felt it was 'worth it'. The average cost new users pay for Internet access in their first year was £143. It appears that this investment or the benefit derived from Internet access must have been worthwhile because in later years new Internet users are willing to spend more for better online access or to be able to spend more time online. Indeed, there was a consensus in nearly all focus group sessions that the costs of using the Internet were almost completely outweighed by the advantages of being able to get the information they wanted.

A simple method of analysing the monetary costs and savings of the Internet for socially excluded groups was developed in the research. Average Internet access costs were £165 a year. The average saving on online shopping and communication was £169. The Internet had a net benefit or credit of £4 a year. Participants that had been using the Internet for four years or more estimated that they saved on average £268 per year.

12. Conclusions and further research

Research investigating the relationship between Internet use and social exclusion is complex. Rekindling a desire to learn exemplifies one of the wider opportunities stimulated by using the Internet. Trying to investigate the extent and nature of this impact epitomises the difficulties of assessing whether Internet access only helps at the margins or whether in combination with other initiatives it might be effective in addressing some of the core issues associated with social exclusion.

Nonetheless this research project has shown that some clear and quantifiable benefits can arise from Internet access by socially excluded groups. If the level of use of online information is used as a surrogate for beneficial impact amongst socially excluded groups it is apparent that the Internet is not just providing wider opportunities; these opportunities are actively being seized by socially excluded groups. Access to most types of information by the socially excluded

Internet users in this study exceeds the level observed by the ONS in national studies.

News and information sought by socially excluded users was predominantly national or international. Local online information was generally regarded as poor. If the Internet is a conduit to overcoming social exclusion it is probable that information about local and national opportunities and initiatives will be required. At present the provision of local information is perceived as being poor in many areas. *Local and regional government organisations will have to address the poor perception of local news and information web sites if they are to enhance levels of access to local information online.*

Many definitions of social exclusion highlight non-participation in economic and social activities, isolation and a perceived lack of opportunity (Demos, 1997; Phipps, 2000; Gibbs, 2001). This study has shown that a lack of participation or isolation or lack of opportunity can be exacerbated for many socially excluded groups through a lack of access to ICTs and the Internet. Whilst lack of access to ICT is not the cause of social exclusion, it has the potential to further exclude individuals and groups. This view was perfectly expressed by one relatively unimpressed socially excluded Internet user who stated "There is no huge benefit if you learn how to use computers and the Internet. However, if you don't learn you are behind socially."

References

- Blair T (2002) Speech by the Prime Minister at the eSummit QEII Centre, London 19th November
- Christie I and Perry H (1997) Wealth and poverty of networks: tackling social exclusion (Demos, London)
- Demos (1997) The wealth and poverty of networks: Tackling social exclusion (Demos, London)
- Devins, D; Darlow, A; Petrie, A and Burden, T (2003) Connecting communities to the Internet: Evaluation of the Wired Up Communities Programme Research Report RR389 (Department for Education and Skills, London)
- Enders Analysis (2001) UK Internet Trends (Enders Analysis Limited, London)
- Foley, P; Alfonso, X and Ghani, S (2002) The digital divide in a world city (Greater London Authority, London)
- Foley, P; Alfonso, X; Fisher, J and Brown, K (2003) Connecting communities: Tackling exclusion (Greater London Authority, London)
- Gibbs, D (2001) Harnessing the information society? European Union policy and information and communications technologies European Urban and Regional Studies 8, 1 pp. 110-115
- Golding P and Murdoch G (2001) Digital divides: Communication policy and its contradictions New Economy pp. 110 - 115
- Graham S and Marvin S (1994) Cherry picking and social dumping: British utilities in the 1990s Utilities Policy 4, 2
- National Statistics (2000 - 2004) Internet access press releases
- Office of the eEnvoy (2001) UK online annual report (Cabinet Office, London)
- Phipps L (2000) New communications technology: A conduit for social exclusion information Communication and Society 3, 1 pp. 39-68
- SOCITM (2001) IT Trends in Local Government 2000/1. SOCITM Services Ltd

