



Navigating the E-society: the dynamics of participation and exclusion

ESRC E-Society Programme

Digital communications technologies are expanding into areas of everyday life and the ability to use them is increasingly becoming a precondition for full social participation. However, there is evidence that some sectors of society are being excluded from these developments. Digital exclusion to date has centred on the notion that the 'digital divide' is defined in terms of whether or not people have access to the internet. This conception, argue Graham Murdock and colleagues from Loughborough University, is limited in a number of ways. This longitudinal study examined ways of 'dismantling' some of the more simplistic thinking behind the idea of the 'digital divide' and looked at how people are responding to this emerging digital environment and the E-Society it is constructing.

- Across the digital technologies researched, levels of ownership and use were higher in couple households, particularly those with children, than in single person households or among lone parents.
- Within household's patterns of use there exist consistent differences with fathers using both home computers and mobile phones more often than either their partners or their children.
- Social networks played an important role in facilitating both initial take up of digital technologies and in sustaining interest and use over time.
- Cultural dynamics emerged as important in structuring both ownership and modes of use of digital technologies.
- By the second wave of the research, levels of mobile phone ownership within the sample appeared to have reached saturation level and ownership of home computers had levelled off leaving a proportion of low income and lone parent households with a possible risk of permanent disconnection.
- The most evident changes over the course of the research took place within households that had already invested in a technology and wanted to increase the number of machines they had or upgrade machines to take advantage of broadband connections. The exception was multi-channel television which saw the biggest increase in low income households, partly as a consequence of the growing popularity of Freeview.

Background

As economic, social and political life becomes increasingly organised around digital information and communication technologies (ICTs), the ability to use them effectively and creatively becomes a precondition for full social participation.

The Project

Discussion of digital exclusion has tended to centre around the notion of the 'digital divide' defined in terms of whether or not people have basic access to the internet. The authors argue that this conception is limited in four ways. Firstly, by focusing attention primarily on home computers it neglects the increasing convergence and interaction of digital technologies. Secondly, it assumes that 'access' is an event, rather than a continuing process that needs to be sustained. Thirdly, it emphasises the monetary barriers to digital participation, paying little attention to social and cultural barriers. Finally, by focusing on individual responses, mostly using standardised questionnaires, it neglects the central role of social context in which people find themselves in structuring digital exclusion and participation.

The research had five main objectives:

- Exclusion and participation - to investigate how differential access to material, social and cultural resources structures both continued digital exclusion and disconnection and patterns of use and participation.
- Household dynamics - to investigate how gender and generational relations within households structure access and use.
- User careers - to investigate the factors that sustain involvement over time, encourage new uses, or precipitate disconnection.
- Change - to investigate how households are responding to innovations in digital technologies and how these responses are shaped by changes in their material and social circumstances.

- Ethnicity - to investigate how far distinctive patterns of access and use are emerging within minority ethnic households.

This research, conducted over a two year period in the East Midlands, aimed to 'dismantle' the over simple thinking behind the idea of a 'digital divide' by challenging each of these assumptions and moving towards a more comprehensive approach to the differential take-up and use of digital technologies. Based in ninety-three households representing a cross section of income levels, household types, geographical locations (rural and urban), ethnic groups, and levels of technology ownership, the research:

- Included use of mobile phones, digital television, and computers and explored how people are navigating their way around the new digital environment and the complimentary and alternative possibilities it offers.
- Tracked people's responses over time, looking at the way they changed and developed.
- Examined how different resources structured patterns of exclusion and participation: monetary resources which included access to free time and private spaces; social resources which included, access to friends, family, neighbours and colleagues who can facilitate initial access (e.g. by handing down an old machine) and provide on-going help, support and advice, and membership of social networks where digital technologies are widely used and positively valued; and cultural resources which involved both competencies and identities. Competencies included both basic skills in reading, writing and speaking, and more digital literacies rooted in knowledge of how to operate the technologies and the facilities they offer.
- Investigated households at different life stages rather than individuals and explored how access and use may be structured as much by differences within intra-household organisation and relations (along gender and generational lines) as by economic differences between households.
- Employed different methods to explore people's experiences, motivations and beliefs.

Implications of the Research

Exclusion and Participation

The research found that the two most established communication technologies, the telephone and television, displayed almost universal take up across the sample. For the few households without a landline, all had at least one mobile phone.

Past research has consistently suggested that households with couples, particularly those with school aged children, are more likely to be 'early adopters' of digital technologies. This research confirmed these findings with this trend being particularly marked for the home computer and multi channel TV. A link between household composition and early adoption was also confirmed by patterns of broadband take-up with couple households and two-parent families being more likely to have broadband.

Household Dynamics

The analysis of the data gathered from the families confirmed that use of the two most widely diffused domestic digital technologies – computers and mobile phones – remains heavily structured by both gender and generation. Fathers used the computer considerably more than any other family members. Fathers also used mobile phones more. However, mothers used multi-channel television services more.

Although the panel included only a relatively small number of minority ethnic households, the research found that they placed considerable emphasis on computers being essential for the advancement of education and workplace and practical skills. Compared to majority ethnic fathers, minority ethnic fathers recorded more episodes of using the computer for information searching and work and study but less for entertainment and keeping in touch.

User Careers

With the exception of multi-channel television, which required a firm decision to purchase, social benefits motivated a number of respondents in the research to first acquire digital technologies and to then keep them. Mobile phones and home

computers were often first acquired as gifts or handed down from other family members or friends. The acquisition of these technologies were regarded by the participants of the research as enhancing their personal opportunities in terms of privacy (being able to make a personal call on a mobile); convenience (booking tickets online); security (being able to contact help in an emergency); and support for continuing education and skill enhancement.

Change

In the second wave of the research it was found that a number of changes in household circumstances influenced changes in technology ownership and use. These included pregnancy, childbirth, change in work status (e.g. job change, redundancy), ill-health, change in family membership, children moving schools/taking exams, and moving house.

During the two stages of the research, DVD ownership and multi channel television connections (mainly through Freeview) increased. Ownership of mobile phones and computers remained fairly static although there was evidence of changes in patterns of ownership and use as a result of technological innovations and upgrading.

Nearly all of the households in the sample had made some changes to their mobiles. Changes in computer ownership were generally associated with upgrading or replacing old models, and increasing the number of PCs in the household. Use also increased as a result of the growing use of digital cameras, upgrading to broadband, choosing to bank online and the increasing popularity of eBay, an increase in emailing and MSN, and an increase in computer use for homework and coursework.

Ethnicity

As noted, use of ICTs in the minority ethnic households in the study tended to be more instrumental compared to majority ethnic households. However, there was also evidence of minority ethnic families using digital technologies to access films, television programmes and news services originating in their 'home' culture or in diasporic communities.

Policy lessons and future research agenda

The research identifies a range of factors influencing the exclusion of certain groups and individuals from the digital age. These findings raise important issues for policy. The researchers:

- Suggest that integrating the internet into digital television systems may prove more effective in connecting poorer households than placing more computers in public locations.
- Point to the emergence of a dual-system in which the advantaged enjoy the full range of facilities offered by broadband and enhanced mobile phones while the disadvantaged continue to use dial-up connections and less versatile models.
- Suggest that more attention should be paid to the way digital technologies are publicised, marketed and promoted to avoid the symbolic exclusion of groups who cannot recognise themselves as valued figures in the emerging digital landscape.
- Confirm the importance of mobilising social networks as support for fuller digital participation through, for example, local mentoring schemes.
- Confirm the continuing importance of other areas of social policy in shaping the life circumstances within which people encounter the possibilities and problems presented by digital technologies.
- Point to the need for 'joined up' thinking in both research and policy, and the need to understand both the everyday interactions between different digital technologies and the wider social contexts within which people navigate

the possibilities and problems these technologies offer.

A number of key research priorities have been identified by the project:

- Further longitudinal research to track changing patterns of exclusion, access and use in the context of rapid innovation and convergence in digital technologies.
- More extensive research on patterns of digital exclusion and participation within minority ethnic communities.
- More sustained attention to the impact of household organisation and dynamics on differential access and use by gender and generation and on the impact of digital technologies on family life and relations.
- More research on the role of cultural resources, particularly self conceptions and identities, in structuring both self exclusion and patterns of use.

Further Information

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The e-Society Programme

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and co-ordinated by the Department of Sociology at the University of York, the e-Society is a multidisciplinary programme of research that seeks to investigate how institutions, practices and behaviours are being changed by the technologies that constitute the digital age. This £5 million programme draws on the expertise of leading academics from across the UK. Launched in October 2003, the programme will run until the end of October 2007.

Further details of the projects in the programme can be found at
<http://www.york.ac.uk/res/e-society/>

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