E-service delivery and the non-user

Outline of presentation to research panel on E-government, the citizen and equity held at ECIS 2005, Regensburg, Germany, 26-28 May 2005.

Mike Cushman
Research Fellow,
Penceil Project
Department of Information Systems,
LSE
m.cushman@lse.ac.uk

Equity in e-Government access has traditionally been seen as a problem of ensuring physical access to technology. While this is clearly important, at least as significant are the skills and dispositions of potential users. There has been less attention to understanding the complex set of literacy, language and IT skills that people need to use e-government websites effectively or to the gap that people described as socially excluded see between themselves and the services and opportunities that local and national government seek to make available over the internet. E-government does not come from nowhere: it builds on, and maybe seeks to replace, other means of bring services closer to the user. For local government the development of neighbourhood, multi-service offices; and, for both central and local government, vastly improved telephone access. The government described its aim in 1999 as, "The information age should increase the choice of how citizens and businesses receive services, not restrict it … We will develop targeted strategies to ensure that all groups have proper access to information age government" (Cabinet Office, 1999). But, as Selwyn (2002) noted, access to equipment easier is than developing the skills to use it and the quality of the access is crucial.

These skills not only include the commonly identified ones of how to use a computer, but also considerable literacy and information literacy skills. Searching is a key skill for locating information on the internet, this requires not only knowing how to construct effective search terms in a wide variety of search engines, each using a different syntax, but also the ability to spell – and spelling is the literacy skill, that at least in English, is the one that people most frequently have difficulty with – 10% of people report themselves as having problems with spelling (Moser, 1999) . While Google, for instance, can easily deal with 'erorrs' and will ask if you mean 'errors', it cannot decipher more deviant spellings.

In looking at the impact of e-government on social exclusion, rather than on government efficiency, it is important to note that the groups that use ICTs and the Internet least – those who are older, poorer and less well educated (Dutton et al., 2005) – are those that are both the most dependent on government services and those most at risk of social exclusion.

The Oxford survey (Dutton et al., 2005) reports that only 24% of UK internet users, 15% of the population, have ever used any e-Government service and initial results from the Penceil project[1] show that non-users of ICTs never spontaneously mention e-Government services for buying or learning to use PCs and there was scarcely more response after a prompt.

If e-Government is to be widely used, there need to be intermediaries who will assist people to access the services, in Bakardjieva's (2001) evocative term 'warm intermediaries'. The question of how these mediators will be provided and who will pay for them has not been addressed by the UK or other governments, nor has the cost of these necessary support services been set against the putative savings from moving to e-access to government services.

There needs to be a commitment to continued investment in the improvement in the quality of alternative channels of access, if the cost of the transition is not to be met by those who are poorest and weakest. The largest recent transformation of service delivery has been the payment of pensions and benefits into bank accounts, rather than through post offices. This has been severely criticised (House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee, 2003) both for the threat to the Post Office network and the other services this network provides and the risk that poor citizens will have to use charging ATMs to access their money. This demonstrates the level of risk to the most vulnerable of an ICT-based transformation that may both be cost-saving and welcome to many other, less excluded, citizens.

Bakardjieva, M. (2001) Becoming a Domestic Internet User. in *3rd International Conference on Uses and Services in Telecommunications*, Paris,June 12-14 2001, pp. 28-39, Paris:

Cabinet Office (1999) Modernising Government, Cabinet Office, Cmd 4310 London.

Dutton, W. H., C. di Gennaro and A. M. Hargrave (2005) *Oxford Internet Survey (2005 Report): The Internet in Britain.* Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.

House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee (2003) People, Pensions and Post Offices: The Impact of 'Direct Payment' on Post Offices and Their Customers, House of Commons, Eleventh Report of Session 2002–03 London.

Moser, C. (1999) *Improving Literacy and Numeracy: A Fresh Start.* London: Department for Education and Skills.

Selwyn, N. (2002) 'E-Stablishing' an Inclusive Society? Technology, Social Exclusion and UK Government Policy Making, *Journal of Social Policy*, 31 (1), pp. 1-20.

[1] How People Encounter E-Illiteracy and how they can Take Action to Overcome it, LSE and NIACE, ESRC e-society project RES-341-25-0036 http://penceil.lse.ac.uk