

On the periphery? The social and educational implications for those who are not savvy Internet users

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Abstract—In this paper I aim to consider the value in bringing work on digital inclusion together with work on new literacies to help us understand the implications for those people who are not particularly skilled users of the Internet for learning and everyday life.

Index Terms— digital inclusion, skills, digital divide, Internet use.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the complexity and overlapping definitions of new, information, new media or digital literacies (Buckingham, 2007; Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2008); the vast majority of researchers and educators agree that both functional skills to operate and use technologies for a range of informational, social and creative purposes as well as a broader understanding of how new technologies influence and are influenced by wider commercial and societal forces are important to engage effectively in a networked world (e.g. Gillen and Barton, 2010; Hague and Williamson, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2007).

Simply put, those who are more digitally savvy or skilled tend to undertake a broader range of activities online, are able to participate to a greater extent in digital practices and are thus more likely to benefit from these practices both for learning and aspects of everyday life (Cheong, 2008; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Hague & Williamson, 2009; Helsper & Eynon, 2010). However, there are many people who do not fall into this group. This heterogeneous group of individuals who are, in some ways, likely to be on the periphery of the networked world, rightly attract a significant amount of attention from policy makers, practitioners and researchers – although many of these (myself included) are perhaps based within studies of digital inclusion rather than new literacies research.

Given this context, there is much value in combining understandings from these two areas. In the literature on digital inclusion, we know relatively little about how the range of new literacies amongst Internet users of all ages and backgrounds are related to use and engagement with the Internet. Instead, we tend to use a global measure of skills when building models that explain why, and how, someone uses the Internet or not. In the literature on new literacies there is less of a focus on how other characteristics, such as, socio economic status, level of education, quality of access to the Internet, life stage, attitudes towards the Internet, and so on, may influence engagement with the Internet (Helsper & Eynon, forthcoming). By bringing these two areas together in more concrete ways we may begin to better understand: how and why people chose to be or are excluded from using the Internet and other new technologies, what it means for everyday life and learning to be an individual who is not particularly digitally skilled, and the

extent to which the development of new literacies can be an equaliser for those wishing to participate in the networked world.

In this short paper, I set out to contribute to this discussion by highlighting three areas, primarily from the perspective of work contributing to the digital inclusion agenda. First, to consider what we know about people who do not use the Internet. Second, to explore the role that skills play in the uptake of online opportunities for learning and everyday life; and third, to highlight some of the methodological and conceptual challenges that are prevalent in this area. In this paper, I deliberately use the narrower term skills as opposed to literacies.

I try to begin tackle this question primarily by drawing on the findings from two data sets. The first is the [Oxford Internet Surveys \(OxIS\)](#), carried out by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), University of Oxford, which provides authoritative information on Internet use in Britain. The surveys are multistage probability sample surveys of individuals 14 years and older, and are carried out face to face. The second is survey data from the [Learner and their Context Study](#), a two year project funded by Becta. The data referred to here is from a nationally representative face to face survey of 1069 young people in Britain aged 8, 12, 14 and 17-19.

NOT USING THE INTERNET: DIGITAL CHOICE OR EXCLUSION?

A key issue when thinking about the development of new literacies is to take account of those who do not use the Internet or other new technologies. Often, this group is assumed to have some kind of “deficit”, for example a lack of financial resources, a lack of skills, a fear of technology etc. that can be overcome via policy intervention and / or over time due to the diffusion of technology (Selwyn, 2003). While to some extent this is true, it is not straightforward. Non-users are not one homogenous group, nor is non-use of the Internet always simply about barriers that need to be overcome. There can be an element of choice in not using the Internet and other new technologies because it does not offer people enough / what they need (Selwyn, 2003; Wyatt, 2003). Of course this choice (and the extent to which it can be described as such) is very much shaped by an individual’s social, economic and cultural context but needs to be properly understood (Eynon & Helsper, 2011). A key problem at present is that it is very difficult to unpick “choice” from “exclusion”. Also, a great deal of research in this area tends to be quantitative so we know very little about the implications of non-use of the Internet for people’s lives and learning. At the OII, we are currently carrying out a small scale qualitative interview study with young people aged 17-22 who used to use the Internet but no longer do, sponsored by the NominetTrust, to try and shed light on this issue.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SKILLS AND INTERNET USE

Digital skills are a key aspect in understanding the differences in the kinds and range of activities people use the Internet for (van Dijk, 2005). As noted above, those with the least skills gain the least benefit from using the Internet as they tend not to use the Internet for as wide a range of purposes and are less likely to use the Internet for “capital enhancing” activities such as finding a job (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008) or learning (Eynon, 2009).

However, skills do not tell us the whole story as an individual's characteristics and background are important. For example, a study by Peter and Valkenburg (2006), found that the way young people used the Internet was influenced by their socio-economic and cognitive resources. Adolescents with greater socio-economic resources were more likely to use the Internet for social purposes than adolescents with fewer socio-economic resources. Adolescents with greater socio-economic and greater cognitive resources were more likely to use the Internet as an information medium compared to those with fewer socio-economic and cognitive resources, while adolescents with lower socio-economic resources and lower cognitive resources used the Internet more frequently for entertainment. Similarly, a study using survey data from the Learner and their Context project demonstrated that while online search skills, self-concept for learning and networks of support are important for understanding uptake of online information seeking by young people, the effects of SES remains (Eynon & Malmberg, 2011). The same story is found in the UK population as whole, where analysis on the OxIS 2009 data set showed that while digital skills are important, other economic, cultural, social and personal inequalities are still relevant in understanding the way people engage with the Internet (Helpser & Eynon, forthcoming). However, in part due to the challenge of building appropriate models of digital inclusion from empirical data we do not know a great deal about whether there are some skills that have more "weight" in terms of supporting a range of online activities – and this would be an interesting line to pursue.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The majority of digital inclusion studies take the form of quantitative surveys. While these studies contribute to a better understanding of what variables influence use of the Internet they do not provide nuanced information about implications of Internet use for learning and everyday life. Indeed, learning is perhaps particularly difficult to measure in survey research as this kind of approach cannot really measure the cognitive dimension of learning. This is not an issue that is unique to survey research (c.f. Sefton-Green 2004) but does need to be considered. In addition, there is an issue of how we can better measure skills or the more complex concept of new literacies; as digital inclusion literature is often criticised for the self-report skills measures that are typically employed (Hargittai, 2005). Indeed, different methodologies are needed. As Anderson and Stoneman (2007; 2011) have argued, the impacts of ICT is never linear, and to better understand how these technologies affect our daily lives and different cultural contexts, more longitudinal studies are required. In addition to longitudinal studies, more qualitative studies can help explore what it really means to be on the periphery of the networked world. Arguably research in new literacies tends to be more methodologically eclectic and thus multi method approaches that cross the boundaries of these two areas of research could be fruitful.

In sum, it is important in research on new literacies and learning to consider those who are low / non users of the Internet and other new technologies. Bringing together work on digital inclusion together with work on new literacies may be one way to help us understand the implications for those people who are not particularly skilled users of the Internet for learning and everyday life.

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