Pixel Chix and Digi Guys: Exploring the Experiences of the “Digital Citizen” in Two Contexts

Rachel McLean, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to widen the debate surrounding participation in the eSociety, shifting the focus from access and economic power to skills and knowledge. It will present empirical research which, whilst not starting out as research into skills for the eSociety, revealed some relevant and enlightening issues. Focusing on two diverse contexts of activity (shopping and health care support) I will illustrate how the status quo (that the educated and economically rich have privileged, unfettered access to the services of the e-society) is flawed, misleading to stakeholders, and detrimental to both service providers and consumers. From a critical social theory (CST) perspective this paper critiques assumptions that the internet brings about citizen empowerment through increased access to information, and opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with service providers and other consumers. It demonstrates that this assumption derives from the myth that technology per se brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment. Concludes that access to ICTs alone does not bring about effective engagement in the eSociety.

Keywords: digital divide; e-skills; e-literacy; online support

THE BACKGROUND

It is generally accepted that information technology (IT) is unique in the effect that it has upon every facet of society. Its ubiquity has impacted upon work, leisure, commercial interactions, and provision and consumption of public services. IT has the potential to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of every aspect of both public and private organisations and individual lives. However, the current take up and usage rates of new technologies appear to be widening the economic divide, which significantly has been redefined in the e-society as the “digital divide.”
Households that were already advantaged in terms of income, education, and employment status are gaining privileged access to the market by means of these new technologies. (ESRC, 2002)

Whilst whole sections of society are excluded from the benefits offered by new technological platforms, organisations (both commercial and not for profit) fail to engage with an entire sector of their stakeholders or potential market. Academic writing and government initiatives to address the “digital divide,” or exclusion of some citizens from the benefits of engaging in the e-society, have focused predominantly on access to technology (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000; Office of the e-Envoy, 2003). Citizens have been redefined in terms of the dichotomy of those who are “connected” and those who are “disconnected” from the e-society (Bonfadelli, 2002). However, access to technology, or being “connected”, alone does not necessarily bring about effective use (Selwyn, 2003). Recognition of this issue stimulates a debate much wider than the simplistic attribution of exclusion from the “e-society” to socioeconomic inequalities alone. Research by the British Computer Society (2005) found that “26% of people in the UK do not have access to a computer.” More significantly, it found that “45% of those asked felt left behind by technology advances, and 54% said they found computers complicated. More than 60% had never had any formal training to help them use a computer.”

Given the emphasis now placed upon the concept of the “informed,” “digital,” or “e-citizen” catered for and supported through electronic service provision, this is a serious anomaly.

The purpose of this article is to explore the debate surrounding participation in the e-society; the focus is on skills, knowledge, and effective engagement. It will present empirical research which, whilst not starting out as research into skills for the e-society, revealed some relevant and enlightening issues. The issue of the digital divide, access to technology, and skills and knowledge to effectively use that technology, are prevalent in academic literature. However, studies are frequently based on survey research on the availability of computers and Internet access and use in the home, at work, and in public places. As suggested by Kvasny and Keil (2006), these studies typically identify and measure demographic factors such as ethnicity, race, gender, geographic location, household composition, age, education, and income level (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Katz & Aspden, 1997; Lenhart, Horrigan, Rainey, Allen, Boyce, & Madden, 2003), or focus on disadvantaged communities and low income citizens (Kvasny & Keil, 2006). Other studies focus on observations of a set of predefined tasks (Hargittai, 2001), and measure time taken to successfully complete the task.

This research attempts to expand on previous studies by focusing on day to day interactions with technology in two
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