

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (1999) "Net gains not evenly shared," The Irish Times 6 December, 11.

Net gains not evenly shared

The "digital divide" is a hot topic these days, with President Clinton promoting universal access to the Internet as a panacea for social exclusion globally.

Conferences in Dublin and Washington this week will highlight the inequality of Internet access in Ireland and the US.

Analysing connectivity rates in both countries is difficult because Internet statistics are notoriously fickle. Surveys can ask different questions, use different methods, and have different results. The Irish Information Society Commission published an MRBI report in October indicating that 28 per cent of Irish adults have personally used the Internet.

This figure is surprisingly high, perhaps reflecting the high number of students polled. The same month, a survey by Amárach Consulting found that 17 per cent of Irish adults use the Internet.

The MRBI report found notable differences in connectivity according to occupation, gender and place of residence. The Irish people most likely to use the Internet are young male office workers in Dublin. Those least likely to use it are elderly manual workers, housewives and farmers living outside Dublin.

The US Department of Commerce Census Bureau publishes statistics on Internet access annually. Its latest report, Digital Divide, based on data collected in December 1998, found that 25 per cent of US households were connected to the Internet and that 33 per cent of American adults were online at home, work or elsewhere. However these national statistics obscure huge differences in connectivity, particularly by income and education level.

Last year, 60 per cent of Americans earning \$75,000 or more were using the Internet, but only 20 per cent of those earning \$20,000 and 14 per cent of those with incomes of \$10,000. Sixty two per cent of Americans with a university degree were online but only 21 per cent of those with high-school qualifications. For millions of Americans with a primary education, the Internet might well not exist.

For American women, the report contains good news. The number of women online has been rapidly increasing and women now make up 46 per cent of all Internet users in the US. But Black and Hispanic Americans are lagging far behind the average, and the divide along income, education and race lines is widening significantly every year.

The report was disturbing enough for the US Secretary of Commerce to convene a Digital Divide Summit in Washington this week to explore how to narrow the technology gap. Closing the "digital divide" is a key part of President Clinton's "new markets initiative" to develop socially excluded areas. Coincidentally, a conference at Dublin Castle this week,

hosted by the EU-Employment Initiative, is also exploring the theme of Internet access and social exclusion.

To increase Internet connectivity, both the Irish and the US governments appear to be heading in the same policy direction: support for public Internet access points in libraries, schools and community centres. The US Digital Divide report found that community Internet access centres are particularly well-used by those who lack access at home and work and recommends their expansion. Similar support is advocated in an Irish Information Society Commission discussion paper, IT Access for All.

A recent paper by Dr Roddy Flynn at DCU on telephone access suggests a historical precedent in Ireland for subsidised public Internet access. In the 1940s, a plan was hatched to expand the Rural Call Box Programme to every sub-post office in Ireland before 1950. The government of the day operated the "call offices" on the same basis as rural post offices - with losses covered by the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. The increase in rural call offices led to a significant increase in demand for home telephones in rural areas. It is possible that a similar policy to subsidise Internet access points would have the same result.

However, increasing Internet access is a far more complex task than simply making Internetlinked computers more widely available. All the research to date, including the Digital Divide report, suggests that there are huge obstacles to overcome before the Internet will be more widely used.

Persistent barriers to accessing, understanding and making use of information on the Internet are linked to the wider social issues of poverty, educational disadvantage and long-term unemployment. The research suggests that the long-term prospects for widespread Internet use in both Ireland and the US will depend on the ability of both countries to reduce the poverty gap and the number of early school leavers, and to provide training and generate employment for the most socially excluded members of society. Both countries will face a similar challenge: the UN has ranked the US first, and Ireland second, on an index of developed countries with the highest levels of poverty, educational disadvantage and long-term unemployment.

If Irish economic and social policies aimed at reducing social exclusion are successful, it is certainly possible that Ireland may one day surpass the US in its national rate of Internet access. However the trick will be to increase Internet use in a balanced way, so that a housewife in Donegal, a farmer in Cavan, and an office worker in Dublin will all have equal access to the benefits of the Internet.

Related links:

Information Society Commission - www.isc.ie

Amárach Consulting - www.amarach.com

Digital Divide - www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/digitaldivide

EU-Employment meeting - www.iol.ie/EMPLOYMENT/conference.html