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Evaluating social aspects of Internet development

Introduction

The Internet and social exclusion has finally reached the agenda of policy makers and the business community. In fact, governments and business leaders are actively advocating more widespread access to the Internet, their interest driven largely by the e-commerce development model which sees all of us primarily as consumers of commercial goods and services.

We are all consumers, and one day the Internet could be a useful tool to buy many things we need to live our lives. However we are more than just consumers - we are learners, teachers, mentors, workers, artists, supporters of friends and family, activists, organisers, communicators, social critics, and much more. We have to shift gears from advocating widespread access to the Internet to arguing also for the resources to make the Internet a valuable tool for building a more inclusive society.

What have we learned from the presentations and discussions at the EMPLOYMENT conference? We can highlight the main issues in three points about evaluating social aspects of Internet development.

1. Evaluating levels of Internet access

The notion of people as Internet consumers needs to be shifted to a vision of people as Internet content producers, making information available on the Internet that is useful and relevant to their lives. Control of Internet content production is especially important for people excluded from the public sphere who could be using the Internet to produce images of themselves and their communities that counter negative or absent images in the mainstream media.

Currently we see roughly three categories of people in their access to the Internet:

- First category: access as producers of Internet content. These people produce information for Web pages and actively contribute to mailing lists and other public media online. Currently this is a very, very small group of Internet users in Ireland and globally. At the top end, the most privileged members of society are using the Internet to increase further their access to information and communication resources to influence public opinion and extend their personal wealth.
- Second category: access as consumers of Internet content. These people read Web pages, receive mailing list messages without producing messages themselves, and download information and programmes. Their "interactivity" on the Internet is

- largely limited to clicking on buttons and perhaps entering credit card details. Most people using the Internet are information consumers.
- Third category: no access. These people are the off-line crowd for whom the Internet is something that other people use. This group is the majority of the population in Ireland and every other country. Increasingly, this group is made up of people on low incomes with low levels of formal education. When we ask why they are not using the Internet, we come up immediately against the core social issues of illiteracy, poverty, low self-confidence, unskilled employment or long-term unemployment, low media skills and so on.

Reliable surveys of Internet access are very hard to come by, especially in Europe where no census office in any EU country is currently conducting surveys of Internet access and use. In Ireland, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) plans to ask about Internet access in its next Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) and may include a question about home Internet access in the 2001 Census. The most reliable data on Internet access has been conducted in the US by the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce ([1](#)). The US data clearly shows that the profile of Internet users does not match the profile of the US population as a whole. The population online has a much higher income and education profile, and the disparities along income and education lines have been increasing over the years the census surveys have been conducted. There is no reason to believe that the situation will be different in Ireland unless strong social policy is developed to change the course of Internet development here.

The first point about evaluating social aspects of Internet development is therefore looking at who participates in the production of Internet content, asking what aspects of their social and economic circumstances facilitate their participation, looking at who is not participating, and asking why not. This evaluation also involves looking for ways that people have overcome access barriers to become Internet content producers when we would not have expected them to do so. In many cases, we will find that they have been enabled by well-designed training programmes that included not only IT training but also solid support to address their particular social and economic circumstances.

2. Evaluating how people shape the Internet to meet real social needs

While we need to maintain a positive vision for the Internet's future it is important not to become too caught up in romantic or utopian ideas about the Internet's "potential." Evaluation of Internet development needs to be clearly focused on how people are actually using it to meet their needs, and especially the needs of the socially excluded.

From the limited research conducted to date in OECD countries on social aspects of Internet use, we know that the Internet's most common and popular use is email. People use email far more often than they search for and read Web pages yet the bulk of research and understanding of the Internet has focused on Web pages, again because the Web is seen as the platform of e-commerce. In OECD countries the most developed area of Internet policy and initiatives is business use and e-commerce in particular. Many billions

of pounds have been spent by governments and commercial organisations in OECD countries to develop businesses uses of the Internet.

In Ireland almost no initiatives addressing social uses of the Internet have been developed outside IT in schools, and the research in this area is almost non-existent. We know next to nothing about how Internet technologies can meet pressing social needs, such as for example the needs of low-income older people in small towns across the country, the many adults who can neither read nor write, the thousands of young people working in temporary unskilled jobs, women who are single parents and unemployed wanting to build a more secure future for their families, and so on.

Evaluating social aspects of Internet technologies means investigating how people are actually using the technology, not how they are supposed to be using it but what they ARE doing with it to meet their needs. The questions include: What can the Internet do for us? What are we using it for? How can it be used to increase social inclusion? What are the social benefits of Internet use? What are the primary social needs in our society and how can the Internet be used to address those needs?

3. Evaluating the Internet as a social capital resource

Human capital is a concept in education theory - it is what individuals develop while acquiring education and knowledge. Social capital, a similar concept in social network theory, is what individuals develop and acquire through networking with others. Social capital is the value of networks as resources people can use to realise their interests. One feature common to many people excluded from employment and education is they lack the social networks - the social capital - that could help move them into further education, training and employment.

Social capital is a primary "so-what?" factor in Internet use, and looking for social capital uses of the Internet will partly answer why it is important that people are using Internet networks, how Internet networks could improve their lives, how these networks could strengthen communities, and how they could improve Irish society.

A good starting point for evaluating the Internet as a social capital resource is to look at the informal networks in the social sector - such as the networks between community and voluntary organisations - and build from there. We have to be patient with these fledging networks online. An example would be the Womenslink mailing list, coordinated by the Women's Resource and Development Agency in Belfast, linking women's organisations in the border counties and Northern Ireland. Womenslink was operating for more than two years before it reached the point where it became a resource adding real value to the participating women's organisations and their communities.

Questions to ask for this aspect of the evaluation include: can Internet networks substitute for the social ties built through face-to-face interaction? How strong are Internet relationships and networks? Do they build trust among people using them? Do Internet networks facilitate supportive contact, especially among people separated

geographically? Do Internet networks extend the social capital of the socially excluded? Do they strengthen networks of community and voluntary organisations?

Conclusion

The support of the WRC and the EMPLOYMENT programme has been critical in getting many innovative IT projects up and running in Ireland, and the lessons from these initiatives could lead to understanding and policy on the social aspects of the Internet. We need to encourage those working on innovative IT projects to evaluate their projects critically and make their evaluation reports available to other researchers, to policy makers and the general public.

However we need to acknowledge the significant gap that exists between practice and policy and to find ways to encourage policy makers to make use of reports available to them - perhaps the Internet can be useful in this regard.

When evaluating ICT initiatives and writing up reports on these projects, we could consider the three points discussed above:

1. levels of Internet access: who is producing the Internet content?
2. shaping the Internet to meet real social needs: how is the Internet being used to meet the needs of the socially excluded?
3. the Internet as a social capital resource: can the Internet support networks that have real value in people's lives?

All of us - researchers, policy makers, Internet users, community developers and others - have a critical role to play in shaping the Internet's future and making it a tool for social inclusion in Ireland, the EU and globally. We can choose how we want our society to develop and how we want the Internet to support that development. It may seem that the agenda for the Internet has already been moulded around the e-commerce model but policy can always be influenced and Internet development is still at its earliest stage.

Note

1. US Department of Commerce (1999), "Falling Through the Net: Defining the Digital Divide: A Report on the Telecommunications and Information Technology Gap in America." Washington: National Telecommunications and Information Administration, US Department of Commerce. Available on the Web: www.ntia.doc.gov