

Reference: O'Donnell, Susan (2000) "Closing the digital divide," The Irish Times 9 October, 8.

Closing the digital divide

Although it will hardly come as any great surprise, the digital divide in Ireland is official. A new report confirms that advantaged groups in Irish society are benefiting most from the Internet and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

The Information Society Commission (ISC) report shows that 41 per cent of adults had Internet access in July 2000, compared with 33 per cent in 1999 and 16 per cent in 1998. About 35 per cent had personally used the Internet.

However, specific social groups are leading the way, leaving other groups struggling to catch up. Furthermore, the report highlights that the digital divide is much more complex than physical access to Internet-linked computers.

Analysis of the MRBI survey data found three distinct categories of ICT use: a small group of early adopters, a larger group of average users, and the largest group - nonusers.

Nine per cent of Irish people surveyed were early adopters of the Internet and new technologies. The hard core of this group have monthly household incomes more than IR£3,000, come from the upper and middle classes, have a third-level education and work in managerial and support positions.

The wider group of early adopters also includes a high number of students, members of the lower-middle class, people living in Dublin and other urban areas, men, and those aged 15-49.

The second category - 43 per cent - are more or less the average users of the Internet and other ICTs. In this group are many people living outside Dublin, those with a Leaving or Junior Certificate, those with monthly household incomes of IR£1,000 to IR£2,000, women, and members of the skilled working class.

Non-users make up the largest category; 48 per cent of Irish people do not use the Internet or most other new ICTs. Many of the hard core of non-users are people with no qualifications, unskilled workers, housewives, the unemployed, those with monthly household incomes less than IR£1,000, and the over-65s. The wider group of non-users includes a disproportionate number of people over the age of 50, farmers and other agricultural workers.

This digital divide will undermine the new Government electronic system, Reach, which provides Web-based access to public services. Those without Internet access and the skills or motivation to negotiate a Web page are often the people most in need of the state services offered through Reach.

For information society policymakers, the crucial issue is the extent to which non-use of the Internet is linked to informed personal choice and concern with costs, rather than being rooted in the wider issues of social disadvantage.

Campaigns to increase Internet awareness will help many people make an informed choice. Consumers' concerns with costs can be addressed by initiatives to make ICTs less expensive, such as Internet access through cable television and low fixed-rate Internet fees.

However, innovative strategies will be necessary to bring the hundreds of thousands of people without the knowledge, skills or confidence to use ICTs to a point where they can make an informed decision about technology in their lives.

The MRBI data suggests that the traditional means of increasing public use of technology - adult training courses and public Internet access points in libraries - may have reached the limits of their effectiveness.

Interest in adult training courses is waning. Half the adults surveyed by the MRBI had already taken computer training and were not interested in more. Some people under 34 cited childcare responsibilities and lack of money for computer courses as restraints to learning. Meanwhile, many over-50s believed they were too old to learn and that ICTs were not relevant to their lives.

Simply making Internet-linked computers available to the public is not the answer. The programme of public Internet access points in libraries has not yet been evaluated, but the MRBI data strongly suggests it may be missing the mark.

The MRBI survey did not look at ways to reduce the digital divide in Ireland, and no other research has been conducted here on this issue. However, a number of evaluations have been completed of interventions in the UK, the US and Canada.

These studies show that any strategy to close the digital divide must include active participation of the community and voluntary sector. One effective means of intervention is a network of community access centres offering learning through shared discovery. Important features include flexible opening hours, technical support and maintenance, and an ethos of developing the capacity of local people to manage and sustain the resource.

Unfortunately many Irish community and voluntary organisations themselves have low rates of ICT use and are struggling to find the resources to use the technologies more effectively. This is an obvious area for government intervention.

One recent US study found that creating useful local Internet content was just as important as providing computers and Internet connections. All the research suggests that the digital divide in Ireland will not begin to close without strong national policy and

clear strategies involving local intervention in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.

Information Society Commission: www.isc.ie

Reach Initiative: www.reach.ie
