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Apart from technology: understanding people's non-use of information and communication technologies in everyday life

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Abstract

Despite the high-profile nature of the current 'digital divide' debate, academic understanding of who is making little or no use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) remains weak. Indeed much of the discussion surrounding the digital divide has concentrated on the characteristics of those individuals who *are* using ICTs or, at best, simply pathologised the 'have nots' in terms of individual deficits. Yet developing a systematic and objective understanding of individuals' non-use of new technologies constitutes a major challenge for those seeking to map and understand the social realities of the 'information age'. The present paper, therefore, aims to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of people's non-use of new technologies: firstly, by considering established discourses of why individuals may be excluded or peripheral to ICT use; and then, via a critique of these positions, proposing an alternative framework of why people may not use ICT in their day-to-day lives based around individuals' 'reading' of technology.

Keywords: Digital device; Information and communications technology; Non-use; Resistance; Choice; Agency

1. Introduction

The ability to use information and communications technology (ICT) is now assumed by most commentators to be a prerequisite to living and working in the

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'information society'. Received wisdom has it that ICT is transforming all aspects of society—from education to civic involvement, employment to leisure. As the UK government has been prone to proclaim, using information technology is nothing less than "the indispensable grammar of modern life" [1]. This civic and societal imperative has given rise to prevailing political efforts within (over)developed countries to ensure that every citizen has a basic level of 'universal access' to information technologies and that disparities are reduced between those segments of society which are making use of ICT and those segments which are not. Indeed, there has been a burgeoning body of academic research over the past 10 years pointing towards the growing emergence of an 'information apartheid' [2] and a 'digital divide' [3]; popularly seen as occurring between technological 'haves' and 'have-nots' [4] or the 'information rich' and 'information poor' [5–7].

This contemporary recasting of the notion of a 'knowledge gap' fuelled by mass media [8] has prompted governments around the world to implement multi-billion dollar initiatives to counter these new inequalities of the 'information age'. Yet, whilst the notion of the 'digital divide' has proved a "usefully alliterative slogan whose pan-political ambiguity lends rhetorical capital to whomever chooses it" [9], it remains a conceptually weak basis for researchers striving to develop a deep understanding of technology and society. As Webster [10] reasons:

> to distinguish between the 'information rich' and 'information poor' both avoids precise delineation of who these are and fails to consider the range of different positions ... In short the model lacks sufficient sociological sophistication.

In particular, academic understanding of who is making *less* (or even *no*) use of information technologies remains weak. This paper therefore starts from an emerging consensus within the sociology of technology [11–13] that conceptualising non-users of technology as purely those who 'have not' any access to any technology is too crude an analysis. Recent developments in public and community provision of ICTs means that all but the most peripheral members of a society will have *theoretical* access to some forms of technology [13]. Yet, whilst the formal provision of ICT facilities in community sites such as colleges, libraries and museums means that all individuals living locally have potential physical access to new technologies, such 'access' is meaningless unless people actually feel able to make use of such opportunities. The logic of this argument can be seen in the increasing numbers of public payphones in UK towns and cities that have been recently converted to offer e-mail facilities alongside conventional telephony. Despite this formal provision it would be a nonsense to claim that every individual living in and around these towns now has effective and meaningful access to e-mail or, indeed, equitable access to e-mail when compared to individuals who use e-mail from their home or place of work. It is therefore important to acknowledge the importance of an individual's 'perceived' (or effective) access in practice over the theoretical (or formal) access to ICT [14]. Any realistic notion of 'access' to ICT must therefore first be defined from the individual's perspective.

Moreover, as Toulouse [12] observes, there are distinct types of access to tech-