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The 'grey digital divide': Perception, exclusion and barriers of access to the Internet for older people

by Peter Millward

Abstract

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Focussing upon the elderly, this article utilises data discovered as researcher for Age Concern in Wigan (U.K.) and examines the feelings of older people toward the Internet. It explores the reasons why some clients and volunteers choose to use the Internet, whilst others do not, relating these perspectives to the organisations, alongside broader national (U.K.) and EU, commitments to reduce the digital divide. The article argues that for the elderly Internet usability is based upon more than availability of technology. Instead a lack of Web skills among the elderly leads to an opinion that information and communication technologies are for the young, leading to a long-term damage lack of interest in using the Internet.

Contents

Introduction

Advances in information and communication technologies (ICT) are amongst the defining technological transformations in the late twentieth century (Castells, 1996; Dyson, 1997). Interest in personal computers (PCs), video games, interactive TV and mobile telephones focuses on their immense current and potential capabilities (Dutton, 1999). Current debates within the social sciences focus upon the impacts of one or more of these technologies. With current advances, the Internet became widely available to the public in the 1990s in some ways to forge a link between multiple forms of ICT. As a result, Castells (2001) argues that interest in the World Wide Web has become increasingly pronounced, as the user market "diffuses" into increasing numbers. He suggests that, in early 2001, there were over 400 million users of computer communication networks worldwide, a massive increase from 16 million users at the end of 1995. It is anticipated that these numbers will continue to grow in the near future, with reliable forecasts predicting the billionth regular user of the Internet likely to arrive in 2005.

Despite these predictions, use of the Internet is not universal. There is a polarisation between the "haves" and "have nots", and the "users" and the "non-users" of ICT within "more developed" countries. This can be thought of as the "social digital divide" (Norris, 2001). This article examines the viewpoints of clients and volunteers from "Age Concern" in Wigan, a middle-sized Lancashire town which had a local economy reliant upon "old" industries such as coal mining and textiles, in an attempt to explore the depth of the digital divide. The article then attempts to find evidence which might help to bridge the "grey" aspect (referring those older people excluded from the Internet) through a grant which the charitable organisation has won in order to install three Internet connected laptop computers within the local borough.

A grant was provided by the Worker’s Educational Association in order to put currently excluded citizens online, and retain the interest of those already "surfing the Web." This opportunity met the needs of Age Concern among those over the age of 55 in combating loneliness, offering mental stimulation and entertainment, providing access to information around the world and improving contact with family and friends.

Hence, this article is based upon primary research for Age Concern, examining why some older people in Wigan use the Internet whilst others decide to stay offline.

The "digital divide"

The social digital divide can operate in two distinct poverty stricken areas: Rural locations (DiMaggio et al., 2001) and inner city areas (Castells, 1998). Residents of both areas have long experienced social exclusion and disadvantages and often share a number of characteristics in common. These include low income, poor education, low social class, and, particularly in the instance of the inner city, "black" ethnicity (Castells, 1998). These characteristics may combine to heightened effect. For Castells (1998), the "information technology revolution" has excluded these people; therefore, inequality becomes increasingly pronounced. Castells (1998) refers to inner city areas as "informational blackholes." He argues that the contemporary world is characterised by informational flows, spread by the Internet. This means that excluded areas face a greater deprivation than merely "being offline" because many industries are now functionally dependent on the Internet. Therefore areas without service providers may struggle to participate within the new "age." Thus deprivation within excluded areas can be expected to escalate and give rise to "the fourth world" [1] whereby a lack of ICT creates new levels of poverty. Castells [2] suggests that it is likely that the development of "the fourth world" will continue until areas have both the skills and resources for freely available online access. Norris (2001) broadly agrees over the appearahce of demographic inequalities in Internet use; however, she argues that "informational blackholes" are temporary and will disappear as Internet participation continues to "normalise" [3].

Norris (2001) adds the elderly to Castells' "informational blackhole" by arguing that the "generational difference" is a key feature of adaptation to the Internet, with older portions of the population taking up use at a much slower rate. Information provided by the National Statistics (U.K.) (2000) show that many older people do not use the "Web" (just 16.3 percent of "grey" society, referring to those people over the age of 55, compared with a survey average of 45 percent). This information would confirm Norris' view of generational differences in the use of the Internet. In spite an overall increase in the use of the Internet to 62 percent of the British populace according to the most recent National Statistics survey (2003), the over 55 age group remains low with only 30 percent using the Internet. Although "technological diffusion" has increased Internet use in many sections of society, a relatively small percentage of those over 55 are use the Internet compared to younger age groups.

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This pattern becomes increasingly exaggerated as an individual becomes older. In the National Statistics survey (2000) Internet usage rate reduces to 33 percent for the age bracket of 55-64; for those over the age of 75 the use of the Internet falls to just six percent. Haddon (2000) anticipated this pattern, by suggesting that many of the "young elderly" may still be working, or might have retired fairly recently and therefore may have used ICT, particularly the Internet, at work. Despite these statistics, Norris (2001) points out that the Internet seems especially well suited to the elderly, given its possibilities for social networking, leisure hobbies, and other services such as the delivery of groceries.

Reducing the digital divide in the European Union (EU)

Accepting the reality of a "social digital divide" or "informational blackhole," the leaders of the 15 European Union (EU) member states met 23-24 March 2000 in Lisbon. At this summit it was agreed that the boundaries defining relative poverty were fluid, so that those without Internet access were not only "informational poor" (Castells, 1998) but were socially excluded from other activities (DiMaggio et al., 2001). It was agreed that by public and subsidised private access, all citizens of the EU could expect to have some sort of Internet access by 2005.

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Castells and Himanen (2002) suggest that this idea was adopted from Finnish plans outlined in January 1995. The goals of this scheme included the networking of all educational institutions and libraries; the use of informational technology in education; Internet literacy; uses of informational technology for the elderly; and, most crucially, the formation of a well-being cluster. Despite the development of a "grey" digital divide the elderly were central to the first state-led Internet access scheme. The EU took notice of the Finnish program and, following the Lisbon summit, adopted a notion of free and subsidised Internet access as a citizen's right by 2005. The EU initiative placed a particular emphasis on the youth of Europe receiving high-speed Internet access in schools and

computer literacy classes in order to promote a "knowledge based Europe" of the future, which could rival the U.S. It also stressed a provision for Internet based health care which is intended to serve all citizens, but particularly the disabled and elderly sections of society who might require greater attention.

Like other member states the U.K. has until the end of 2005 to reach this deadline. In order to do this it has two major tactics. The first of these involved the public "schools and libraries scheme" whilst the second involved private access. The schools and libraries scheme featured all schools and libraries receiving high-speed Internet connected computers for free public use. Fully operationalised at the end of 2002, this plan aims to combat both urban and rural poor groups within the U.K. by offering free Internet access to all citizens within five miles of their home. Private access is a more gradual process which began with the Blair-led government regulating Internet connection costs. The government plans to extend and cement this scheme by 2005, by offering subsidised "refurbished computers for low income families" (House of Commons Information Committee, 2001).

Associated with these efforts are numerous smaller schemes, such as "Becta" in Leicestershire, and the Internet connected BBC mobile bus which toured the Northwest of England in spring 2003. Deliberately attacking the "grey" digital divide, Age Concern has become increasingly involved in similar projects. Arguably the most impressive of these to date was the "Mobile Internet Taster Sessions" project (MITS), which was run with sponsorship from Microsoft. This venture operated during July, August and September 2001 and enabled active older volunteers to visit local day centres, sheltered and residential housing schemes in order to introduce "the Web" and e-mail to less mobile older people who would not, otherwise, have access to ICT. This scheme operated in six counties: Lancashire, Hampshire; Herefordshire, North Staffordshire, Cheshire, and Greater Manchester. The format also included an ICT skills programme for the project's volunteers. The aims of the project were to examine the effect of the Internet on older people (both clients and volunteers) and to explore the sustainability of the scheme with each "Age Concern" area with a view to future replication. Alongside this, Age Concern tries to encourage Internet use for its clients and volunteers by actively promoting local Internet skills courses, and has produced a series of free instructional leaflets. It has also published two Internet user guide books: "Grasp The NETtle" (1999) and "How to be a Silver Surfer" (2002). Nationally it also seeks to further develop a culture which opposes the "grey" digital divide, by attracting new investment to set up more schemes like MITS.

Wireless Outreach Network (WON) programme

Age Concern, Wigan borough, received a grant from Workers' Educational Association (WEA) to set-up a "Wireless Outreach Network" (WON) programme. This grant involves the purchase of, and connection costs for, three laptop computers which will be stationed in the Wigan area. One laptop will be permanently located in the Wigan information office for volunteers and customers to use free of charge, whilst another will operate under similar conditions in the nearby Leigh office. The third laptop will be mobile, but will normally be available to elderly users of Whelley hospital which is situated about three miles outside Wigan town centre. Typically the project will focus on older people who are economically inactive for a range of reasons. However, it is anticipated that the service will also be utilised by isolated older people, carers and day care centre users. It is hoped that the scheme will help its users maximise their current social conditions.

The free availability of ICT services will be advertised in numerous ways. These will include a wide range of networks such as newsletters, partner organisations and free publicity in the local press. Ideas to engage current non-Internet users include showing people how to contact friends and relatives and access services using e-mail, researching on the Internet, organising home shopping, reproducing family photographs and engaging learners on short Internet based courses as part of the WEA community grid for life-long learning. Although Age Concern cannot afford to send users on formal Internet and other computer courses, it currently has a number of volunteers who are prepared to act as volunteer mentors to help less confident Web users.

The Centre for Urban Policy Studies (CUP) at the University of Manchester (1994) described Wigan as the 73rd most socially and economically deprived local authority district in England. This study is based upon 1991 Census data, and takes into account a total of 366 local authorities; therefore, 293 out of 366 local authorities can consider their residents to suffer less poverty than Wigan. Associated with this is Wigan's traditional image, which is that it is reliant upon "old" industries, such as coal mining and textiles. Thus there is a longstanding feeling of poverty, technological backwardness and a lack of sophistication, characterised in George Orwell's book *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937).

According to Wigan MBC (Wigan Metropolitan Borough Council, 1998) the over 55 age group, with which Age Concern deals, accounts for over

24.7 percent of the total population. Following Castells' (1998) description of the "informational blackhole," it is likely that levels of Internet participation are low, given Wigan's ageing population and its levels of social and economic deprivation. As a result of this deficit, targets for the WON scheme at Age Concern are realistic, being approximated to be 75 individuals per week by the summer of 2004. This participation figure spans the three different locations of laptops.

Research took place three weeks before the computers were delivered, prior to many participants having ever seen an Internet connected computer. This means that the data was "raw" in providing truthful responses on perceptions of ICT. The aim of this research was to explore ways in which this project could be best utilised by the over 55 age group in Wigan, and then relate these to discuss the larger aims of U.K. Internet access schemes. For older people these relate to an increase in self-sufficiency specifically by combating loneliness and increasing awareness of health and medical issues. In order to maximise this, the underlying research questions included: Are there any recurring characteristics of Age Concern clients who use or do not use the Internet?; what types of Web sites are current surfers interested in?; what (if any) kinds of Web sites do non-Internet users perceive as interesting?; and, are there any barriers of access which prevent non-surfers developing an interest in ICT, other than availability?.

Research methods

A mixed approach was used. This involved the design of a basic "tick box" questionnaire which all participants were asked to complete. This questionnaire also worked as a conversation stimulus, for those participants who wished to give further insight, from which a more qualitative point of view could be elicited. All qualitative approaches were recorded through the transcription of notes and, if possible quotations, immediately after the interview. This method was selected so not to make participants feel uncomfortable in the presence of a recording device. Usually interviews lasted for no more than fifteen minutes.

The research took place over a five-day period in April 2003, in which I sat in the waiting room of the main Age Concern office in Wigan and asked participants to fill in the questionnaire. Amongst the services for which participants were waiting included advice on income tax, holiday destinations, housing provisions and enrollment in Age Concern-specific insurance offers. Not wishing to inconvenience clients of Age Concern,

they were only asked if they would participate if they were waiting to see an advisor; the questionnaire was quite short, limited to ten questions. Some Age Concern volunteers, who were over 55 years old were also asked to participate, knowing that many of them had taken part in the MITS project (2001). They expanded the qualitative approach even further. The full questionnaire sample size was 58, with five participants giving detailed accounts and many more providing extra comments from which further notes could be made.

Research findings

Of the 58 participants, 24 were male and 34 were female. The most common age grouping of the survey in general was 71-75 years old, followed by an age grouping of 76-80 years old. The vast majority of participants (86.2 percent) had relatives or friends who did not live in the Wigan borough. It was anticipated that due to the communication possibilities of the Internet, many would have taken advantage of it to contact distant relatives and friends. However, this was not the case with 69 percent of those surveyed offering no previously reported use of the Internet.

The "dos": Analysis of Internet users

Concerning gender, the survey found that Internet use was fairly evenly split with 39 percent male, and 61 percent female. Initially these figures seem slightly uneven, although this was not the case, as they followed the general gender patterns of Age Concern users (41.4 percent male and 58.6 percent female).

Such parity did not exist when age and Internet use was broken down. Of the eighteen participants (31 percent) who had experience with the Internet, 15 (83.3 percent) were aged 55-70. One participant was under 55, visiting Age Concern with her husband aged over 55, whilst the other two were aged 71-75. Such results do not fit with other patterns that found most Age Concern users in the research period aged 71-80. This breakdown of surfers is not surprising, given the findings of Haddon (2000), which show that the "young" elderly are more likely to use the Internet.

"Hardly ever" use or not wanting to be seen as an expert?

Of those who did use the Internet, it appeared that most did not do so often. The most popular reported regularity of use was "hardly ever" (33.3 percent). This was discovered by asking a participant to tick one box from a series of options. Alternatively, this result may not be due to a genuine "hardly ever" frequency but could be more likely equated to the fact that this box was not like other options. It offered a more subjective form of self-reporting than other alternatives, such as daily or weekly, and so offered an "easy way out." This option for an answer was placed in the survey based recent research collaboratively carried out by Age Concern and Barclays (2002). This research suggested that the greatest fear for those over 55 is being humiliated or "caught out" by not knowing how to operate an obvious function of a computer, which a regular user should know. However, there was some evidence contrary to this, as a female volunteer who had taken part in the MITS project reported:

> "I think [that] my greatest achievement was one day when Stephan [session leader] was a bit late turning up for the last session. There were about five people [customers] there and we'd planned to be there longer than normal, so they were all going to have at least half an hour each on it [the Internet]. It was a case of "come on, we don't want to waste any time, can you get us on?" They [the customers] all sat around me, and we got through and we were all so pleased. My sister, who's younger than me, said afterwards — "I couldn't believe that there you were in complete charge. I didn't know you'd take over. I said "it just happened," which in a way proves that if you are left on your own you are just going to go and do it.

The volunteer reported that she had experienced an empowerment from this encounter, which had given her a new confidence to tackle other new technologies. As a result, she reported that she had since bought a mobile phone on which she sometimes "text messages" her daughter, and a digital television from which she e-mails a former work colleague "at least once a week."

Despite this, the participant was an obvious exception to the trend that many participants were uncomfortable committing to an exact user frequency group. In this instance, in spite of personally designing the questionnaire, I felt that there was a missed opportunity to exploit what "hardly ever" really meant. Personally, I felt that "hardly ever" may have been more frequent than many of the participants preferred to admit; however, there is no empirical evidence to prove this statement. A sub-question explored the possibility of increased use if access was free of charge. Many, or fifteen out of eighteen (or 83.3 percent), reported that they would increase use under those circumstances.

Meeting anticipated uses?

Previous research conducted by Age Concern and Barclays has suggested that men and women use the Internet for entirely different purposes. Their survey suggests that men over 55 mostly use the Internet for pursuing hobbies and finding information (78 percent). Alternatively, women in this age group use it more as an alternative to the telephone to chat with friends and family, both in this country and abroad (86 percent). However, perhaps due to small sample size, this research found no real gender differences, although it does appear that there are some general preferred Internet uses, such as e-mail (26 percent), and travel/weather information (21.7 percent). Given that e-mail is a quick, cheap and simple way of contacting people anywhere in the world, its inclusion amongst the popular uses is not surprising. The popularity of holiday and weather information is a little more surprising, given that "National Statistics" bulletins have not found it to be used in a widespread fashion. This could possibly be explained by the survey being conducted in spring, and the fact that some participants visited Age Concern for the specific purposes of addressing holiday bookings.

Health-related Web sites were less popular. Given the previously explored findings of Castells and Himanen (2002) and the fact that one laptop was located in Whelley hospital, this lack of interest is surprising. Young and Schiller (1991) found that mental activity keeps the elderly healthy; perhaps the use of the Internet provids a means of stimulation so that health-related Web sites are unnecessary. Alternatively, some Internet users may be ill and simply prefer to visit a doctor or another medical expert for advice, rather than scan the Internet for answers.

Some of the participants who had previous experience of the Internet were very enthusiastic about it. One man, recovering from a stroke, remarked that he was "hooked," regularly staying online until 4 AM. However, despite his medical condition, he was examining health-related sites but instead those that featured local history. As a result of his interest, he had attended a short evening course at a local college on the design of Web pages. He used these skills to create his own Geocities Web site about the history of Abram, his own personal area of Wigan. This site features historical images and stories which in turn has been linked to the site that launched his "addiction." These remarks provide some evidence to support Young and Schiller's contention that mental stimulation improves physical well being; this stroke victim experienced no further ailments since the initiation of his Internet interests. Rather than removing this individual from his real life community into a virtual one, it strengthened his local presence [4]. As a result of his experiences the participant now argues that "all pensioners like me should be on the Internet."

Several other participants also revealed that they had enrolled in IT (Information Technology) classes, and reported similar feelings. This was particularly achieved through the use of e-mail, as one participant suggests:

> "[When my son and his family] moved to Australia in ’93 I thought that was it, we visited them every couple of years, and they sometimes came across, but we couldn’t do it [visit] much. I had my husband at the time. Anyway after his [her husband’s] funeral a few years ago, Paul [my son] came across and said that I should try e-mailing him. I thought [that] I couldn’t do it, but he bought me a computer and showed me how to do it in the two weeks. It looked good but I wasn’t sure. Then I saw an advert in the (Wigan) *Observer* [local newspaper] advertising computer classes for beginners at Winstanley College [sixth form college], so I joined. I wasn’t the only old one, there was a few and it was easy. Now Paul sends me pictures of him and the grandkids, he’s got four, and it’s helped me keep in better contact with them since they moved."

For some over 55 it seems that the Internet is the means to carry out many activities with increasing ease, such as contacting family, remembering fond memories and looking for holidays. These activities minimise the stress brought about by illness and ailments, reducing the need for health-related Web sites. Ironically, one target of Age Concern was to incewase access to health and medical sites.

Given these positive effects of the Web, Internet provision plans appear to be justified. The WEA, as the funding body of the Age Concern project, shares these aims of increasing Internet access. Perhaps greater access to laptops in day care centres (which the organisation runs) may be one way to provide increased access to the elderly.

The "do nots": Analysis of non-Internet users

On the other side of the Web use coin, non-Internet users were in the majority of the survey population (69 percent). Although survey members in all age groups were represented within the non-user category, they were more heavily represented by older Age Concern users (i.e. 71 years old and older), who were also the main users of the charity in general. Participants were asked to explain why they had never used the Internet via a basic tick box. The available options suggested the cost of a connection; the cost of computer; "don’t know how to use"; "don’t know where to access"; "don’t know what it does" and, "no interest". It was required that participants would tick one or more of the explanatory boxes,

and it was emphasised that it was acceptable to give several answers. The results found that the biggest factor as to why these people did not use the Internet was "no interest" in the Internet (26.7 percent) with the smallest explanation being "don't know where to access" (zero percent).

"No interest" or a second-level digital divide?

One participant who had "no interest" in the Internet reported that:

> "People of my age do not take kindly to these technologies — sometimes it just scares them, like a rabbit in a headlight."

In this remark, there was something more than just a lack of interest in the Internet, which may have heightened this apathy; instead it was a "fear" of new technology. I asked what it was about new technologies that concerned her? She replied that she was "too old for that sort of thing."

Just 13.3 percent of participants stated that they could not operate the Web. How can we explain this result? Viney (1993) has shown that the contemporary elderly, having survived at least one major War, are a particularly "proud" group. If this idea is accepted, the strong display of pride illustrated by many of the participants makes it easier for this group to produce self-made barriers of "I don't use the Internet because I have no interest."

One participant said that "my five year old grandson can (use the Internet)." This participant felt that it was it was less stigmatising to have "no interest" rather than not be able to use the facilities. Perhaps this result correlates those findings of Age Concern and Barclays (2002) which found humiliation to be a major fear of an older person. Therefore, if this finding is accepted, the real barrier of access is a lack of skills. Hargittai (2002) refers to this as a "second-level digital divide" and argues that there are clear generational differences (alongside other "social digital divide" characteristics, such as educational level and income) affecting the use of the Web. It is likely that an apparent lack of Internet skills and confidence could create a feeling that the Internet is "only for the young." Hence a barrier of personal protection could be erected by reporting a lack of interest in the Web.

Another participant who stated a lack of interest, but not skills, as a reason for not surfing the Web, also elaborated that his indifference was because he saw himself as "too old to use [the Internet]." Despite this self-perception, in his next sentence he offered that he had bought a "digital TV" about a year ago, from which he could e-mail people. However he chose not to use the frrely available Internet facility. Previous joint

research by Age Concern and Barclays had suggested that unnecessary "whim" purchases are unusual for the elderly. Given that digital sets retail for about twice the price of normal television sets, it is more likely that there was a real purpose behind his purchase. Given the immediate closeness of his unprompted comments, it is possible that the promise of Internet access through his television set could have been a factor in his decision. In his next remark, he eagerly returned the subject back to the Internet, by telling a story about his brother who "is even older than me, and he's been using it [the Internet] for more than two years." The evidence is hardly conclusive, but it is possible that his older brother had shown the participant the possibilities of the Internet, and particularly e-mail, around two years ago, the point when the participant became aware of his brother's use. Perhaps impressed with this, it is possible that he then purchased a digital television set in order to replicate this action. However having experienced early problems accessing or navigating his way through the Web, he gave up. This means that it is possible that the comment of "no interest" and "too old" became a defensive substitute for his real answer, which was that he did not know how to use the Internet. To reiterate, this sequence of events may not have happened for the reported reasons, and the real reason as to why this man chose not to use the Internet may be of a genuine lack of interest. However, this version of events is quite feasible, and if it is true, it suggests that a "second level digital divide" accounting for a lack of Web skills is potentially as important as the invocation of "informational blackholes," On the other hand, this potential difficulty could be turned into an opportunity for the development of Internet skills. It was reported by an Age Concern day care centre operator that they run activities for users in order to provide mental stimulation and entertainment, two Age Concern's aims for this project. Therefore, if laptops were not only used in offices and hospital, but also in the day care centres, Internet skills could be taught as an activity. This offers the potential to reduce the "second level digital divide" for large sections of the elderly in Wigan and could mean that the proportion of the elderly who report "no interest" in the Web could be dramatically reduced.

Web sites of interest: Meeting anticipated uses?

Surprisingly, given the type of site used by Web surfers in the survey, the most popular form of sites which non-users anticipated to be of interest concerned health and medicine (21.7 percent). This provided a marked difference from the group of Internet users within the survey who had highlighted e-mail and holiday destinations as a main uses. However, the anticipated use of the health related sites helps to fulfil an aim of the original project, to promote independent living and reduce state dependence of senior citizens (Castells and Himanen, 2002). What are the implications of greater use of health-related Web sites? First, it means that

rather than allowing health to deteriorate to the point of requiring expensive treatment, an individual can take health tips from various Web pages. This in turn reduces state dependence, where an individual can find information to enable self-diagnosis and treatment of minor illnesses.

However, the 21.7 percent who reported that they could envisage themselves utilising an ICT facility for health means, were also informally asked if they thought that this might replace a visit to the doctors. Uniformly they did not believe this to be the case. Generally those who did not use the Internet were more likely to be over the age of 70; once these individuals reach retirement, they were more likely to have some sort of ailment (Neuberger, 2000). This means that it is probable that if he/she has a number of medical appointments, thinking about the illness is expected to become an integral part of their life. Therefore, when a participant who may not have had a great deal of knowledge about the possibilities of the Internet sees a tick box answer as "health/medical information," it is not unlikely to resonate with his/her current thoughts.

Conclusion

As a result of the "social digital divide" the EU has imposed that national governments should offer Internet access to all citizens by the year 2005. It is hoped that by increasing access, groups who have been marginalised by ICT might become increasingly involved. The benefits for the governments are multiple but involve the creation of an information based European economy, which can rival that of the U.S. and a more self sufficient society, which can allow a greater investment in areas other than basic welfare provisions [5].

If some individuals have tried and failed to use Internet, they are more likely to say that they have "no interest" in doing so, rather than reporting their actual lack of skills.

National government drives toward increased ICT participation have mainly centred around the "first level" digital divide, that is problems of access. In the U.K. this has been carried out through the adoption of the "schools and libraries" scheme and refurbished computers for homes, alongside smaller projects such as the one featured in this article. These

schemes are representative of positive steps toward an all-inclusive Internet society. However a second process of exclusion, based around perception and operational skills, has been largely overlooked. This can be at least as vital as the issue of access. This research suggests that a major reason why the members of "grey" society do not use the Internet because they have "no interest,"

However, despite the forecasted success of access schemes, such provisions can deepen the divide for the elderly. If some individuals have tried and failed to use Internet, they are more likely to say that they have "no interest" in doing so, rather than reporting their actual lack of skills. Hence it is important that increased access to the Internet be tied to improved training programs, providing classes at a variety of skill levels for all interested parties.

Increased access to the Internet and training need to be conveniently located. It has been suggested that services might be better utilised in the various day centres which Age Concern co-ordinates. In this sense, basic skills could be taught as part of the weekly activities, and users could be shown the potential benefits, namely e-mail and local history and holiday sites, alongside potentially more pressing matters such health pages. As well as providing access to those people who might have not otherwise encountered the Internet, this could overcome the "second-level digital divide" (Hargittai 2002) by teaching Web skills as an activity, and hopefully whetting enthusiasm in the Internet. User targets of 75 individuals per week should be easily surpassed, which would encourage further funding for future Age Concern projects. □

About the Author

After graduating with a "First Class" BA (Hons) degree in Sociology from the University of Liverpool (U.K.) in the summer of 2002, Peter Millward moved to the University of Sheffield (U.K.) to become a Research Student in the Department of Sociological Studies. He has carried out voluntary research at Age Concern in his hometown of Wigan (U.K.) to assess the depth of the "grey" digital divide and is particularly interested the mediation of post-national identities on the Web and the evaluative success of Internet access provisions.
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Notes

1. Castells, 1998, chapter two.

2. *Op.cit.,* p. 88.

3. Norris, 2001, p. 4.

4. Also reported by Calhoun (1998).

5. The later of these Castells and Himanen (2002) have shown to be particularly relevant to the elderly.

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