Socitm Inform

POLICY

Briefing

Digital by choice: Bridging the digital divide

Part 2 of 3: User-pull - embracing users' needs

— December 2018

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Executive summary (parts 1 - 3)

Sustained digital participation, underpinned by ICT support in the community and in the home, is becoming an entitlement for engagement in 21st century society.

'Slower adaptors to technology' tend to be older people, those who are socially excluded and those dependent upon state support – and the barriers to digital participation are well-documented, but inadequately understood and addressed.

A 'user pull' approach, built on fulfillment of what users need and want – i.e. digital by choice – rather than the prevailing 'technology-push' inherent in digital by default strategy, is fundamental to achieving a step change in digital participation by older people and other slower adaptors.

Effective 'user-led' approaches to digital participation exist in small pockets of good practice and need to become mainstream.

Transformation, place-shaping, better economic, social, health and environmental outcomes, and re-design of public services are all dependent upon the uptake of digital technologies across all sections of society.

Local government has a crucial role to play in empowering and enabling 'grassroots-led' digital participation and is uniquely well-placed to do so in partnership with users and other relevant local stakeholders in the community.

A recommended strategic approach would encompass greater use of partnerships and collaborations, light-touch management, improved communication and co-ordination, harnessing the motivations of older people and slower adoptors, creating vibrant IT-enabled social networks, recognising diversity and co-designing provision.

This is the second part of a series of three Socitm Policy briefings. Part 1 contains an explanation of the purpose of the series, and looks at 'why digital participation matters'. Part 3 considers ICT learning support and the key role for local government, and draws out number of policy implications and recommendations.

Introduction

Governments across the world have been striving for nearly two decades to achieve a connected world and to promote widespread uptake of digital technologies. Vast ranging, increasingly pervasive internet services offer numerous benefits for citizens and ever-increasing commercial innovations and advantages for business and society.

Government (business & third sector) responses

In order to exploit the potential of ICT, major investment has occurred in government and in business with innovation taking place at an unprecedented rate and scale in almost all areas of life, to the point where the digital world offers 'e-everything'.

In the UK, major programmes to transform service delivery have been underway in local government for well over a decade (since the early 2000s' Local e-Gov Programme) with the expectation of making significant cost savings by delivering government services online.

However, despite the extensive efforts, in 2017 over 13 million UK citizens (20%) were identified as limited or non-users of the internet, with the majority being from lower income households.

Statistics show that access to the internet is currently unevenly distributed amongst the global population, and older people in most countries are less likely to be internet users than younger people.

The population of older people continues to rise more rapidly than that of younger ages: there were 571,245 people aged 90 and over living in the UK in 2016 . Further, there are now 11.8 million people aged 65 or over in the UK, and this number is projected to rise by over 40% in the next 17 years to 16 million, and to reach the 20 million by 2030 .

However, recent surveys in the UK show that while around 90% of the total population regularly use the internet, these figures decline to 78% for the 64-75 age group and to less than 40% for those over 75. Significantly, UK adults aged 75 years and over had the highest rate of lapsed internet users in 2016 at 4.8%, (compared with only 0.2% of adults aged 16 to 24 years).

The statistics reveal a significant gap which has been termed the 'digital divide' between those who do and those who do not enjoy the benefits of access to the internet.

Many studies have demonstrated that the digital divide is not a simple binary division between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' – rather, digital divides arise from three main sources of inequality which occur both between nations and within them. In simple terms, these differences can be categorised as those of connectivity, capability and content. Thus, digital divides are likely to exist where people do not have:

- Access to appropriate equipment (connectivity)
- Appropriate skills and capabilities
- Motivation from the 'pull' of compelling functionality and perceived relevance of content

This analysis has led many stakeholders to the conclusion that non-users (the 'digitally unengaged') can be transformed into users (the 'digitally engaged') by an additive model which addresses each of the three types of barriers. Consequently, governments and other bodies in many countries have been investing significant resources into providing technical infrastructure, awareness and training initiatives, and the development of digital content and digitally-delivered services, with the aim of increasing access to the internet and promoting digital engagement.

Many sectors/organisations (including major business online corporations) - such as banks and retailers, as well as government, third sector organisations and others - have collaborated in digital inclusion 'activities' of various kinds.

Stimulated by the launch of the 'Manifesto for a networked nation ' in 2010, digital inclusion provision today is supported by national government and

delivered by 'Future Digital Inclusion'; the DWP Work and Health programme (featuring digital skills training to support jobseekers); the BLF-funded Online Today programme (delivered to people with sensory loss); and Reboot UK (for individuals encountering complex barriers).

These programmes have focused primarily on teaching standard basic digital skills to non-users/ limited or 'narrow' users who are seeking (or are required to seek) employment – rather than on helping them to enrich their lives through enjoying the pursuit of individual goals, interests and passions in their personal lives. Content has been defined for the target population rather than by them and delivered 'top-down'. While the approach originated in efforts to promote entry into the job market, it has been applied widely to many groups and situations in attempts to promote digital inclusion.

"At my first session three and a half years ago, I found an extremely friendly and encouraging group of people"

User, Long Eaton 50+ group

In addition, to these structured and centralised efforts to deliver digital inclusion, there are an assortment of 'interventions' in the local community delivered typically by Age UK branches, University of the Third Age (U3A), housing associations, community learning services and libraries offering access to internet-enabled devices, and informal community groups.

These interventions also include a variety of pilots and projects and IT 'taster sessions' such as 'ITea and biscuits' and 'Techy tea parties'. These sometimes involve staff from technology companies as volunteer IT tutors. Typically, such interventions are usually short-term, often 'one-off' events, available only intermittently at infrequent intervals, reliant on unstable funding regimes and volunteers, and are often held in premises not usually frequented by the target population and therefore unfamiliar to them.

A 2013 survey of available ICT learning provision in seven UK cities found that just over three quarters of it could be accessed by older people, but often failed to meet the specifications for their digital learning identified by older people participating in the KT-Equal programme. The availability of long-term support and technical troubleshooting, and the flexibility for participants to choose what they learned, and the chance to consolidate existing skills was generally found to be lacking.

Despite these extensive efforts to achieve digital inclusion, significant numbers of older people and others are still not online at all, or struggle to keep pace with rapidly changing technologies and interfaces and, therefore, make very limited use of digital technologies . This threatens the full realisation of projected improvements and cost savings in online service delivery. The persistence of the digital divide in access and use constrains local government both in transforming service delivery for the benefit of service users and in achieving cost reductions.

Evidence suggests that the prevailing government-sponsored efforts - typically in the form of these top-down, 'technology-push' interventions offering pre-determined courses of learning, focused on basic digital skills - are not well-matched to the needs of a significant proportion of learners (or would-be learners). At best, many older people and other slower adaptors are nervous, even fearful, of digital technologies; few will voluntarily join courses of this type or benefit from them.

Figure 2. Characteristics of 'technology push'

Technology-push Characteristics:

01	Top-down
02	Structured training
03	Qualification-driven
04	Predetermined approach and target
05	Prescribed process of engagement
06	Requirement to pre-book for training
07	Emphasis on basic digital skills
08	Often crisis-driven
09	Standalone interventions
10	Variable support
11	Online learning materials for off-line learners
12	Assessment and monitoring of learning
13	Monitoring of performance/ outcome measures
14	Personal details are documented
15	Focus on reaching pre-set goals e.g. specific skills
16	Requires people without digital skills to use ICT to register for sessions
17	Classes often require individuals to register/sign up and commit to attending at fixed times
18	High turnover of volunteers (and consequent lack of continuity in the relationship)

There are multiple reasons for the limited success of many of the established initiatives/interventions. These include the characteristics listed in figure 2, many of which are seen by older people and others as barriers to their sustained engagement in the digital world. Furthermore, interventions are usually 'done to' users rather than being led by them, tending to have a narrow instrumental focus on access and the acquisition of basic digital skills, with little or no regard for the diverse personal goals users may wish to achieve, and how services and content can be co-designed to facilitate the achievement of their hopes and aspirations.

Critically, there has been a lack of understanding that it is the combination of such factors as fear and embarrassment, perceived lack of relevance of the internet/digital technologies, and a lack of help and support rather than disinterest that tend to constitute the major and substantive barriers to the adoption of the internet and associated digital technologies for older people and other slower adaptors.

When people are forced to learn in a crisis (as dramatically portrayed in the film 'I, Daniel Blake') anxiety and fear predominate. Such emotions are not conducive to effective learning. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that the top-down, technology-push approach focused on basic digital skills tends to exacerbate the problems and discomfort of people unfamiliar with information and communication technologies - rather than easing them.

The 'Routes to Inclusion' evaluation of learners who have been supported by the Online Centres Network provides valuable insights into the barriers to learning digital skills. It shows that the learning journeys of their clients are often complex, fraught with difficulty and stress, often occurring at times of deep crisis and trauma for the individual. Importantly it shows that one-to-one support is needed from centre staff.

The report refers to learners reaching personal goals and building relationships with staff; it says that 'rather than offering digital skills as a transactional service, our centres help people learn by developing long-term relationships with them'. This finding underlines the need for an alternative support-rich approach matched to user needs.

User-pull: Embracing users' needs

To gain the bigger view on the impact and value of the use of digital technologies and the internet - and its crucial role in social inclusion and connectedness in wider society and quality of life in the 21st century - demands a good understanding of the real needs of older people and other groups of slower adaptors. Recognising and meeting these needs is fundamental to the achievement of much more extensive digital take up in society.

As part of a major participatory collaborative research process, user requirements were elicited and validated in facilitated workshop sessions conducted with older people. The ICT learning support they identified as necessary to enable them to achieve and sustain their digital participation was articulated by them (see figure 3).

Figure 3. User-specified ICT support needs

User-specified ICT support needs

01	Readily available
02	Trusted and sustained
03	Delivered in familiar, welcoming and local venues
04	Embedded in social activities and personal interests
05	Free of time pressure and assessments
06	Inclusive of problem-solving/ trouble-shooting
07	Offering impartial advice and 'try before you buy'

Source: 'Taming the Dragon; making technology work for us' [workshop at Anglia Ruskin University 2012]

"I can now do my shopping on-line with ASDA and have my groceries delivered to my home now that you have taught me"

User, Long Eaton 50+ group

Whilst existing digital inclusion approaches have generally failed to meet these needs, there are in existence some small pockets of good practice in successful digital participation. In these 'grass-roots' examples, user needs are recognised and met through user involvement and co-creation with relevant parties in the local community.

Research into practice in older people's groups reveals that confidence and success in digital participation arises when older people themselves are the architects, owners, co-creators and central players in an ongoing and shared IT learning support process that has wider goals and objectives in mind beyond simple acquisition of the digital skills necessary for using government services. To create awareness of the relevance of the use of digital technologies for slower adaptors, giving them opportunities to influence the content of learning opportunities offered to them, means their needs can be better met and relevance increased.

Learning in an enjoyable and rewarding social context where people can fulfil their personal goals through the use of digital technologies offers a viable alternative route to digital inclusion. Such a process promotes positive attitudes and enthusiasm, with the outcome that people will gradually opt for 'digital by choice', because their experience is relevant and satisfying – and easier.

The few, small scale but qualitatively rich examples show that the above user-specified needs can be met very effectively in the community – demonstrating 'user-pull' in action and delivering long-term enduring benefits. Successful practice in promoting digital participation is built upon genuine user engagement at a grass-roots level, collaborative processes and knowledge sharing through peer support and continuity of provision. Such 'user pull' (see figure 4 below) has been developed and successfully sustained since 2005 by the user-led IT learning support provision at the Long Eaton 50+ group. Through successfully meeting the user-specified needs, the strong 'user-pull' developed and continues to be sustained.

Evidence that real needs are being met is reflected in comments from group participants and from volunteer 'tutors'. The participants spoke of their enjoyment in the group, their surprise that they could learn to use computers and the variety of uses they employed such as Skype and maintaining friendships. Verbatim comments of participants are in Appendix 1.

The volunteers gained equally, speaking of their pleasure in being part of the group and the satisfaction gained by passing on skills, often gained over many years of relevant experience. The comments of volunteers are in Appendix 2.

"It is a joy to help the 50plus-ers gain confidence and enjoy the use of the internet"

Volunteer, Long Eaton 50+ group

User–led ICT support in the community is being sustained on an ongoing basis in a low-key, low cost manner in small-scale inspiring examples. Low costs are the result of the unpaid work of committed older people working in partnership with local councils, and of an ethos of making economies through prudent use of local resources. Keeping costs low is further facilitated by the absence of the major infrastructure costs associated with established corporations seeking to achieve greater digital inclusion.

Figure 4. Characteristics of user-pull

User pull characteristics:

01	Enjoyable learning embedded in social activity
02	Community-based - 'trusted faces in familiar places'
03	Set up by older people to meet the evolving needs of older people
04	Drop in – no appointment needed
05	User-centred - users set their own agenda, 'do their own thing'
06	User sets the pace
07	Freedom from demands, assessments and monitoring (no form filling)
08	Low cost/free of charge
09	Informal and approachable
10	Learning as part of a social process
11	Peer-to-peer learning and sharing (IT buddy scheme, Skype mentoring)
12	Enables users to try out digital devices - free of sales pressure
13	Flexibility - no requirement for continued attendance
14	Eliminates/reduces the fear of digital technologies/the internet
15	Builds and strengthens confidence in using ICT

Appendices

Evidence that real needs are being met is reflected in the following responses from group participants and from volunteer 'tutors' to the question: 'Why do you come to the Long Eaton ICT support drop-In?'

Appendix 1 - User comments:

"I enjoy coming here, it has helped me make more friends"

"I didn't think I would learn how to use computers"

"Together we have learnt how to use SKYPE, so now we contact each other when we are at home"

"I can now do my shopping on-line with ASDA and have my groceries delivered to my home now that you have taught me"

"At my first computer session three and a half years ago, I found an extremely friendly & encouraging group so found it easier than expected to learn more about my new iPad"

"Initially I felt a bit of a techno-phobic especially as a gent about 20yrs my senior was studying the well-prepared manuals for his iPad and Smart phone. We became great IT buddies & I was happy to register with Skype so he could then practise to 'chat' with his daughter, this became a regular non session weekly session with us and sadly when his daughter died a vital friendship link"

"The reason that I come to the Library each week to use the computer is the fact that it is affordable which allows me as an O.A.P. to learn and to find out how to use the computers in a situation which is pleasant and informative"

Appendix 2 - Volunteer comments:

"Having been an IT professional for some 22 years (systems analyst/computer literacy trainer) - before going back to financial management (qualified accountant) - I find a lot of satisfaction in imparting my skills/knowledge to other people"

"Since retiring in 2010, I was recruited by Roy Smith at a U3A meeting to assist over 50s with their computing skills at the sessions on Monday mornings in Long Eaton Library. In my past employment with Derbyshire County Council as a copy typist and VDU inputter, I gained many IT skills and I enjoy passing on these skills, plus others I have gained with my use of smart phones, laptops, PCs and tablets"

"It is a pleasure to help the 50plus-ers gain in confidence and enjoy the use of the internet, email and many other delights of computing"

"They are a lovely, lively group and I have enjoyed my time with them"

"I decided to volunteer at the Long Eaton 50Plus Computer group whilst looking for a new job after being made redundant. I find the opportunity to help others improve their knowledge of computers satisfying but also challenging. My background is more in Windows computers but the questions cover all areas of tablets and smartphones, from basic to advanced, Android and iOS, which I have to investigate in order to help answer the questions. This is revealing where my knowledge is lacking and helping to fill in some of the gaps"

Resources

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About Socitm

Socitm is the professional body for digital leaders in local public services. We offer networking and peer support, professional development, and access to research and consultancy on a wide range of digital policy and technology issues to 1500 members and their employing organisations.

Socitm works with Central Government, the Local Government Association, COSLA, SOLACE, CIPFA, ADASS-IN, the Local CIO Council, the Local Government Delivery Board, iStand and a wide variety of other strategic partners in areas such as digital leadership, strategy, skills and inclusion, data quality, interoperability standards, transparency and open data. Socitm also has strong links with its partner associations in Europe and around the world.

Have your say

We welcome comments and discussion on the ideas presented in this Policy Briefing.

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