Public Libraries and the Digital Divide

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The People’s Network is one of the public sector’s most successful infrastructure projects. While the government struggled to build the Millennium Dome on time and in budget, local authorities delivered the biggest modernisation program in the history of public libraries. The aim of this program was ambitious, noble and pragmatic – to provide free access to the internet at every public library. Why, then, do we still see newspaper headlines like these?

‘Digital world creates a new underclass’ (1)

‘Disadvantaged miss out as digital divide deepens’ (2)

‘Just who is using the web?’ (3)

Elderly and poor people are being left behind by sweeping changes in modern life, according to Consumer Futures (4), a study by the National Consumer Council. These people are disadvantaged by the rise of internet shopping and banking and the lack of face to face contact with managers to resolve problems. The result is a growing divide between well educated customers, who are comfortable internet users, and poorer families who find it hard to work their way through glitches with bills and labyrinthine telephone complaints lines.

More than 13 million people in Britain live in households below the low income threshold. More than two million people have no bank account. Those who need internet the most often have least access to it. Just 28% of people over the age of 65 have home access, against a UK average of 57%. This is a barrier to old and poor people being able to access basic services. The increasing migration of services online, with the best deals available only to the digitally empowered, is reinforcing social exclusion.

A National Audit Office report (5) has estimated that 75% of people counted as socially excluded are also digitally excluded – this includes those who are out of work, in poor health, live in social housing, live alone, or have a low level of qualification. The focus of this report is the lack of access that disadvantaged people have to government services. It’s these people that must be targeted by government so they get the same information and benefits available to ‘online citizens.’

New research from UK online centres and FreshMinds, Understanding digital inclusion (6) identifies the digital divide not just as a wide problem but as a deep one, with those stuck on the wrong side more excluded and harder to reach than ever before. While 61% of the population are getting all the benefits of digital access, the remaining 39% are not – and market forces, demographic change and government policy are making no difference to this divide.
Futurelab (7) has proposed a new ‘charter for change’ to tackle the digital divide. This charter challenges the government to act now to ensure that everyone can make informed and empowered choices over ICT use and their access to technology. We need to move beyond the assumption that simply providing hardware and offering access to ICT will bridge the gap. This was one of the assumptions behind the People’s Network when it was first introduced.

The People’s Network

The People’s Network has played a big part in reversing the decline in visits to public libraries and attracting new and different users. But the latest figures show a worrying blip in the steady increase in visits that has characterised the last five years. While total visits are still 4.4% up since 2002/03, the total fell by 1.4% between 2005-06 and 2006/07. Part of the reason for this might be a failure to maximise the benefits of the People’s Network due to the introduction of charges, internet filtering and out of date equipment and software.

Charging is the biggest barrier to accessing the People’s Network. These charges widen the digital divide and break the spirit of the government funding which made the Network possible. Charging also creates another income dependency similar to the millstone attached to audio visual services. When services become subject to market forces any decline in income can lead to library closures and staff redundancies. There are plenty of disaster stories around which tell us that charging for the People’s Network is a bad idea.

- Authority A has charged to access the People’s Network since it was introduced. When this charge was waived for the first 20 minutes in 2005/06 to encourage visits, income fell and charges were reintroduced the following year. However, this then led to a drop in usage of more than 50%.
- Authority B introduced charges in February 2007, usage dropped by 50% and visits went down by 25%.
- Authority C introduced charges three years ago, use fell by 40% over night and has never recovered. They are now considering abolishing charges but halving the number of People’s Network terminals.
- Authority D introduced charges for all usage except for 30 minutes on information sites. Usage dropped by 50% and visitor numbers fell.
- Authority E has reduced their charges as they were losing trade to local internet cafes.

The general pattern is that authorities who have introduced charges have experienced significant drops in both usage and visitor numbers and have not always met their income targets. Staff time in administering the charges has also increased, creating a very false economy. I have disguised the names of these authorities but perhaps they should be published within a league table which shows who is charging, and how much, for this publicly funded service? And perhaps the worst offenders should be asked to pay back their National Lottery grant which was provided with the aim of narrowing the digital divide?

Charges are not the only barrier to accessing the People’s Network. A mystery shopping exercise (8) in 14 libraries found that policies on internet access varied in public libraries across the country. Access to the internet was refused by 2
authorities because proof of ID was not given. Among the 12 sites providing access there was no consistency in internet filtering. Only two libraries blocked nothing. In the other 10 libraries, the most commonly blocked were chat sites (50%), an advice site for gay teenagers (33%) and a gambling site (33%). None of these sites were illegal, and their availability in other libraries raises questions about consistency of access to legitimate content across the country. To compound the problem, much of this filtering is covert and so the user does not even know that they are being denied access to legal sites.

Another barrier to access is the failure of some library authorities to refresh their computer hardware and ensure that the latest programmes are available to service users. Terminals go out of date very quickly, slow down and crash, making a simple internet search very frustrating. Some authorities will not allow users to download information onto memory sticks, or upload their work onto public terminals because of concerns about network security. The effect of all these barriers is to create a two tier internet service – the Oxford Internet Survey (9) has pointed out that ‘the wealthy probably have super speedy home connections and access at work, while the poor make do with internet cafes and possibly school computers.’ The People’s Network does not even get mentioned.

The Oxford Survey indicates that 90% of university graduates use the net, against only 55% of people with a basic secondary school education. The internet is used by 91% of households with an income of over £50,000, against just 39% with an income of under £12,500. And disabled people are under represented on the net, with only 36% online against 77% of the able bodied. The digital divide is both a symptom and a cause of social exclusion. This divide will only be reduced or eliminated when the following conditions are created:

- all individuals are able to exercise an empowered and informed choice about their use or non use of ICT
- all individuals have ready access to the requisite social and technical support, skills and know how to support their use of ICT
- all individuals have ready access to ICT based content and services which are relevant and useful to their needs and interests
- all individuals have ready access to a full range of ICT hardware and software

For public libraries to play their part in achieving this we must abolish charges for internet access, we must remove filters and other forms of internet censorship, and we must keep our hardware and software fully up to date. If we fail to do this then the huge investment, time and effort put into the People’s Network will have been wasted and public libraries will become part of the problem, rather than the solution, to the digital divide.

References


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