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DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND INCLUSION: A SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AGENDA

by Phil Ramsey

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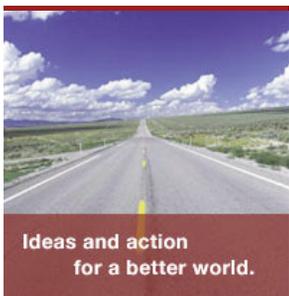
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DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP AND INCLUSION: A SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC AGENDA

“ I do not think it is acceptable that there is a community amongst the poorest people who are not enjoying the same access to information and the same access to savings as those who are more technically savvy. Why should I be better informed and have more choices in my life just because I am happy using the internet and have had the luxury of money and time to refine my skills? ” Martha Lane Fox



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Digital citizenship and inclusion: a social democratic agenda

by Phil Ramsey

digital exclusion across the UK is an entrenched problem, with 21 per cent of the UK adult population never having used the Internet, and 30 per cent of the adult population not having Internet access at home.¹ This article will address some of the initiatives that have been set up to tackle this problem, and will argue that government intervention - to cater for those digitally excluded for socio-economic reasons - is both worthwhile and necessary. Given the enormous benefits to being online, government should work to ensure that all who want access to the Internet are granted it. However, I will argue that those who are genuinely not interested in being online should not be discriminated against by government.

The anatomy of digital exclusion

In the UK, 70 per cent of adults now have Internet access at home, leaving some 30 per cent of people without personal online access.² Ofcom, arriving at this figure in its report *Accessing the internet at home*, breaks this figure down into subgroups of the excluded. Of course, whether or not one has the Internet at home does not take into account potential usage at work, at college or university or in other public buildings. However, of the 30 per cent who don't have Internet access at home, 67 per cent don't use it elsewhere.³

Accessing the internet at home also surveyed participants in its study to find out the reasons for their lack of Internet take-up. Of these, there were two main groups that emerged: those who were excluded for financial reasons (30 per

cent), and those who were excluded through lack of interest (42 per cent).⁴ More than half of those excluded from Internet access for financial reasons (55 per cent), were found in the Digital Britain report to be living in "social category DE homes".⁵ Likewise, a recent report by PWC, *The Economic Case for Digital Inclusion*, found that people disadvantaged socio-economically, and older people within society, were more likely to be digitally excluded. Based on its research, PWC found that:

"62% of the adults who had never accessed the internet (6.4 million) were over the age of 65; 51% of those with only basic secondary school education were digitally excluded [...]; more digitally excluded adults needed more frequent contact with public services"⁶

That the disadvantaged socio-economically are more likely to be digitally excluded, should be of no surprise, given that the cost of accessing the Internet remains relatively high and prohibitive to many. With costs for basic equipment running to hundreds of pounds, and the total cost of a broadband package being on average twenty to twenty five pounds a month, for many this is too great a cost. In Digital Britain, the New Labour government stated that due to market forces, "UK consumers today enjoy some of the lowest communications bills of any in the European Market".⁷ Indeed, the driving down of costs under market pressures is a good thing, but while many still give affordability as a reason for exclusion, alternative measures must be addressed. This is a theme that I will pick up later in this article.

Those with no interest in the Internet

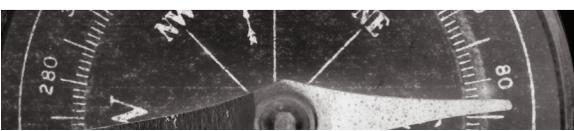
It would be wrong to suggest that affordability and age are the only reasons that people do not gain access to the Internet at home. The evidence here points to a large constituency who "say they are living contentedly offline and see no real need or benefit to going online".⁸

As I showed above, 42 per cent of those who do not have the Internet at home have a "lack of interest" in it. Indeed, the Ofcom report found that even if a computer and Internet connection were provided for free to those without the Internet at home, 43 per cent would decline this offer.⁹ Research carried out by Consumer Focus in its report, *Broadband Minded*, affirms the position of Ofcom in suggesting that affordability is not the only reason for exclusion. The report identifies the fear that it would undermine face-to-face communication as a reason for not gaining Internet access, as well as reasons such as a lack of "motivation", "reluctance to change behaviour", and "Anxieties associated with unfamiliarity of the online world".¹⁰

These findings are very revelatory, and should be instructive to the debate on public policy and the Internet. They represent the views of a significant group who have no real interest in being online, although increasingly this group is ignored by those making policy. As I will explore later in this article, this group must not be disadvantaged or discriminated against. I will also show that whilst social programmes to provide the Internet at home to the disadvantaged are worthwhile, they must not become a stick to beat the genuinely disinterested with.

Effects of digital exclusion: what the digitally excluded miss out on

New Labour in government has not been complacent in attempting to get increasing amounts of people online. Not surprisingly, the driving force behind this has been the economic rationale: that both citizens and the government can save large amounts of money if they get online. If you like, efficiency savings can be achieved in the public sector, seen as good for government, while citizens are treated and thought of as consumers, who can make savings. Indeed, the figures that have been produced on this are compelling, for government, and for the individual.



Financial benefits to the individual:

In The Economic Case for Digital Inclusion, Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PWC), puts the case strongly for economic benefit to the individual. Firstly, addressing the individual as consumer, it is argued that "Households offline are missing out on savings of £560 per year from shopping and paying bills online".¹¹ Moreover, the report makes the connection that those living in low income households are the very people who are worst affected by digital exclusion, and thus miss out on "annual savings of over £1 billion a year".¹² The report then considers the individual in terms of his/her education and employment opportunities, and again argues the case for being online for economic reasons. PWC found that "if the 1.6 million children who live in families which do not use the internet got online at home, it could boost their total lifetime earnings by over £10 billion".¹³ In terms of employment, "If the currently digitally excluded employed people got online, each of them would increase their earnings by an average of over £8,300 in their lifetime and deliver between £560 million and £1,680 million of overall economic benefit".¹⁴

Financial benefits to the state:

In similar terms, the economic benefits to the state, of UK citizens having access to the Internet, are considerable. The report states that government can make savings of between "£3.30 and £12.00", when transactions between the state and the citizen occur online. It argues that "If all digitally excluded adults got online and made just one digital contact each month instead of using another channel, this would save an estimated £900 million per annum", with the total benefit to the economy of a fully connected UK being £22 billion.¹⁵ With potential savings as considerable as these, it is clear to see why New Labour in government has been so keen to see rates of Internet access raised. Moreover, during this time of fiscal tightening, the options to the state of cutting costs by moving public services

online are obviously attractive. This was the message that Gordon Brown set out in a speech on the digital economy in March 2010, and that was reinforced by him on the General Election campaign trail in April 2010.¹⁶

Task Forces and Initiatives

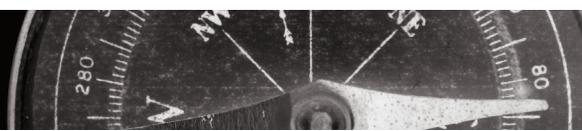
As a result of the perceived economic benefits, both to the individual and to the state, there has been a raft of government programmes and initiatives, set up to address the issue of digital exclusion. In this respect, one could certainly not accuse the New Labour government of being complacent on the issue of digital inclusion. Central to the New Labour government's drive to tackle digital exclusion was the appointment in 2009 of Martha Lane Fox, to the role of "Champion for Digital Inclusion". Lane Fox, seen as the one of the leading entrepreneurs of the Internet age, founded lastminute.com in 1998, and is non-executive director at "Marks & Spencers plc, Channel 4 and Mydeco".¹⁷ In this respect, she was fundamentally a private sector appointment. Lane Fox's role was initially to head up the "Digital Inclusion Task Force", a body that New Labour asked to be a "critical friend to government, providing both challenge and support".¹⁸ Later in March 2010, Lane Fox's remit was widened, and following some semantic tinkering, was renamed "Digital Champion".¹⁹ She was charged to work alongside Sir Tim Berners Lee (the creator of the World Wide Web - not the Internet, which is a common misperception) to advise the government on the setting up of the Digital Public Services Unit, commissioned to bring together the "Digital engagement team, the Government CIO functions, and the Smarter Government Digital delivery Programme team".²⁰

The main focus of Martha Lane Fox and the Digital Inclusion Task Force has to date been the Race Online 2012 initiative, which seeks to achieve as close to 100 per cent Internet access across the UK, by the time of the London Olympics.

Choosing the Olympics as a target date certainly has a certain rationale to it: that of the Olympian task facing Lane Fox and her team. Thus far the Race Online 2012 project has identified three target groups: "All low-income families with children who want it will have home access to the internet by 2012; All unemployed adults who want it will have personal access to the internet, an email account, and the ICT skills to find vacancies and apply for jobs online by 2012; [...] older people at risk of social exclusion can benefit from the internet as part of mainstream health and social care provision".²¹

Far from leaving the Digital Champion and her task force to be a peripheral player, New Labour in government has thrown considerable weight behind the drive for full digital connectivity. In the National Plan for Digital Participation in March 2010, the government sought to make good on the drive for Internet access for all by pledging that "by March 2011, the Government will provide, through the £300 million Home Access programme, grant funding to over 270,000 families allowing them to purchase a computer and internet access for a year".²² Such a move is a fundamentally social democratic pledge, offering to families what the market conditions can otherwise not provide. This programme backs up the already considerable network of 3,500 "UK Online Centres", which provide Internet access to those who do not have it otherwise, and offer a range of educational and training services to those lacking in the requisite IT skills to use the Internet. Indeed, it claims that more than half of its centres "are in the 2,000 most deprived areas in England".²³

In addition, the "Pass IT On" programme - a joint initiative between the Digital Champion, Race Online 2012 and the UK Online Centres - aims to get volunteers to pass on their IT skills to those lacking. At the centre of Pass IT On - is the offer of a "taster session", which will introduce people who are not online to the benefits of getting connected, while the "Online Basics" course and the "myguide"



portal offer tuition on using the Internet and an easy foothold online. Race Online 2012 has proposed that both “formal” and “informal” volunteers will carry out these sessions, who will be recruited through, for example, existing charity volunteer networks and educational institutions. Moreover, generating demand for the Pass IT On service will be carried out by bodies such as HMRC, JobCentre Plus, SureStart and Citizens Advice.²⁴ Finally, the “Digital Participation Consortium”, is “a UK-wide coalition of Government, industry and third sector organisations drawn from across the foundation areas of Digital Inclusion, Digital Life Skills and Digital Media Literacy”.²⁵ Headed up by Ofcom, and drawing in companies and organisations such as the Post Office, MySpace and Age UK, the consortium represents a serious cross-sector network of bodies with a vested interest in getting the UK online.

So far I have looked in some detail at issues of access, affordability, and social provision where the market does not provide Internet access. I do not intend to consider issues of infrastructure and technological capabilities in this article, but a brief aside is necessary at this point. In 2009 the New Labour government proposed in Digital Britain that it would place a levy of 50p per month on all fixed telephone lines, exempting low income households, on the basis that it represented “a fair and sensible national investment to ensure that the overwhelming majority of the country can get access to next generation broadband”.²⁶ The government in the report estimated that it would raise £150m-£175m a year for the “Next Generation Fund”, which would help finance technological improvements to the broadband infrastructure across the UK. However, in order to get the Digital Britain legislation through Parliament during the “wash up” (when all the parties fight over what policies will make it onto the statute book), the government had to drop the proposed tax. At the time, the Conservative party opposed it, and instead favour using money from the

licence fee from 2012 onwards, which is currently used for digital switch-over.²⁷ As I have shown, there has been a range of programmes put forward by New Labour in government, set up to address the issue of digital exclusion. However, setting targets for total Internet access poses a significant problem: how should public policy address those who won't connect?

The citizen in the digital age

The role of the Digital Champion and her task force must be seen as largely encouraging, from a social democratic position. We see this explicitly from Martha Lane Fox in statements such as this:

*I do not think it is acceptable that there is a community amongst the poorest people who are not enjoying the same access to information and the same access to savings as those who are more technically savvy. Why should I be better informed and have more choices in my life just because I am happy using the internet and have had the luxury of money and time to refine my skills?*²⁸

Moreover, she has argued in a similar vein that “digital skills are now part of creating equality”,²⁹ and that as well as the economic argument for digital inclusion, “there is a social and moral imperative to help each of those groups” that are not connected.³⁰ However, whilst such benign plans to improve inclusion and access should be welcomed, another of one her views requires greater scrutiny. In a BBC Radio 4 documentary, “Can't Connect, Won't Connect”, she stated:

*I don't think you can be a proper citizen in our society in the future if you are not engaged online. And I'm not just talking about engaging with public services, but having access to the same information and choice as other people.*³¹

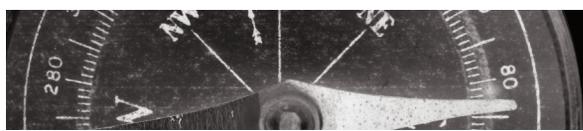
The idea that one could not be a “proper citizen” without Internet access is a

troubling notion. The creation of a two-tier citizenry - those online and those not - seems to undermine the very goal that Lane Fox is trying to bring about in the first place: bringing everyone online to help create an equal playing field, yet as I have shown above, this excludes a constituency who are not interested and may never connect. For Lane Fox, the solution to this is therefore to simply ensure that no one is excluded. However, it seems that the order here is wrong. Rather than ensuring everyone is connected, government ought to accept that there will always be a proportion of the population who won't connect to the Internet. Instead, government should perpetually retain an equal access to public services offline, to ensure that no two-tier system is created. So my argument here is one about process.

If government services are increasingly moving online, than people need access. Many will connect with public services in this way, bringing great benefits for the user and financial savings for the state. However, that group who are digitally excluded, yet have no interest in getting connected online, are often the worst off in society. To further entrench the position of such people is to take the wrong track. This subject ought to be firmly on the agenda of social democrats, and progressives everywhere. Perhaps revealingly however, Lane Fox has stated that she sees her role as “apolitical”, and stating that she looks at this problem “as a consumer and as a user”. In this, she is missing the point that this issue is intensely political.³²

Public Services Online: the extension of “individualism”

As I have shown throughout this article, many of the effects of being online benefit the “individual”, such as the impressive figures that the consumer can save each year. In terms of addressing the citizen as an individual, New Labour in government has been very efficient at addressing the provision of government services online, and making concrete provisions for the



user. Highly successful websites such as "DirectGov" and "Business Link", have collated information which used to be found on 2,500 websites into two portals.³³ In Strategic Government, New Labour sought to embrace the knowledge of the private sector through websites such as "netmums.com or moneysavingexpert.com", and argued for the move to "a genuine two way conversation and collaboration with citizens, communities and professionals as policies on public services are developed".³⁴ Such developments have certainly facilitated greater government-citizen interaction online. One can now apply for job seekers allowance, pay car and income tax, renew a passport, and access a raft of other services, entirely online.

Late in the last Parliament (2005-2010), Gordon Brown announced that he wanted to personalise government services online even further, and create "MyGov"; a so called "second generation form of digital engagement", developed in order to "end of the one-size-fits-all, man-from-the-ministry-knows-best approach to public services".³⁵ Self-consciously taking the lead from innovations in the private sector, like online banking, and websites such as Amazon - which suggest other products that customers may be interested in, based on searches and purchases - it was proposed by Brown that this:

personalised platform will allow us to deliver universal services that are also tailored to the needs of each individual; to move from top-down, monolithic websites broadcasting public service information in the hope that the people who need help will find it - to government on demand.³⁶

The rationale here is clear: individualised, personalised public services - delivered online, and mirroring the private sector - are the most effective way for the state to develop its online presence. But of course there is a cost of the further individualisation, and "privatisation" of

public services: community cohesion is put at risk of further erosion. If people are increasingly encouraged to use public services online, then face to face meetings with others will decrease. Moreover, when public services are designed to best suit individuals, not communities, then the social capital of villages, towns and districts and locales within cities will diminish. However, it is has been agenda of individualisation of public services that New Labour has consistently pushed throughout time in government.

On a slightly different subject, there has been a distinctive, report from central government that deviates from this individualised and privatised vision of public services. Describing e-democracy and citizens engaging with government online, the Department of Communities and Local Government found that that there are weak links between e-participation and community empowerment, and that rather it is individuals rather than communities that benefit more.³⁷ On the reasons for this, the report found that "Most participants will be sat at isolated computers in their bedrooms, dining rooms and so on, creating a sense of individual engagement rather than collective participation".³⁸ There is a risk here in conflating two quite different categories: public services online and e-democracy. However, the more generalisable point here – that the Internet can lead to isolation – is a useful one.

However, market values are individual values, and if the state is to pursue and agenda of individualism in its programme of online public services, than community cohesion will be affected further: As Compass has argued, "The permeation of market values through all parts of society has corroded many of the institutions and the relationships which once bound people together".³⁹ Thus, tasks which once involved interaction with others, and the making of connections in one's community, will increasingly happen in abstraction from the outside world. Moreover, the Post Office, which has traditionally offered

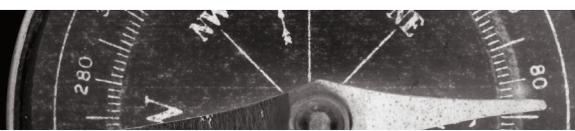
the over-the-counter provision of many public services, will be less needed, and older people - a group as we have seen are already disproportionately digitally excluded - may become even more isolated. When making such arguments from a social democratic position, one must be aware of the sense of conservatism which often accompanies arguments from the left. To call for certain values of community cohesion and a rejection of individualism, may entail resisting of modernisation and change. Rather than suggesting that such conservatism is luddite in its nature, I would want to suggest that being rather more skeptical on the benefits of moving public services online, may be necessary to secure a social democratic agenda on this issue.

When applying the issue of community under New Labour in government, we are reminded of Mark Bevir's understanding of the New Labour project. He has argued that "New Labour believes in restructuring the welfare state so as to create more space for individualism and competition", and that rather propagating a vision of community and collectivism, its vision consists rather

of citizens who are united by having a stake in a shared enterprise, and who are thus required to fulfil certain duties, but who otherwise are encouraged to compete in order to advance themselves in their own ways and by their own merits.⁴⁰

Within the context of this article, we can understand "shared enterprise" in that group who have Internet access, enjoying the many great benefits that it offers the individual. Similarly, we can then see that having Internet access allows individuals to "advance themselves in their own ways", beyond those who do not have Internet access. Therefore, I want to conclude by making two key points as to how this problem should be addressed:

I. There ought to be an extension of social programmes to get people online



Yet..

2. Where the state is concerned, those who are not online should not be discriminated in anyway

1. There ought to be an extension of social programmes to get people online

As I have shown above, New Labour in government has not been complacent in addressing the issue, and through schemes such as the Home Access programme, the UK Online centres, and Race Online 2012, there have been some concerted efforts to address the issue of digital exclusion. However, I want to suggest that programmes should be extended beyond the already existing - which particularly focus on those with children in education - and should encompass all citizens on a low income, unable to get online for financial reasons. One example of a programme which fits this description is the service offered by ConnectMK, a private limited company wholly owned by Milton Keynes council. The:

PC Loan Scheme [...] has entered into a partnership with Microsoft to provide re-furbished computers for loan to local people on means-tested benefits at a charge of £1.50 per week. Partnerships with local schools ensure that disadvantaged school children are provided with computers and broadband connections.⁴¹

The National Plan for Digital Participation suggests that this is a scheme which is planned to be offered nationwide. This should be made a reality, whichever party is in government or coalition, and a bold plan put in place, so that:

Everyone on state benefits ought to be entitled to the provision of computer equipment and a broadband connection

Additionally, Broadband Minded found that "to benefit from the money savings associated with going online, generally requires a bank account", and that the lack of a bank account was identified as a

reason to not go online. Citizens of the UK should thus have the right to a bank account, and with a scheme setup in conjunction with the Post Office, similar to the one outlined in the Labour Manifesto for 2010 General Election.⁴²

2. Where the state is concerned, those who are not online should not be discriminated in anyway

As I have shown, there is a constituency of people within the UK who have no interest in connecting to the Internet, and one has no reason to believe that this change. To reiterate, an Ofcom study found that even if a computer and Internet connection were provided for free to those without the Internet at home, 43 per cent would decline this offer.⁴³ Rather than suggesting you cannot "be a proper citizen in our society in the future if you are not engaged online" - as Martha Lane Fox has stated - those who are not online should be discriminated in any way by the state. Whilst government should encourage people to become connected to the Internet, and should rightly profit from efficiency savings from those who are, there should be no public services or citizenship apartheid. Instead, government should ensure that:

All access to public services and opportunities offered by government online, are replicated offline;

no second-class citizenship status is created for those who are not online

In this respect, not having Internet access should not be disadvantageous to those who are not online. The Internet affords many benefits to the user and to government, but those who do not want to connect to it should not lose out in any way.

Acknowledgements:

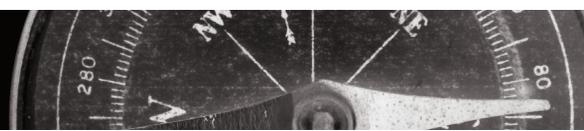
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