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Whose Internet is it Anyway?

Exploring Adults' (Non)Use of the Internet in Everyday Life

Neil Selwyn, Stephen Gorard and John Furlong

ABSTRACT

It is acknowledged that communication researchers need to develop more sophisticated and nuanced accounts of the social and individual dynamics of the internet in everyday life. Based on a household survey of 1001 adults with 100 in-depth follow-up interviews, the present article explores people's (non)use of the internet by asking: (1) who is (and who is not) using the internet in everyday life; (2) for what purposes people are using the internet and how are they developing their own constructions of the internet; and (3) how these understandings and uses of the internet are shaped by existing socioeconomic factors and circumstances. From this basis the article goes on to identify the key issues underlying adults' (non)use of the internet in terms of interest, relevance, mediation of significant others and the role of household dynamics. It also considers, from this basis, how non-users may be encouraged to make use of the internet.

Key Words computers, digital divide, internet, social shaping, worldwide use

Introduction

During the 1990s, the internet fast became the technological application par excellence in terms of representing and embodying the long-heralded

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'information society'. As a means of storing, transferring and distributing information between computers and their users, the internet has transformed the personal computer into a powerful connected resource – bringing hitherto unimaginable networked computing power to homes, schools and workplaces. Now the internet is popularly celebrated to be transforming all sectors of everyday life – from the economy to civic society, commerce to leisure – hastened by the emergence of new internet-capable platforms such as the mobile telephone, digital television and games console. For the vast majority of technologists, politicians and industrialists, the internet is poised to 'affect the world seismically, rocking us as the discovery of the scientific method, the invention of printing, and the arrival of the Industrial Age did' (Gates et al., 1996: 313).

The technical capabilities of the internet which underpin these expectations are considerable. While the internet is primarily construed as an information storage and communication device (Jones, 1995), more recently its application as a means of production and consumption has come to the fore. Internet-based delivery of services such as banking and consumer products (from the direct 'downloading' of digitized music, films and software to the online retailing of 'hard' goods such as books, clothes and computing equipment) has led to the increased significance of the internet as a means of consumption. Conversely, the internet is now also an important means of production – most commonly in the production of web-based material but also in terms of collaborative production of music, software and other digital arts.

This growth in capability and application has been accompanied by a relentless commercial territorialization of the internet by private firms and corporations. It is estimated, for example, that US$50 billion worth of 'e-tailing' took place via the internet in 2003. Yet the social significance of the internet is not seen solely in commercial and economic terms. Governments and other public bodies across Europe are striving to achieve 'universal' use of the internet among the populations of developed countries – thus allowing the equitable online delivery of public services such as education, health, social security and other welfare services. In the UK, for example, the stated intention is for all citizen interactions with central and local government to be able to take place online by 2008. Underlying these targets and initiatives, governments are striving towards internet-based 'e-societies', which are both more effective and less socially divided (Hudson, 2003).

To date, these visions of internet-based 'e-topias' have been compromised by the fact that use of the internet is by no means universal

among those who have access to it. The plethora of market research which has grown up around the internet suggests that rates of people using the internet via computers appear to be levelling off at around two-thirds of the population of countries such as the UK and US. There has been recent consternation within academic and commercial research circles over the growing numbers of people who are either actively avoiding the internet or have ceased using it altogether (Katz and Aspden, 1998; Wyatt et al., 2002).

In accounting for this partial 'diffusion', the voices of social scientists are beginning to be taken more seriously when claiming that (non)use of the internet should be seen primarily in social, rather than technical, terms. If we can move beyond the 'cyberbole' which has surrounded the internet during the past decade, it is clear that as well as shaping and impacting on society in the ways already outlined, the internet is also being shaped and altered *by* society, for better, for worse. In other words, the content, function and form that the internet is being used for (and not being used for) by individual users are not just due to technical issues such as access and skills, or even human–computer interaction issues of ease of use or software design. Instead, the internet, like all other technologies, is party to shaping from social factors. This social shaping of the internet is apparent at different levels. For example, at a societal level, access to and use of the internet continues to be delineated along the 'abiding social faultlines' of modern society (Golding, 2000), such as age, income, race and gender. At an individual level, 'the internet' is not one technology but means different things to different people and is used in different ways for different purposes. As Miller and Slater (2000: 14) contend: 'the internet is not a monolithic medium, but rather is a range of practices, software and hardware technologies, modes of representation and interaction that may or may not be interrelated by participants, machines or programs'.

This notion of people's (non)use of the internet in their everyday lives being contingent on the wider social structuring of society as well as a host of individualized circumstances, interpretations and mediations, merits further attention. As Haythornwaite (2001: 364) contends, media and communication researchers need to 'build a picture that situates internet use in the rest of individuals' lives, including the people with whom they interact, the technologies they have around them, their lifestage and lifestyle'. From this perspective, it is acknowledged that studies need to move away from crude indicators of 'access' and 'use' and, instead, develop more sophisticated and nuanced accounts of the social and individual dynamics of the internet in individuals' day-to-day lives

(Anderson and Tracey, 2001). The present article aims to add to this literature by seeking to explore how people's (non)use of the internet is socially shaped by asking the following questions:

- Who is using (and not using) the internet in everyday life (and how is engagement patterned by demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, age, gender)?
- What do people use the internet for in everyday life, how do they construct their own internet?
- How are individuals' uses of the internet shaped by existing socioeconomic factors and circumstances?
- How, then, may non-users be encouraged to make use of the internet by governments and other interested bodies?

Methods

In order to address these questions, the article draws upon data collected as part of a two-year research project examining overall patterns of IT use by adults in the UK. This project focused on four regions in the west of England and South Wales, chosen in terms of representativeness for population density, economic activity and levels of educational attainment. A systematic, stratified sample (in terms of age and gender) of 1001 adults over the age of 21 living in the research regions was selected for home-based structured interviews carried out in the summer and autumn of 2002. Within the sample, 41 percent (N = 405) were male and 59 percent female (N = 596), 92 percent (N = 917) were classified as 'white British' and 8 percent (N = 84) classified as 'non-white British'. The age range of adults spanned 21–96 years with a mean age of 51.6 years (SD = 18.2 years). According to the 2001 local census returns for these areas, the sample slightly overrepresents female respondents, but is otherwise a fair representation of the study population.

In order to extend this quantitative analysis, the article also draws upon a second stage of data collection involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out in the winter and spring of 2003 with 100 respondents covered by the survey sample. This subsample was selected to include equivalent numbers of individuals with high/low levels of technology use and high/low educational background, with additional criteria of representative selection including age, socio-economic status, geography (urban/rural) and ethnicity. These semi-structured interviews focused on individuals' technological 'careers' as well as their employment and educational backgrounds. In this sense, the

interviews approached a 'life-story' method, which focused on eliciting an individual's experiences through a chronological autobiography of technology use and non-use (see Dhunpath, 2000). The article now goes on to discuss our respondents' (non)use of the internet via analyses of these survey and interview data.

Results

Results from household survey data

Although 92 percent of the survey sample reported having the potential to access a computer (including shared access in public sites or the homes of family and friends), only 52 percent had actually used a computer during the previous 12 months. Similarly, 42 percent of respondents (N = 420) reported having used the internet during the previous 12 months; 3 percent of the sample having done so 'rarely'; 9 percent 'fairly often'; and 31 percent 'very often'. The majority of internet-using respondents displayed a limited 'repertoire' of uses of the internet. The mean number of different applications used on a 'frequent' basis (i.e. 'fairly often' and 'very often') was 3.5 applications (SD = 2.16). In this respect, the use of the internet remained a minority activity compared with respondents' use of other information technologies such as television, video/DVD, radio, hi-fi and mobile phones. Indeed, watching television and listening to the radio were the most popular technology used among the sample; with 93 percent watching television frequently (i.e. 'fairly often' and 'very often'), and 81 percent listening frequently to the radio. It is also worthwhile briefly mentioning the ubiquity of the computer in facilitating people's internet use in our survey. Only 4 percent of the sample reported using the internet on a platform other than a computer – 18 individuals via digital television and 18 individuals via a mobile phone.

These data relating to frequency and range of internet use can be used to delineate our sample into a typology of internet users according to the frequency and range of their engagement (see Howard et al.'s [2001] typology of 'netizens', 'utilitarians', 'experimenters' and 'newcomers'). Although crude, these categories can be used to investigate the social stratification of internet use. On the basis of the data reported here, the following four categories were created:

- *Broad frequent users* (13 percent of the overall survey sample), who reported making frequent use of the internet (i.e. 'very often' or

'fairly often') and used the internet for three or more different applications/purposes;
- *Narrow frequent users* (18 percent), who reported making frequent use of the internet and used the internet for one or two different applications/purposes;
- *Occasional users* (11 percent), who reported making occasional use (i.e. 'occasionally' or 'rarely') of the internet;
- *Non-users* (58 percent), who had not made use of the internet during the past 12 months.

These categories of internet user were noticeably patterned along demographic lines. As can be seen in Table 1, individuals' level of internet engagement in terms of these four categories differed along the lines of age, socioeconomic status, educational and health background. Of these variables, differences were most noticeable in terms of age, socioeconomic status and educational background – with adults in the '61 years and over' age group less likely to be either frequent or occasional users of the internet. Frequent or occasional use was also less likely among lower socioeconomic groups and those individuals who had completed their education by the age of 16. Interestingly, differences in terms of respondents' gender were less pronounced. Finally, mode of access to the internet (in terms of physical location and technological platform) was also significant – with 'higher-tech' platforms and home access rather than work access being associated with heavier levels of internet use.

With regard to the nature of this internet use, within the 42 percent of the sample who had used the internet during the past 12 months, sending and receiving email was the most prevalent activity (carried out by 89 percent of internet users), alongside searching for information on goods and services, or seeking information relating to work, business or study. Relatively few respondents used the internet more than 'rarely' for activities such as learning (59 people), newsgroups and chat rooms (53 people) or adult entertainment (9 people).[1]

Even when considering only the respondents in our sample who had used the internet (and therefore controlling for the inequalities inherent between 'users' and 'non-users') how individuals had used the internet remained patterned strongly along demographic lines. As has been found in other recent studies (e.g. Mossberger et al., 2003; Pew Internet, 2003; Katz and Rice, 2002; Rice and Katz, 2003), use of the internet for communication and information-seeking was most likely to differ along the lines of age and socioeconomic status, although the scale of these differences varied from application to application. For example, use of the

Table 1 Internet users/non-users by personal characteristics (data are given as percentages of each social/economic group)*

	Broad frequent user (%)	*Narrow frequent user (%)*	*Occasional user (%)*	*Non-user (%)*	*Sample size (N)*
Gender					
Male	15	19	11	56	405
Female	12	16	12	60	596
Age group (years)					
21–40	22	25	14	40	330
41–60	16	22	14	47	319
61 or more	3	7	6	85	352
Marital status					
Single/separated/widowed	9	11	7	74	355
Married/living with long-term partner	16	21	14	49	625
Health status					
No long-term illness/disability	16	20	12	53	761
Long-term illness/disability	5	10	10	75	229
Education					
Continued after 16 years old	23	28	17	32	384
Completed education at or before 16 years of age	8	11	8	74	617
Socioeconomic status[a]					
Service	23	30	18	29	83
Skilled non-manual	21	23	12	43	300
Skilled manual	14	22	21	44	87
Partly skilled	5	11	8	76	418
Other	14	12	9	65	113
Main location of internet access					
Home	24	31	20	25	496
House of friends/relations	2	5	3	90	299
Workplace/public site	5	5	5	86	124
Platform of internet access[b]					
Computer < 5 years old	26	30	18	25	387
Computer ≥ 5 years old	21	33	20	25	123
Digital television	35	25	30	10	20
Mobile telephone	40	30	20	10	20
Total (*N*)	132	175	113	581	1001

* May not add up to 100% in total due to rounding up/down of numbers.

[a] The socioeconomic identifiers are based upon the Registrar General occupational status categories used in the UK (for ease of use these have been collapsed into the five categories of: 'service', 'skilled non-manual', 'skilled manual', 'partly skilled', 'unskilled/other').

[b] These variables are not mutually exclusive so do not total to 100.

internet for email and product searching was roughly comparable across all five socioeconomic groups. Internet users from lower socioeconomic groups were more likely to have used bulletin boards and chat rooms and to have 'browsed the internet with no purpose', but were less likely to have looked up information for work, business or study. In terms of respondents' age, although few differences were apparent in terms of email and 'browsing the web with no purpose', older adults were less likely to have used chat rooms, sought out products or looked up information for work/business/study. Differential patterning of information and communication applications in terms of respondents' gender, marital status, health or educational background was not apparent.

In terms of use of the internet for consumption and production purposes, differences were again most prominent in terms of respondents' age and gender. Older adults were noticeably less likely to engage with all of these applications – except for webpage production and accessing adult entertainment (the only application for which adults over the age of 60 years were proportionally the highest users). Differences between male and female respondents were apparent in terms of males' increased use of the internet for banking/financial management, downloading software/films/music or images and webpage authoring – a finding consistent with Kennedy et al.'s (2003: 72) observation that 'women use the Internet more for social reasons, while men use it more for instrumental and solo recreational reasons'. Differences between respondents in terms of educational background were less apparent than in previous studies (e.g. Mossberger et al., 2003). For example, educational background did not appear to be linked to differences in whether or not an individual had used the internet for participating in formal education or courses. Differences in terms of socioeconomic groups were also less consistent than in previous research. Of particular interest in our data was the trend for using the internet for formal education to be highest among both the 'service' *and* 'unskilled/other' social groups.

Results from interview data

While these survey data are useful in highlighting the differentiated nature of adults' engagement with the internet they can tell us only a limited amount about the factors underlying these differences. In order to explore the range of socioeconomic factors mediating individuals' engagement with the internet at the individual *and* societal levels, the article now goes on to consider our follow-up interview data with 100 of the survey respondents. In particular, it considers the data from our

interviewees in terms of the four categories of broad frequent, narrow frequent, occasional and non-users of the internet in order to develop 'a more nuanced understanding of the reasons for different usage patterns' (Anderson and Tracey, 2001: 462).

Broad frequent users Our interview sample contained a number of 'heavy' internet users who illustrated the central role that the internet is capable of playing in people's lives; from daily online gamers through to people who had re-established communication with estranged family members via email. Yet rather than prompting a completely different way of life, the nature of even these intensive uses of the internet was clearly entwined with respondents' offline lives. As this self-confessed 'geek' explained, her use of the internet had become a supporting part of most aspects of her everyday 'offline' life – from television viewing to gardening:

> Sometimes if I see a programme on the TV, I'll look up the website. There will be something I think, 'that looks quite interesting', and then a few days later I'll remember that I saw that and I'll have a good search. And then you find yourself going off on a tangent. But I'm not an aimless surfer. I tend to go out with quite a specific idea of what I'm looking for; it's usually around need. I'm going away for the weekend, where am I going? Let's go and have a look, what's on [the web]. Then you end up looking up at historic sites there and you end up finding out about stately homes, then you find out that you never knew Queen Elizabeth I first visited this place in whatever year. So, I do find sometimes it's more to do with what I'm doing that triggers where I'm surfing . . . I also do a lot of shopping online. Stuff for the garden. Because I've only got a small car, I'll often order things from [the garden centre] that I can't – 'cause you have to order a big taxi or you need to hire a van or you need a friend with a big car. It's easier to pay a fiver [online] and have them deliver. (Female, 38 years)

In contrast to the 'transformatory' rhetoric of the internet, it is important to note how the internet was being overwhelmingly used by our interviewees as a stimulus for pursuing existing interests rather than 'creating' new interests. People who were using the internet on a broad and frequent basis were generally building upon and extending previously developed interests or using the internet as part of a repertoire of IT and non IT-based means. As one man argued, 'the internet is a fantastic initial source for information, then I follow it on' (male, 50 years). This balance between online and offline means was evident in his recently developed interest in genealogy. At the time of the interview, he was using the internet to informally trace his family tree but had

arranged to 'take it further' by joining an established society: '[in the summer] I'll join the royal family history society, they do lots of courses in tracing your family tree and when I get the time it will be something I do'.

Often with the broad frequent user group, the internet was being used to support very mundane and prosaic aspects of day-to-day life – such as aiding domestic and leisure activities in the everyday running of the family household. Although initially claiming that 'we don't spend a lot of time on it', this mother listed a comprehensive range of internet usage within her household:

> We use it for reference, if you want to find something out. I use it for shopping a lot. We use it for e-mail and we use it for estate agent stuff to find a plot of land. My daughter uses it for the Children's BBC site and my husband likes football so reads all sorts of rubbish on there about that. We do use it once every two days; we nearly always do the grocery shopping on it. (Female, 36 years)

Our broad frequent users of the internet typically had unproblematic and unfettered access to the internet in at least one location. One of the highest users in the sample, for example, had broadband access at home via a desktop and laptop computer, a WAP enabled mobile phone and a wi-fi capable laptop; seeing internet access as an integral part of herself, regardless of location: 'I'm looking to be able to plug me into the net in public and private places' (female, 38 years). Unlike other users, these interviewees' use of the internet was usually not contingent on, or mediated by, other people. Our broad frequent users were either single, using the internet as part of a fluid, collective use of the internet in a household or, as in the case of this social worker, had been actively encouraged and supported to use the internet by family members:

> My stepson arrived for my birthday in August and he said, 'I've brought you a present' and he put it on the floor there and it was his old computer, fully set up. Well, he plugged it in and set it up, put it on the internet, everything was done for me. And I would have never gone into that, if I hadn't been pushed by [my stepson]. And he just pushed me willy-nilly into the whole internet fiasco. (Male, 61 years)

The importance of an internet-friendly social context was also evident with younger interviewees who had been encouraged by friends' involvement with the internet to also become users:

> I wanted to get on the internet. A lot of people I knew were getting on the internet. I meet a lot of people around different places – 'cause I like bikes,

> so I go to rallies and stuff – it's far easier just to email them than try and get them on the phone. (Male, 41 years)

Narrow frequent users In contrast to these broad users were interviewees who used the internet on a frequent but less extensive basis. These narrow frequent users could often be characterized as either having less general interest in the internet, less time or less money to devote to it, as well as, in some cases, less social support when using the internet. Aside from issues of circumstance, these users could also be all characterized as 'narrow' inasmuch as the internet was fulfilling a specific need or interest in their lives, rather than permeating into many different domains. For example, some of these narrow frequent users approached the internet solely as a reference tool – often supported by other means of reference such as books. For these interviewees, the internet solely referred to their use of the worldwide web as a resource for information and, often, self-education:

> There is a thrill about finding things out and the web encourages that, I enjoy finding a reference and looking that reference up – that is great fun. For example I read a book by the two hostages who were held in Beirut and in their book they made loads of referencing and I looked it up on the web just to see who they were. (Male, 32 years)

> Quite often, I'll pull a book out if I'm after some information. I go to the book first and if I can't find it in the book, then I go on the internet . . . [but] you're doing the crossword and you're stuck on a crossword, click click, Ask Jeeves and he'll tell you the answer! (Male, 63 years)

Neither of these interviewees made much, if any, use of the internet beyond this informatic function. This rigid specificity of use was apparent with other respondents. One interviewee, who was a teleworker, used the internet primarily at home for email work-related communication – a mode of use which was replicated in how he and his wife used the internet for social purposes:

> Web, not so much . . . email constant. It's sort of a stage where you could talk to someone but it's marginally quicker to email – people [at work] just email. It's email crazy. (Male, 33 years)

> [My wife] is primarily in communication with friends and family. Also she does a lot of charity and raising funds. So that's all communication via the PC. I would guess in the course of a week we would get a reasonable number of emails from Oz and different parts of the country here. . . . My father lives in Adelaide and my mum lives in Birmingham. I've just been through a long, long list of emails trying to work out where we can meet,

> in a couple of weeks' time, with some friends in London. . . . It's used, by me, far more than the phone. (Male, 33 years)

With these narrow frequent users, the internet was very much an individually constructed technology – for some it was constructed as a reference tool, for others a communication tool. These bounded constructions and understandings all had a profound influence on the level and nature of engagement. As this personal trainer, who used the internet exclusively as a 'work tool' for researching information relating to health and fitness, reasoned: 'Basically, I got the computer because I felt I needed it for work. I felt I needed to be on the internet; I felt I needed that access at home' (female, 32 years). Of course, as well as issues of need or interest, in some cases interviewees' narrow use was also due to issues of time and cost:

> *Interviewer:* Do you specifically search out websites or does serendipity take you in different directions?
>
> *Interviewee:* I can't afford the serendipity, I'm afraid. I have to know what I'm looking for and have a reasonable chance of finding it within 10 minutes, quarter of an hour . . . I found in the past that internet use, puts my [telephone] bill up by about £25, £30 a quarter, which I can't afford. Actually I'm quite glad in a way, because it's very easy to sit in front of the internet and surf. If it was free access I probably would spend a lot more time on the internet, but for not necessarily much more gain. (Male, 31 years)

Occasional users Our third group of interviewees made more occasional and often more cautious use of the internet; again, due to differing combinations of need, interest, access, expertise and constraints of time and money. For example, one mother reported only having made sporadic use of the internet for 'holidays, [and] when my partner's going for a job interview'. As she explained, a lack of confidence combined with a lack of interest had prevented her making more extensive use:

> We've actually got a computer at home, but, the only thing I don't like to use very much is the internet because I'm not very confident on it, so I don't find – I mean, our computer's really slow anyway on the internet – but I don't find it very interesting personally on there. (Female, 45 years)

With these occasional users, the internet appears to sit less comfortably with pre-existing ways and means of doing things – being only occasionally seen as a more useful or more effective means of achieving goals. As this woman explained with regard to her extensive collection of cookery books:

Interviewee: I suppose I do learn some things off [the internet], but I still really like books. [As] you can see, we've got lots of books. If it came to choosing a novel and reading it and reading it on the computer, I wouldn't read it on the computer.

Interviewer: Why not?

Interviewee: It's an interesting point. I mean, I've got the cook books there, but if I'm feeling particularly lazy and I want a recipe then I'll go onto the internet – especially [TV cooks], like Delia Smith, who've got their own website, I can just go in there and do a search for a recipe and get that recipe off without having to go through all her books and do that. You know, so I suppose I would have to say I use both things.

Interviewer: So if you were doing a dinner party or a special meal . . .

Interviewee: Oh then you'd have to get the books out, I'm afraid! I have to have the visual stimulation as well as the written bit. (Female, 43 years)

For many of our occasional users of the internet, these issues of interest, relevance, utility and appropriateness were exacerbated by the fact that access to the internet was often mediated through a combination of family, work or finance-related issues. For example, some interviewees' only contact with the internet was via the workplace. As this worker in a furniture manufacturers explained, as the internet was not an integral element of his job he could not (and did not) make extensive use of it, above and beyond occasionally browsing the worldwide web during his lunchbreak:

I occasionally go on the internet at work, just to see what's there really. Really just to have a look at the news more than anything, you know. Microsoft homepage – just have a look at the news headlines . . . I will look at the sport, sort of occasionally. But, um, not a massive amount, no. (Male, 43 years)

As this retired man explained in the following, justifying the expenditure needed to progress beyond these limited forms of access to the internet (in his case via the homes of other family members) into personal ownership in the home was proving difficult:

We have thought about it. And in fact, I'm still wondering whether I should, really. I've nothing, no, nothing against it – I think it's very, very good, the internet – amazing, in fact, the stuff you can get on it, you know, the info. I may well do that. I don't know. It depends on the old finances, actually, to be honest. (Male, 69 years)

For most occasional users, these restraining influences were often viewed as an issue – but were usually supported by a general lack of

interest or motivation to make more use of the internet. As this man explains, not making extensive use of the internet was therefore ultimately a matter of preference as well as circumstance:

> Maybe in the business place it's far more important, but actually in everyday life, you can take it or leave it. It's not crucial to have internet access . . . I don't think you can generalize. Some people, it's just a choice – they prefer not to use it. (Male, 31 years)

Non-users Very few of our respondents could be described as 'truly unconnected' from the internet – i.e. 'people who live completely apart from the internet . . . who do not live with or even know many users' (Pew Internet, 2003: 19). However, many non-users had made no personal use of the internet due to a combination of choice, interest and disposition. As this 'refusnik' explained: '[I am] resentful towards the way the modern world is going – I'm a bit of a Victor Meldrew [British sitcom grumpy old man]! You can always scan the papers for cheap flights. I don't think there is any way we can apply it to our lives to make such a vast difference. We are happy as we are' (male, 67 years). Another married correspondent expressed more conservative views about 'allowing' undesirable material into his home: 'we don't want any more of that stuff in the house' (male, 59 years). Conversely, for some 'novice' computer users there was a sense that using the internet was a later part of becoming computer literate. As one respondent who was learning to use a computer explained, she had not used the internet yet because 'I'm not used to [the computer] enough yet' (female, 31 years).

These cases aside, many of the absolute non-users of the internet interviewed did have, and had previously had, *some* degree of contact with computers and the internet – albeit in rather superficial and heavily mediated forms. For example, some non-users had immediate access to computers in their homes at the time of the interview. The complexity of this non-use in the face of apparent ample opportunity is illustrated by the case of Mrs King, a 35-year-old part-time translator and housewife. As she initially recounted: 'my husband always says, "you've got all day, why don't you go on the internet?" ' Yet Mrs King's non-use was not as straightforward as 'evading' her apparently clear opportunities. As she went on to explain, her ability to take advantage of this offer was limited by her family: 'they always fight over it, you know. So if I come along I feel I'm intruding. But, I just sit and watch and I just laugh, but never thought of playing with it.' Thus, like many of our non-users, Mrs King's engagement with the internet was experienced through others. She talked, for example, of how '*we* try to send email' although she had never

used the computer herself. Here 'we' was very firmly her husband and children. As she recalled with regard to a previous home computer used: 'we had it for a very long time and honest to God, I never ever sat . . . I sat and watched it, but never played it'.

This notion of being in close proximity to the internet without actually using it was a repeated experience for other non-users. It was common for non-users to have a range of social contacts who were internet users, and sometimes called upon as proxy sources of computer use. Parents, children, relatives, work colleagues and friends were all cited by 'lapsed' interviewees as such 'surrogate' users of the internet – performing a range of functions from sending emails to planning and booking holidays:

> *Interviewee:* I booked a holiday direct for Greece. I haven't done it, I just said *you* do it.
>
> *Interviewer:* Who did it for you?
>
> *Interviewee:* A friend of mine who does the same job as me. And my daughter had it at her work so she can do it for me.
>
> *Interviewer:* So you are in a way still able to make use of a computer?
>
> *Interviewee:* I could use it if I wanted to but I don't want to. . . . Booking a holiday, finding cheaper holidays, flights. Other than that I can't think of any other reason to use it. (Female, 57 years)

All of these sources of 'use-by-proxy' therefore precluded the need for these lapsed users to directly engage with the internet themselves. As one woman concluded: 'If I want something that could be on the internet then I'll ask someone who has one. If not then I won't bother. I wouldn't want to go out and buy [a computer]' (female, 54 years).

Discussion

In many respects, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2003) was justified in concluding that 'demography is destiny' when it comes to using the internet. Our survey data certainly reaffirm the findings from previous studies that who you are is strongly related to whether or not you use the internet, and what you use it for. But as we saw from our interview data, the social reasons underlying people's (non)use of the internet are complex and entwined with a host of factors. For example, although it is tempting to see people's use of the internet as patterned in stark terms of socioeconomic status or age, we should not overlook the importance of the micro-politics and moral economies of households and

families, social and cultural capital, gender identity and even issues of status and fashion in an individual's internet acquisition and use (Anderson and Tracey, 2001). Thus, it is not being an older adult or a women per se which makes you an internet user or non-user, but the opportunities, needs, motivations, material circumstances and lived experiences of being an older adult or a woman which all amount to (non)engagement.

Given our desire to develop more nuanced accounts of the factors structuring internet (non)use, it is worthwhile to take some time to address the dynamics underlying the differential patterns of engagement apparent in our data. Here we can start by observing that our interview data pointed to subtleties of inequality which were not necessarily apparent in the broader measures of 'internet use' provided by the household survey. For example, whereas gender did not appear to be a significant factor in terms of the survey data, gender differences pervaded much of our interview data. Although women and men may appear to have roughly equitable levels of access and use, our interview data suggest that the *quality* and *nature* of that access and use remains heavily gendered, especially within the context of the family and household. For some of our less-engaged female interviewees, we saw how any good intentions or expectations which women may have about using computers, 'ultimately collide with the gendered constraints built into the pre-established territories of the home' (Cassidy, 2001: 44). The social world of being a woman or a man has a huge shaping influence on how the internet is used or not used, as it also did (for example) in relation to being an older adult or being a parent.

Household dynamics and relations were especially apparent in shaping some of these dynamics. In particular, some of our latter interview data provided powerful examples of the 'technical intermediation' of the domestic sphere in constituting structural circumstances which prevented some respondents from otherwise making use of the internet. We saw, for example, how for some female interviewees the complexity of familial relationships and household structures were crucial to understanding their (non)engagement with the internet – especially in terms of the familial negotiations and conflict regarding ownership, control and spatial positioning of computers in the home as well as the 'guilt' of spending time on the home computer at the expense of other members of the family (Burke, 2003).

Indeed, the mediating role of the pre-existing micro-politics and power dynamics of the household and family was especially noticeable in terms of gender. Van Zoonen (2002: 17) highlights differences between

'deliberative' media cultures in some households where members of the household negotiate the uses of technologies, as opposed to 'traditional' media cultures 'in which computers and the internet are considered to be the domain of the [dominant members] . . . who monopolise the computer and the internet'. Although some evidence of 'deliberative' cultures was apparent in our interview data, many female interviewees' use of the internet was noticeably compromised by their partners or children dominating 'shared' resources. From one perspective, therefore, acquiring access to the internet but not using it could be seen as just another inequitable 'family trade-off' implicit in many women's domestic labour (Abroms and Goldscheider, 2002).

Also apparent from our interview data was the significant shaping role of differential access to social support. Aside from formal 'experts' such as technical support found in the workplace, the importance of less formal 'warm experts' in the development of internet use should also be recognized – i.e. friends, family members and other personal contacts not necessarily with formal technological expertise who nonetheless act as competent mediators between the technology and the lay-user (Bakardjieva, 2001). This combination of formal and informal sources of technical expertise has long been recognized to be an integral part of what Giacquita et al. (1993) refer to as the 'social envelope' of computer use. As Seiter (2003: 103) concludes:

> . . . friendships, kin networks and work relationships are crucial to the successful adoption of new technologies such as computers. Computer use often involves borrowing software, troubleshooting problems, trying out new programs, boasting or discussing successes, cross checking machines. Advice and encouragement are important components of this.

Although some of our data reinforced the findings of previous studies in identifying networks of friends, relatives, neighbours and other local sources of technological expertise as positive elements in individuals' internet use (e.g. Murdock et al., 1996; Lally, 2002; Wyatt et al., 2002), our data also highlight the structuration and inequitable nature of some of this contact. Most notably, narrow and occasional users' engagement with the internet was sometimes subject to negotiated collaboration (or conflict) with the same others – leaving internet use to be fitted around the existing dynamics and patterns of everyday life. Often the (dis)-empowering nature of these relationships was not clear-cut. For example, some interviewees' use of others as substitute users of the internet, what we termed as 'use-by-proxy', *could* be seen as an empowering use of others – as in our highlighted case of using the internet through friends in order

to avoid financial outlay. Similarly, with partners and spouses, as Gray (1992) describes, women can sometimes use or exaggerate their technical inability to make male partners contribute to domestic duties – making such apparently submissive behaviour a 'tactic of resistance' within the household. Thus to portray the internet merely as a site of disempowerment is to ignore the subtleties of the interactions behind their (non)use.

With all this in mind, we would suggest that (non)use of the internet is best understood both in terms of social structuration and an individual's personal circumstances. In this respect, it is important to note how the internet fitted alongside (or not) our interviewees' pre-existing everyday offline activities. In most cases where the internet was being used, this use was connected to the activities which people were already doing. Rather than creating 'new' adult learners or amateur chefs, the internet was, more often than not, allowing people who already engaged in these activities to do them in different and sometimes more efficient ways. This was evident in the internet's role in facilitating a 'digital overflow' of work and the workplace into some of our interviewees' homes (see Cranmer, 2002). Thus, as Anderson and Tracey (2001: 458) argue, 'applications and services delivered via the internet are not changing the way people live their lives in a simple, straightforward manner, but are supporting and enhancing their existing lifestyles, whatever those lifestyles may be'. This tendency for people to assimilate the internet into the patterns of everyday life is to be expected. Computers become 'extensions of ourselves, reflections and echoes of who we are, were, and will become' (Romanyshyn, 1989: 193) – sometimes disrupting and altering and sometimes reinforcing and replicating already established and entrenched patterns of day-to-day life. Thus, as Morley (2003: 443) concludes, 'even the very latest technologies can always be adapted to suit very traditional purposes'.

In attempting to answer the underlying policy question of how more people can be encouraged to make use of the internet in everyday life, crucial issues of 'life-fit', relevance and usefulness all therefore need to be given serious consideration. In this respect, Balnaves and Caputi (1997) point towards understanding the *relevance* of access to technology and information from the point of view of the individual, and, in particular, the relevance of the consequences of engagement with IT for people. On the one hand, 'relevance' can refer to activities which are merely pleasurable and 'fun'. But, on the other hand, the consequences of engaging meaningfully with IT can also be seen in terms of the effect on individuals' 'social quality' – i.e. socioeconomic security, social inclusion,

social cohesion and empowerment (Berman and Phillips, 2001). Thus, the impact of the internet could be seen in terms which reflect the extent to which its use enables individuals to live their day-to-day lives, experience their everyday pleasures and to *participate* and be part of society, i.e. the extent to which 'ITs enhance our abilities to fulfil active roles in society, or being without them constitute[s] a barrier to that end' (Haddon, 2000: 389). It follows that the already strong or weak across these domains may have less compunction to be using the internet. For example, if one of the perceived benefits of using the internet is to increase a 'sense of community' or 'interaction' between individuals why would people already established and strong in these areas necessarily turn to online forms over and above their already successful offline sources of community and interaction? Similarly, those who are lacking in the life-domains outlined earlier are likely to be lacking for a variety of deep-rooted social reasons – which will persist even if opportunities now exist via the internet.

In terms of what can be done to encourage 'universal' use of the internet by governments and other interested bodies, it is therefore fair to conclude that 'patterns of participation in the information society are not necessarily as simple as might be perceived' (Anderson and Tracey, 2001: 473), and certainly not overcome simply by addressing 'technical' issues such as physical access and skills. Instead, if governments and other public bodies are to play any role at all in facilitating citizens' engagement with the internet then it needs to be at the level of the social – in particular, ensuring that favourable circumstances exist within which to use it. Above and beyond ensuring that the necessary technological infrastructure is in place (as evinced in the current broadband debate in many countries), there is a pressing need for governments to act to ensure that the internet is relevant and useful to the everyday lives of those who are expected to make use of it. While the importance of (re)engineering the content and services of the internet is beginning to be recognized via 'e-government' strategies, unless these services allow people to engage in activities which were already integral parts of their everyday lives then we should expect uneven patterns of engagement. There is a need, therefore, to concentrate on making socially desirable activities such as voting or learning a part of people's day-to-day lives, before expecting the internet to be used for such purposes. Similarly, at a basic level, an obvious way to ensure that social stratification of internet use is minimized is to address some of the basic, non-technical social divisions in society. Above all, there is a pressing need for politicians, policy-makers and technologists to develop reasonable expectations of the internet and its use. The internet

is unlikely to lead to a new, equitable and efficient version of modern society but is more likely, as we have seen in this article, to reflect the same society as ever – just via different means.

Notes

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1. Given the 'spectacular growth in availability of sexually explicit material on the internet' (Fisher and Barak, 2001: 312) as well as the prevalence of other forms of adult entertainment on the worldwide web, the low numbers of adults in the present survey reporting such use is almost certain to be a reflection of the limitations of self-report methods rather than an accurate estimate of usage.

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