

Addressing Digital Inequality in the United Kingdom



George Maier

BSc Film and Television, University of Nottingham.

In recent years there has been a surge in the academic discussion of inequality arising across a number of disciplines. Most notable perhaps are the arguments of economists Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz who have both provided distinct rebuttals to leading neoliberal discourses. It is clear that there is an appetite for debates of inequality, however, there is perhaps a need for greater political discussion on particular strands within wider pictures of inequality provided by macroeconomists. Establishing such insights can allow us to produce a more nuanced understanding of how inequality functions within developed countries such as the United Kingdom, and critique political policy appropriately based upon this. If we look specifically at digital inequality, for instance, we can observe quite directly how wider contexts of inequality found in macroeconomic study can impact day-to-day life and provide limitations to economic inclusion.

In order to truly assess the effects of digital inequality in the United Kingdom we must first acknowledge the ways in which digital technology (specifically the Internet) have become intertwined with fundamental societal practice. We now have a situation where the method for registering to vote in the United Kingdom is predominantly online; as such a fundamental democratic process is substantially reliant on Internet access. More recently, on the 9th of April this year it was reported in *The Guardian* by Stephen Armstrong and Maruxa Ruiz del Arbol that universal credit would be a 'digital-only' service where claimants would have to manage their benefits through the Internet. We can add to this the continued digitisation of job advertisements, meaning social mobility and access to job opportunities has become increasingly reliant upon Internet access. As a result of this, when we talk about digital inequality in the United Kingdom, we must be clear that we are not talking about a superficial issue. Rather, we are talking about a form of inequality that has the potential to bring about direct effects upon the democratic inclusion and social wellbeing of the most disadvantaged groups within the country.

One of the issues impacting, and arguably limiting, academic and political discourse on digital inequality has been the

use of outdated models when assessing restrictions to digital technology. For a majority of the time since the Internet's boom around 1995 there has been an overly simplified perspective of restrictions to digital access, growing partly from the use of binary terminology such as 'the digital divide'. In 2002 Lisa Servon wrote that '[there is] a significant separation between information "haves" and information "have nots"' (pp. 1-2). Servon's work refers to distinct divisions in access to information and communication technology across different countries. There is a strong implication in Servon's work, and work of that time, that restrictions to Internet access in developed countries are so slight, when viewed comparatively against the developing world, that they are insubstantial. While this binary approach to digital inequality is perhaps quite applicable to less economically developed countries, it becomes quite limited when assessing restrictions in economically developed countries, especially where there is a societal reliance upon Internet access. In 2013 Eszter Hargittai made clear that there is a distinction to be made between digital division and digital inequality, and that the latter is a more 'refined understanding ... that emphasizes a spectrum of inequality across segments of the population depending on differences along several dimensions of technology access and use' (p. 2). When looking at the UK it is important to not dismiss arguments of digital inequality based upon the fact that there is a general level of Internet access in comparison to less developed countries. Instead we should look more closely at the varying factors which create a significantly more complex image of inequality.

The Office for National Statistics produces an annual report on Internet access in the United Kingdom, which provides critical evidence for reviewing issues of inequality. In 2010 the ONS survey suggested that 17% of those with an annual income of less than £20,700 had never used the Internet, whereas the number is just 2% for those with an annual income greater than £41,600. It was also found that 55% of those with no formal qualifications had never used the Internet compared with 2% of those with a degree. More recently the 2014 report by the ONS indicated that the problems remain, detailing that 32% of households without Internet access indicated that this was because of a lack of the relevant skills while equipment costs restricted a further 12% of these households and access costs a further 11% of households. What this data suggests is that Internet access limitations are incurred by occurrences of below average household income, but perhaps more importantly, that other indicators of longer-term deprivation, such as low levels of education, factor in considerably. There is a high risk that deprived groups could become excluded from democratic systems, the job market and future welfare payments if public policy fails to address restrictions in Internet access.

In problematising the distribution of Internet access the critique can easily be placed upon austerity measures that exacerbate digital inequalities in direct ways. Notably, we can look at the recent national closure of libraries as a key way in which public policy has not only failed to address digital inequality, but has served to make access more difficult. Often libraries can serve as community access points in areas of deprivation, and are heavily relied upon. Since 2002 the importance of libraries in overcoming issues of digital inequality has been recognised (Chowdhury 2002 pp. 279-391). The provision of local libraries helps not only to provide access to Internet technology, but also often serve as venues for free IT education, either through library staff informally or through arranged classes.

The ONS data suggests a rather predictable link between digital inequality and more generalised indicators of wealth and income inequalities. As educational attainment remains low within certain societal groups it is important to pay attention to digital inequality as a potential further limitation to social mobility. Particular disadvantaged groups may be disproportionately affected by a combination of factors such as low educational attainment and exclusion from workforces that only become exacerbated by inequalities in Internet access that can restrict access to education and employment further.

In order for digital inequality to be addressed coherently, public policy must abandon ideological links with austerity in order to bring about both a generalised release from long-term patterns of inequality, but also specifically a release from the increased burdens caused by digital inequality. Provisions such as public libraries should be promoted, funded and encouraged to provide educational sessions related to digital technologies. Additionally, until Internet technology is more widely accessible it is important for essential societal services to have adequate offline alternatives to any online systems in order to provide a more equalised access.

The information and views set out in this blog article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the LSE Undergraduate Political Review, nor the London School of Economics.

Bibliography

Armstrong, Stephen; Arbol, Maruxa Ruiz del (2015) 'Unconnected and out of work: the vicious circle of having no Internet' *The Guardian*. 9 April 2015. [Online] Available from: http://www.theguardian.com/society/2015/apr/09/unconnected-and-out-of-work-the-vicious-circle-of-having-no-internet?CMP=share_btn_fb [Accessed: 10th April 2015].

Chowdary, Gobinda (2002) 'Digital Divide: How Can Digital Libraries Bridge the Gap?' *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* Volume 2555, 2002, pp 379-391.

Hargittai, Eszter (2003) 'The Digital Divide and What To Do About It' in *New Economy Handbook* edited by Jones, Derek C. United States: Academic Press.

Office of National Statistics (2010) *Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2010*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access—households-and-individuals/2010/index.html> [Accessed: 26th June 2015].

——— (2014) *Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2014*. [Online] Available from: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access—households-and-individuals/2014/stb-ia-2014.html#tab-Reasons-for-No-Household-Internet-Access> [Accessed: 26th June 2015].

Servon, Lisa J. (2002) *Bridging the Digital Divide: Technology, Community and Public Policy*. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers.

- Copyright © 2015 London School of Economics