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Social exclusion and information and communication technologies: lessons from studies of single parents and the young elderly

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Abstract

Current notions of social exclusion are to an extent anchored in older concerns with relative poverty, which had the merit of considering not just material deprivation but also the social and cultural dimensions of participation or exclusion. The focus of this article is on the role of ICTs in relation to people's ability to participate in society. It draws upon detailed qualitative research on single parent and young elderly households to explore what counts as experiences of inclusion or exclusion and the processes behind them.

Dealing mainly, but not exclusively, with the more traditional ICTs of telephony and broadcasting, the article considers processes of self-exclusion as people have mixed evaluations of these technologies derived both from current circumstances and past experiences. It then looks beyond the acquisition of ICTs to show how other modes of access to these resources are important before reflecting upon the quality of experience of ICTs, not just in terms of the functionality on offer but also taking into account that technologies are themselves symbolic goods. Finally, and drawing on more recent research, the article asks what lessons might be learnt from these traditional ICTs when considering newly emerging ones like the Internet.

Dimensions of social exclusion

In a recent attempt to explore the usefulness of the term social exclusion in the context of housing, Marsh and Mullins (1998) chart how the concept reached its prominence over a relatively short time period primarily in the field of European policy-making and then in the Governmental policies of nation states. Academics have subsequently engaged with the new discourse following the funding which emerged. But at the same time there has been some debate over the explanatory power of the concept. Hence social exclusion remains a contested notion.

Part of the debate concerns how much discussions of social exclusion differ from the concerns and framework of the poverty literature. In fact, many the sentiments in EC documents which address questions of social exclusion reflect in many respects the older discussions of 'relative poverty' and in particular of 'relative deprivation' which was first promoted back in the 1960s by Townsend. Townsend (1987) argued that people should not be excluded from acceptable styles of living and social activities practised or approved by the majority of the national population, a principle which has now been enshrined in some of the statements from the European Council of Ministers. In trying to operationalise the concept of relative deprivation, Townsend cited a whole list of different forms of 'material' deprivation (in terms of diet, clothing, housing, facilities, environment, etc.). But he also went on to include various forms of 'social' deprivation (e.g. in education, in terms of lack of integration in the community, in respect of participation in social institutions, in employment rights, etc.). This approach to poverty clearly takes into account its social and cultural dimension:

'….*the crucial thing about human beings is that they are social beings rather than physical beings. It is through social relationships and social roles that needs arise. This comes from being parents, partners, neighbours, friends and citizens, for example. People are not only consumers, therefore, but leaders, active participants and producers.*' (Townsend, 1987, 35).

Three points can be made from this. The first is that while access to resources, and especially but not solely economic resources, remains important they are not the only consideration. This line of argument opened the way for other social processes to lead to deprivation. At the same time the very term 'relative deprivation' addressed the fact that disadvantage could itself be partial: we can be disadvantaged in some respects while not in others. In some respects this moves away from conceptualising poverty in terms of a single underclass and fits better with concerns of, for example, the literatures on gender, ethnicity, ageing and disability. This 'multidimensional nature of disadvantage' (Marsh and Mullins, 1998) is perhaps better captured under the umbrella term of social exclusion rather than poverty.

Second, a key term in Townsend's original analysis is being able to 'participate' in society. At one level this means considering not just what we possess but also what we can do, the extent to which we can fulfil various social roles - which in itself refers back

to older discussions of social rights and citizenship (Somerville, 1989). But what is brought more clearly to the fore in these discussions of relative deprivation is the social and cultural dimensions which are involved and how these change over time. If we wish to fill out the concept of social exclusion with more meaning, it is these aspects which would need to be taken into account. And certainly for the purposes of this article, it would be legitimate in principle to ask what role ICTs, both current and future, might play in relation to social exclusion. To what extent might ICTs enhance our abilities to fulfil active roles in society, or might being without them constitute a barrier to that end?

The third point is that discussions of 'participation' also evoke the sense of being a part of society: which in some sense and at some level means 'joining in' or identifying with the social world. The very words 'social inclusion' have the merit that they capture this sense of avoiding social isolation. It is still open to debate as to what, more exactly, this participation is or should and in what we might be participating. However, this strand (and indeed the search for alternative vocabulary and concepts to capture this element) has been identified as one possible feature distinguishing the very idea of social inclusion (Blanc, 1998).

In some ways it is this last element of the debate which provides the most scope for exploring the role of ICTs. Hence, through reflecting on empirical research this article first explores in more detail how the specialness of many ICTs, and by extension of newer or future ICTs, lies in their particular role of facilitating connection with wider society. This is especially so through the interpersonal and mass media of communication which both practically and symbolically enable participation in the social and cultural world (Haddon, 1998).

In addition, the article goes on to consider some further issues concerning the mechanisms of social exclusion around ICTs:

1) The rejection of ICTs. The current literature on social exclusion already explores the theme of self-exclusion (e.g. Ratcliffe, 1998), and in the case of ICTs this would translate into the rejection of or lack of interest in those services and technologies which are on offer.

2) Forms of access to ICTs. Existing EU telematic schemes and other such initiatives already make available new facilities not just though domestic access but also through alternative forms of community access. But through looking at empirical research on current practices in relation to established ICTs we can appreciate that there are already modes of accessing ICT resources other than at home which people employ.

3) The quality of the experience of ICTs. For example, if we look at housing debates, while homelessness is one issue, so too is the quality of housing in which people live (e.g. in terms of space and amenities) and how this affects their lives. So what are the equivalent issues in the case of ICTs?

The empirical research

The above issues are explored not by reference to some hypothetical 'average' or abstract citizen or consumer but through focusing on the daily lives of certain social groups living in particular circumstances. While it is not possible to exhaust all the issues through looking at the relationship which these social groups have to current technologies, we can derive some general observations. And we can at least begin to ask how much these might be applicable in relation to newer and future technologies.

The article draws on two British studies conducted in the mid-1990s in which the author was involved. These in-depth qualitative studies of single parents[1] (Haddon and Silverstone, 1995) and of the young elderly[2] (Haddon and Silverstone, 1996) each lasted a year. In each study, the adults in twenty households filled out time budget diaries and were interviewed on two occasions. The first interview was about their lives in general, including their biography, routines and lifestyle, economic circumstances, time use, values and aspirations and the concerns or problems which they experience. The second interview explored their relationships to ICTs, including the history of how they encountered the technologies, current usage patterns, the role of ICTs in their lives, concerns about ICT and evaluations of them. Although not a longitudinal study as such, in both interviews considerable attention was paid to how the interviewees experienced change over time, in order to appreciate the dynamics (and constraints) at work both in their lives and in their relation to ICTs.[3]

While questions were asked about a range of technologies (e.g. PCs, mobile phones) at this point in time the key ICTs which most of the interviewees possessed were audio-visual ones such as stereos, basic broadcast media (i.e. radio and TV, sometimes with VCRs, but not satellite or cable) and telephony (sometimes including answering machines). Very few had PCs. So in this article the focus is on what we can learn from the interviewees' use of these technologies, especially from their experience of telephony and television as two prime examples of interpersonal and mass media.

But what has changed if we return to look at such data a few years later? Technologically, apart from changes around the digitising of TV, perhaps the two most notable developments have been the rise of mobile telephony and the Internet as mass markets.[4] Changes in the tax rules in the UK have made it slightly easier for single parents to hold jobs without losing benefits, increasing their opportunity to participate in the labourforce. Meanwhile, the particular young elderly group examined here have aged, while some of the more recent young elderly (retiring over the last five years) will have had more experience of PCs (and the Internet) at work. Some of these recently retired had also experienced the start of a consumerist boom towards the end of their youth (as opposed to growing up in years of more austerity).

Such developments need to be borne in mind when reading these accounts.[5] However, the chief virtue of these particular studies is their depth and the fact that they provide a good deal of information about people's live, including the minutiae, as a context in which to understand their whole relation to ICTs. The studies illustrate how general

social processes are lived out and may elucidate, in terms of day to day considerations, how social exclusion is experienced - in its complexity. It will be argued that many of the general processes demonstrated here still apply, although the details may change and we would have to ask ourselves just how they might be made manifest in relation to newer ICTs

Single Parents: Diversity and Circumstances

First it must be said that researchers examining single parents have repeatedly noted their wide range of material circumstances and the variety of their personal experiences (Hardey and Crow, 1991, 2-3). Both of these facts obviously necessitate caution when making generalisations . Nevertheless, there are some patterns to single parenthood. Even by the 1990s, in the UK nine out of ten single parents (i.e. those with the main responsibility for the children) were female (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991, 1). One key difference between single parents derives from their route into single parenthood. The largest group of single parents comes from marital breakdowns: i.e. those single parents who are divorced and separated; single-mothers are the next largest group, while the smallest group consists of widows (and widowers).

Some single parents gain a sense of independence and perhaps make a break with a past relationship through creating their own home. However, one problem identified in the single parent literature is that of social isolation. This is by no means experienced by all single parents and certainly ex-partners can still provide emotional or practical support.[6] However, in one major British survey 'loneliness' was cited more than any other aspect as the worst thing about single parenthood, more even than the financial difficulties - 48% of single parents mentioned loneliness (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:14).

Commenting on their general economic circumstances, Hardey notes that 'families headed by single mothers make up by far the largest proportion of families in or on the edge of poverty' (Hardey, 1989:125). Single parents in all categories do less part-time work than married mothers and this is quite clearly because of the economics of single parenthood: i.e. the point at which loss in benefits arising from taking on some part-time work forces women to choose between full-time employment or simple dependency on the State. Hence in UK surveys a majority of single parents classified themselves as 'not well off' or 'hard-pressed' economically (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991:31). Similar sentiments were echoed in our own study.

Single Parents: Interests and Horizons

At some point in the interviews there was always some discussion of what interviewees felt about a variety of ICTs. The range of responses from single parents was as broad as that from any other section of the population. Some, usually those who were working, were contemplating whether a facility such as a mobile phone would help in the organisation of their day to day logistics. On the other hand, a number had little or no use for, or interest in, such facilities or others like answerphones, computers, video

games, cable or satellite. Indeed, some went further and positively rejected the idea of having these technologies in their home.

Yet other single parents would have liked to have one or more of these technologies, but the lack of financial resources denied them that access.[7] Sometimes they felt that the possession of certain ICTs would specifically be useful in relation to their circumstances as single parents (e.g. having a VCR to occupy the children while they dealt with domestic chores). But in other cases, they would have liked ICTs such as computers or satellite access because of their general interests in life and their ambitions.

One further consideration was that the very horizons of those single parents with few financial resources could be more limited by their experience of having a low income. As one interviewee put it:

Andrea: 'If I had a higher income it might be different. I mean I just don't ... it's out of the question for me to think "Oh, I wouldn't mind a CD player", you know. I just don't think about it. I think things like "Oh I wish I lived in the country".'

In other words, single parents could evaluate the benefits of technologies in an interview, and they could go through the exercise of discussing in principle whether these ICTs would be useful or desirable. But the point is that in cases such as that above we have an example of how some single parents did not actually think about such ICTs in their day-to-day life, both because of the more pressing problems which they faced and because of the general economic constraints they experienced.

Even where they had already considered certain ICTs, technologies which were perhaps on some ideal wish list, often these had a much lower priority than the other things to which they aspired. For instance, if they could have had extra money, many of the single parents in the study talked of preferring to spend it on childcare so that they could have more of a break from the home and increase their leisure options. For others, holidays were more important.

And yet, the very horizons of some of these single parents could themselves widen in the light of changing circumstances: for example, as various problems associated with the transition to single parenthood were settled and as the interviewees became more established, for instance, in work:

Helen: 'I watch 'Tomorrow's World' and things like that....I find it quite interesting but I don't really feel it is relevant to me...because I think I've been a single parent on a very low income, very isolated, for so long that modern technology has had no relevance in my life whatsoever. But now that I'm getting out in the world, my son's growing up, I can actually afford a life and a career for myself, then, yes, these things are going to become a lot more relevant.'

Single Parents: Experiences of ICTs

The basic telephone had a high priority for most of the single parent interviewees - some could not do without it while others acknowledged that its absence would be a considerable inconvenience to say the least. Several mentioned how important it was to have access to a phone in emergencies, especially in relation to their children since, as single parents, they were the only adult at home. Even if used only occasionally, the very presence of the phone could provide a kind of general reassurance that the outside world was available if needed.

The telephone could also serve as a significant practical supporting technology, helping single parents to organise their life. For example, several of the single parents in our study commented on the flexibility it gave them in terms of negotiating child arrangements with friends and with ex-partners: they could easily phone and change arrangements at short notice rather than having to plan childcare or their ex-partner's parental access far in advance. For those who managed to lead a more active lifestyle in their social networks, the phone was simply important for co-ordinating activities with others.

The phone also played a vital role for these women who were trapped in the home in the evening since they were the only adults available to look after the children. And reflecting the changes in their lives, the telephone took on even more salience at times of crisis. This included, for example, the very break up of partnerships which in some cases had lead to single parenthood. The phone facilitated the support from their social networks and from other sources of help at such times:

Linda: ' I think... the phone, not so much now because I'm more used to it, but at the very beginning it was my lifeline. I remember sometimes getting up at three in the morning and phoning the Samaritans but I don't do that any more.'

There was often less dependency on the phone for social contact as children grew older and more independent and the single parents who were interviewed could get out of the home more.

To a large extent, the response to television of the single parents in this study depended upon their previous biography: if the television had never played a major role in their lives when they were younger, it did not necessarily do so when they became single parents. In fact, for those interviewees with a more developed social life or those who worked in evenings, television occupied very little of their life. But more generally, television also drew a mixed responses, sometimes reflecting the very ambiguous feelings which these single parents had both because of worrying about what their children were being exposed to and because of a concern that television was taking up to much of their children's lives - both of these issues being echoed in the wider population (Haddon and Silverstone, 1996).

However, TV viewing was not always a matter of positive choice. Many of the single parents on a low income could not afford other leisure options outside the home and their childcare responsibilities further reduced their ability to get out - hence the

pressure towards adopting some form of home-centred leisure. So, whereas single people of a similar age often have more leisure options to get out of the home and socialise (Haddon, 1999), as we saw in the discussion of the phone, these single parents were often pinned to home and alone, especially in the evening when the children were in bed.

Debby: 'I don't do much else apart from sit and watch this telly or if the phone rings or have a bath. Because obviously I can't go out. Normally the programmes whisk away the time. Once I've seen the programme the times gone and I'm ready for bed.'

Here we see how TV provides company and acts as a time-filler, but it must be added that, as for many other people, there were particular programmes which had a more positive appeal.

A few of the single parents in this study possessed and routinely used home computers. However, this tended to be because PCs were a standard tool of their work or necessary for their educational commitments (e.g. studying within Higher Education). If we consider the issue of modes of access to ICTs discussed in the introduction, for single parents out of work and with no such commitments, a lack of exposure to the technology meant that they often had little competency with computers, and certainly they had a limited awareness of how they might be useful in everyday life.

In relation to telephony, those single parents who still worked or had gone back to work, acknowledged how useful it was to be able to use the work phone. Many who had had to give up work to cope with young children noted how the loss of access to work resources meant increased costs and inconvenience. For example, where relatives and friends worked, it was often easiest to catch them at their workplace when phoning to make social arrangements. Once some of these single parents had had to give up work they had a choice. Either they had to telephone friends from their own phone when the tariffs were still expensive, which might mean rationing the number or length of such calls. Or else they had to try to reach friends at home at potentially more inconvenient times.

As with other goods, access to ICTs can also be achieved through friends and especially through relatives. This was best illustrated by the only single parent in our study who was not on the phone. She lived on Income Support and had a 2-year-old son. She was one of a number of single parents who had very good relations with her own family, from whom she received considerable support. She saw her parents several times a week and helped them out with chores at their home. But she also used their phone when possible to contact her friends and to make arrangements. Like other single parents, she received significant gifts from her family: for example, her brother gave her his TV when he up-graded his set. Meanwhile, her father bought her the *Radio Times* each week so that she could plan her TV viewing - illustrating how we need to be sensitive not only to expensive hardware or software, but also to the smaller consumables relating to the use of those technologies. In other words, access to ICTs through other

households and in the form of ICT gifts, be they bought as presents or hand-me-downs, could also play an important role for many of the poorer single parents.

But while such support from social networks and in particular from wider kin can in certain senses reinforce interpersonal relationships and was appreciated by these single parents it could also infringe on their desire to be independent. Meanwhile, the nature of some hand-me-down goods as well as the second hand ones which many of the poorer single parents bought for themselves raises yet further issues about the quality of experience of ICTs. For example, in the case of one of the interviewees the image on the TV supplied by her family was of such low quality that it was sometimes difficult actually to see what was happening on screen. In another case, a single parent was hoping to get an old BBC computer cheaply when the school where she worked part-time upgraded its equipment. Yet her son was less than enthusiastic about acquiring such elderly technology when his peers had far more modern PCs. This illustrates that we must not overlook the symbolic side of ICTs - i.e. what 'having the latest' means. Here we have the example of computer hardware, but this is even more true for items such as interactive games software which, as a cultural industry, has an in-built fashion dimension.

Finally there is the issue of economic constraints on usage. To provide an example, in her own youth one single parent had used the phone extensively to chat and arrange meetings with her peers. Now this experience was being denied to her son as she re-evaluated what counted as 'necessary' calls. For instance, she had persuaded her son to walk across the fields to speak to his friend who lived five minutes away rather than use the phone. She had also introduced a regime of charging for calls such that most of her son's pocket money was now spent on the telephone. And other attempts to rein in expenses also impinged on her children.

Jan: 'Another thing I used to do was share transport for various children's activities. So I would often ring rather than pop round. Now I send one of the kids round to my neighbour to see who's taking and who's collecting from Brownies rather than picking up the phone.'

Another single parent had wanted to get a phone in 1986 when she moved into the flat. It was only by 1994 that she felt that she could afford to have one installed - and even then she was constantly worried by the prospects of phone bills.

Young Elderly: Diversity and Circumstances

As with single parents, there is some variation in terms of the routes into retirement experienced by the young elderly in this study. While some women 'housewives', those with disabilities, carers and the unemployed had already been out of the workforce for some time before reaching retirement age, others had a variety of reasons for leaving full-time or part-time employment when approaching this point in their life. These

included deteriorating health and increased stress, commuting pressures, economic considerations, changing family commitments, the changing nature of the work itself and, of course, the options offered to people - for instance, some had no option and were pressured to retire. Within our sample some interviewees had experienced sudden and unexpected (early) retirement, which could be traumatic, while others were able to wind down, undergoing a gradual transition to retirement over a period of years with less hours per week, part-time work or occasional work. Less commonly, others were still working at least part-time into their 70s.

How the young elderly experienced retirement also varied. Some were uncomfortable with the loss of work, at least for a time. Some sought active replacements for it, be it in the form of voluntary work, sitting on committees or through taking on other commitments. Yet others engaged more actively in leisure, for example, travelling more. Meanwhile some young elderly interviewees spent even more time than in the past with their extended family or peers. On the other hand, others led a more isolated and sometimes lonely life, especially following the death of partner. Both individuals and couples were sometimes tied to the home through physical impairments.

Economically, the sample reflected wider social trends whereby many of this generation of young elderly people had managed to build up some savings during their life, some of which had been enhanced by early retirement and retirement lump sums. Many of the interviewees, both working and middle-class, now benefited from the occupational pensions which had begun to appear at the start of or during their working lives. This applied more to men than women, and applied especially less to women who had worked part-time for many years. However, for others early exit from the labourforce had meant a lack of contributions to pensions for some years which then reduced their entitlements (noted more generally in Bosanquet, Laing and Propper, 1990). And for those retiring early, waiting for the state pension to start also sometimes led to temporary hardships. On the whole, compared to some previous cohorts of young elderly, more of these households could describe themselves as economically comfortable - although that self-perception itself reflected the fact that their reference point was often the more austere early years of their life. Yet the picture was also clearly mixed, with pockets of poverty or else the phenomenon known as being 'housing rich but income poor' - i.e. some may have owned their own homes but nevertheless they received a low income.

Young Elderly: Interests and Horizons

While the young elderly interviewees had been willing to take on some additional technologies beyond the mass media of TV and radio and telephony, on the whole they exhibited a conservatism as regards acquiring newer ICTs, or additional facilities. Many of this cohort were from working class backgrounds and had undergone upward social mobility in their own lifetime as middle-class occupations had expanded. Although this generation had enjoyed more affluence from the 1950s, in certain respects they retained non-consumerist values. The young elderly in this study were not impulse buyers, and acquisitions usually had to be justified.   Hence the interviewees argued in terms of not

'needing' any more equipment, facilities or services rather than not desiring them.[8] For example:

Vera: I'm sure, you know, that these things are wonderful for people of 20 who are coming up but quite honestly we've lived all our lives without them and I don't find they're necessary at all.

When we look at the technologies such as VCRs, cordless phones and teletext that these young elderly had adopted quite late in life, sometimes after retirement, these ICTs were perceived as extensions of what was familiar and useful in relation to their current activities. For example, some travelled frequently and used teletext and radio for travel information, while others resorted to both subtitling and teletext because of a deterioration in their hearing. But while some were more adventurous, most clearly did not want to try too much experimenting. Although most had been willing to take on a VCR, at least this technology had been around for some years before retirement and often those interviewed who had acquired VCRs later in life had already had the chance to see them being used by peers and especially by their own children.

Finally, this was still on the whole not the computer generation. Most of the young elderly, like many of the single parents, had not acquired familiarity or competency with PCs through work. Many of those now nearer to being 75 years old had not lived through office automation at all during their working lives, while others had actively tried to avoid computers since they were very near retirement age when this had occurred and they had not wanted to have to take on new ways of working and learn computing skills at such a late stage in their working lives. At the same time, their own children had usually been too old to be swept up by the home computer and games boom that had started in the 1980s (Haddon, 1988). Yet, if this was the general trend, there were always exceptions. A few had used PCs towards the end of their working career, and continued to do so now, as a hobby or while pursuing new educational options such as courses offered by the University of the Third Age.

Young Elderly: Experiences of ICTs

For various reasons, a certain dependency on the telephone had often emerged amongst these young elderly interviewees. The telephone had become integrated into their different lifestyles and patterns of social contact, even in those households where it was used relatively infrequently. For instance, it was common to use the phone for maintaining ties with a dispersed community of friends and extended family or else to organise an active retired lifestyle. As this couple observed:

Joanne: We were without it for 11 days once and I did come to the conclusion that I really think if I had to choose, I'd go without the car before the phone. Terrible cut off feeling. I mean, I hope I haven't got to go without either but...

Ray: Well, we build our social life around the phone really, don't we?

For example, many young elderly interviewees noted that they actually made more calls nowadays than before retirement, because of new family and social commitments. As with those single parents who had left the workforce, one factor which led to more use of the home phone was the fact that there was no longer access to a work one.

On the other hand, a very different factor promoted the importance of the phone. This the onset amongst at least some of a certain amount of physical deterioration, if not in the form of actual impairments then in the form of more fatigue after any exertion. So as well as serving to complement and facilitate meetings, some phone calls had now replaced face-to-face contact, more so for friends who had moved further away. This 'occasional' networking was important, sometimes remaining the only way in which old friends kept in touch once or a few times a year. And even when friends or relatives lived relatively near, the onset of mobility problems could mean increasing reliance on the telephone.

Finally, there was a far greater risk of actual loneliness for those young elderly who were living alone. This was less of a problem when people had lead a single, independent life for some time before retirement, and more of an issue for those who had recently lost their partner and with it their way of life. For some of these young elderly, phone conversations with their children were one of the highlights of the week.

Moving on to television and reflecting national statistics, there was an overall tendency to watch more TV after retirement, although not everyone fitted into this pattern. In fact, in many cases where the young elderly led fairly active lifestyles, TV watching had expanded only a little because their other activities had taken up the time made free from work.[9]

Those watching considerably more TV included the young elderly interviewees who were more house-bound or home-centred through increasing physical immobility. Also included were those who had lost their partners. For these, TV in the evenings broke the silence and provided some company.[10] Meanwhile, young elderly who were slightly bored and uneasy with their retirement could turn to TV by default since it helped to pass the time. In fact, for many of the young elderly the extra free time of retirement provided by the end of work and/or the departure of their children meant that the TV came on a little more now and again to fill the gaps between activities - more so when a certain amount of fatigue followed any exertions. Besides, especially for those less active and more home-centred, broadcasting schedules could provide some temporal orientation when there were few other markers to distinguish the days.

In terms of evaluating the experience of television, the young elderly have just as complex a relationship to TV as any other groups in society.[11] For example, a number felt guilty about TV watching, rationing their viewing and seeing TV watching as a waste of time and non-constructive leisure.[12] In fact, it has been suggested that the earlier experiences of this cohort of people created a stronger work ethic, which included the feeling that they had to have authentic pleasures (Willis, 1995: 7). Hence, a number of writers mention how the elderly strive to keep control of TV and not let it

dominate their lives (e.g. Willis, 1995: 7). Over and above the issue of their relationship to TV in general, most of our participants made some effort to see programmes such as the news. They felt that TV in general provided a window on the world and they considered that it had some positive educational value. This all illustrated how the young elderly, contrary to some stereotypes, have often not disengaged just because they are no longer involved in the social world of work.[13]

Returning to the issue of the mode of access to ICTs, although many of the young elderly were affluent enough to afford whatever they wanted, gifts of ICTs were sometimes important. For example, some of the young elderly interviews had first received a VCR from their children when they might not necessarily have thought of buying one for themselves. As with single parents, small telecoms items such as extension phones also provided an example of the type of technology which could be a gift.

As one sign of financial constraint, the phone bill posed problems in the poorer households:

Rosie: I've got my sister up in Lincolnshire and my daughter's at Clacton. My son lives at Chelmsford and I've got another sister up in Nuneaton, so by the time I phone all them sort of thing, I was getting really out of hand. My son had to come to the rescue before because I'd had... about £90 I think the phone bill was. But then I suppose I do it for someone to talk to, don't you really (...) I wouldn't do without me phone. They keep on telling me to cut it down but once you start talking you don't realise how long you've been on it, do you, really?

In addition to the influence of their current economic circumstances we also see the effect of an historical legacy. The interviews in this cohort of people, and especially those of working-class origins (whether they had been upwardly mobile or not), had a generally great sensitivity to spending money because of the experience of austerity in their earlier years. Even those who regarded themselves as 'comfortable' now were often careful with money, which included being careful about phone bills.

Lessons learnt

We return now to the earlier discussion of 'participation', ICTs and social exclusion. These cases studies show how telephony, the example of an interpersonal medium of communication, has increasingly come to play a very important role in facilitating the logistics of everyday life. It allowed the single parents and young elderly in these studies to be contactable quickly, to find out what was going on and to co-ordinate their interactions with others. In this sense we see how an interpersonal ICT helped to enable face-to-face contact and sociability.

But the telephone was also itself a significant channel of communication for maintaining involvement in familial and social networks. In general this becomes ever more important to the extent that people operate over wider geographical areas and make contacts beyond the very local area, and as greater mobility disperses both friends and kin. These particular groups remind us that that telephony can be even more vital when having a relatively home-centred life is not totally a matter of choice but reflects certain constraints. And in the examples of trauma noted early, we see how it is not always the daily usage of the facility which is important but rather having the security to be able to reach out to the world should the occasion necessitate it.

Television, as the example of a mass medium, was more problematic in respect to arguments about 'participation' as a dimension of social inclusion. Some of the interviewees in these two studies would indeed acknowledge that TV offered them a different level at which to engage, enabling many of them to feel part of the social world.   And as Meyrowitz noted some years ago, this could be especially important in terms of providing those who are home-centred, or home-bound, with a form of company to help them feel less isolated (Meyrowitz, 1985). But whereas the phone was usually a privileged ICT, TV was generally regarded more ambiguously by these interviewees. On the other hand, few would consider being without it, such was television's established place in everyday life.

If we move on to the question identified in the introduction concerning why people reject ICTs, one preliminary point to make is that while the particular merits of ICTs have been stressed so far, we have also seen how they can provoke a mixed response. This was perhaps most clearly expressed in relation to watching TV but it was also clear, for example, in concerns about the costs of telephony. In fact, in the single parent study, one participant refused to have TV, while another decided she could not afford a telephone. An additional ground for rejecting new ICTs is that existing interpersonal and mass media already facilitate enough participation in the social world. Hence, a common response in these studies that there was 'no need' for alternative media.

In this respect, the case of the young elderly showed the influence of past biography in this process, underlining the importance of what is familiar, what competencies have been developed over time and what values have emerged. Meanwhile, the case of single parents showed especially well how people's horizons can also be limited by current social circumstances, especially the low income received by people in this position. Neither of these rule out new ICTs such as the Internet becoming more salient in people's lives over time. But it does show how non-adoption is based on values and priorities, albeit ones which social scientists would seek to understand.

The second issue raised in the introduction concerned modes of access to ICTs. Whether it is for the purpose of attempting to measure the options open to people or for the purpose of analysing the social processes which might have a bearing on social exclusion, it is important to look beyond the ICTs which people possess in their own homes. Generally speaking, it can be just as important that people are able to utilise resources, even if they do not own them. In the actual case studies, the clearest example

of this was, institutional access (or lack of it) to telephony through work. Such institutional access to ICTs for personal use tends to under-researched, but it can be equally important as domestic access in the case of new media such as the Internet (Haddon, 1999).

In general, many people first encounter new ICTs in contexts outside the home. Hence it is in such situations that they learn not only how to use them but under what conditions and how they can be useful. A similar point can be made concerning access to ICTs via friends and family. If we refer back to the actual case studies, we saw in the case of the single parents an example of how such access could be important. More recent research on the Internet underlines the point that it is sometimes through seeing ICTs in use in other people's home that a new technology is first appreciated (Haddon, 1999). Indeed, in the case studies, this is where the young elderly interviewees in the case study often first encountered VCRs. Of course, the corollary is that if people move in social networks which themselves do not possess new technologies, then this route to envisaging the possibilities offered by ICTs is not open

As regards the third issue, the quality of the experience of ICTs, we have already noted how interviewees in our case studies had anxieties about technologies. Particularly in the case of telephony we also saw how on-going costs could constrain usage. Obviously related questions, especially about economic constraint on use, could be asked of new ICTs such as the Internet. Second, we saw how ICTs can be more or less limited in terms of their functionality and in terms of the quality of what they deliver. The same would apply to new media. For those people experiencing relatively more economic constraints, a variety of goods, including equipment, may often be either acquired cheaply or second-hand. So in the case of the Internet, when assessing the facilities to which people have access, it will also be necessary to take into account how sophisticated that access is - and obviously this is a moving target as both technologies and applications evolve. Lastly, we have to appreciate that technologies are just like other goods in that it is not just the functionality which is important. In the case of new ICTs we must lose sight of the fact that ICTs also carry symbolic connotations, for example ranging from being the latest or high-tech to being relatively obsolete or out-of-date.

Implications for the analysis of newer ICTs: The case of the Internet

This last section speculates, albeit with the aid of some different, more recent empirical studies, about how we might wish to use these insights in relation to newer ICTs. The examples chosen relate to the Internet since this is both a medium of interpersonal communication and a mass medium, and hence lessons can be learnt from telephony and television. The Internet was also on none of the horizons of the single parent and young elderly interviewees at the time of the studies discussed above.

As a medium of interpersonal communication, more recent research[14] is already showing how e-mail is starting to complement voice telephony in some social circles for the purposes of social messaging and for making arrangements - for example, to organise

meetings (Haddon, 1999). In some cases, perishable information about what options are possible, what is going on, and what people might participate in, lends itself to distribution by e-mail because of its one-to-many facility. Meanwhile, while many of those on-line still prefer voice telephony for longer periods of interaction with others, we see especially in the case of international e-mail the first signs that voice telephony is sometimes displaced because the costs of the Internet are so much cheaper. In fact, some people now keep in touch more with friends and relatives abroad then they ever would have done relying on telephony (Haddon, 1999).

In the light of the discussion so far we might ask for what purposes and at what stage might a lack of access to on-line messaging start to constitute a disadvantage? Can such a lack of access mean that (new forms of) information or communication passed around within social networks are missed, or would the fall-back of voice telephony usually suffice? Just how important is it for different social groups to have new forms of maintaining links with distant social networks? To what extent and by whom would textual messaging be rejected precisely because voice communication is both more comfortable and familiar.

Turning to its qualities as a mass medium, the Internet can offer an alternative window on the world compared to existing broadcast media. While many people in general still use the Web as an information resource to look up material as and when needed, for others the on-line world is already a 'place' that is interesting to visit, where people can find out and feel informed about what is going on, and sometimes visit various communities of interest (and indeed some EC projects try to foster such communities among groups felt to be social excluded).

But if we think about the discussion of the single parents and young elderly, to what extent will different social groups perceive the content of the Web ambivalently, just as they do in regards to TV content? To what extent will the activity of browsing on-line be evaluated as constructive leisure versus wasting time, just a people compare time spent watching TV with time used for other activities? And of course, what is often presented as the great merit of the Internet compared to mass media, its interactivity, may be less well appreciated by groups which have not yet embraced the PC. To what extent will being without access to the Web be perceived as being a disadvantage, or something one can do without given all the existing source of information and entertainment?

More generally, the case studies remind us the patterns of adoption of newer ICTs like the Internet among different social networks will help shape the contact which people have with the on-line world. The studies also underline the constraints which are always imposed by the cost of access and of hardware. And they draw attention to the different quality of the experience of the Internet which people might have even if they can afford or are provided with a means of access - e.g. if they ultimately use older, less powerful, PCs or relatively slower modems.

To sum up, the usefulness of these case studies lays in the subtlety, detail and complexity of the examples, which nevertheless attempt to explore what might count as experiences of social inclusion and exclusion and the processes behind them. This final section notes how such questions, or equivalent questions, can equally well be asked of newer or future ICTs. Moreover, the overall implication is that we can gain some critical understanding from an approach which looks more at how technologies fit into, or alternatively find little place within, the totality of people's everyday lives, including the experiences which they bring with them from their past.

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[1] The term 'lone parent' is more common in the UK - hence this is the term that appears in the references to British research.

[2] Defined methodologically as people between 60 and 75 years old.

[3] Obviously this relies on the interviewees memory, or collective memory when two adults were interviewed.

[4] While questions were asked about mobile phones, at the time of the research the technology was simply not so ubiquitous, fashionable, and cheap (i.e. the competition was not so developed and at that time mobile phones could only be obtained by subscription).

[5] In fact, it would be of value to carry out longitudinal studies of such groups to see how much the socially derived constraints, evaluations and horizons which are described below remained or altered, especially in the face of development of new mass market technologies.

[6]Discussed by French, 1991:136.

[7]It is worth adding that despite some discussions of technologies and gender which portray women as being wary of ICTs, the female single parents in our study often expressed an interest in a range of technologies.

[8]Although this response has been found in at least some households amongst all the various groups studied over the years, it was more common in the study of the young elderly.

[9]This process has also been observed by other researchers such as Randall,1995: 5, Willis, 1995: 6 and Bleise, 1986: 574.

[10]A theme also noted in Bliese, 1986: 580.

[11]Discussed also by Cook, 1990: 49.

[12]Also noted in Randall, 1995: 4 and Cook, 1990: 49.

[13]See also Bliese, 1986: 575-6; Willis, 1995: 3, 8.

[14] This was based on a five country qualitative study for NCR Financial Services involving in-depth research on 20 households per country and focusing on single person households and dual-income families Haddon, 1999).