

Digital Inequality: Disadvantaged Young People Experience Higher Barriers to Digital Engagement



Britain is rapidly digitising, increasing opportunities across a wide range of areas in our everyday lives, from interacting, to being informed and to undertaking transactions more rapidly and at lower cost. Yet, both academic and policy research show that the benefits achieved from digital engagement are not distributed equally. Dr. Ellen Helsper, an expert on digital inequality and Associate Professor in the Department of Media and Communications at the LSE, presented the findings of a study commissioned by the Prince's Trust that looked into the socio-digital skills of young people and the relationship these have to their

general well-being. The accompanying report, "Slipping through the Net", is launched in Parliament today.

The study confirms that whilst access to the Internet in some form is near-universal, the quality of such access, digital skills levels, the availability and expertise of support networks, and, most importantly, outcomes of digital engagement differ radically for disadvantaged young people. This report compared young people in general with those who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEETs). It shows that NEETs encounter barriers to engagement to a greater extent than their peers, for example, in technical as well as 'soft' skills, such as netiquette, online self-representation and risk avoidance. Qualitative findings vividly illustrate the quantitative survey work done by providing narratives around dehumanising online experiences, disengagement through frustration and rejection (see the [full report](#) for details).

The report highlights the importance of diversity of personal support networks and motivations to engage with the digital environments. For example, the support that NEETs use is primarily made up of their friends and family, while their peers make use of more specialized services, such as technical support forums, experts and colleagues or teachers. When it comes to attitudes and a desire to engage in digital activities, half of NEETs reported that no one online could be trusted. Many talked about a lack of reaction to online queries, especially when it came to job applications. This lack of response was experienced more painfully by NEET youth as it amplified the common experiences of rejection in everyday life. Yet, even in the face of multiple negative experiences, NEET youth remain optimistic about the potential contributes of the Internet to the society in general and to them in particular.

The overarching narrative of the policy recommendations is as follows: digital inequalities are complex and multidimensional, thus they require complex multi-stakeholder solutions. Thus, socio-digital inequalities cannot be tackled without a collaborative effort from the government, education, NGOs and business sectors. Initiatives with young people should create an environment that supports them in gaining a wide variety of digital capabilities ranging from technical proficiencies to resilience building and soft skills. To make future efforts more successful, additional investment in 1) training youth-facing support service providers in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) related issues and 2) more thoughtful design and evaluation of ICT interventions and training is needed.

Dr. Helsper summarized the core message of the report: *"Surviving in this digital world is about more than technical infrastructure and skills. A range of capabilities is needed for a wide range of activities related to general well-being. Therefore, a multi-stakeholder approach involving various government departments, as well as the commercial and third sectors is the only way forward to avoid disadvantaged youth falling further behind."*

In the last decade the debates around digital inequalities have become increasingly complex, as both scholars and policymakers recognize that a shift in thinking about digital inequalities is necessary. Thus, the conversation moved away from a simplistic approach to inequality-as-access to a more complex narrative of digital inequality as a compound and multidimensional issue. Dr. Helsper's report advances this line of thinking by taking a look at everyday digital engagement and exclusion amongst a generation that has been described as digital natives. It takes a novel approach by focussing on the tangible outcomes of digital engagement, as well as more traditional aspects such as ICT access, skills, use and motivation to engage.

According to data collected by the Office for the National Statistics in 2016 there are around 865,000 young people country-wide who can be classified as NEET. These young people are among the most vulnerable clusters of the country. Frequently, NEET youth suffers from compound socio-economic, as well as digital disadvantages. Experiences of homelessness, rejection, lack of connection to and care from educational and employment institutions go hand-in-hand with the lack of opportunities and abilities to engage fruitfully with the digital realm.

This post gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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