

E-Participation: Looking Beyond Skills and Realising Public Value

Digital inclusion is a key part of the European Digital Agenda 2020. Without ‘inclusion for all’ the citizens of Europe will neither contribute to nor benefit from the promise of Open Government nor reap the potential economic and social benefits that can be achieved in the next 10 years. The traditional approach to inclusion has been to look at the provision of ICT skills and to help people to develop the necessary competencies that will enable them to participate in a digital economy. The context of digital inclusion is changing because of the impact of rapid developments in technology and the way that individuals and communities interact with each other and produce and consume digital content in the form of services and products. This means that to facilitate transparency of government operations we need to re-visit what we believe to be the capacity requirement for all members of society; we must re-examine the prerequisites for engagement and recognise the emerging opportunities for the co-production of public services in the form of public value chains and new business models. This is necessary in order that the transformation and e-enabling of front-line government officials will be effective in particular for those individuals and communities that are the biggest consumers of public services. Skills remain an important element of the digital inclusion agenda and this paper seeks to argue that there is a need to look beyond skills when addressing digital and social exclusion and to consider other ways to engage the disengaged in the light of the challenges that technological changes are bringing.



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1. Introduction

The social impact of ICT is recognised by the European Commission as significant with more than 250 million daily internet users in Europe and virtually all Europeans owning mobile phones (European Commission, 2010). This adoption of technology is changing lifestyles. In addition, the convergence of services towards digital platforms means that within 10 years digital content and applications will be delivered almost entirely online. These developments are seen in a positive context where content and access drive demand which in turn attracts investment in technology and services. At the same time the Commission identifies a number of barriers to the realisation of the benefits of the new technologies, not least:

“...insufficient internet access, insufficient usability, by lack of relevant skills or by lack of accessibility for all.” (European Commission, 2010, p.6).

In the i2010 Annual Report, the European Commission (2008) reported that in 2007 regular Internet users were 51% of the total population. By 2008 this percentage had reached 56% but this equates to approximately 218 million people across the EU 27 who remain digitally disengaged and probably excluded (Codagnone & Osimo, 2008). The Commission identifies a final 30% of disengaged users comprising older people, those on low incomes, those who are unemployed and those who are less educated who will not reap any benefits from information technology advances (European Commission, 2010, p.24 - 25). The percentage of homes having access to the Internet varies across individual countries from just 30% in Bulgaria to 90% in Austria (Eurostat, 2010) and yet the fact remains that those groups who are the lowest users of ICTs, in particular those who least use ICTs to access services are probably those who are the greatest users of Government services (Codagnone & Osimo, 2008).

2. Skills-Based Policy Approaches to Digital Inclusion

The Commission sees the answer in the promotion and delivery of digital literacy and competences outlined in Key Actions 10 and 11 (European Commission, 2010, p.27). Europe is not alone in recognising the importance of skills. The World Economic Forum report into ICT for Economic Growth (World Economic Forum, 2009) sees skills as one of the 6 pillars of the ICT Ecosystem:

“Best-practice countries have a solid base of ICT technical skills and a good level of broader science and math education. Interventions to improve ICT-relevant skills include focused training, certification and pipelines to university graduates in engineering and IT fields.” (World Economic Forum, 2009, p.2).

The acquisition of skills is seen as the route to tackling poverty within the European Union and as a way of ensuring the capacity of the workforce to deliver a competitive Europe. (European Commission, 2010). The importance of digital competencies has also become synonymous with digital inclusion and subsequent declarations have identified skills as the route to participation.

“To be effective a smart, sustainable growth strategy must also be inclusive so that all Europeans are given the opportunities and skills to participate fully in an Internet-enabled Society.” (European Commission (Granada), 2010, p.1).

Acquisition and implementation of digital skills is currently characterised by the idea of progression. The DigEULit project in 2006 identified seven headline skills (Martin-Grudziecki, 2006) and for each a “continuum of increasing competence from “novice” through “advanced beginner”, “Competent”

and “proficient” finally reaching “expert” (Martin-Grudziecki, 2006, p.251).

The Renewed Social Agenda for Europe highlights the need for skills in the face of globalisation and rapid technological change (European Commission, 2008). It recognises the demand for skills as widening the gap between the skilled and the unskilled and the need for the EU to invest heavily in skills development (European Commission, 2008, p.6).

3. A Question of Social Relevance

However, this approach to participation while having a value in itself is not enough to ensure participation, particularly in the face of changes in technology and changes in people’s behaviour and the way in which they use technology. The development of mobile technologies has meant that use of technology is less linear and less planned, more complex and random; and our expectations have changed so that we wish to consume digital content in the same way. At the same time there is a growing awareness of the potential for creating public value from the increasing availability and accessibility of publically owned data. This shift in thinking cannot be underestimated; the underlying philosophy of a skills-based approach to digital inclusion assumes that people will take a passive role as recipients of services. A further dimension of this hierarchical approach is the perception of the benefits realised by one who is digitally included. Van Den Bosch and Dekelver highlighted that participation in Internet use by people with low levels of education or income declines as complexity increases (Wouter Van Den Bosch, 2009). While stressing the need for proper training and guidance they pointed out that:

“...we should also look beyond skill and training alone, as what people expect, want and ‘consume’ on the Internet is also related to socio-economical status” (Wouter Van Den Bosch, 2009, p.3).

A Price Waterhouse Coopers study for the Digital Champion (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2009) proposes the benefits of digital inclusion as economic: higher earning potential, better educational opportunity, cheaper holidays, cheaper shopping. Arguably, such benefits have no immediate relevance to one who is both socially and digitally excluded and whose primary concerns are for survival and whose primary mechanisms are personal networks.

The World Economic Forum highlights the need to appreciate what it calls the complexities of an ICT ecosystem:

“As the growth and adoption of networked ICT services expand, policy makers must appreciate the unique behaviours of complex ecosystems. The behaviours of networked economies are non-linear” (World Economic Forum, 2009, p.8).

The concept of non-linear, networked behaviour should be seen to apply in the realms of social and digital exclusion and while understanding its importance we should be able to look beyond the skills progression and recognise that digital inclusion requires a much broader approach.

4. The Importance of Public Value

There is a real potential for ICTs to create public value in a way that is relevant by focussing first and foremost on outcomes for the lives of socially excluded individuals and communities. In European Ministerial declarations we begin to see recognition of importance of value creation. The Ministerial e-Government conference in Malmo outlined a vision for technology to deliver transparency, openness, efficiency and maximised public value which would support Europe’s transition to a leading

knowledge-based economy (Enzell, 2009). This vision saw the empowerment of citizens and businesses and the involvement of stakeholders in the policy process (Enzell, 2009, p.2). At the same time there was recognition of the need to develop inclusive services to remove the barriers experienced by digitally or socially excluded groups (Enzell, 2009, p.2). The Visby Declaration (Näsval, 2009) at the conclusion of the Swedish Presidency clarified the meaning of “value creation” as:

“...driven by information flows between different societal domains and enabled by technology take-up and demand, entrepreneurship as well as professional and everyday use.” (Näsval, 2009, p.1).

The importance of the need for equitable and inclusive access to information technology is reflected in the Granada Ministerial Declaration (European Commission (Granada), 2010), the declaration repeated the call of the Malmo Declaration (Enzell, 2009) for openness, transparency, empowerment, inclusion and public value.

What is important is that people should be seen as participants in policy making and in shaping their own future, not simply as recipients of services. There is a need to re-evaluate the offer to excluded groups so that it is more than just the type of economic benefits envisaged by current policy such as proposed by Price Waterhouse Coopers. Benefits can arise not just from helping them to use ICT but seeking opportunities to use ICT to help them. (Codagnone & Osimo, 2008). There is no doubting the importance of skills but we cannot equate skills alone with ideas of inclusion. We need to have a wider view when considering policy and initiatives. The impact of technological advances is that individuals are operating in a non-linear environment, seeking to meet their immediate needs first and then taking and developing ideas that arise within networks of common interests: the networks of the socially excluded are often networks for survival. The use of ICT needs to be re-contextualised and the approach to inclusion evaluated on the basis of that contextualisation. What we see today is that the rapidly changing nature of technology in society is creating new contexts and a single skills focussed approach may not serve the needs of those who are digitally excluded.

The Morgan Stanley Internet Trends Report 2010 (Wu, 2010) highlighted the rapid growth of mobile devices since their launch in June 2007, outstripping desktop internet access by some 55 million subscribers worldwide by 2009. By 2012 shipments of smart phones will outstrip shipments of desktop and laptop PCs combined. This growth in mobility and the expectation of mobile access is driving the development of new devices with a common technology base: tablet devices, MP3 players, GPS devices, e-Books, mobile video applications, games and wireless home appliances. Each new device and application is creating a new context in which we use technology. How ICT is used is evolving driven largely by rapid technological change which in turn is enabling new social contexts; once a single community which facilitated receiving services, such as access to advice and advocacy, developed a network of individuals based around a set of common needs. Now, such knowledge and experience can be captured and shared as needed and that experience can inform wider service delivery. Communities are no longer confined to being recipients but can also take the role of co-producers.

5. A Continuing Risk of Further Exclusion

A 2009 study by the Joint Research Centre looked at the role that social computing could play in generating public value. It identified four categories of impact: political, socio-cultural, organisational and legal (Huijboom, et al., 2009). While the study raised issues of privacy it also emphasised the potential for community cohesion around specific issues. Social computing opened up possibilities for enhancing transparency, stimulating the accessibility and personalisation of public services and improvements to efficiency. However, the report also highlights the danger that:

“In the near future, some groups may be excluded from participation in online social networks” (Huijboom, et al., 2009, p.11).

Despite the impact of rapidly changing technology and the way in which we consume and create digital content e-Inclusion is not a technological issue, but one of social inclusion and competitiveness (Guyader, 2009).

“eExclusion issues are direct consequences to the digitization of all of the activities of our societies, and because of the unprecedented vitality of that sector in terms of research and development and in terms of ‘time to market’,” (Guyader, 2009, p.12).

The Vienna Study focussed on the importance of ‘broad based growth’ as a route to “real and solid prosperity” being at the core of the Renewed Social Agenda (Codagnone, 2009). The report defines e-Inclusion as being the use of ICT to achieve broader social inclusion objectives and inclusive ICT; the I2 paradigm of inclusive technological innovation and innovative inclusive policies. However, the study also recognises that:

“...the pace of technological developments might also lead to further exclusion” (Codagnone, 2009, p.9).

We may well be in a position to achieve the Riga targets by 2015 without a change in the current policy measures but there is a clear risk also identified by Cadagnone and Osimo that:

“more people fall behind also as a result of unchecked technological and market developments raising new barriers that stop or hinder the efforts of those trying to catch up” (Codagnone & Osimo, 2008).

Because of the pace of change in technologies exclusionary processes may increase. The desirable individual benefits and societal outcomes that derive from digital inclusion depend on the use and appropriation of ICT and the lack of appropriation and purposeful use is at the core of digital inequalities (Codagnone, 2009, p.9).

The Vienna Study acknowledges that “generic digital literacy initiatives do not produce meaningful results ... unless they are linked to purposeful and substantive interests and needs” (Codagnone, 2009, p.10).

This change in emphasis is towards considering how the outcomes for the individual, their family and their community are important and relate to their interests and needs; not the needs of the state to deliver services. The changing technological environment is having an impact on the complex relationships between individuals, society and the economy. With a wider understanding of what it is that excludes individuals and communities, we need to look beyond skills to consider how we build capacity for excluded groups to use ICT to realise a difference, empower their networks and work for them.

“Looking across today’s global networked society, one of the most notable differences is the manner in which value is created. While industrial economies are based on controlling the supply of scarce resources, networked economies create value by abundantly connecting individuals, functions and endpoints. As each new person and device is connected to a network its collective value grows exponentially.” (World Economic Forum, 2009).

6. Policy Challenges

Looking at exclusion from the perspective of changing contexts brought about by the impact of rapidly changing technologies presents a number of policy challenges from: the current ‘state of the art’ in a rapidly changing environment; business models for inclusion policies which call for partnerships with both the private sector and civil society; and by the subsidiary challenges of leading policies which range from United Nations Conventions through ISO standards bodies to EU Council resolutions (Guyader, 2009).

“The State of the e Union”, a collection of essays edited by Gotze and Bering (Gotze, Pedersen, & Tapscott, 2009) highlighted 4 pressures driving the need for change in the public sector:

- the technology revolution of Web 2.0 which is changing the way we produce and consume information;
- the demographic revolution of the “Net Generation” the first generation to come of age in the digital age having different expectations of how they consume information;
- social networking, the explosion in online collaboration and self organisation;
- the economic revolution, how that collaboration is changing the way in which enterprise innovates and orchestrates capability.

The policy shift viewed historically shows the journey from government that provides information electronically, through the drive to deliver transactional services and “do business with government” to where we are now, the potential for the co-production of services, relevant to the individual and the community enabled by technology. Such changes recognise the potential for empowerment and inclusive government through Web 2.0 technology. Such potential for re-use of public data in order to create public value is exemplified in England by the work of Mayo and Steinberg (Cisco Systems Inc, 2009).

7. An Outcome-Based Approach to e-Inclusion

There is an emerging idea of how a successful outcomes-based approach to e-Inclusion might look. The implications of a beyond skills approach focussing on public value and outcomes are given form in the think piece from the Institute of the Future “A Planet of Civic Laboratories” in which the importance of data generated through everyday technology could and should drive planning and policy development in cities (Institute of the Future, 2010). Delivered in the form of a map which looks at key technologies, strategic drivers and stakeholders the piece looks at the role of excluded communities and speculates on how they will need the capacity to use the data generated through technology to influence decisions that impact on how they create value for themselves. This ability to recognise need, identify partners and to co-produce services defines a new value chain which begins with open and transparent government and as such requires a different approach to digital inclusion. This is the logical extension of what Codagnone and Osimo described as using ICT to help them.

These policy challenges suggest that we should refocus the European debate on these questions and enable the European Digital Agenda to take on board the broad conclusions. The importance of digital inclusion that goes beyond skills and refocuses on building the capacity of excluded groups to influence how services are delivered and to identify what services are needed and to participate in their planning and delivery. Such an approach is highlighted by the World Economic Forum:

“Designing for inclusion entails the need to focus on human-centric value creation in all phases of the lifecycle. Given the highly personal nature of mobile communications, in-depth market sensing, rapid prototyping, community led distribution and sound feedback loops are all needed to ensure that services are appropriately tailored to meet the complex and changing needs of the poor.” (World Economic Forum, 2009).

8. Conclusions

Current EU policy recognises the importance of ICTs for the development of the economy and the key role of skills as part of that strategy. Unfortunately skills development has become synonymous with digital and social inclusion. Despite the improved access to infrastructure and skills there remain significant numbers of excluded people who are probably most in need of services that governments seek to deliver on line. There is a question regarding the relevance of the current promises of improved earning potential and easy to acquire, cheaper consumer goods as the benefits of digital inclusion to hard to reach, digitally disengaged people. Developments in technology are changing the way in which people interact with the digital domain and changing expectations. There is an increased potential to use ICTs for the benefit of disengaged groups as part of giving them a voice and including them in the design of services to meet their needs. ICTs can strengthen their survival networks and empower them to help themselves. We need to rethink the digital inclusion offer. It is with this in mind that we should seek to refocus the European debate and enable the European Digital Agenda to take on board the broad conclusions.

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