'Digital-by-default': reinforcing exclusion through technology

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Introduction

In the UK, the majority of welfare service users are members of those communities most likely to be digitally excluded. Yet, despite this, current UK government welfare policies are based upon a 'digital-by-default' approach to service delivery, wherein face-to-face, telephone and paper-based interactions are replaced by the use of web-based services or mobile 'apps'. In this piece, we consider the implications of this 'digital-by-default' agenda for welfare service users and the impact that the policy is having on statutory and non-statutory service providers. Our comments are informed by over eight years of collaboration with South Yorkshire city councils, social housing groups, government bodies and third sector digital inclusion organisations. Data supporting these comments is sourced from local and national survey work, service user and provider interviews, action-research and community interventions. This work has been funded by the ESRC and South Yorkshire city councils (see Coleman et al., 2010; Gorayah et al., 2011; Yates et. al., 2013).

'Digital-by-default'

In considering the roots of the 'digital-by-default' policy, it is important to remember that technology-based policies are as much imbued with political and ideological goals as policies in any other area. So, although initial rhetoric surrounding 'digital-by-default' appealed to the need to bring government services 'up to date' (that is, to match banks, insurers and holiday firms in their use of digital media), a more likely explanation for its adoption lies in anticipated 'efficiency savings'. The government's Digital Strategy (2013), for instance, 'estimate[d] that moving services from offline to digital channels will save between £1.7 and £1.8 billion a year', a figure that is equivalent to 5% of the reductions in the UK benefits spend proposed in the 2014 budget. The use of technology also supports the moral imperative of the government's welfare reforms to individualise welfare and make clients 'responsible' for their benefit expenditure, in theory making it easier to identify benefit fraud and administer sanctions.

It is important to remember that many DWP back-office services have been computerised for decades. Digital-by-default, in contrast, focuses on the clients' interaction with government. The web sites and apps to deliver this are predominantly developed and supported by the private sector. So, for example, the council run housing office becomes a private sector maintained, if council run, web site. It adds a layer of privatisation to welfare access.

The question is where do these savings come from and who do they affect? Arguments for savings through digital 'channel shift' are based, in all sectors, on assumptions about transaction costs. For example, it is typically argued (using a whole range of poorly verified figures) that digital transactions cost anything from 10 to 100 times less than face-to-face transactions. For instance, filling in your car insurance on-line can save the company on staffing costs and therefore potentially lowers your premium (or raises profits for the company). However, it is important to remember that the 'savings' lie in shifting the costs of processing transactions onto the customer and the IT system. As consumers, we therefore carry these costs in our ownership of technology (e.g. the cost of a laptop with internet access) and the use of our time, in addition to taking on responsibility for the veracity of the data we supply.

The same logic that underpins the above example is now being applied to government services, from tax to benefits. We will leave aside the

issue of whether or not the 'savings' achieved go back into the benefits system, reduce the budget deficit or pay for tax cuts. There is, of course, a key difference between online customers for banks, insurance companies or holiday companies and the clients of government services: commercial organisations can choose to ignore expensive potential customers. A company such as Lastminute.com does not *have* to provide services to a disabled person on a low income with no access to the Internet. They can choose the low cost online customers. Government services cannot do this; they have to be available to all potential clients. They cannot ignore those who are disconnected from, or have limited access to digital media. Herein lies the fundamental challenge for 'digital-by-default', as extensive users of welfare services are considerably more likely to be digitally excluded.

So who are the digitally excluded? First, there are those who have no access to the Internet whatsoever. Government and Ofcom figures for 2014 place access to the Internet at around 80% of the UK population. This includes all forms of access from home broadband, access at school, work or community location, and access via mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets. It is this broad definition of Internet access that we use throughout the essay. A more detailed look at these measures indicates that good quality, regular access at home, at work or via a mobile device is lower than this – closer to 70%. Analyses of Ofcom and Oxford Internet Surveys indicate that the majority of those without Internet access:

- Are older (over 55)
- Live in social housing
- Score much higher on indices of deprivation
- Are more likely to be unemployed
- Are more likely to be disabled or have long-term health issues
- Are more likely to be from social class groups C2, D and E
- Have lower educational attainment

The second group of people considered to be digitally excluded – the less frequent and less varied users of the internet – fit the same profile as those without access. We have found social class to be one of the most reliable predictors of access and use, with social class groups C2, D and E all found to undertake banking, government service use, information-seeking and political engagement activities far less frequently than the national average. However, age remains the most significant predictor of access and use. This has led some, especially a number of right-wing think tanks, to argue that issues of access are 'temporary'. It is crudely argued that, as the population ages and older non-users pass away, a greater proportion of citizens will be online (see Policy Exchange, 2013). Yet, whatever one thinks of such arguments, they are logically flawed in two ways. First, many of the older citizens who now find themselves excluded are former IT users who had access at earlier points in their lives. Second, the issue is not just about access but inequalities in use.

By failing to recognise or appreciate the intimate relationship that exists between digital exclusion and social exclusion, the 'digital-by-default' policy has arguably exacerbated existing problems with social exclusion and over-burdened service providers in other areas of the welfare system – particularly in the charitable sector. As one of the social housing leads we interviewed noted, 'digital-by-default pushes down the balloon in government and it springs up elsewhere'. Our research has found that benefit clients are becoming reliant upon Citizens Advice, UK Online centres and local action groups to support their access to and use of services – for example, to complete online claims for Universal Credit or to use Job Centre systems. There is also evidence that the digital 'channel shift' has added demands onto the long-standing digital inclusion work by mostly third sector organisations such as the Tinder Foundation (formerly UK Online) and the GO ON programme.

Other service providers, such as social housing providers, have also had to plan for the impacts that 'digital-by-default' may have. If their clients

lack digital access or skills and fail to engage with digital services their benefits will be affected, and this will impact the revenue streams to service providers, putting them at financial risk. Social housing providers are therefore actively addressing issues of digital inclusion by providing free or low cost Internet access and skills training. Elsewhere, government, both local and national, has engaged in 'forced channel shift' where non-digital options are simply removed or made second tier. For example, Job Centres are effectively becoming small IT centres with dedicated terminals. However, to address the fact that many clients lack access and skills, 'Assisted Digital' services have had to be offered, such as staff to help you fill in the online form in the Job Centre or a call centre that fills in 'your webpage' over the phone. We have noted such services being overwhelmed at times of 'channel shift', thus negating planned savings.

There are therefore three fundamental problems with the 'digital-by-default' approach. First, it has assumed that the majority of government services, no matter what their context, can easily adopt a model from consumer services. Second, it has failed to include, or chosen to ignore, the hidden costs of supporting this new system, which in practice tend to be pushed onto service users themselves or other service providers. Third, it has underestimated issues of usability across a varied and challenged user population. Though the government Digital Strategy emphasises usability, ensuring a high level of usability with all potential clients is very expensive and time consuming especially when the purchasers and users of the new systems, such as councils and their clients, have little if any input into system design. Yet where failure to properly use systems could lead to benefits being cut, services being lost or even fines, it is incumbent on government to ensure usability. It is not banal to argue that poor interface design overtly acts to further social exclusion and inequality.

Conclusion

We believe that in order to defend access to welfare services, current policy needs to accept that:

- The cost savings to government offered by 'digital-by-default' are often additional costs to welfare clients or other organisations
- Systems need to be far easier to use
- 'Assisted digital' support is likely to be needed both long-term and in greater amounts than currently planned
- Support for the third sector in providing skills support and internet access needs to be increased
- Further roll-out of 'digital-by-default' should be aimed at those groups with the greatest levels of internet access (e.g. social class groups A, B and C1)

We would also ask our academic colleagues working on issues of inclusion, exclusion and welfare to take heed of the policies and practices that can be implemented through technology solutions. These are not just neutral technical fixes or replacements for other media but a means to enact policy and to change the relationship between clients and welfare services.

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