

VIEW FROM THE CYBERFLOOR: MODES OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN SCOTLAND

Chris Holligan

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of a descriptively oriented empirical research study which explores how individuals utilise the internet at public sites in three different urban locations in Edinburgh. Central government policy has placed considerable weight upon internet access as a tool for facilitating social inclusion (O'Connor et al 1999; Wyatt, et al 2000). According to Tony Blair (Scottish Office 2002) social exclusion is a 'shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.' This official account of exclusion partially accords with a more critically oriented academic description, but it omits a politicisation of the contributory factors that facilitate processes of exclusion and inclusion (Duff 2000; Anderson 2000). As Webster (2000) argues, the Scottish Office Social Inclusion strategy paper (1999) 'does not discuss the causes of the problems' (p.29). The latter neglect must be a major deficiency in policy 'theory' since it represents a failure to address aspects of social structures which constrain the depth and forms of inclusivity. Madanipour et al (1998) highlight exclusion as a process with a substratum that lies deeper in society than the Prime Minister's 'shorthand label' implies. Madanipour et al (1998) argue it is 'a multi-dimensional process in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision-making and political processes, access to employment and material resources and integration into common cultural

Chris Holligan is a lecturer in Educational Studies in the Faculty of Education and Media, University of Paisley. He has published papers in a range of social science and education journals.

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processes. When combined they create acute forms of exclusion that find a spatial manifestation in particular neighbourhoods' (p.22). Levitas (1998, p.3) claims social exclusion is an 'essentially contested concept' around which consensus is lacking about the causes or the best means of countering them. In order to challenge the inequalities that associate with poverty the government's approach (Scottish Office 2002) is premised on the rhetoric of rights in a democratic society within the global economy. And so it is argued that

government believes that everyone has a right to participate fully in society, and to have the opportunity to reach their full potential. No democratic society should permit the development of conditions in which alienation, racism and violent disorder can flourish. Moreover in an increasingly global economy, economic competitiveness and the ability to thrive depend on the extent to which the full human resources of Scotland can be mobilised and maximised.
(Scottish Office 2002)

Hutton (1995) argues that to achieve a more inclusive society government must incorporate both extremes of the social structure into a cohesive welfare state citizenship. Without interaction between social strata, it is argued, exclusion will become more ingrained (Byrne 1999). Patricia Hewitt MP, Minister of State designated as 'Champion Minister' of Policy Action Team (PAT) 15 (Department of Trade and Industry 2000) tasked with developing information and communication technologies (ICTs) in deprived areas, outlined the need for more data on the utilisation of ICTs by deprived neighbourhoods. In relation to PAT 15, Hewitt's vision of the virtual society is not dissimilar from social scientific accounts (Mackay et al 2001; Robins and Webster 1999).

Mackay et al (2001) describe the information society concept as an umbrella term to designate the thesis that 'information and information technology' are at the core of an emerging social order where 'we are witnessing the reordering of the social structure: power and status is being distributed in new ways ... with a growing social polarisation between those with access to information and the information have-nots' (p.2). Manuel Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) provides one major perspective on the information society as a 'network society' where space and time, eliminated by electronic networks, no longer constrain communication. In line with government policy assumptions (Hellawell 2001) Castells argues that internet technology is a means of

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cognitive empowerment, creating new democratic possibilities for communication and participation which will challenge the capacity of dominant ideologies to prevent individuals from constructing their own worlds. Within both the policy and academic discourses outlined lies a view of the individual as an agent with autonomous discursive capacity able to achieve by reflecting upon self and social life, a thesis which Kaspersen (2000) ascribes to the social theorist and government adviser Anthony Giddens.

Ethnographic research studies of the role of the internet in social life have demonstrated its potential to be inclusive of alternative identities (e.g. lesbian). Correll's (1995) North American based studies demonstrated moreover computer mediated communication can facilitate the formation of genuine relationships and so reduce social isolation. Weise (1996), utilising a participant observational research design to study such communication, found that with the passage of time she developed a feeling of emotional bonding through online relationships. Her findings support Jones's (1998) claim that computer mediated communication 'allows us to customise our social contacts from fragmented communities and to plan, organise and make efficient our social contacts' (p.11).

Jones's (1998) optimistic vision of the Internet's inclusive potential is likely not to be realised however should mundane factors such as income constraints pose disincentives to Internet access. In this regard survey data taken from the Scottish Household Survey (SHS) based on a sample of the general population in private residences in Scotland. This survey, funded by the Scottish Executive, was conducted during the first six months of 2000 (see www.scotland.gov.uk/shs/). It is valuable in illuminating the role of social class and chronological age in connection with levels of Internet access

These SHS statistics reveal higher social groups accessing the Internet for personal use more than groups on lower levels of household income, for example, occupants of skilled manual jobs. The trend towards a decline in Internet use by social class suggests the information 'have-nots' remain those with (likely) lower levels of formal education. Whilst personal values may influence an individual's decision to pursue Internet access the costs of owning and maintaining a personal computer, and paying for a phone line, are arguably more plausible causes for the relative exclusion of the unskilled and elderly. That 30 percent of the total sample of 17,190 persons interviewed during the SHS survey made personal use of the Internet indicates that the

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Internet is an important technology in the lives of a large proportion of the population in Scotland. In broad terms the SHS statistics confirm Madanipour et al's (1998) thesis of exclusion as a multi-dimensional phenomenon; in the case of the SHS survey data, age and social class are important variables influencing inclusion. Besides this representing exclusion from relationships, as the literature would suggest, it can also be interpreted as an inequality shaping access to new information and other intellectual resources.

Table 1
Personal use of the Internet
(first six months of 2000)

	% of people who use the Internet for personal purposes	Sample size
All people	30	17,190
By social class of the highest income household		
Professional occupations	59	902
Managerial and technical occupations	49	4,003
Skilled non-manual occupations	37	1,629
Skilled manual occupations	29	3,371
Partly skilled occupations	23	1,610
Unskilled occupations	11	420
By age group		
0-15	27	3,518
16-24	49	1,748
25-24	43	4,809
45-64	25	4,280
65+	4	2,835
By gender		
Male	33	8,137
Female	27	9,053

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source: Scottish Household Survey 2000

Hutton (1995) argues for the importance of including the extremes of both ends of the social structure in the interests of advancing greater social cohesion. Clearly these data reveal that important forms of social polarisation continue to characterise Scottish society, a finding which is consistent with Mackay et al's (2001) argument about social polarisation of an underclass of 'informational have nots'. Following Castells's concept of the 'network society' and its liberational features it seems likely that those at the lower position of the class structure will continue to have their lives constrained by historically given space-time restrictions.

Currently lacking in our knowledge about the internet and social inclusion in Scotland are the personal perceptions of users themselves about the kinds of benefits they derive from internet access. If we were to find, for instance, that free Internet access enhanced the lives of individuals in deprived neighbourhoods in ways suggested by Castells and others this would strengthen the case for Internet access being made more affordable to those on lower incomes.

The survey data are complementary to the main purpose of this paper, which is to provide insights into how internet technology is used in different social contexts. It also aims to enlarge the scope of inclusion as a concept found within the policy discourse of ICTs and deprived neighbourhoods to explore how a wider idea of inclusion, one premised upon the involvement of affluent individuals with ICTs, might allow us to identify the ways in which the poor might still be marginalised in interesting ways in terms of their chosen mode of digital inclusion. The current study was undertaken during 2000-2001 with the generous support of a research grant from the Carnegie Trust.

RESEARCH DESIGN

(i) Research question

How is the internet involved in the lives of individuals living in Edinburgh who differ in age, gender and social background? We were encouraged to ask this question because it was felt that age, gender and social background differences might influence how people 'express' themselves digitally. Participant observation carried out by the author in the venues provided impressionistic evidence that internet access location was associated with

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levels of affluence and social class. As Duff (2000) notes there are several dimensions of inclusion and exclusion, political, material, normative and linguistic. My study has implications for Duff's first three concepts of inclusion.

(ii) Sample and venues

Three case studies were carried out at venues in Edinburgh. The fictitious names of these venues are: Cyberia, EasyAccess and Telport. The work conducted in each venue conformed to the nature of qualitative enquiry (Flick 1998). In selecting these location of public internet access I sought places which offered differences on the grounds that distinctiveness of function can be elucidated through contrast (Barnard 2000). Cyberia is based in the affluent New Town, EasyAccess is located in Rose Street, central Edinburgh and Telport is based in Niddrie, an area afflicted by a history of severe and continuing multiple deprivation. Cyberia and EasyAccess are commercial organisations whereas Telport offers free internet access to mainly local residents. Users of Cyberia interviewed were aged about 30-40, in EasyAccess the age range was 18-25, and in Telport users were typically aged 55-65. The cafe ambience of Cyberia is intellectually high-brow; EasyAccess is set in a very functional unidimensional colour scheme resembling an internet supermarket. Telport has a community centre ethos and is based in a former secondary school occupying two large rooms in the building which is now a business centre. A total of 12 individuals served as informants in each of the venues, six males and six females. The total sample was therefore 36 informants.

(iii) Research method and data analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual basis. A goal of this method was to make implicit knowledge explicit; as Flick (1998) suggests, semi-structured interviews try to 'reveal existing knowledge in a way that can be expressed in the form of answers and so become accessible to interpretation' (p.87). The purpose of the interview schedule was to identify the kinds of uses made of the internet and how informants elaborate on particular utilisations. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. Regarding the analysis of these verbal data I drew upon the ideas of analytic induction and grounded theory where categories or themes are generated from raw data (see Bulmer 1977, pp.249-257). To give the reader a 'flavour' of the informants' commitments to particular kinds of internet uses in the venues, I also counted the number of mentions of a category occurring in the interviews for each

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informant (Bryman 1992). However, in view of the qualitative research design and limited sample size it is not appropriate to regard this numerical information as having any statistical validity (see Appendix 1). A total of six themes were identified: 'family', 'job', 'social', 'knowledge', 'consumer', and 'politics'. Following the custom in ethnographic reporting procedures I have attempted to provide a representative account of examples of statements belonging to the themes which emerged from the analysis (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). The quotations reported were selected on the basis of their thematic typicality. In an earlier study on a different topic the research team I belonged to successfully adopted this practice for data analysis and reporting (Munn, Johnston and Holligan 1992).

INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In view of the somewhat abstracted nature of the category labels (e.g. 'family') qualitative comment is offered to give the reader insight into the informants' expressed modes of internet inclusivity. For the purpose of clarity I have reported below the internet venues thematically.

(i) Family

Telport

Maintaining contact with the extended family and acting as 'mentor' was important for some: 'I use it just for learning for the sake of the grandchildren, I might be able to teach them something!' (William). The internet was giving this person the opportunity to add value to the life of a child, and to make demands on himself for the child's sake. As a mode of inclusion William's sense of family purpose may have boosted his own self-esteem as family guardian. In this regard internet involvement is contributing to building social capital – a notional commodity of community engagement and cohesion. Putman (1993) has suggested that trust and engagement distinguish a healthy group from a less healthy group.

Barriers of time and space are less alienating: 'I've got relatives on the other side of the world and we've been exchanging e-mails. It's better than letter writing' (John). Family separation is partially overcome and the process of communicating enjoyed. Inclusion within the extended family network has been facilitated by the internet. E-mail itself seems to facilitate emotional links: 'I use e-mail a lot. My son is working in Germany so we e-mail each

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other quite a lot' (Norma). The challenges to social cohesion arising from a hypermobile society are in the process of being addressed through the compromise the internet offers to Norma and her son.

Besides keeping in contact with family members some users investigate family history as well: 'I come in here every Monday and send e-mails to my sister in California. I log on to see what she has got to say. I'm also trying to find out more about my husband being shipwrecked during the war' (Hilary). Clearly 'family' in Telport revolves around caring for others and the ambition to maintain intelligent and cohesive relationships. A combination of low income levels, area crime levels and restrictions affecting physical mobility arising from age might, in the absence of internet access, have contributed to the exclusion of Telport users from family interactions. It is also clear that in Telport women appear to use the internet more than men, suggesting that they might be more involved in the emotional labour of sustaining social bonds. This gender difference may connect with the sorts of activities that digital inclusion is used to achieve for users of Telport (see Appendix 1).

Cyberia

As someone who has left home and travels frequently Tom's relations with certain family members has improved since his family went online: 'I stay in touch with my family when I travel. We are all online. In a strange way I've probably improved my relations with some family members because I'm more frequently in touch with them on the internet than I was back home!' Here the internet allows him to 'recover' a relationship that seemed to have drifted from Tom in real life.

Dave, who is employed in safety training in the offshore oil industry, found that like his fellow workers 'on the rigs offshore I use e-mail to keep in touch with family, on and off the rigs.' Exclusion from family that often arises from the imperatives of earning a living away from home has led to high levels of marital breakdown, for example, in the Aberdeen area. E-mail can reduce the loneliness that could be a factor in bringing about the demise of relationships (Weise 1996; Jones 1998). For the younger users of Cyberia the internet is arguably giving them a platform for the maintenance of established friendships.

EasyAccess

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In this venue the dominant feature driving e-mailing was its value for 'keeping in touch' with family scattered throughout the world: 'I use it mainly with family in Australia and elsewhere, 3 hours per week.' (Christine). A large number of young tourists and backpackers frequented this venue. 'I send them to my sister in Spain, brother in America - it's cheaper than phone calls!' (Jenny). E-mail also helped in cases of family breakdown: 'My mum's in London so I e-mail her from here - it's useful for that.' (Alistair). His parents had split up and it was important to him to remain in touch with his mum after she left Edinburgh.

From each of these venues individuals were exploiting the technology to find 'solutions' to issues that life posed for them. It was enabling and empowering in the context of these individualistic life-styles.

(ii) Job

Telport

Seeking employment was a rare use of the internet in Telport. Of greater interest was family and learning. Teresa, a younger woman, was exceptional however: 'I'm doing the internet computer course so that I can get a job in the future. It's interesting to see what is on the web.'

Cyberia

In Cyberia a more affluent, educated and younger generation exploited the internet for interests that they already possessed; the internet allowed them to pursue these interests in other ways and sometimes more effectively: 'I surf a lot in the music sites of the Industry where I work' (Tom). For Dave the internet was helpful for 'job hunting'. Self-briefing for interviews was another use made of it by Lisa: 'I use it for job interview preparation. I look up government policies about the jobs on the net before I go.' Lisa clearly benefits from the informational possibilities of the internet which enhance the probability of job success.

EasyAccess

Not surprisingly the internet was used for occupational purposes by the youngest of my sample cohorts the most often: For Shiraz 'nearly 100% of my job searching is done on the internet, for up to 3 hours a day. Most banks put their details of vacancies on the web and that makes it easier to apply than to their short ads in newspapers.' General 'career searching' was a use Clare

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made. Self-reliance and researching occupational possibilities away from the traditional sources of career guidance is perhaps a trend in the kind of 'portfolio world' of work that has been characterised by Charles Handy (1995) in his studies of the future of work in post-Fordist economies. Mike, a graduate computer engineer from the Department of Artificial Intelligence at Edinburgh University, found a post in North America: 'It's had a massive effect on my life; just recently after reading web sites in the USA I secured a job in computers in Manhattan!.' Mark, a journalist with a UK national newspaper, found the internet very important for its functioning: 'I've found the internet to be an extremely useful tool for work. I use it virtually everyday for e-mailing people, other correspondents and companies. We file our Scottish stories and send them to London HQ online.'

(iii) Social

Telport

Certain social uses of the internet are more prominent for mature females than for their male counterparts (see Appendix 1). For Janice, a keen member of an e-group of dancers, the internet helps in contacting and organising others: 'we all communicate via our e-mail address web site "Dancers UK". We get e-mails from all over the world.' With her twin sister she was highly enthusiastic about e-mail which had enhanced the scope of her social circle. Traditional socialising normally requires disposable income. The social life of Telport cybersurfers would, in the absence of the internet, be more impoverished than it currently is in view of the poverty afflicting Niddrie.

Support for disabled friends also features in Telport's virtual society: 'This friend of mine who can't get about anymore used to run clubs all over Edinburgh. We're putting her work – local history – on the web. Now the people who used to go to the clubs can contact her from all over the world, which they now do.' (Hilary)

Social contact with old military buddies from the distant past influenced John's engagement with the internet: 'With its help I've managed to track down 31 former soldier colleagues from 43 years ago and we're going to have a reunion!'

I also heard from the manager of Telport that some members of the community with facial disfigurement, for example, are making contact with

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new people over the internet without the stigma that attaches to their appearance.

Cyberia

Sociability was clearly important in internet use for this younger cohort of both males and females (see Appendix 1). As Simon's friends are now scattered throughout the world he uses it to 'mainly keep in touch with them now that they are elsewhere', a point that echoes the theme of Family. Robert, a media studies academic from North America, is visiting Edinburgh and has formed friendships globally through the internet. His trip to Edinburgh involved staying with one of his new friends: 'It's probably the best communications medium in the world. Through the net I've met my friends in Edinburgh and in other parts of the world. The whole world is a coffee shop!' Overcoming difficulties of communication is one of the reasons that Julia is attracted to the internet: 'I tend to use it to e-mail friends who I might not otherwise stay in touch with. It is quicker and I like the process of writing letters on it. You can say things that you might not in a face-to-face situation.' Retaining and developing romantic attachments is something Corin, an actress, attributes to e-mail: 'I keep in touch with David weekly. We've built up a close relationship over the year. I love going to the cafe and e-mailing him.' His remark suggests that the internet venue is in its own right a place of sociability and for this reason policy makers ought to consider the ways in which the design of venues might impact upon levels of digital inclusion; the social semiotics attaching to certain venues might attract some individuals whilst simultaneously discouraging others.

EasyAccess

Chat Rooms were frequently used in this venue. Staff I talked to in EasyAccess were aware of many of their customers interest in chatting. Many spent several hours at a time in favourite Chat Rooms, meeting friends and making new ones. One male informant described how his life had been radically improved by the internet. He is a member of the gay community and had found it very difficult in Edinburgh to make new friends: 'You can't just go up to people in the street these days and start talking,' he explained. Through sites on the net he has now increased his group of friends and now feels a happier person.

This virtual kind of sociability was uncommon in the other venues where different purposes, some reflecting stages in the life-span (Lefrancois 1993),

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were being achieved over the internet. One informant remarked that the more intimate setting of Cyberia made him too self-conscious about spending time in Chat Rooms: 'with the coffee tables so close to the computers you feel that people can be reading your e-mails!' He favoured the more impersonal layout of EasyAccess where one could spend hours chatting and feel anonymous.

For Clare chatting and socialising online was the norm: 'My friends and I sometimes chat for 3-4 hours a day. It's very addictive!' Playing games and making friends are things Christine has achieved: 'I use Yahoo and play Trivia in that Chat Room, it's fun. I do that at home too on my own computer for 3-4 hours a night. I've made friends through that Room and I travel around the world visiting them.' Chatting is something that males do as well: Pete, for example, chats 'about lots of things with people. I keep in touch this way with people I meet on holiday and arrange to meet them in Chat Rooms. Sometimes in Chat Rooms I strike up new friendships.' Internet based games were an important context for meeting new people: 'I got hooked on the internet when I was at university. In a Chat Room I was introduced to MUDS and now I speak to people from all over the world. I've made a close friend in Singapore.'

(iv) Knowledge

Telport

The Department of Trade and Industry (2000, PAT 15) claims that 'ICTs are an increasingly important route to education and training, employment, communication and goods and services' (p.56). According to the Department for Education and Skills (DES) the National Grid for Learning is the national focal point for learning on the internet (La Valle et al 2001) with ICTs playing an important role in self-directed learning. Females and males in Telport participate eagerly in informal, non-certificated learning. Andrea's exploitation of the web is very wide ranging: 'I'm really interested in Egypt and everything about it. I followed a CNN campaign about the American presidency. At the moment we're studying health issues getting insights into diet and exercise. It opens up your world so wide for information, you're always learning something.' Norma's university work for the University of the Third Age is supported by visits to 'literary web sites and I've been following the Times sites. It helps me in our meetings in people's homes.' For Thomas (aged 63) the internet was beginning to replace the radio and television as a source of information: 'Lots of people get information from newspapers and television. With the internet you can get anything. I say to people give me a

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subject and I'll get you things on it!' Internet engagement is life changing for some, such as Sean: 'it has affected my life in that I write more and can find out more information.'

In many ways it is clear that in Telport learning is an intellectual leisure pursuit which has inclusive functions in connection with the concept of the learning society. The context for their learning is the internet means they have a high degree of autonomy in how and what they learn. In other ways however it is a highly isolated (and potentially isolating) mode of learning. It revolves around individuals interacting on an individualistic basis with machines. Such a social formation might prove to alienate and therefore exclude individuals from a sense of belonging to wider cultural processes and identities (see Street 1999).

Cyberia

Female informants in Cyberia utilise the 'knowledge' function of the internet less than those in the other venues. Many of them were university graduates and perhaps had less of a 'learning need' compared with the less educated informants of Telport. As a group – called 'rich dudes' by a Telport informant – they are not the target audience for social inclusion policies which tend to be predicated upon encouraging the poor to live lives more like the affluent. Given that they will possess more resources it follows they are likely to have other means for learning besides the internet. However, in terms of speed of access to information it is likely that even middle-class groups will utilise the internet for knowledge retrieval: Allan for instance is writing a novel about the Balkans, and finds the internet invaluable 'as a source of information for all kinds of things. Access to them is easy and so I spend less time in libraries.'

EasyAccess

The younger male informants of the entire sample were keen users of the internet for learning purposes (100%) like their older male counterparts in Cyberia (100%). The dominant trend for EasyAccess informants regarding knowledge involved the internet as a tool for supporting the achievement of academic goals: Callum, for instance, used it 'for my dissertation in philosophy.' For Linda researching things is central: 'I don't have a university education so if I want to know about things I research. The internet has broadened my outlook on life and given me access to more information.' Clearly it provides ideas that modify perspectives and no doubt open up for

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them new horizons for themselves about the future. That individuals do not have to depend upon 'cultural intermediaries' to access knowledge – e.g. visit libraries, enrol in formal courses, seek academic advice – is very possibly a reason that encourages them towards the internet.

(v) Consumer

Baudrillard (1999) argues that we live in a 'growth society'. Such growth he sees as needed to contain the poor and maintain the social system. Consumption in the consumer society involves increasing differentiation and distinction and does not foster social solidarity. This social theory makes sense of aspects of my data. For instance, as Baudrillard (1999) argues we consume not just objects, but relationships. Chat rooms fitted this process of relationship consumption. Differentiation clearly occurs in relation to knowledge. Official discourses of social inclusion, it can be argued, are premised upon ideas of poverty that define it in terms of the quantity of goods that a group possesses; they neglect to raise questions about the quality and nature of relationships in a competitive society which may contribute to social exclusion. Wealth as material affluence appears to be the underpinning notion used to evaluate whether or not an individual or group is excluded.

Telport

Materialistic forms consumption are predictably low in Telport in view of the poverty afflicting the area, and the likely size of the informants' disposable incomes; many no longer had full-time posts. However, I observed very warm human relations and a community ethos in Telport. It was rare to see the clients of EasyAccess and Cyberia interact with each other on any basis whatsoever. A frequent display of personal security warnings on-screen (warnings to watch one's personal belongings carefully) and off-screen (wall-posters) was a noteworthy feature of EasyAccess suggesting a lack of trust in others. The non-commercial basis of Telport might be, in line with Baudrillard's (1999) analysis, a factor facilitating social cohesion offline. E-commerce has been forecast by the OECD to be worth at least \$1 trillion by 2005 and is compared with the capacity of the Industrial Revolution to transform society. In our sample this new economy seems to be accessed mainly by the young female informants using EasyAccess and the males in Cyberia. A flavour of the kinds of uses of the internet in Telport point to traditional forms of buying goods and services: for Sylvia it meant 'looking up flights this morning to see what is available and what it is going to cost.' Jack was interested in cheap deals for 'buying IBM computers.' Mike finds

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the internet helps in evaluations: 'You can access prices for things and compare with shop prices.'

Cyberia

The styles of consumption found in Cyberia was remarkably similar to Telport's: 'I buy stuff from the internet.' (Chris). Cottage holiday lets and house buying are tasks undertaken via the web by Lisa: 'when we wanted a cottage at New Year I used it and we're looking at properties on the net as we're thinking of buying a house.'

EasyAccess

These informants were very similar to the others. Consumption on the internet was expressed in terms of booking flights and accommodation, travel opportunities and researching the 'prices of cars'. Clearly, these choices imply an idea of inclusion as a capitalist process based upon the consumption of personally sought goods. One conclusion that we may wish to draw from this and other sections of my findings is connected with Duff's (2000) question in his insightful philosophical paper about inclusion and exclusion in the legal sphere, namely 'What is inclusion inclusion into?'

(vi) Politics

Cyberia

The social structure surrounding places of internet access is likely to include some kinds of people and to exclude others. Perceptions of Telport informants about Cyberia being for 'rich dudes' indicates the dialectic of inclusion/exclusion which reflects the class-structured society. Once 'included' by a particular ethos individuals may behave in ways in cyberspace that are consistent with how they conduct themselves off-line. The comments of both Thomas and John offer a politically left-wing perspective on why the internet can help one to subvert the official media messages. Thomas argued: 'the internet is much better than television because on TV questions asked of politicians have to be vetted all the time so it's pointless to ask anything of them when you can chat to people online. For example, during the war in Serbia to find out what is really happening you could e-mail the people in the countries directly. Newspapers aren't reliable either.' A perceived hierarchical control mode over information dissemination turned John away from relying upon traditional media for news: 'I'm suspicious of existing media. You can use the internet to overcome top-down information flow. Newsgroups are

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especially good as forums for discussing issues on the internet. With political newsgroups you can read people's reactions all over the world to things and the pretexts used to conceal information by people at the top. The internet lifts up a corner of the carpet and gives you a wee look underneath. It enables people to think for themselves.'

DISCUSSION

Government policy during the 1980s revolved around the 'information society' concept and a discourse of social justice developed about the need for greater access to information, economically relevant skills and other resources. During the 1990s academics articulated visions of technocultures and cyberspace's capacity for empowerment and emancipation. Through internet communication a virtual communitarianism and greater social justice would follow, the rhetoric stated (Wyatt et al 2000). This somewhat simplistic utopian vision tended to neglect issues of historically ingrained social exclusion linked with industrial decline and poor housing stock (Webster 2000). Official government policy about the information society seemed to overlook, perhaps deliberately, the structural nature of exclusion within a class-based society. In passing one might add that those of us who live in the United Kingdom are aware that government studiously avoids references to social class which might indicate a lack of interest in promoting notions of equality that require the structural redistribution of wealth.

The free internet access available in Telport clearly gave added purpose to the lives of my research informants. In the light of the survey data in Table 1, it is clear that without free Internet access Telport's digital community would have been deprived of many interesting and potentially life-enhancing opportunities. This evaluation is consistent with Negroponte's (1995) idea of Internet access as empowering. The purchase of internet access also enhanced the lives of Cyberia and EasyAccess users; free access in Telport, in the context of the arguably more restricted life chances of Niddrie inhabitants, meant that the internet may have made even more of an impact on the lives of these participants. Despite these positive endorsements of digital inclusion, some intellectuals regard the virtual society as one of cunning capitalist exploitation, a place where the need for sociability and belonging is transformed into a commodity to be exploited in cyberspace. For Chomsky (1998) 'globalisation' involves 'imposing the right priorities on a recalcitrant world.'

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The younger generations of Niddrie rarely used Telport. Their apparent digital exclusion was seen as a cause of concern amongst policy-makers which is interesting. Such anxiety might reflect government unease concerning the formation of an underclass. A darker vision of the internet (Lyon 1999) suggests the technology acts as an opiate in its social impact. By the bonding of human with machine, politicians succeed in stultifying social unrest. On the other hand, for the technological optimists Chat Rooms allow for identities to be explored through unrestricted choices and 'moves' made online under one's individual control (Hine 2000). Such lives online could, though, lead to individuals becoming entrapped in fantasy spaces and in this sense curiously excluded. Negroponte (1995) regards this virtual identity making space as positive in its effects; it is seen as part of the 'empowering nature of being digital'. It is seen as a means of revitalising communities (see also Levy 1997). Giddens (1991, 1994), in line with Negroponte (1995), claims that nation states should utilise their communicative and information resources to ensure social inclusion. According to Swift (1985), however, ICTs facilitate something different from empowerment: the information they provide, he suggests, constitutes a rationalisation of control. Giddens (1991) argues that information is central to coping with the demands of modern life, but one can argue that it does not follow that information as such contains the seeds of any large-scale change in the structures underlying exclusion in the way envisaged by information society theorists (Levy 1997; Rheingold 1995). Social egalitarians (Lister 1990; Levitas 1998) believe that policies of redistribution are essential mechanisms for combating exclusion. Poverty is seen as the primary cause of social exclusion and, following Marxist analysis, a free market economy is inherently one where exclusion is inevitable, argue these egalitarian socialists. It can be argued from the survey data that, in view of the dominance of the upper-classes as personal users of the internet, internet technology could contribute to a perpetuation of existing inequalities as opposed to their amelioration. This could presumably mean that the development of internet technology is left in the hands of the dominant social formations and this fact alone could impede the growth of alternative ideological perspectives in cyberspace and beyond (Thomas and Wyatt 2000; Henwood et al 2000).

Nevertheless my findings are suggestive of the internet as a significant facilitator of social inclusion, especially modes based around sociability, knowledge sharing and lifelong learning. The interview data can thus be 'read' as supportive of the utopian account of the internet's social potential. That the real lives of some individuals were being influenced by internet participation

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indicates that inclusion does not exist merely in cyberspace. At the very least it is clear that the internet, for our sample, enhances the quality of their lives and this fact would appear to at least problematise the views of its sceptics. The fulfilment that digital inclusion achieves for those studied might not be as easily available to them by other means.

At the macro-level of academic and political debate about inclusion and exclusion, discussed earlier, it remains however an open question as to whether or not internet access, free or otherwise, can by way of radical transformation really challenge the deeply rooted causes of exclusion that the political left argues are located in inequalities of wealth and power (Eagleton 2001). As Thomas and Wyatt (2000) claim, internet access is not the only problem attaching to issues of exclusion; controlling the internet should also be seen as a point of departure for debates about exclusion, they suggest. Future research might usefully challenge existing policy orthodoxes about the internet by addressing the ways in which it could paradoxically foster novel forms of exclusion partly in view of the very limited nature of the control that excluded groups tend to have over trajectories of development in general. One fear is to the effect that the excluded could become 'banished' further from participating in mainstream society as a result of becoming addicted to the experiences gained in cyberspace. In such a scenario their being digitally included would run very much counter to the policy rhetoric concerning the Internet fostering greater inclusion in the world as we currently know it.

APPENDIX

Numerical counts of theme mentions

Telport (n=12)

	Female (n=6)	Male (n=6)
Family	6	4
Job	1	0
Social	5	1
Knowledge	6	4
Consumer	1	2
Politics	0	0

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Cyberia (n=12)

	Female (n=6)	Male (n=6)
Family	1	4
Job	1	3
Social	5	6
Knowledge	1	6
Consumer	2	4
Politics	0	2

EasyAccess (n=12)

	Female (n=6)	Male (n=6)
Family	4	4
Job	4	4
Social	4	6
Knowledge	3	6
Consumer	4	2
Politics	0	0

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