

Bridging the Digital Divide in Scotland

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INTRODUCTION

Perceptions of the different meanings and issues surrounding the term *digital divide* have set the scene for policy development in various countries. In recent times, broader analysis of the meanings and problems have altered understanding, and a new range of initiatives to tackle perceived problems is being devised in the United Kingdom (UK) and its regions. In what follows, digital divide perspectives are outlined and action to close the divide in Scotland is discussed.

BACKGROUND

For some time now, the Information Society vision in many countries has been accompanied by knowledge of risk of exclusion and strategies to close the so-called “Digital Divide,” often seen as a short-hand term to indicate significant inequalities in access across social groups, and in particular between those who have access to ICTs (i.e., the “haves” and the “have-nots” or those who do not have access) (Civille, 1995; Raab, 1996). EU directives (e.g., eEurope 2002 [2000] and eEurope 2005 [2002]) support the goal of cheaper and more widespread access. The 2002 goal is to achieve physical access to the Internet, and the next stage is to consider content to stimulate access. The hope is that the benefits that emerge as a result of access to modern information and communication technologies (ICTs) will be felt by regional and local economies and communities.

Extending access to ICTs will help ensure innovation, economic development, and the new economy (Tambini, 2000a). In discussing universal Internet access, Tambini (2000b) points to arguments that without widespread access, e-commerce would not be able to support greater innovation and entrepreneurship. In addition, the intense concentration on developing e-government could not be legitimised. Moreover, benefits said to be associated with the design of ICTs to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency in public service delivery could not be realised. Norris (2001) and others note the views of pessimists who fear an escalation of existing inequalities, and optimists who hold that new ICTs have the potential to widen opportunities for more democratic participation.

However, without universal Internet access, it is unlikely that wider forms of electronic participation and actions associated with e-governance and e-democracy could be supported. Additionally, distance learning and public education resources would not reach wider audiences or increase literacy levels.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN SCOTLAND

The Scottish Household Survey shows that access to the Internet in Scotland is growing quickly. People who are excluded comprise the unemployed, those with low incomes, low levels of education, and poor literacy and numeracy levels. The Scottish Executive, the Scottish Parliament, the voluntary sector, and other organizations in Scotland have designed a range of initiatives to tackle problems associated with the digital divide. The Scottish framework is based on raising awareness, widening access, increasing skills, building support, developing content, and motivating and involving communities.

Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament

Similar to the UK Government, the Scottish Executive (i.e., the devolved government of Scotland) is committed to achieving universal access to the Internet by 2005. The Scottish Executive initiative—Digital Scotland—set out to ensure that Scotland obtains and retains maximum economic and social advantage from the development of ICTs. Digital divide problems are associated with a lack of telecommunications infrastructure and with poverty, lack of awareness, and low skill levels (Digital Inclusion: Connecting Scotland’s People, 2001). Emphasis has been placed on expanding Scotland’s communication infrastructure to stimulate demand for broadband and to test innovative delivery technologies. A three-year Digital Champions programme¹ was set up to improve inclusive ICT provision in Social Inclusion Partnerships (SIPs) in deprived areas of Scotland. This project provides community professionals with local knowledge to engage local people in various initiatives in order to drive local ICT activities forward.

In 2002, a £3.2 million initiative was launched by the Social Justice Minister to create a network of 1,000 new Internet access points in areas where current public provision was still poor.² The Scottish Executive also promotes awareness of existing public access to the Web, and provides an online service to help people find the nearest access point.³

The Scottish Parliament's Web site⁴ provides extensive information online. To help address problems of the digital divide, the Parliament worked with the public library sector to establish a network of 80 partner libraries throughout Scotland, many of which now provide public access to the Internet through freely available terminals.

With a key focus on the citizen, government portals across the UK are offering services that they suggest are relevant to life episodes. Closely linked to the UK Government Portal (www.ukonline.gov.uk) is the Scottish Government Portal that operates under the brand *Open Scotland*⁵ to promote choice and public take-up of services.

Voluntary Sector Initiatives

In August 1999, com.com/holyrood, a public-private partnership between the Scottish Centre for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and British Telecom (BT), was given the task of installing 200 PCs into local halls and community centres throughout Scotland. However, access alone was not considered enough to address the digital divide, and SCVO also began to develop voluntary sector content. In June 2002, a Web portal⁶ was launched to act as a single gateway to Scotland's voluntary sector. In addition, a lobby channel allowed voluntary organisations to conduct their own e-consultations. Moreover, online questions could be forwarded to Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSP).

Education and Learning Initiatives

The National Grid for Learning (NGfL) Scotland was set up by the Scottish Executive Education Department in September 1999 to connect all schools, colleges, universities, and libraries in Scotland to the Internet by 2002. A key objective of the NGfL Scotland Communities team⁷ is to use ICT to improve opportunity, access, and quality of life for excluded groups, and to actively involve communities in worthwhile local projects. The communities channel of NGfL Scotland aims to supply information, advice, and assistance to all those providing support for ICTs in their community. In addition, NGfL Scotland's Connecting Communities Training Programme⁸ promotes the effective use of ICT in community learning agencies across Scotland.

The Scottish University for Industry (SUfi) was set up to promote public/private partnership, commission re-

search, draw on other analyses, and investigate the needs of market and client groups in Scotland. SUfi built on partnerships already existing in Scotland and worked closely with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and other partners to develop skills in using ICT. The subsequent development of a variety of IT centres in different locations of Scotland has provided Internet access and a learning environment for people to meet, to learn about new ICT, and to achieve new skills.

Scottish radio and television broadcasts were organised in late 1999 to promote learning directly and supporting the BBC's Webwise campaign, building on an earlier programme entitled *Computers Don't Bite*. Drawing from £200 million pounds allocated to support Community Access to Lifelong Learning (CALL) across the UK, the new Opportunities Fund (NOF) in Scotland was allocated £23 million pounds to support LearnDirect, an organisation providing public information about local learning centres.

Scotland is aiming to close the digital divide and to encourage people in deprived areas to acquire the key IT skills that are suitable to the demands of an Information Society.

Wired Communities in Scotland

During 2001, in an attempt to promote digital inclusion, a three million pound initiative outlined the intention to create two pilot digital communities in Scotland. The document, titled *Digital Inclusion: Connecting Scotland's People* (Scottish Executive, 2001, p. 22) outlines intention and funding for:

- the provision of entry level PCs, software, and Web access to up to 2,000 homes in each community;
- the development of links with school-based ICT and Web access initiative;
- the development of a community Web portal for each community with local content relevant to that community, including relevant online public and commercial services;
- the provision of training to increase the level of ICT and Web skills;
- the promotion to raise awareness of the benefits of the Web; and
- the creation of a network of local people to provide ongoing support.

The same report also outlines the aims of the digital communities Scotland project as follows:

- to use ICTs to help tackle social exclusion in these communities;

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