



ESRC MAKING A DIFFERENCE

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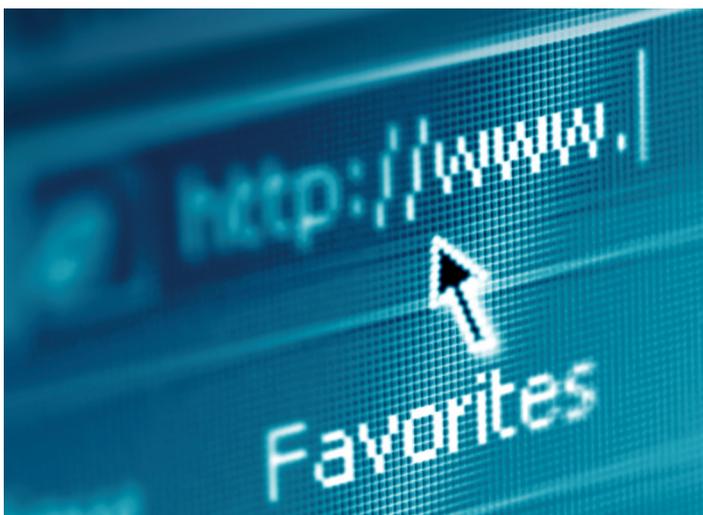
IS CYBERSPACE A SOCIAL GOOD? IF SO, WHO BENEFITS?

The UK's 'Closing the digital divide' programme is an example of how a lot of governments have treated Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) – believing that distribution should not be solely dictated by the market.

But are ICTs really a social good? And if they are: how are the benefits distributed?

ESRC funding enabled Dr David Stevens, of the University of Nottingham, and Dr Kieron O'Hara, of the University of Southampton, to investigate this expanding area of academic and political concern.

Taking an international, national and individual perspective, the pair examined, among other things, how policymakers can pick out more important social uses of ICTs so as to target resources in these areas. And they looked at how ICTs could be used to help minimise social and political exclusion.



About the project

Justice On-Line was a one-year project which aimed to develop a yardstick for assessing the different – and often competing – claims for ICT resources and opportunities. Using analytical tools and techniques from the computing and political sciences as well as from philosophy, the academics set out to produce a standard framework for identifying ethical issues and appropriate solutions.

Linking original theoretical work to current technological research and development, their insights were intended to apply to the technology that is currently available or likely to be on-stream over the next five to ten years.

The three perspectives adopted by the researchers were:

- **International** – Is there evidence of a global digital divide? Is there a role for ICT in promoting development? The investigation included a study of recent ICT-based initiatives in Andhra Pradesh, India.
- **National** – what counts as effective access to ICT? And how does that affect political life? The investigation focused on e-government and the use of ICT in direct and deliberative democracy. A special study was made of e-government and ideology, in Singapore.
- **Individual** – the investigation focused on potential compromises to personal privacy, and the suggestion that ICT has ushered in a post-privacy era.

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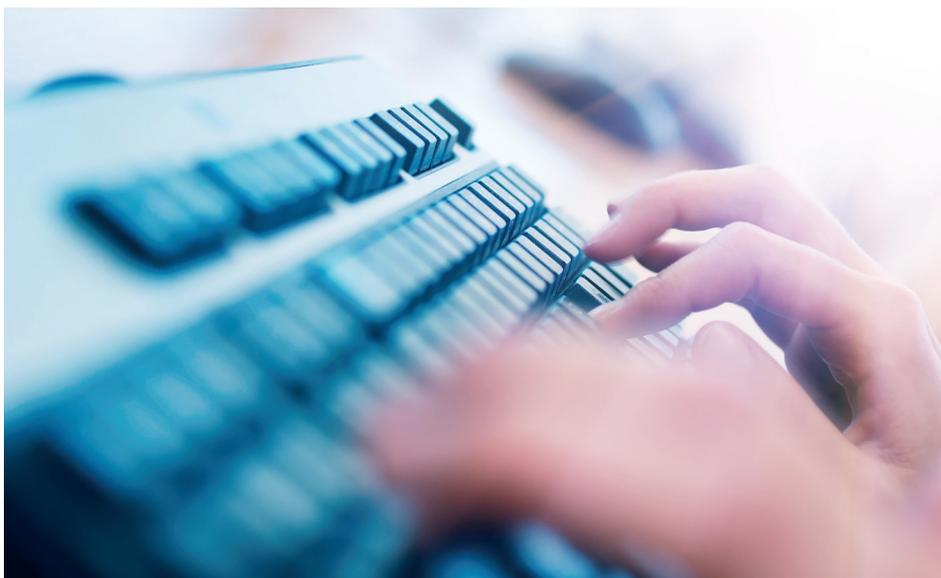
What the researchers found

- ICT is an important social good and there are a number of reasons to worry about its distribution. Access to and an understanding of modern technology is a pre-requisite for normal levels of social functioning in the modern world.
- The nature of the ICT industry means that the case for Government intervention or regulation has yet to be satisfactorily made. The industry is extraordinarily effective at innovating – so altering incentives to do so is a risk.
- This market is unusually efficient at distributing its benefits, regardless of differences of wealth – though age barriers are a different matter. So extremely interventionist policies to rectify injustices or inequalities in distribution are too risky.
- The chief aim of policy should be to address the greatest deficits and to ensure that everyone has access to ICT above specified minimum levels.
- There is only vague evidence to suggest that e-voting and direct democracy leads to irresponsibility among voters.
- An unintended consequence of e-voting was lack of security and a decrease in privacy. This highlights the trade off between the gains of ICT and the erosion of privacy, which will be exacerbated by anticipated developments in technology, such as more efficient search, better information storage, pervasive computing, and so on.

Knowledge transfer

The main knowledge transfer activity from the project was a book, *inequality.com: Power, Politics and the Digital Divide* aimed at a general audience while remaining academically rigorous.

Arguments from the book were also written up as academic papers and disseminated to policymakers, computer scientists and others, and talks on issues such as privacy, memory and ICT and politics were given at gatherings such as an e-government workshop at the World Wide Web Conference.



Further developments

Arising from the project, there have been collaborations between Dr O'Hara and high-profile researchers, including: a major paper with Sir Tim Berners-Lee and other senior figures in World Wide Web research to launch a journal *Foundations and Trends in Web Science*; research on privacy written up in a book, *The Spy in the Coffee Machine*, co-written with former British Computer Society President, Professor Nigel Shadbolt; and with leading computer scientists, neuroscientists, psychologists and information scientists for a long review paper 'Memories for Life'.

The researchers have been involved with the Office of Science and Technology's Foresight Programme, and submitted a paper in response to the Cabinet Office e-government initiative *Transformational Government*.

Dr David Stevens said: "Thanks to the research funding, we have been able to uncover a number of significant results, and the impacts of these findings have been felt within both the policymaking and user communities.

"For example, our examination of the potential for invasion of privacy which ICT provides has shifted our understanding of its key social impact. Technology has already ushered in the post-privacy era, and now the Interest has shifted to technology's ability to ameliorate the new problems."

People involved in the project

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Further Information

For the full report *Justice On-Line: Distributing Cyberspace Fairly* visit:
www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk

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