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# A tale of two e-citizens: a consideration of engagement in the e-society in two contexts

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# A TALE OF TWO E-CITIZENS: A CONSIDERATION OF ENGAGEMENT IN THE E-SOCIETY IN TWO CONTEXTS.

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this paper is to widen the debate surrounding participation in the eSociety, shifting the focus from access and economic power to skills and knowledge. It will present empirical research which, whilst not starting out as research into skills for the eSociety, revealed some relevant and enlightening issues. Focusing on two diverse contexts of activity (shopping and health care support) I will illustrate how the status quo (that the educated and economically rich have privileged, unfettered access to the services of the e-society) is flawed, misleading to stakeholders, and detrimental to both service providers and consumers. From a Critical Social Theory (CST) perspective this paper critiques assumptions that the internet brings about citizen empowerment through increased access to information, and opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with service providers and other consumers. It demonstrates that this assumption derives from the myth that technology per se brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment. Concludes that access to ICTs alone does not bring about effective engagement in the eSociety. “Digital” or “e” citizens need not only skills and knowledge, but responsive and supportive service provision currently lacking in both public and private spheres of e-citizenship.*

*Keywords: skills for the e-Society, inclusion, online health support, eCommerce.*

# 1 THE BACKGROUND

It is generally accepted that Information Technology (IT) is unique in the effect that it has upon every facet of society. Its ubiquity has impacted upon work, leisure, commercial interactions and provision and consumption of public services. IT has the *potential* to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of every aspect of both public and private organisations and individual lives. However, the current take up and usage rates of new technologies appear to be widening the economic divide which significantly has been redefined in the eSociety as the “digital divide”.

“Households that were already advantaged in terms of income, education and employment status are gaining privileged access to the market by means of these new technologies.”  
(ESRC, 2002)

Whilst whole sections of society are excluded from the benefits offered by new technological platforms, organisations (both commercial and not for profit) fail to engage with an entire sector of their stakeholders or potential market. Academic writing and Government initiatives to address the “digital divide”, or exclusion of some citizens from the benefits of engaging in the e-Society, have focused almost entirely on *access* to technology (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000), (Office of the e-Envoy., 2003). Citizens have been redefined in terms of the dichotomy of those who are “connected” and those who are “disconnected” from the e-Society (Bonfadelli, 2002). However, access to technology, or being “connected”, alone does not necessarily bring about effective use (Selwyn, 2003). Recognition of this issue stimulates a debate much wider than the simplistic attribution of exclusion from the “e-society” to socio-economic inequalities alone. Research by the British Computer Society found that 26% of people in the UK do not have access to a computer.” More significantly, it found that 45% of those asked felt left behind by technology advances, and 54% said they found computers complicated. More than 60% had never had any formal training to help them use a computer” (British Computer Society, 2005). Given the emphasis now placed upon the concept of the “informed”, “digital” or “e-citizen”, catered for and supported through electronic service provision, this is a serious anomaly.

The purpose of this paper is to widen the debate surrounding participation in the eSociety, shifting the focus from access and economic power to skills and knowledge. It will present empirical research which, whilst not starting out as research into skills for the eSociety, revealed some relevant and enlightening issues. Focusing on two diverse contexts of activity (shopping and health care support) I will illustrate how the *status quo* or accepted “state of affairs” (Collins, 1983) (that the educated and economically rich have privileged, unfettered access to the services of the e-society) is flawed, misleading to stakeholders, and detrimental to both service providers and consumers. From a Critical Social Theory (CST) perspective this paper critiques assumptions that the internet brings about citizen empowerment through increased access to information, and opportunities to communicate and share knowledge with service providers and other consumers. It demonstrates that this assumption derives from the myth that technology *per se* brings huge benefits, including wealth and empowerment. Further, it illustrates that information systems policy, development and implementation traditionally do not take into consideration the desires and needs of digital citizens or users (including useful services and necessary skills). The potential opportunities and benefits of online communication and engagement are not realised. The paper concludes that access to ICTs alone does not bring about transformative or even effective engagement in the eSociety.

## 2 STUDY DESIGN

The two research studies (one of three years and one of two years duration) presented here are funded projects (United Utilities eBusiness Research Studentship, and an in house University seed corn research grant.) Each set out with intentions and aims that became dramatically challenged and subsequently redefined in the light of initial research. Both projects set out as interpretive, explorative studies (seeking to “understand people’s feelings, values, norms, interests, motivations and actions” Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005). Both studies evolved into Critical Social Theory (CST) research (concerned with power and emancipation, challenging the established order or hegemony and introducing a “discourse of possibility” Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2005).

Adopting a critical approach can be problematic for researchers, not least because there are relatively few critical empirical studies to draw upon for guidance, although the number of such studies is growing (Howcroft and Trauth, 2005). Each new CST study has a contribution to make in reflecting upon methodology for future empirical research. Within CST research, the goal is emancipatory, aiming to challenge existing, dominant, theories or practices and attempting to bring about transformative action (Alvesson and Deetz, 2002). CST researchers not only mount these challenges to the agents in the subject of the study, but also to the existing, dominant theories or practices in the research tradition. Critical theory researchers announce their subjectivity and biases (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000) in the design of the study, selection of research participants and interpretations of data. This on occasion leads to challenges that the work is not “objective” or “scientific” from traditionalists. However, it is important to acknowledge the value of the adoption of new philosophies, and welcome less traditional methods in researching new experiences such as living in the e-society. Such encounters are essentially individual, reflecting each person’s experiences and skills and researching them as such offers a richer insight into the range of participants’ situations. Generation of transferable theories from emergent themes is possible to inform service providers and policy makers with the intention of bringing about “transformative redefinition” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) or change, and ultimately emancipation.

A key theme for critical theorists is the manipulation and objectification of people into passive conformists in the “machinery of society” (Alvesson, 1996). The belief that people are “*potentially* autonomous, capable of self-reflection and critical questioning” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) is essential to the preoccupation with emancipation which is the essence of critical research. It is interesting to consider the concept of the “e-citizen” in the light of this theme. The internet is perceived in the *status quo*, and significantly by technologically determinist service providers, as bringing numerous benefits including access and empowerment. Providing services electronically with the assumption that people will use them and be empowered, and labelling those people as “e-citizens” is indeed to manipulate and objectify them into passive conformists of the “machinery of society” (Alvesson, 1996). In reality there is no such thing as an “e” (electronic) or “digital” citizen. There are however, people who may choose to carry out tasks that facilitate their day-to-day activities through electronic channels; People who are capable of self-reflection, critical questioning and choice. People who could contribute to the effective design, consumption and improvement of electronic services if they were given the skills, knowledge and above all *voice* (Habermas, 1984).

There is however, a conflict at the heart of the construction of the “e-citizen”. On the one hand the e-citizen is the passive object of organisations as they push selected information. On the other hand they are expected to take responsibility, and be informed. The construction of “citizens” has to some extent mirrored the construction of “consumers”. Terms such as the “prosumer” (Toffler, 1980) and the “responsible consumer” (Gilliatt et al. 2000) have emerged, as the responsibility for actively gathering information has been thrust on to the consumer. A UK government white paper explicitly

defines the “better consumer”: “The better consumers are informed about what the market offers” (Department of Trade and Industry, 1999), constructing the dualism of the good consumer/ bad consumer hierarchy (Derrida, 1978) quoted in (Macey, 2002), with the implication that an uninformed customer is irresponsible. Similarly, through academic writing, government publications and policies and even training and education programmes, UK citizens are being reconstructed as “the well-informed citizen”, “the responsible citizen” (Schutz, 1964; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2003) and ultimately the e-Citizen with the “confidence to access the world online”(British Computer Society, 2004).

The following two empirical studies will present interactions with the e-Society by citizens of the UK in two diverse contexts; health and retail.

### **3 THE RESEARCH IN TWO CONTEXTS**

As stated above, neither research project set out with the theme of “skills for the e-society”. It is established that the critical researcher is unaware of the twists and turns her path will take. CST researchers “criticize those “all-knowing” researchers, who develop their theoretical frameworks up front and then seem to find no reason to reconsider them during empirical work” (McGrath, 2005). Unlike science, CST research does not aim to set up a mechanistic process to ‘test’ out a thesis or hypothesis. Instead, it aims to show how, through a process of conflict, reflection, negotiation and improvisation the research was carried out. A benefit of this process is that new and unexpected research ideas or themes can emerge from the work. The following sections will present the two contexts and empirical studies.

#### **3.1 Online Health Support**

The first context is electronic health support. It is well established that health information is one of the most frequently sought topics on the internet (Nicholas et al. 2003). However, most of the research to date focuses on the health consumer’s use of the internet to retrieve health information provided by health professionals or service providers such as NHS Direct Online, MedicDirect, or even independent alternative therapists. This top down technologically determinist approach (Negroponte, 1995) fails to capture the truly empowering essence of the internet as a facilitator of communication and consumer connectivity. Academic literature suggests that through online communities a unified body of health consumers with a common and specific interest could come together, share experiences, offer support and even take collective action (Armstrong and Hagel III, 1996). It was this phenomena that *EyeSupport* hoped to tap into in the development of their website.

*EyeSupport* is a support group for patients who have had an eye removed usually (but not exclusively) due to ocular melanoma (cancer of the eye). The group is based at a North East England Health Trust, and has approximately forty members. Most members fall into the age range of between fifty-five and sixty-nine (although the group is now being opened up to parents of children who have lost an eye.) The catchment area for the group extends from South Yorkshire and Cumbria up to the Scottish Borders, and so an online support service would be an effective way to manage trust resources whilst providing effective support for clients. This initiative has the full support of the clinicians. The group has a number of enthusiastic members who are keen to develop a website and online community as a response to a perceived need for information and support amongst the group in order to “bring together people from a wide catchment area” and to “bring other members to the group” (*EyeSupport* Chair, 2005) through internet publicity. It is important to note that only two group members have taken any formal IT training, and only twelve stated that they had access to the internet in spite of the governments promises on access (Office of the e-Envoy, 2003).

The researcher was contacted by a member of the group initially for informal help in setting up the website. Subsequently, a bid for funding for the project proved successful. At this stage the research aim was defined as:

To explore the evolving phenomenon of the use of the internet by health service users and to investigate the relatively neglected issue of how the internet is integrated into existing information and support systems.

The intention was to facilitate the use of the tools of the e-society to assist and support *EyeSupport* members in post-operative daily life, and in developing individual capabilities. In this case study, the researchers adopted a participative action research (PAR) approach attempting to describe the actions, events and decisions taken during the course of the development, implementation and use of the site. The case study approach is a well recognised immersive method for conducting an in depth study such as this (Yin, 1994). Initially a focus group was held at one of the meetings of the *EyeSupport* group where the research project was presented and experiences and requirements of the group explored. The project was also presented to the health trust board. It was anticipated that a website would be developed based on the group's requirements and suggestions, demonstrated to them at a later meeting, and in an iterative process any amendments to the design and content addressed.

Significantly, electronic discussions were held with the Information Systems (IS) representative of the health trust to explore the possibility of the trust hosting the website. The response was predictably corporate and technologically determinist, the IS representative stating that if the trust was to host the site he would have to *design* the site. He offered to contact the liaison staff nurse "to determine suitable content". A request from the researcher that an *EyeSupport* focus group be held to inform the content remains unanswered. It is important to note that this was not the view of the liaison staff nurse who maintained that the group must take control of the website.

This interchange was conveyed to the chair of *EyeSupport* who expressed his concern at the content of the website being removed from the sphere of control of the group. He commented that the website "would be of no use if members were told what they could and couldn't include". In response to this the site was hosted independently of the health trust. This raised issues of liability and control. It was agreed with the Trust Board that the content should avoid medical information which may be misleading or worrying to some members of the group. Instead the focus would be on individual experiences and stories, life style advice, and group news. Extant power relations between service providers and users continue to control electronic content and interactions even where those service providers are attempting to empower users through the adoption of new services and channels for support. Similarly, through lack of skills, *EyeSupport* members are so far prevented from taking control of the construction and content of the website.

Despite constructing a basic website for members to build on, and the researcher attending *EyeSupport* meetings to demonstrate it and gather ideas, little interest has been shown in it. In the initial stages of the project a significant number of members stated that they had access to the internet and that they would find a website useful. Some told of computer courses they attended, or of the skills of their children who would help them in accessing the site (recognition of the value of social capital (Bourdieu, 1997). However, the ensuing dearth of response, or in some cases responses that illustrated a complete lack of internet awareness (for example, a key member who has always suggested that he is very internet aware and attends two computer courses has repeatedly handed over large printed documents to put on the website) caused the researcher to reflect on the reasons for this, and the relevance of this study to the field of experiences and skills of e-Citizens.

Comments made to the researcher illustrate the lack of both skills and awareness rather than access problems. It is significant that some of the leading members of the group appeared to have exaggerated their level of IT literacy. It is almost as if they feel that they *ought* to be able to function

in the e-Society and find it hard to admit to a lack of understanding or skill. This echoes how illiterate members of society develop many techniques to avoid having to admit that they cannot read and write. A key member of the group has frequently been asked for his email address to facilitate communication between the research team and *EyeSupport*. His response each time is a quick justification of how the computer at home “isn’t up to it” and how “the kids keep telling me we need to sort that out” and he “just hasn’t got round to it”. A second group member attending an IT course was asked for his email address and replied that he “had to sort that out with the college.” He added that the college he attends has asked for seven pounds to arrange an email facility, then asked the researcher “if I give you seven pounds could you sort that out for me?” indicating a lack of understanding of the process despite attending a course and being asked to hand over money.

Another member of the group reported “faulty” equipment as a barrier to accessing and using the website. However, further discussion suggested that the equipment probably wasn’t faulty, but that this member did not have the skills to set up the PC and internet access and so “gave up”.

“We got a PC and it didn’t work when we plugged it in to the internet.... so....(shrugs). My son-in-law has a laptop and when he plugged that in it worked, but I think there must be something wrong with it. So I just use it as a word processor” (*EyeSupport* member)

In spite of having the economic power to purchase a PC, this member was prevented from using the facility offered to him by the hospital through a lack of technical ability to set up the equipment. It is possible that the PC did not work and should have been returned to the seller. However, the fact that it wasn’t returned suggests that this member didn’t believe this. He later commented “I’m a bit of a duffer with technology” almost blaming himself for the fact that his PC was not set up to connect to the internet on purchase. This was the attitude adopted by several group members who appeared to blame themselves for their lack of skills. Two members commented that they hadn’t looked at the website as “I wasn’t born in the computer age” and “I’m useless at technology”

At a recent meeting of this group the researcher offered training on accessing the website. Meetings are held in the hospital, and so training could be given on how to access the site from a fully functional PC available in the hospital. Selwyn (2004) draws the distinction between public and private (domestic) access to ICTs. Ideally, the members of this group need individual, tailored home centred training. This will be given more consideration in the discussion of the two eSociety contexts considered in this paper. Significantly, when the small research grant is spent, the members of *EyeSupport* must take over the website maintenance themselves. At present no group member is equipped to do so.

### 3.2 Online Retail

The second context is online retail. In the initial stages of this research, and as a response to the predominant view that the internet was bringing many benefits and empowering customers, an interpretivist approach was selected. It is established that critical research often starts out from an Interpretivist stance (Walsham, 2001; McGrath, 2005). The researcher aimed to hold up the mirror of interpretivism and show how eCommerce was being adopted by consumers. She aimed to understand the *status quo*; how business-to-customer and customer-to-customer communication had improved so that knowledge was shared, businesses benefited and the customer was empowered. However, the challenge to this generally accepted situation appeared to be gaining volume. A conflict of narratives was emerging. Whilst the mainstream (academic literature, broadcast media and policy makers) generally espoused and celebrated the empowerment of customers, the occasional cautionary tale of fraud or security breaches was heard. Friends and colleagues recounted stories of dissatisfaction with eCommerce services. The *status quo* was that the use of the internet in commercial activity is

beneficial and empowering, yet the “broader empirical evidence” (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) such as friends’ and colleagues’ narratives and newspaper articles recounting internet crime or simply dissatisfaction with online shopping increasingly appeared to challenge this belief, suggesting a “dissensus approach.” On reflection the researcher decided that the most effective lens or “magnifying glass” to investigate this phenomenon would be that of critical social theory (CST). As Howcroft (2001) states: “Proclamations to the effect that we are entering into a new age should be examined critically rather than simply accepted without question”.

In this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with twenty-two participants, each one lasting between thirty and sixty minutes. Interviews were recorded with the permission of the participant, and verbatim transcripts were produced from the recordings. In analysis, the researcher made use of transcripts, recordings and field notes. Initial analysis of the data was through pattern coding and theme analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This method of analysis is an iterative process involving data collection and analysis simultaneously, complementing the reflexive approach which is central to critical research. Opportunities for reflection are ‘built in’ as the data generation and data analysis phases overlap and interweave. In this process of theme analysis the conflict in the ‘practice’ and the ‘promise’, or the ‘myth’ and the ‘reality’, of eCommerce became more apparent. Discourse analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts to greater depth. During the course of this analysis, the researcher noted that the issue of the lack of skills for electronic retail was dominant. Often this referred to the ‘mystique’ surrounding eCommerce and how companies actually operate. Occasionally however, it referred to a lack of skills or knowledge in the user. For example, responses suggested that participants did not have skills for information retrieval and evaluation, or how to set up virus checkers, spyware or spam traps. Further, they did not have knowledge about costs involved, or how companies use customer data or how to mend the computer if something went wrong. An interesting point here is that in this context, in contrast to the online health context, interviewees were all professional people working in universities, libraries, IS and computing departments and research centres; people who are technologically aware, suggesting that even citizens who have a higher level of IT literacy still encounter problems as citizens of the ‘e-society’. Some of these problems were due to the lack of skills, some to the lack of knowledge about technology and company processes, and some to the lack of company responsiveness.

Significantly, the participants in this study also appeared to be subject to “manipulation and objectification of people into passive conformists in the “machinery of society” (Alvesson, 1996). One interviewee commented:

“Something that’s probably significant is that I’ve only actually acquired a credit card very recently. One of the reasons I actually got that credit card is because it would make it easier to do internet shopping.” (Interview 9)

illustrating the need for those who wish to engage in the electronic society to adopt such trappings and become a cog in the machinery of capitalism. Similarly, those who engage in online retail often become the “objects” of commercially pushed information. Rather than offering citizens a means of interaction with companies, eCommerce has brought another channel for companies to communicate to rather than communicate *with* customers; “the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1995)

Further, concerns about internet security and trust issues were highlighted by participants in this study. Some of these concerns hinted at the “mystique” surrounding technology and electronic business processes. One participant voiced his concerns about the “uncertainty” of interacting with companies electronically.



“I’m very wary about sending any information on the internet because I get so much SPAM stuff. ....there’s so much uncertainty. I just don’t like the idea anyway, because all they need to do is put in your post code and your name and there you go they’ve got you. And how do they link that up with other databases. You don’t know do you?” (Interview 4)

Similar comments were made about the volume of SPAM by other participants. One commented that it is “the scourge of the internet. I really think that it needs controlling there’s no control, you know with the internet it’s unstoppable isn’t it? It’s going to put people off” (Interview 6). Another participant commented “you get viruses and things that I’ve had by clicking boxes in yahoo or something like this and the next thing you know you’re inundated.”(Interview 12) Such suspicion, and mistrust does not suggest that these citizens have experienced “meaningful use of ICTs .. where the user exercises a degree of control and choice over technology and content”; the ingredients of effective engagement with ICTs. (Selwyn, 2004).

A further theme emerging from these interviews is the level of skill required to find information on the internet. The general belief is that access to such a volume of information on any subject at the click of a mouse *must* be empowering. However, *access* to information alone is not in itself empowering. The potential for empowerment lies in the ability to understand and evaluate the information (Harrison, 2002). Recognition of the need for such skills is beginning to emerge, but continues to be regarded as a problem of those “excluded” from the e-Society. Experiences of these participants illustrate that information retrieval and evaluation in the “information age” is a skill lacked not only by the excluded, but also by the IT literate. Many interview participants remarked that they experienced information overload, “there’s too much information” (Interview 3), and “You can spend so much time just trying to find the information that you want” (Interview 6). A further participant likened the search for information on a website to being lost in a “labyrinth” (Interview 5).

A further barrier to meaningful engagement in the eSociety for the participants in this context is the lack of responsiveness and support from companies. A number of participants narrated experiences of needing more “self explanatory websites” (interview 9), being “in the dark” about costs (interview 5), waiting for days or even weeks for replies to emails, or of websites that were out of date. One participant narrated his experience of house hunting on the internet:

“I saw one yesterday, phoned up and it was gone because they haven’t updated their website. Well why not? This is really annoying especially over something like that.” (Interview 1)

Illustrating how meaningful interactions in the e-society are dependant upon the actions and level of engagement offered by organisations providing the service. To facilitate meaningful engagement organisations need to adopt a greater sense of audience and be more responsive to customer needs.

Significantly, however, as in the context of online health support above, the participants in the online retail context frequently blamed themselves for their poor experiences or lack of skills and knowledge. One participant commented that “when something hasn’t worked and I’ve found a blockage that I couldn’t get around, it gives you a very negative feeling, leaves me feeling useless” (Interview 4). One very powerful comment was made:

“I think it is very complex. Do you know how spyware works and hence how to fix it when it stops working properly, or how to completely remove it even? We’ve all wasted many hours trying to get our computers to do what we want them to do, with high levels of frustration I suspect, and we are the so called experts.” (Interview 22.)

Others justified poor design or service by claiming that they had “expected too much” (interview 3) or by a simple “maybe it was just me but...”

## 4 THE DISCUSSION

Whilst the citizens in the first context or case presented here could be explained through the numerous studies that attribute levels of ICT access to socio-economic status, gender, age or disability (Devine, 2001), (Murdock, 2002) the participants in the second case challenge this simplification and dichotomisation of the issue of access to services of the e-society. Even though the participants consider themselves to be technologically aware and IT literate, and have access to the internet both at work and at home, they still experienced problems or frustration due to a lack of skills or knowledge of electronic engagement, or in some cases, due to the lack of engagement by the service providers. The citizens in neither context appear to have experienced a revolutionary transformation in their interactions with organisations through the use of the internet.

Selwyn (2004) reconsiders the relationship between “access to ICT” and “use of ICT” outlining four stages of access and engagement (See Table 1). He reflects that consideration of the digital divide and the eSociety should focus not only on access and use, but on the *impact* and *consequences* of engagement. In reconstructing the digital divide as “a hierarchy of access to various forms of technology in various contexts resulting in different levels of engagement and consequences” Selwyn notes that a “single dichotomous” concept of the digital divide “makes little sense”. The author of this CST paper suggests that not only does this concept make little sense, but that it is limiting in its potential to influence policymakers and bring about effective change. Whilst the digital divide is synonymous with the “haves” and “have nots”; the “connected” and the “disconnected” little will be done to address the wasted potential of new channels of service delivery.

• Table 1 Stages in the Digital Divide

<b>Formal/theoretical ‘access’ to ICTs and content</b>	Formal provision of ICTs in home, community and work settings that is available to individual in theory.
<b>Effective ‘access’ to ICTs and content</b>	Provision of ICTs in home, community and work settings that individual feels able to access.
<b>Use of ICTs</b>	Contact with ICTs in any form. May or may not be ‘meaningful’ use. May or may not lead to medium/long term consequences.
<b>Engagement with ICTs and content</b>	‘Meaningful’ use of ICTs. Use where the user exercises a degree of control and choice over technology and content. Use could be considered to be useful, fruitful, significant and has relevance to the individual.
<b>Outcomes – actual and perceived Consequences – actual and perceived</b>	Immediate/short term consequences of ICT use medium/long term consequences of ICT use in terms of participating in society. Could be seen in terms of: <i>production activity</i> <i>political activity</i> <i>social activity</i> <i>consumption activity</i> <i>savings activity</i>

Table 1 Stages in the Digital Divide (Selwyn, 2004)

Further, the dichotomous construction of the “informed” “responsible” citizen as opposed to the “uninformed” “irresponsible” citizen shifts responsibility rather than power onto the people, and

provides a smoke screen to the real issues of training and skills and service provision. Significantly, through the perpetuation of the myth of the informed e-citizen, people could actually be experiencing poorer services. For example, an incomplete information search could result in information incompleteness and asymmetry placing the consumer in a *vulnerable* rather than powerful position. The vast amounts of information available today mean that the ability to structure a search and evaluate information retrieved is an essential skill in the avoidance of information overload and the execution of a productive search. Again, this (mis)construction of the “informed” “responsible” citizen as the norm is of benefit to service providers. Information seeking and retrieval incurs costs to the customer in terms of time, connection charges, print outs, subscriptions and so on. These are charges which have been passed to the customer by the company (Bakos, 1991). The “responsible citizen” is possibly doing the work of the organisation, cutting costs for them in terms of the need for informed staff, staff time and expensive manuals or brochures. However, not all individuals are able to effectively evaluate volumes of information. Harrison (2002) draws the distinction between information as passive “relevant data” and advice which is “information shaped to the needs of the individual”. It is not intended to imply that information *cannot* empower, but that a certain level of skill is required to retrieve and evaluate relevant information; providing access to the technology artefact alone does not automatically facilitate a skills revolution.

Bourdieu (1997) states that “to appropriate and use” artefacts of technology a person “must have access to embodied cultural capital; either in person or in proxy.” We are increasingly reliant on ‘knowledgeable’ friends, to assist us in our interactions as ‘e-citizens’, again at a cost to individuals, and a benefit to the organisations providing the service. Selwyn (2004) builds on Bourdieu, showing how social capital can be collective, and mobilised through social obligations between networks of individuals and organisations, or through expert sources (Kitchin, 1998) which are increasingly remote and virtual (helplines and online help facilities). Research into technological exclusion has highlighted the benefit of “localised face-to-face social capital” (Murdock et al. 1996). Such services are very under developed in the UK, but would be of clear benefit. For *EyeSupport*, in the first context considered here, the involvement of the local Hospital Trust IS team in the development and subsequent use of the website and online support facility would have been invaluable. The lack of engagement by the trust’s knowledgeable experts effectively forced the support group (a trust initiative) out of their domain both virtual and real. However, through the affiliation with the hospital, content continues to be controlled whilst advantages of such an affiliation (e.g. IT experts, hosting facility, clinicians’ input, coaching of website maintenance member) have been lost to the group. The collective creation and consumption of this digital resource could have produced a more effective support facility benefiting health service providers and users.

In the second context, local face-to-face support is more problematic. However, a greater sense of audience and provider responsiveness could go some way to addressing the issues.

In both contexts the lack of IT awareness, or the “mystique” surrounding IT was a strong theme. New developments in mobile and broadband technologies open up the potential for digital service delivery on more familiar platforms such as mobile phones and television (Carey, 2005). Both the familiarity of these devices, and their long established position within the domestic sphere make them ideal platforms for provision of effective access and engagement (see Table 1). However, ultimately, meaningful use as defined by Selwyn (2004) “where users exercise a degree of control and choice over technology and content” continues to reside in the hands of service providers and policy makers. Challenges to this hegemony or existing pattern of power and authority must be mounted. Pressure should be exerted upon these agencies to encourage them to promote and allow collaborative stakeholder design of technology and content, and so encourage citizen self empowerment.

## 5 THE CONCLUSIONS

The UK government has voiced its intention to make all Government services accessible online by the end of 2005. Various initiatives such as the The BCS e-Citizen scheme (British Computer Society,

2004) which is overseen by the ECDL Foundation, the international body with overall responsibility for the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) attempt to address the issues discussed here, and make grand promises:

“As an e-Citizen the Candidate will now be introduced into an exciting world of online resources and services in the areas of news, government, consumer, travel, education/training, employment, health, interest groups and business” (The European Computer Driving Licence Foundation Ltd., 2004).

However, making these services accessible, possibly at the expense of other channels alone does not go far enough in empowering citizens. Greater collaboration in creation and consumption of online services is needed. Extant power relations between service providers and users currently prevent the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1984) where services could be designed collaboratively. Private and public organisations could provide social capital through focused local face-to-face training. eBay is an example of a company attempting to do this. In holding courses at centres around the UK training people in “how to buy and sell on eBay” (eBay, 2005) the company is benefiting from an increased, and skilled, customer base. Similarly, a PC company could offer home set up and training. Companies should consider the skills of their potential market in their service design and marketing initiatives.

In order to address the incongruity between online service provision and the needs or requirements of customers, organisations that adopt electronic channels need to develop a greater sense of ‘audience’ and consider the customer’s requirements more fully. However, the relationship between ‘providers’ and ‘consumers’ is so culturally ingrained that a true shift in the power balance remains elusive. A significant twist to the ubiquitous belief that the internet empowers citizens lies in the question “how far can governing or commercial enterprises actually afford to empower customers within the capitalist economy?” (Zuboff and Maxmin, 2004). Buyer (or customer) power continues to be regarded as a threat to sustained competitive advantage (or clinical governance in the case of *EyeSupport*) and as such needs to be managed effectively (Porter, 1996). The maintenance of the *status quo* through distorted communications and an illusionary empowerment of customers through the internet could be serving the interests of organisations well.

The empirical material collected in the course of this research suggests that rather than a powershift “e-citizenship” brings a *responsibility* shift to citizens of the e-society who do not necessarily have the skills to take on this responsibility. The conclusions of this research address a range of stakeholders. Firstly, it is essential that businesses and policy makers work together to identify and address skills gaps. Organisations should consider the skills of the clients or customers in their service initiatives and design, and take on the responsibility of equipping them with relevant skills where necessary.

Secondly, citizens of the eSociety need to be aware of the new responsibilities facing them. As Collier states, although it is not necessary for an oppressed group to resolve their situation, it does not make sense to deny that they ought to do so (Collier, 1994). Citizens need to become more active in order to redress the customer / company power imbalance. It is possible that by placing higher demands on companies and taking the time to share experiences of dealings with companies through reviews or postings on websites some small progress could be made.

Existing power relations tend to leave customers reluctant to challenge companies and governing bodies. However, the internet offers the *potential* for alienation and oppression to be replaced with collaboration and action. In taking action such as complaining directly to companies over poor service, or to government agencies over unethical or simply ‘annoying’ marketing techniques, and in recognising their own skills gaps and calling upon governments and companies to attempt some redress, existing power relations could at least be challenged.

Finally, government departments should lead by example. A recent news story told how the UK's Inland Revenue website had "frozen" due to the large number of people attempting to electronically submit income tax returns close to the deadline for self assessment. The Department's response was authoritative; the penalty of one hundred pounds charged to those who submitted returns after the deadline would stand, and that "people should not have left it until the last minute" (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2005). This approach does not suggest a commitment to customer empowerment. Perhaps the Inland Revenue should have anticipated that people *would* "leave it to the last minute" and ensured that the technology they had in place was able to cope with such high usage. A greater sense of audience and 'partnership' is called for to equip citizens for engagement in the eSociety.

## 6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As stated in the Study Design, neither of these projects set out to research the issue of skills and knowledge gaps of the e-Citizen. This data was almost a "by-product" or theme that emerged in the course of small scale research projects with different aims. As such, this paper is an introduction to issues which need greater exploration in a wider range of contexts. The paper has not addressed issues such as the adequacy of government initiatives in supporting citizens in the digital society, nor of company initiatives in investing in skills for the customer base. A more in depth study is needed to evaluate training such as the ECDL *Skills for the e-Citizen* module. This will be part of future work and is currently the subject of a collaborative bid for funding.

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