



# Public library internet access in areas of deprivation: The case of Glasgow



Gillian Anderson<sup>a</sup>, Jason Whalley<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Management Science, Strathclyde Business School, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK

<sup>b</sup> Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

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## ABSTRACT

The Internet plays an increasingly central role in the lives of individuals. It enables individuals to engage in social, economic, leisure and entertainment activities including wider access to information. Due to extensive societal use of the Internet, those without access are clearly disadvantaged. They will lack the necessary information to make decisions, forgo the savings from shopping online and limit their opportunities for social interaction. This paper investigates the role that libraries can play in providing free public Internet access. This role is examined within the context of Glasgow, a large post-industrial city in the United Kingdom where Internet adoption is lower than in comparable cities and where a large proportion of its population face a range of socio-economic hardships. Primary data was collected from library users in three areas of deprivation. Our analysis demonstrates the role that libraries play as the provider of public Internet access. It shows that this role is not without its difficulties – inadequate levels of resources have been provided to fulfill the multiple roles that libraries perform in these communities. Libraries enable users to engage in a wide array of online activities, the range of which reflects both the push of government policies and the pull of innovative services.

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## 1. Introduction

The Internet is increasingly playing a central socio-economic role. Large parts of the economy rely on the Internet to sell and distribute their goods and services, while some form of online activity underpins social activities. This is demonstrated by the rise of large online retailers like Amazon and the widespread use of social networks, online content etc. across society. Given how important the Internet has become, those without access to it are clearly disadvantaged. While broadband adoption has steadily increased across the UK, there are large differences across the country in terms of the urban–rural split on the one hand and between different cities on the other.

Although broadband adoption has steadily increased in Scotland, within Glasgow, the country's largest city, adoption has stagnated. The reason for this stagnation is unclear. There are many socio-economic problems associated with Glasgow, though cities with comparable levels of populations and similar socio-economic characteristics all appear to have achieved higher levels of broadband adoption. Many parts of the city can be described as impoverished, with limited numbers of people working and low life expectancy. While this partly explains the low level of broadband adoption within Glasgow,

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0) 191 227 4941.

E-mail address: [Jason.whalley@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:Jason.whalley@northumbria.ac.uk) (J. Whalley).

it raises another issue that is the focus of this paper, namely, are individuals living in these areas obtaining access to the Internet through others means? Some Glaswegians may have access through a dongle, while others could use a smartphone.

There is, however, a third alternative way for Glaswegians to access the Internet, namely, through public provision in a library. Within the United States, the role of libraries as providers of Internet access has attracted attention from commentators adopting a range of different perspectives. For example, the provision of Internet access by libraries to those who are poor or homeless has been explored by [Gordon et al. \(2003\)](#) and [Crates \(2014\)](#) respectively. In contrast, [Jaeger et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Sin \(2011\)](#) investigate the resources available to libraries while [Jayakar \(2011\)](#) places them within the wider policy context of broadband availability and use. Regardless of the specific perspective adopted, the research highlights the pivotal role played by libraries in providing Internet access to marginalised communities.

This increasingly important role in the United States reflects the emergence of an information-based society and the presence of a series of barriers such as affordability and the lack of relevant skills that inhibit adoption, but also the move of government services online ([Arnason and Reimer, 2012](#); [Jaeger et al., 2012](#); [Sin, 2011](#)). It also raises questions regarding to the situation in Glasgow. Although Glasgow has an extensive network of libraries across the city that offer free Internet access to library members, it is not clear what activities are undertaken online. Moreover, how the barriers to adoption manifest themselves remain unclear, as does how Glasgow as a city responds to them so that Internet adoption by its population can occur.

With this in mind, the remainder of this paper is structured as an exploratory study into the online activities of users in three areas in the city. The eight libraries in these areas are located in areas of deprivation in Glasgow, with the consequence that the exploration occurs within a context of a divide, which in this case is related to deprivation, which exists within the city. In the following main section, salient issues in the digital divide literature are discussed before Section 3 briefly describes Glasgow. This is then followed in Section 4 by a discussion of public Internet access. The methodology adopted in this paper is outlined in Section 5, with the resulted findings detailed in Section 6. These findings are discussed in Section 7 before conclusions are drawn in the final section of the paper.

## 2. Digital divide

In its simplest form the digital divide represents a gap in access to and use of digital or electronic information between different sectors of society and first arose around the end of the 1990s ([van Dijk, 2005](#)). It has been argued that it is just another facet of social exclusion ([Rafferty and Steyaert, 2007](#)) and ‘diminishes the chances of participation in all relevant fields of society’ ([van Dijk, 2005, p. 177](#)). [Epstein et al. \(2011\)](#) go further, splitting it into access to technology and capacity to use technology. Both are required if households and businesses are to maximise the benefits that are available to them via the Internet. For some, access to digital information is an entitlement similar to that of other household utilities ([Westminster e-forum, 2012](#); [European Commission, 2009](#)), while others, such as [International Telecommunications Union \(2012\)](#) suggest that it is a basic human right.

There is an extensive literature on the barriers to and drivers of household Internet access. This literature is (partially) summarised in [Table 1](#), with a focus on the barriers to adoption. The table highlights various categories such as demographics and education that are regarded as being important.

Based on demographics factors, users are less likely to use the Internet if they are older, from an ethnic minority, female, have no children or are from a deprived area ([Dutton et al., 2009](#); [Larose et al., 2012](#); [Ofcom, 2013a](#); [Prieger and Hu, 2008](#); [Selwyn, 2004](#); [Scottish Government, 2012a](#)). [Enyon \(2009, p. 281\)](#) specifically investigated the digital divide in terms of education and learning, finding that ‘use of the Internet is shaped by socio-economic, demographic and attitudinal factors’. Those educational and skill related factors that influence the likelihood of using the Internet are that it is not used at work, that work involves low technology and equipment skills, the level of education is basic, low general Internet skills and technology confidence and low levels of Internet experience ([Communications Consumer Panel, 2012](#); [Dutton et al., 2007](#); [Eynon, 2009](#); [Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008](#); [Helsper, 2008](#); [Scottish Government, 2012a](#); [Selwyn, 2004](#)).

Economics also influence use of the Internet. The Scottish Household Survey reports that in Scotland only 50% of those earning less than £15,000 per year use the Internet, with this figure rising to 98% for those whose yearly incomes are above £40,000 ([Scottish Government, 2013b](#)). Ofcom reports this for Glasgow, showing similar trends – only 38% of households in lower socio-economic groups have a fixed broadband connection. This figure, however, rises to 87% for more affluent groups ([Ofcom, 2013a](#)).

Social aspects play a key role in the adoption of new goods and services ([Rogers, 2003](#)), with the social experience of learning important for older people ([Radcliffe and Winckler, 2011](#)). The structure of social networks, as well as direct social influence and neighbourhood relations, mediate ICT and Internet use ([Communications Consumer Panel, 2012](#); [Crang et al., 2006](#); [Dwivedi et al., 2009](#)). A study for Communications Consumer Panel interviewed 48 Internet users with low levels of digital engagement and 44 stakeholders ([Communications Consumer Panel, 2012](#)), finding that a ‘lack of interest’, ‘fear of technology’ and their failure to prioritise use due to being unable to perceive the associated benefits, were factors likely to prevent adoption. They also found that a ‘fear of being excluded’ could be a driver for some to use the Internet. If non-users are able to use the Internet by proxy – that is, someone else is able to go online for them – then they are less likely to use the Internet themselves ([Ofcom, 2012a](#); [White, 2013](#)). A negative attitude to technology is also a barrier to being online ([DiMaggio et al., 2001](#); [Eynon, 2009](#); [Verdegem and Verhoest, 2009](#)). [Eynon \(2009\)](#) found that 91% of those with a ‘positive attitude’ were current Internet users. Peer pressure and the household context may also act as a barrier to going online ([Agarwal et al., 2009](#); [Selwyn, 2004](#)).

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