



Surfing the web – Recreation or resource? Exploring how young people in the UK use the Internet as an advice portal for problems with a legal dimension

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ABSTRACT

Internet use and access in the UK has increased rapidly in the last decade, with the concept of 'information superhighway' recognised as an axiom of Internet technology. Despite this, few studies have sought to investigate the incidence of use of the Internet as an advice resource outside of the health information arena. With an increasing impetus in the public sector towards the provision of online delivery mechanisms for civic orientated activities, including advice provision, it is timely to better understand the appropriateness of online advice seeking. Focusing on young people aged between 18 and 24 years, we investigated how much the Internet was used to obtain information about everyday problems with a legal dimension, who used it, how it was used and how successful respondents were in searching for information online. Data were extracted from a large-scale household survey of adults' experience of problems with a legal dimension conducted across England and Wales (10,512 adult respondents). Results revealed significant growth in the use of the Internet to obtain information about such problems, rising from 4% in 2001 to around 18% in 2008. The responses of the 18–24 year olds to the survey illustrated that despite having comparatively high levels of Internet access, this age group utilised it to a lesser degree than similarly 'connected' age cohorts, and were less successful when doing so. This study highlights aspects of the second digital divide, going beyond access to explore use and outcomes of use. Implications for the future of the Internet in providing information and advice for young people, are discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Internet, public services and information and advice about problems with a legal dimension

In 2000, the UK government set out an ambitious timetable to achieve universal Internet access and ensure the electronic availability of all government services by 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2000). In furtherance of this agenda, authorities have invested considerable resources towards the accessibility of services online, and over the last decade, government services have undergone a technological transformation, with emphasis placed on the potential for the Internet to better support the consumer driven needs of citizens.

The shift to e-Government has occurred alongside a transition in the way that the public are understood and served. With citizens increasingly conceptualised as consumers, there has been a shift towards development of consumer-orientated approaches to public service delivery (e.g. see Buck, 2007). The development of online services can be attributed, at least in part, to the Internet being a

delivery mechanism with the potential to be cost-effective and flexible. As such, the design of government services online has been dictated by the precedent set by the private sector, with efforts made to offer the type of access that individuals have come to expect from comparable online services such as 24-h banking (Cook, 2000).

In utilising the Internet to a greater extent, the public sector has largely followed behind large private sector companies, who in the 1990s took the lead in initiating and engineering the replacement of whole tiers of administration with computer networks and automated services (Burrows, 2003). In a public service context, one such example is the www.direct.gov.uk website. This site provides a centralised online entry point to Government services – a portal where government services and information coalesce – and evidence of the extent to which integrated online service provision has been harnessed by the public sector. Here citizens are able to undertake a variety of public service orientated tasks such as: initiating the passport renewal process; instigating vehicle licensing; and obtaining information pursuant to taxation, education and transport.

The provision of such services has been geared partly towards efforts to better respond to the needs and demands of citizens, however benefit is also seen in its ability to reduce the administrative

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burden arising out of traditional public sector service provision. Citizens have been able to effectively forgo the need to access services traditionally, by instead relying upon online diagnostic tools and information, such as that provided by the Department of Health (<http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk>). In the legal services/advice sector context, websites such as Community Legal Advice (www.communitylegaladvice.org.uk), run by the Legal Services Commission, National Debtline (www.nationaldebtline.co.uk), provided by the Money Advice Trust, and the Consumer Direct advice site (www.consumerdirect.gov.uk) provide information about some of the many problems people can face that have a legal dimension; such as problems concerning job loss, eviction, terms of employment, the purchase of faulty goods or poor quality services, debt repayment, credit terms, contact with children following the breakdown of relationships, domestic violence, entitlement to welfare benefits, anti-social neighbours, unfair treatment by the police, planning permission, etc.

However, in the remit of both health and legal services, the public also gains, and to some degree loses out, from the wide range of non-governmental websites vying for attention. Whilst benefit is seen in the diversity and potential independence of advice, the lack of regulation and the non-mainstream nature of some websites mean that issues of credibility and impartiality remain. Issues such as these may not be obvious to the inexperienced or unaware user when finding information online (Sillence et al., 2007).

In recognition of the increasing influence of digital technologies on the social interactions of young people, government services have utilised the Internet to develop sites aimed at this demographic. These targeted solutions are evident in sites such as: www.connexions-direct.com a website providing advice directed towards the needs of 13–19 year olds; a number of drug and health sites such as www.talktofrank.com and www.ruthinking.co.uk; alongside teenager-specific advice sections on the broader www.direct.gov.uk website and third party websites such as www.thesite.org, www.samaritans.org.uk and www.brook.org.uk. However these bespoke efforts have not always met with success. Conclusions drawn by the National Youth Agency (2006) and the DCSF (Lambley, 2007) have indicated that young people are not particularly responsive to government and voluntary sector websites, which they consider hard to find and difficult to understand (Youth Access, 2009).

1.2. Barriers to (successful) Internet use

In general, Internet access continues to increase. According to the 2009 Oxford Internet Survey, 70% of households surveyed had access to the Internet, an increase of 12% from the commencement of the survey in 2003 and an increase of 4% on 2007's results (Dutton et al., 2009). However, the “digital divide” is no longer merely about physical access to the Internet, but also about an individual's willingness to utilise the Internet as an information resource, and their capacity to do so (Attewell, 2001; Zhao and Elesh, 2007). Thus, the thrust of recent enquiry has been orientated towards the way in which individuals successfully use the Internet. This issue has recently been conceptualised as the “second digital divide”, moving beyond access to determine how issues of ‘equipment, autonomy, skills, support and purpose’ shape successful interaction online (DiMaggio et al., 2004).

This is a particular issue for younger users, who, despite the widespread assumption that they possess greater Internet know-how, may not always see the Internet as a source of information or advice; more often considering it a ‘toy’ or a ‘game’ (Nicholas et al., 2003; EdComs, 2007). In the field of health, there is evidence that young people do make use of online health resources (see e.g. Borzekowski and Rickert 2001; Skinner et al., 2003), however these studies tend to either fail to contextualize the ratio of this use

within the broader pattern of Internet activity or fail to proportionally represent the wider adolescent population. Age-comparison studies on the other hand, have found young people to be 14% less likely to utilise the Internet for obtaining health advice, less likely to be aware of the most useful sites and more likely to report searching on the Internet ‘frustrating’ (Nicholas et al., 2003). It may also be that young people simply prefer obtaining advice face-to-face. Evidence for this is found in Garvey et al's (2009) conclusion that most young adults prefer traditional forms of advice provision on account of difficulties in establishing trust in online advisors.

Insofar as willingness to use the Internet is concerned, a nexus between this and level of educational attainment has been noted. A 2005 study on Internet use conducted by Iske, Klein and Kutscher, though not exclusively focused on young people, found that those with higher education levels tended to start out at the same place as their less educated peers, using the Internet for ‘chat room’ activities. However, the authors note that these individuals quickly became bored and diversified their online activity and website access (Howard et al., 2001; Iske et al., 2005). Whilst young people are not necessarily those with the least qualifications, they are more likely to be in the earlier stages of formal education, as well as having less life and work experience, all of which will shape their online activity.

Education is relevant beyond just framing an individual's use of the Internet, as it also bears influence on an individual's capacity to optimize their time online. Whilst individuals may be willing to use the Internet to obtain advice or information, those with lower education attainment may lack the skills to effectively search for and distinguish between the quality of the online advice they find (Scott, 1999; Bennett et al., 2008; Puustinen and Rouet, 2008). Even those with higher education may still face challenges, Landauer's et al. (1992) study, although now somewhat dated, concluded that the average [US] college educated person was unable to form a correct Boolean expression for even a simple case and that casual searchers often know little about a topic and its vocabulary. In specific relation to young people, Puustinen and Rouet (2008) have found that these users have trouble selecting relevant categories from web-like menus, struggle to generate an appropriate set of key words when utilising search functions, and rarely think to use synonyms or alternative words upon initial failure (see also Bilal, 2002; Dinet et al., 2004). These findings suggest that difficulties may be faced, not just in the initial discovery of relevant websites, but also finding information contained within websites.

Thus, if as citizens, our interactions with public services are increasingly conducted online, a risk is run that access may be diminished rather than widened for some of the most vulnerable. There is a danger that any reduction in traditional advice services may further isolate and exclude particularly those young people, who are not just less inclined to use the Internet, but less well placed to maximise their use of it. This is all the more pertinent when considering those young people already facing social disadvantage. Where issues of poor access, lower age, and incomplete education coincide, successful use of the Internet for advice-seeking activities will be fraught with impediment.

Youth Access (2009) identified socially excluded young people – those who experience multiple social disadvantage and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET's) – as a case where online services are less likely to be appropriate. Socially excluded groups have been shown to be often unable or unwilling to access the Internet for advice (Greater London Authority, 2002; MBA, 2007) and even those with the willingness and physical access, may struggle to derive the anticipated benefit of online activity (Parle, 2009; EdComs, 2007). Particularly if relevant services are difficult to locate (Scott, 1999), these individuals do not possess the skills to maximise their use of the Internet (Eysenbach and Kohler,

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