

Crossing the Digital Divide in a Women's Community ICT Centre

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the role of community-based training initiatives in enabling women to cross the so-called digital divide and become confident users of ICTs. Drawing on a case study of the Women's Electronic Village Hall (WEVH) in Manchester, United Kingdom, one of the first such initiatives in Europe offering both skills training and Internet access to women, the article will illustrate the impact that community-based initiatives can have in challenging and changing prevailing gendered attitudes toward technology. Gendered constructions of technology in dominant discourse suggest that women must also cross an internal digital divide, involving a change in attitude and self-identification, before they can see themselves as technically competent. Learning about technology is intimately linked to learning about gender, and the performance of skills and tasks that are culturally identified as masculine can be an empowering step for women, successfully challenging preconceived gendered relationships with technology.

The WEVH occupied a unique position, acting as a model for other women's ICT initiatives and influencing the development and proliferation of other community-based ICT access projects. There were two main motivating forces behind its setting up in 1992. The first was a shared vision of the potential for ICTs to be used as a tool to combat social exclusion. The second was a feminist commitment to redressing the inequalities and underrepresentation of women in computing. Both these perspectives formed an important backdrop to the growth and development of the organisation and have continued to inform its strategic plans.

BACKGROUND

The Digital Divide

The context in which the WEVH was set up in the early 1990s was the first wave of initiatives concerned with tackling the so-called digital divide. During the decade that followed, there was a proliferation of initiatives driven by both British government and European policy aimed at ensuring that the emerging information society was inclusive of all citizens including specific measures for the participation of women.

While the personal ownership of PCs (personal computers) and home-based access to the Internet has increased at a rapid pace in Britain since the early 1990s, it is still the case that significant sections of the population do not have access to computers or the Internet. Moreover, those who are digitally disadvantaged often do not have the skills to take advantage of the potential that ICTs have to offer¹ (Office of National Statistics, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk>). Community-based ICT facilities to tackle the so-called digital divide were seen as one of the key strategic tools in community development and urban regeneration that was reflected in policies at the local, national, and European level.²

During the first wave of measures to tackle the digital divide in Europe in the early 1990s, women were considered one of the primary target groups for ICT training and access. The emerging Internet at that time was predominantly used by "techie" men, designed and implemented without the perceived need for inclusive strategies, and immersed in a strongly male-identified culture. At the time of its creation, the WEVH was therefore responding to a

clear need to tackle gender inequality, an issue that was considered self-evident to all concerned. Over a decade later, following the transformation of user interface design and the creation of the World Wide Web, Internet access reached the majority of the British population, and there is now only a small difference in usage between men and women (Citizens Online, 2005).³ While this is certainly an improvement, this simple analysis of Internet usage ignores the realities of women's continued underrepresentation in the IT industry, from their lack of influence on content and applications development to widespread inequalities in women's employment opportunities in IT. Yet it seems that the increase in women's access to the Internet and basic ICT skills has seen a reduction in public commitment to resources for women-specific ICT initiatives, which had historically been justified by the statistics of Internet usage.

While quite rightly addressing important social-exclusion issues, the notion of the digital divide as it has been used in British policy debates is somewhat limited, assuming a one-way process in which access to a computer and the Internet enables individuals to cross over and join the digitally empowered. However, there are significant numbers of ex-Internet users or refusers, that is, those who have stopped using the Internet either by choice or because they no longer have access: "It is clear ... that overall growth patterns of Internet usage conceal significant changes in usage by different sub-populations, including some evidence of drop off by particular groups" (Woolgar, 2000, p. 5).

Community ICT Access

The creation of the WEVH was part of a growing movement of community ICT initiatives that were developed at the local level both in Britain and elsewhere in the early 1990s. All of the initiatives had the common aim of providing "supported access in a location other than work or home" and "access to ICT in a social context" (Liff, Watts, & Stewart, 2000, p. 2-3). They have been known by a range of names including e-gateways, telecottages, telecentres, electronic village halls (EVHs), ICT learning centres, cybercafes, telework centres, community teleservice centres, and so on.

The idea of the electronic village hall was based directly on a model pioneered by Lars Qvortrup in Denmark, and was influenced by a growing counter-culture in the USA of online community networks and bulletin boards such as The Well (Rheingold, 1995). The creation of urban electronic village halls was part of a vision for the city of Manchester that combined community grassroots involvement with a local-authority public-information service known as the Manchester Host, an e-mail and bulletin-board system that local people could connect with and use to communicate with each other that would have shared community space as well as online databases supplying information. A cornerstone of the vision was that local people who did not have access to computers in their homes would be able to use these services at community access points: There were already some examples of these kinds of community centres operating successfully in rural Scandinavia. The concept of an electronic village hall in Manchester was a deliberate attempt to adapt the concept of a rural telecottage into an inner city context (Leach & Coppitch, 2005). The name implied that the centres would function as cozy, friendly local meeting places where technology could be made accessible and simple to use. In 1990, there was no World Wide Web, just text-based, command-line interfaces, so it was imperative that there were people to enthuse and support new users who might find the technology intimidating. The centres would be staffed by enthusiastic "telemateurs" who would raise awareness and act as missionaries within the communities. This was very important: The projects were not responding to expressed needs, but were proactive in trying to create those needs and a critical mass of users on the Manchester Host. As well as the WEVH, two other electronic village halls were set up in geographical neighbourhoods, providing services to spatial rather than virtual communities. The EVHs were charged with wide-ranging social and economic aims, including a regeneration agenda supporting and encouraging the development of local communities and businesses through the use of ICTs.

Women and ICT: Finding a Space

While this political context in the city of Manchester was one strand in the WEVH story that informed its

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