

## Working Paper 15

# Information and Communication Technologies, the Public Library and Social Exclusion

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### *Abstract*

*This paper seeks to locate public library efforts to address social exclusion within the wider debate about the transition to an “information” society and UK public policy responses to this. It notes, first of all, that utopian perspectives on information societies have little basis in reality and serve only to obscure a widening “digital divide”. It is suggested that UK government policy, whilst to some degree recognising this problem, has focussed on labour market led responses to it, based on training for IT skills and literacy. This, it is argued, neglects the need to create access to and control of infrastructure and resources by excluded people themselves. The public library clearly represents one possible mechanism through which such “informational” inclusion might be achieved, but we argue that thus far public libraries, in comparison with initiatives such as community networks, have not been particularly successful in linking ICT developments to a focus on exclusion. In the end, therefore, we suggest that public Library ICT policy will need to shift from a focus on the creation of a universal “people’s network” to a prioritisation of access to ICT by excluded people and communities. Libraries will thus need to develop proactive ways of encouraging excluded communities and groups to utilise ICT, and working in partnership with agencies with similar aims, and with local people themselves, will be an especially important part of this process (September 2000).*

### **1. Introduction**

“Information Technology is friendly; it offers a helping hand; it should be embraced. We should think of it more like ET than IT” Margaret Thatcher, *Speech at the Opening of the IT 82 Conference*, 1982 [1]

“The information superhighway should not just benefit the affluent or the metropolitan. Just as in the past books were a chance for ordinary people to better themselves, in the future online education will be a route to better prospects. But just as books are available from public libraries, the benefits of the superhighway must be there for everyone. This is a real chance for equality of opportunity”. Tony Blair, *My Vision of a Young Country*, 1996 [2]

In 1997, with the launch of New Library, the People’s Network, the public library finally

embraced the “Information” Age. Supported now by a modernising government, its authors could finally claim that the webbing of the public library service would become a reality. The new network would incorporate “revolutionary changes” bringing about “undreamed of increases in the quantity and quality of information” (p.1). In the information society, “making information and communication networks accessible to every citizen will be vital to generate the energy for success”. The electronic public library, it is claimed, will “enhance education and lifelong learning opportunities for adults” and “will support training, business and employment to foster economic prosperity”. In the end, the authors of *New Library* conclude, the new public library “will nurture social cohesion through fostering a politically and culturally informed society”. (Library and Information Commission, 1997, p.1)

This paper is an attempt to critique some of these matters, especially those which relate to the claimed impact of “wiring up” the public library upon socially excluded individuals, neighbourhoods and social groups. It will aim to do this, first of all, by briefly exploring the relationship between the “Information Society” and social exclusion at the general level, focussing especially upon the claims of some futurologists and policymakers that “information rich” societies will eliminate poverty and disadvantage from their midst. It will then look more specifically at the UK, and at the various initiatives, policies and projects which attempt to address the issue of the “information poor” and the problem of creating a “socially inclusive information society” [3]. The final sections of the paper will then focus specifically on the UK public library, reviewing both the trajectory of recent policy and a number of public library information and communication technology [ICT] initiatives now emerging at local level.

Can the transfer of informational resources (or capital) to the poor and disadvantaged really help tackle or ameliorate social exclusion? If it can, is the public library the most appropriate agency through which to channel such resources? Can the development of information skills, literacy and capabilities among excluded people really lead to “inclusive” societies in the information age? If it can, what part can the public library realistically hope to play in this process? We aim in this paper to offer some evidence and some ideas which might open up the debate on these issues, and question some widely held assumptions.

## **2. The Information Society, UK Public Policy and Social Exclusion**

The idea that the “Information” society [4] is, in itself, a route towards the elimination of social exclusion is one that has a powerful and highly visible public currency. According to the evangelists of the IT industry like Bill Gates, Alvin Toffler, and numerous other management consultants, futurologists and gurus we are moving to new age which is “post industrial” and crucially, “post capitalist” (Drucker, 1993). Society will be “information rich” and characterised by access to knowledge for all; ICT will abolish tedious and dangerous work. Opportunities will multiply for access to new channels of education and training, and people will be able to create new communities, and even new identities, in cyberspace. Crucially, this new society will be

globalised and distinctions and inequalities between social groups, and indeed, whole regions of the world, will dissolve and die. For Alvin Toffler, such “Third Wave” societies promise humanity “a quantum leap forward ..... we are engaged in building a remarkable new civilisation from the ground up” (Toffler, 1981, p.23).

Sceptics might immediately point to elements of both utopianism and self interest (what Robins and Webster (1999) label “techno-boosterism”) in these claims. Nevertheless, many of these ideas have been legitimised, in the public consciousness at least, by two factors especially: their adoption by politicians of most political persuasions, and their link to what we might describe as a quasi-economic theory. According to economists as eminent as Robert Reich, a “liberal” US academic and Clinton’s former Secretary of Labour, the world economy is now a globalised “knowledge” economy where “intellectual capital”, as opposed to money, is the key determinant of power and success (Reich, 1992) . European Commissioner Martin Bangemann concurs, urging Europe “to enter the information society and reap the greatest rewards” (Bangemann, 1994). National politicians have followed this lead with exhortations to mine the wealth of information in the hope that the results will trickle down to the poor. Tony Blair wants to make London the “knowledge capital of the world” and Al Gore looks forward to an information age with “sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to environmental challenges, improved healthcare and a greater sense of the shared stewardship of our small planet” (Gore, 1994).

Of course, not all commentators and interest groups have accepted this rose-tinted view of the coming information age. In the UK, a number of observers have adopted a broadly neutral stance which has argued that whilst the transition to an “information intensive” society is inevitable, its effects are potentially unpredictable, unknown and need to be channelled and directed by rational and considered policy decisions (Oppenheim, 1996; Moore, 1997). ICTs, in this view, are seen as broadly beneficial and in any case inevitable, but it is accepted that unless careful policy choices are made, the transition to an information society may have harmful consequences for many socially excluded individuals and society as a whole. The possibility of “information poverty” or a “cyberspace divide” is thus accepted in this view, on the assumption that rapid technological and economic change will result in disorientation and exclusion for some.

Policymakers utilising this standpoint have therefore broadly seen the creation of an “information society which is socially inclusive” as a key challenge. Reports such as those produced by the National Working Party on Social Inclusion in the Information Society (INSINC) have argued that technologies, systems and networks which are relevant to disadvantaged people have to be developed. Indeed, the INSINC Report, *Social Inclusion in the Information Society* defines an information society which is socially inclusive in the following terms:

- “it will have ready, easy to use public and individual access to the communication channels without heavy dependence on private or public agencies as intermediaries
- it will ensure that information which is essential for full participation in society, and for

support in times of need, is available at no cost at the point of delivery

- it will invest heavily in the information and communication skills of its citizens, raising their levels of information awareness, competence in discriminating when faced with large quantities of information, and ability to exploit information". (National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997, p.9)

Since 1997, ideas such as these have become more influential in the development of UK information policy, especially since the election of New Labour. New Labour's overall strategy document on the information society, *Our Information Age* (Central Office for Information, 1998) notes that "the government's role is to make sure that we do not have a society of information haves and have nots" and that "in the information age, the many, not the few, must benefit". The document proposes a range of initiatives to improve "access to information" such as IT for All, "policies on libraries" and a range of proposals for electronic government and improved access to information. However, few of these proposals say anything about the development of infrastructure or services that will target the poor and socially excluded, or about preventing the progressive "enclosure" and privatisation of major public information services such as TV (Robins and Webster, 1999 p.7). Indeed, New Labour's "approach to regulation will focus on promoting choice, innovation and efficiency through competing services and infrastructures". It will "liberalise the framework where possible" and promote "competition and competitiveness" (Central Office for Information, 1998, p.2).

This acceptance of the information market is to be complemented, according to *Our Information Age*, by an approach to social exclusion based primarily on the provision of educational opportunity for the acquisition of information skills, capabilities and literacy. As the document claims "education and the information age will support and reinforce each other.... the information age will transform education, at all levels and for all ages.....education will in turn equip people with the necessary skills to profit from the information age" (Central Office for Information, 1998, p.1). The document is thus peppered with proposals for transforming education, making it "information rich" in terms of both content and delivery. ICT is thus seen as a catalyst for addressing social exclusion through the creation of IT literate and, crucially, employable individuals who will then be able to "plug in" to a cyberspace society through their work. This links, of course, to New Labour's general programme of minimising social exclusion through a raft of policies designed to improve employability, reduce unemployment and maximise the percentage of the population participating in the labour force [5]. It also, we might note, places a heavy emphasis on the individual's capacity to adapt to the information society (INSINC's third proposal) rather than attempting to control or shape the structure of that society itself.

The success, or otherwise of such "welfare to cyberspace" strategies remains to be seen, although we look at some early initiatives in the next section. However, observers like David Byrne rightly point out that such policies place a heavy emphasis on individual responsibility for and responses to situations of exclusion. Moreover, at best they move individuals from circumstances of exclusion to non-exclusion rather than attempting to address exclusion structurally and eliminate what Byrne calls "exclusion as a domain" and "create a social order

which excludes exclusion” (Byrne, 1999, p.78). Indeed, Byrne argues convincingly that post-industrial capitalism (his preferred term for the information society) has actually contributed to problems of social exclusion in the UK by replacing stable and relatively well paid skilled industrial work with low wage, service-based insecure employment. In the end, such “poor work” is for Byrne the “big story” of the information age, creating a large, insecure, poorly paid and unstable working class that drifts in and out of exclusion, be it defined by deviance, poverty or space (Byrne, 1999, p.53)

More generally, Byrne’s critique reflects the analysis of those commentators who suggest that, far from eliminating social exclusion, the transition to an “information society” is actually responsible for its contemporary intensification and the widening rift between rich and poor [6]. Most of these commentators use alternative terms to express the nature of contemporary social change such as “post-industrial capitalism” (Nelson, 1995) ; “post-Fordism” (Amin, 1994) ; “informational capitalism” (Castells, 1997) or “globalism” (Sivanandan, 1998). Differing in emphasis as they do, all of these accounts nevertheless reject the idea that the “information society”, if it exists at all, is “post-capitalist”. Instead, they argue that the global information society represents a restructuring and an expansion of capitalism, and as result that it is threaded through with new forms of inequality and exclusion. Much of this exclusion, of course, is global in scale [7] and related to vast inequalities of access to resources, capital and power. A discussion of this is beyond the scope of this paper, but we should note in passing that it is possible to express exclusion in informational terms, especially in the sense of differential access to and control of informational resources and capital (Holderness, 1997).

In the UK the analysis of such informational inequality has particularly been linked to the urban restructuring associated with post-industrial capitalism. Researchers such as Graham and Marvin (1996), Carter (1997) and Byrne himself (1998) have focused on the way that deindustrialisation has fragmented traditional UK working class communities in cities and former industrial areas and created concentrations of marginalised, unemployed and very poor people in some inner cities and peripheral council estates. For Graham and Marvin, some of these areas, in addition to their many other problems, have become “information black holes where the poor remain confined to the traditional marginalised life of the physically confined” (1996, p.380) and where life is characterised by poor access to telephony and informatics, poor infrastructure investment; withdrawal of services like retailing and banking; poor community networks and declining public services like schools and public libraries. Moreover, such empirical research as there is strongly supports these claims. The government survey *Is IT for All*, for example, found that people in social classes DE were much less likely than average to have ever used a PC or connected to the Internet: only 39% had ever used a PC and 14% surfed online compared with average figures for the whole population of 58% and 29% respectively (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000 p.23).

Examples of responses to such informational exclusion are discussed in the next section, but here we pause and draw together some conclusions from this general discussion of the information society, ICT policy and social exclusion:

(i) It seems obvious but important to underline that the transition to an information society will not automatically reduce or minimise social exclusion. Indeed, there is powerful evidence that post-industrial society brings with it an extension and intensification of exclusion.

(ii) It seems to us unlikely to us that, as a whole, labour market approaches designed to integrate people into the world of informatised work will succeed if (a) such work does not exist or (b) such work fails to provide reasonably paid, secure employment. In any event, such approaches in the end do little to eliminate structural exclusion based on inequalities of access to and control of resources

(iii) Attempts to create socially inclusive information societies really do in the end depend on access to and control of infrastructure and resources by people themselves. This implies a much greater involvement than at present by “public” or “community” bodies in the development of technological infrastructure and the exploitation of it.

(iv) It follows that there are numerous opportunities for the public library to position itself in the development of such a new public sphere in terms of (i) infrastructure provision (ii) as a provider of access, support and training. However, the role of the public library will depend on both its own adaptability and relevance and the roles adopted by other stakeholders such as local authorities and community organisations. These issues are the focus of the rest of the paper.

### **3. Addressing Informational Exclusion: Non Public Library Responses**

One important response to the “informational” exclusion identified in the previous section has been centred around ICT policies and initiatives developed by UK local authorities. In the early 1990s a relative policy vacuum in central government concerning the public interest in ICT was partially filled by a range of initiatives and projects aimed at building an inclusive information society at local level. Influenced by the work of urban geographers such as Gibbs (1994) and Graham and Marvin (1996) some urban local authorities began to develop “telematics” programmes aimed at redressing industrial and social decline. Such programmes usually involved the sponsorship of new ICT based infrastructures in local communities; the retraining of local people in informatics related skills and the establishment of local community ICT access centres which offered a mix of training and community information activity. Usually, as we shall see, local authorities developed these programmes in partnership with a range of local interests including quangos; local businesses; the local voluntary sector and (sometimes) community organisations.

Perhaps some of the best examples of such urban telematics developments are those being attempted in Manchester, which in promotional terms in 1994 labelled itself “the information city” (Manchester Telematics Partnership, 1994). In an economic development strategy developed as early as 1991, Manchester City Council recognised the development of a new ICT based economy as a core response to the reality of industrial decline and subsequently brokered the formation of a local quango - Manchester Telematics Partnership - as a mechanism for

regeneration. MTP has since promoted:

- ICT infrastructure developments such as the Manchester “Host” initiative
- “electronic village halls” which provide ICT training and telework centres for disadvantaged groups and local communities
- Manchester Community Information Network, a now Internet based city electronic information service
- Manchester Multimedia Network, an electronic arts and cultural industries initiative.

According to Carter (1997), although such alliances and developments may “not be able to transform the forces of global capitalism” they can create “socially useful cyberspace” linked to “numerous practical examples of how people and organisations are working to achieve liberation and empowerment”.

To varying degrees, initiatives such as those in Manchester have been replicated by other local authorities across the UK. Some have developed particularly extensive ICT training programmes as a spur towards job creation and economic restructuring - Knowsley, in Merseyside is an example where these initiatives have become closely linked with the library service. More generally, many local authorities are now beginning to shift from a predominant concern with IT as a management tool to the development of ICT services which promote open government and access to information. In a recent report *London Local Government in the Information Society* the authors conclude that London Boroughs have made “great progress” in the provision of electronic one stop shops, telephone call centres and electronic kiosks (Bax, 1999). In a different survey Horrocks and Hambley (1998) found that by 1998 there were over 300 local authority web sites in the UK, pointing to the “webbing” of British local government.

However, it is clear that there are limits to both the scope of, and the impact of, these local authority initiatives, especially in terms of their relevance to the experience of socially excluded people. Understandably, many local authorities have linked ICT initiatives to an employment and economic development agenda, and whilst some training based projects boast impressive success rates in terms of return to work figures and the like, an exclusive focus on employment as an outcome can clearly often neglect other potential applications of ICT which may be more relevant to the situation of excluded people. Moreover, many general local authority ICT initiatives linked to “open government” are criticised by writers such as Horrocks and Hambley precisely because they do not particularly address the needs of the socially excluded. In their survey of local authority web sites, these writer found the 50-60% of them were being used for mainly “promotional” activity by the local council, and that this did very little to improve local access to services or local democracy (Horrocks and Hambley, 1998).

Because of these limitations related to the institutional culture of local authorities, organisations like the Community Development Foundation have argued strongly that a more effective route to a socially inclusive information society could be provided through sponsorship of community networks. Community networks can be defined as “communication initiatives where members of

identifiable local communities or communities of interest seek to exploit the information highway for their own benefit” (National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997, p.3). Influenced initially by the libertarian idealism of early US pioneers of “virtual communities”, protagonists of these networks have now developed a large number of community based ICT projects in the UK, an interest group (Communities Online) and “gateway” sites on the World Wide Web which provide access and background material [8]. Supporters of these developments have argued that they offer a huge potential for promoting social inclusion because they improve local communication and enhance community development; because they help link excluded communities and people to the outside world; because they facilitate skills and capacity building in local people; and because they improve the possibilities of local involvement in decision making (National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997, p.16). Harris (1999), argues further that initiatives like community networks support the local “information ecology” and reduce the possibility that communication in excluded communities will stagnate, and in extreme cases, cease altogether.

In material terms, most advocates of community networks now recognise that, if they are to effectively address social exclusion, they need to be more than simply on-line or cyberphenomena [9]. As a result, most community networking initiatives, such as the “flagship” examples noted in Shearman (1999), have an “offline” existence in community resource centres, electronic village halls or other local buildings. Overall, community networks are characterised by a diversity of function. Some incorporate a training, telework or economic regeneration function, and this is often linked to local community regeneration initiatives, such as those in Grimethorpe, South Yorkshire (Shearman, 1999, p.28). Other projects, however, such as Artmedia in Batley, West Yorkshire, emphasis community arts and local cultural activity; others such as the Eastwood and Oakhill Community Magazine in Rotherham, emphasise local communication and literacy development (Fisher, 1999). Many are supported financially by a wide range of national and local funders, including local authorities on the Manchester model, and most attempt to involve a wide range of local groups and people in their management and decision making. Success in doing this is identified by Shearman as a key precondition for the sustainability of a project or network. An ability to diversify and engage in a range of ICT related activities is also seen as a major determinant of success (Shearman, 1999, p.24).

Some community networking initiatives have thus clearly demonstrated a potential to address informational exclusion in a holistic and flexible way. Because of their capacity to involve and engage local people, many of these projects have succeeded in offering avenues to skills, literacy, employment, personal development and community regeneration which have proved invaluable in many deprived neighbourhoods across the UK. However, it is also clearly the case that the distribution of successful community ICT initiatives is patchy and uneven, and not necessarily related to overall levels of exclusion or need. Day and Harris (1997) argue that the non-mainstream funding position of most community networks has hampered their success, in part because they have often had to distort needs based aims and objectives in an attempt to chase funding streams. Sustainability, of course, is a key problem.

As a result of these limitations, a strong lobby of opinion formers (CDF, Communities Online,



INSINC) have begun to argue for the development of a network of community based ICT resource centres as perhaps the best way of tackling exclusion at an informational level. Such centres, advocates argue, should be consistently funded by, but not managed by, the state. These arguments have to some degree been accepted by the Social Exclusion Unit initiated Policy Action Team 15, which focussed on developing ICT policy for deprived areas (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000). In their recently published report, the PAT 15 team view the development of community based ICT initiatives very sympathetically and use numerous examples of good practice from networking projects to illustrate their findings. In general they argue that ICT “provides a vehicle for people living in deprived neighbourhoods to reconnect with society in a variety of productive and positive ways” and they identify three key avenues:

- skills development, jobs and self employment
- [personal] self development and creativity
- helping communities work [community development]

PAT 15 recommend that, to further these means, by April 2002 deprived neighbourhoods should have “at least one publically accessible community based ICT facility..... Prime examples are schools, libraries and community centres but consideration should also be given to locations such as doctor’s surgeries, faith based centres cybercafes and neighbourhood learning centres”. A process of neighbourhood planning, it is argued, should determine locations. Funding proposals are, however unclear and subject to review, and it is especially uncertain how these link with New Opportunities Fund (NOF) proposals linked to *New Library : the People’s Network*.

As yet, of course, the degree to which these proposals will be put into practice is largely unknown. However, as a conclusion to this section we can note some of their broad implications for the public library service. First, it is clear from this review that the public library service is not the only, or arguably even the main, provider of ICT access in local and excluded communities. In some localities local authority general initiatives have played a pathfinder role, in others initial activity has focussed on community networking projects. Second, it is obviously the case that, out of PAT 15, the government wishes to promote “joined-up” development of multi functional local ICT centres. Public libraries will need, in the next 2 years or so, to decide whether or not involvement in the development of such centres, and in some cases their location in libraries or adjacent accommodation, represents a viable development strategy.

One alternative emphasis for library services is to seek a more central role in the development of general local authority ICT strategy and services. This would probably involve production of content such as web-sites and community information services together with the largely passive provision of “access” to ICT through library service points. However, such a strategy would, in our view, operate largely at “arms length” from excluded users and would result in the library service adopting only an indirect concern with matters of social exclusion.

#### 4. Public library ICT policy : a “new library” for the excluded?

In the 1990s the understanding of the importance of information technology as a mechanism through which the status and role of public libraries could be changed grew apace. *Reading the Future* (Department of National Heritage, 1997) for example, argued that “the biggest changes in public libraries over the coming years will arise from the development of information technology” (p.2) Partly as a result of this perception, the feeling grew among the public library community that ICT, and the Internet especially, represented an opportunity to restore the public library’s position at the centre of a “public sphere” of information - a role that had been encapsulated in the “library grid” of the 1930s.

*New Library: the People’s Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997), building on some of the mid-1990s experimentation in some public libraries, articulated these feelings into a national strategy to wire up public libraries and re-skill public librarians. This report, the subsequent *Government Response* (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1998) and the eventual implementation plan (Library and Information Commission, 1998) represent a significant point in library history. *New Library* pushes this national role with a confidence not seen hitherto. In doing so it embraces New Labour’s priorities [10] with their stress on the public library as part of an information age network aiming to re-skill Britain for the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

“This report argues for the transformation of libraries and what they do; it makes the case for re-equipping them and reskilling their staff so that they can continue to fulfil their widely valued role as intermediary, guide, interpreter and referral point – but now helping smooth the path to the technological future” (Library and Information Commission, 1997, p.2)

*New Library* argued for large scale Government investment in libraries to achieve this “transformation” because “public Libraries are the ideal vehicle to provide... access and support, and to foster the spread of vital new technological skills among the population” (p.2). The report is confident in claiming this central role for libraries:

“The library is enormously powerful agent for change: accountable to and trusted by people and integral to education, industry, government and the community. A UK – wide information network made available through libraries and implemented on the basis of a high specification central core could do more to broaden and encourage the spread of information and technology skills among the population – especially the young – than any other measure the government could introduce” (Library and Information Commission, 1997, p.3)

*New Library* makes a superficially compelling case. Public libraries are located across communities. They are often one of the few public services still located in socially excluded areas. It is persuasive in its belief that:

“As a trusted intermediary, public libraries can span the present and technological future, ensuring no citizen is left behind, providing a safety net against alienation and social exclusion... a route to universal access and opportunity” (Library and

Information Commission, 1997, p.16)

The *Government Response* buys into this central role for the public library in delivering its own 'information age' objectives. It commits the Government to making libraries part of the universal ICT access strategy: "every public library should be connected to the National Grid for Learning by 2002" (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1998, p.1) Furthermore, it identifies four areas where the public library will be charged with aiding delivery of Central Government's agenda:

- By harnessing the Internet librarians will become "guides for people who are taking their first steps with these new technologies"
- By being a cog in the *Information for All* programme
- By delivering Government services to members of the public
- By being a component part of the University for Industry

The emphasis is on libraries functioning as gateways to technology training and to information. Money is committed to reskilling and also for 'cutting edge' projects (in conjunction with the Wolfson Challenge fund, see below in Section 5).

However, if we examine the trio of documents (the implementation report, *Building the New Library Network*, is primarily concerned with the practicalities of networking and reskilling), for an explanation of how public libraries and librarians are to deliver social inclusion we find little guidance. In essence, while *New Library* acknowledges that a key principle must be 'equality of access' (p.68), all of the reports reflect a belief that by being there in communities public libraries are, by and large, already vehicles for inclusion. The shift to ICT thus becomes, primarily, a process of updating and reengineering a successful product rather than a fundamental challenge to any present failure to engage with excluded communities.

The ambivalent attitude of the three reports towards charging for access to ICT is indicative of this lack of consideration of the need for basic change. *New Library* makes all the obvious arguments for a free service (p.79). However, although it notes that it is clear that cost would be a barrier to libraries role in "levelling the playing field and providing technology for those who cannot afford to buy it" the report is ultimately equivocal on the issue:

"Whether the service is free or charged for is an issue that will need further examination. Libraries already make charges for some things, and most people do except this" (p.22)

The Government's response (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1998) does not consider the charging issue whilst *Building the New Library Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1998) assumes charging for some services with appropriate concessions (p.135). Indeed, in its revenue calculations it assumes charging which might include Internet access, E-mail, CD-ROM usage or use of Office facilities. Ultimately, the consequences for local authority funding of picking up the cost of free access probably ensured that the report team shied away from such a recommendation. The issue of removing charges is only really tackled later when the New Opportunities Fund issued its guidance for access to capital funds to build the network (see Section 5 below).

From a perspective of the needs of socially excluded communities, there is also little said about the extra staffing support that might be needed in some libraries; the need for public libraries to develop community networking partnerships; or the whole issue of sustainability of community projects. Thus, in the end, these reports are fundamentally blueprints for modernisation of resources, technology and inputs. They certainly embody the government's equality of opportunity agenda but they far more circumspect in the articulation of community need and the ways that libraries might engage with excluded communities or individuals within an ICT context.

Overall, these policy documents, together with the statements in *Our Information Age: the Government's Vision*, (see Section 2), set out clearly the policy goal of overhauling the public library through the introduction of ICT and a key function of this modernised public library is envisaged as the reskilling of the UK for the Information Society. The mix of statements and funding intentions from these reports leaves a picture of public libraries rewired and librarians reskilled but provides scant guidance or remit regarding those excluded or disenfranchised from using the service. The reports are largely silent about the mechanisms for tackling a "society of information haves and have nots" (Central Office of Information, 1998 p.13). In the end, these seem to rest with the financial and political circumstances of individual local authorities.

## **5. Public Libraries and ICT in practice: from access to empowerment, from service to partnership?**

ICTs have, of course, had an important influence on the development of the UK public library for many years before the advent of these formal policy statements. In terms of the real impact of ICT on the public library there is a clear and unsurprising pattern. In the 1980s, most of the development focused upon library management systems and a steady shift from stand alone to network solutions. Then, in the 1990s, interest developed in ICT as a tool to improve public libraries' informational capabilities. Much of the focus again shifted to networking, especially after the commencement of the EARL project in 1995 (Smith, 1995). By the late 1990s the public library sector was growing in confidence in articulating a core role for itself as an access point to the information superhighway. Leech captures the mood well:

Networking is a key word in public libraries at the moment. Reports about the public library sector over the past ten years have been calling for it. New technologies are not just available for it, but are making it attractive. The leading organisations in the sector have been involved in the report *New Library: the People's Network*, which has produced an exciting vision of the public library of the future, and have followed it up with *Building the New Library*, which has put together practical proposals for doing so. And the government has not only given approval for digital information, but is also putting money behind it. Things have not looked so promising for the public library world for a long time (Leech, 1999, p.39)

The three years of DCMS / Wolfson funding, between 1998/2000, (for ‘cutting-edge’ library ICT projects’) reflected this concentration on wiring the library network. This funding was a bridge between the period of recognition that national funding was required and the provision of New Opportunities Funding in 2000/2001. Sixty-nine awards were made. Some bids were undoubtedly innovative and gave consideration to those most in need of access. However, many more were primarily concerned with creating ICT infrastructure. The following statement was not untypical:

The purpose... [of the bid], which will increase the number of networked public access PCs from 153 to 271, is to continue the transformation of [our] libraries from traditional library service to New Library.” (Library and Information Commission, 1998)

As we noted in the previous section, there is an assumption in all this activity that the focus on the network, the updating of libraries with ICT provision and their redesignation as learning centres will by itself support a social inclusion agenda. It is an assumption that presumes that public libraries are already an effective vehicle for social inclusion and that they simply need technological updating. Again, quoting Leech:

Public libraries have long been information hubs for the communities they serve, and the fact that these hubs are rapidly becoming electronic will only ensure better services” (Leech, 1999, p.47)

Such sentiments reflect the preoccupation with universal “access” that is so widespread in the library world. In the development of the National Grid for Learning and the commitment to ‘wire’ all public libraries by 2002 the Government itself seems to accept that such “access” and universalism provides a solution to social exclusion.

However, in other areas of social, economic and cultural policy, the government has also been developing a (complementary or contradictory?) strategy of targeting extra resources for those who have the greatest social needs. The articulation of this approach began with *Bringing Britain Together* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998), was expanded through the work of 18 policy action groups, including Policy Action Team 15 relating to ICT (see below) and is now detailed in the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000). Librarians have, on the whole, been slower to identify with such strategies which extend beyond universal provision and which focus on need rather than demand. Even with the roll out of NOF funding, public libraries’ investment in ICT remains largely driven by demand. Chris Batt, the LIC’s “IT Czar” notes that the ‘size of the learning centre will depend largely on the size of the library: this might be two terminals for a small library or over 50 terminals for larger or central libraries.’ (Batt, 2000)

This is not to say, however, that some librarians have not been involved in innovative ICT based projects that consider the needs of disadvantaged communities, but these are clearly exceptions to the mainstream. Undoubtedly, there are examples of developments since the mid-1990s onwards that highlight both the ways that libraries can use ICT to engage with socially excluded communities and also illustrate the barriers to be overcome. However, the schemes have perhaps had only a marginal impact on national library policy, strategy and funding arrangements. IT

Point in Solihull, for example, was an early project from the mid-1990s which demonstrated:  
That there is a market for public libraries to provide a service offering public access to computer software and network facilities [in a socially deprived community]" (Solihull Education, libraries and Arts, 1998)

The project also illustrated the "value of local community involvement", the need to work with partners, the importance of a wide range of ICT provision (i.e. not just IT information substitutes but computing resources) and the negative impact of charging on use.

Across the country other projects, many small scale and time limited, have also explored initiatives that address the needs of the socially excluded. These include centres for homework, learning and family literacy. A study by Botten (1999) concluded that homework clubs (in Leeds, Kensington and Chelsea and Knowsley), targeted at deprived communities:

Working in partnership with relevant outside agencies, sharing skills and expertise can help to make a powerful statement about our role in helping to overcome barriers to learning (p.417)

A number of library authorities have also seen the potential of exploiting community information provision as a vehicle for engaging with their local communities to experiment with new electronic media. In Leech's analysis for CIRCE, while most authorities were simply changing from paper based lists to ICT based files some, such as Rotherham and Sheffield, were exploring community online magazines and hosting web sites for community groups (Leech, 1999).

It is in these areas of linkage that libraries are beginning to engage in more creative ways of working in and with excluded social groups and communities. These engagements, using ICT, start to articulate a different agenda and different priorities for libraries. This agenda is one that is seen as crucial for libraries by advocates of community networking if they are to have a productive role in addressing social exclusion. As we have already noted in Section 3, community networking developments turn the use of technology around: ICT can become a tool for engagement, community development and empowerment of excluded people rather than a source of alienation and mystification. Community Resource Centres (CRCs) can be potent enablers of the development of social capital. Libraries are seen as possible locations for CRCs, given the right circumstances, but writers such as Harris (1999) put more stress on the proactive work needed to use ICT as a mechanism for libraries shifting from being merely *in* the community to being *of* it. Such a shift, writers like Harris emphasis, will involve a shift from "access" to "empowerment" and from "service" to "partnership".

We thus have two models being articulated in the late 1990s that claim to support the "informatisation" of communities and local people as a means of addressing social exclusion. One prioritises "access" to networks and technologies, and puts a great deal of stress on updating the processes in and services provided by libraries and other public agencies (staffing, technologies and delivery mechanisms). The other starts with the needs of communities, and especially those communities with least access to ICT. Both models assume that providing ICT in socially excluded communities will be inclusive.

However, our review of the evidence suggests that, to best engage and support the needs of

excluded people and communities, a proactive, targeted model based on community partnership is essential. The government's own Social Exclusion Unit Policy Action Team 15, who examined the issue of ICT within socially excluded communities, underline this conclusion in their report, *Closing the Digital Divide* (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000). This report cogently argues for the primacy of community need as the starting point for solutions to the current 'digital divide' between information 'haves' and 'have nots'. It also acknowledges the support that is vital in ICT developments within communities:

Experience gained from the many ICT-based projects, which are currently in place, confirms that merely providing the technology is not sufficient. The local facility must also provide:

- Technical support to set up and maintain the facility
- Support for new and existing customers
- Leadership to drive the facility forward
- Appropriate content to interest and meet the needs of local users
- developing the capacity of local people to develop their own content
- Opportunities and support for local to develop their own content
- Local promotion and outreach activities to encourage usage and the involvement of local people
- a strategy for being sustainable"

(Department of Trade and Industry, 2000, p.57)

*Closing the Digital Divide* does identify public libraries as potential community ICT 'public access points', especially in terms of their role as learning centres. However, crucially, libraries are not seen as the central point of provision but as one of a variety of locations 'where people naturally congregate or are prepared to go'. The report also puts caveats on a location's acceptability that need to be considered:

What is important is that the location of the facility meets the needs of the target audience. For example, while many people will be content to use facilities in schools and libraries, others with poor experiences of formal education can find these venues unattractive (p.39)

Centres should be open at times when people can get to them including evenings and weekends...In some areas libraries were criticised for not being open long enough (p.40)

Finally centres need to provide face-to-face support for people accessing ICT for the first time...Support also needs to be on hand to deal with technical problems. Ideally support staff should be found locally(p.40).

PAT 15 also see the issue of charging as crucial to uptake of facilities. They quote the *IT for All* survey from 1998, which identified cost as the most common barrier to use. However, they do not unequivocally claim that access to information should be free at the point of delivery as some other reports have (for example, National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997, p.5) or the

even clearer guidance on access to ICT provided by the New Opportunities Fund:

At the heart of our People's Network funding programme is a commitment to social inclusion, ensuring that no citizen is excluded from obtaining ICT literacy and gaining access to networked content. It is therefore expected that access to those networked resources will normally be free at the point of use" (New Opportunities Fund, 2000, p.7)[11]

All of the reports that analyse community need also draw attention to the great need for skilled support for community based ICT provision, wherever it is located. The implications of this for the public library service, if it is to be part of the network of community access for the socially excluded, may lay beyond the present training and skilling proposals in *Building the New Library Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1998). Although, as a result of this report, over £20m has been made available for improving the ICT skills of public librarians (Batt, 2000) it is not clear that this will be enough to bring about the necessary transformation of the role and skills base of the average public library assistant. What may also be needed is a sustainable strategy for putting extra staffing resources into learning centres in those locations where there is greatest need for access to ICT. Funding for such developments remains a major problem: PAT 15 identified significant difficulties with long term funding and highlighted the time (wasted, from a user's perspective) that workers had to spend on obtaining funds. This is reflected in library projects. IT Point had to obtain funds from the British Library and then from Europe and the Single Regeneration Budget (Solihull Education, Libraries and Arts, 1998).

In conclusion, a reading of *Closing the Digital Divide* does give a flavour of how public libraries could work in partnership to support ICT developments in excluded communities. The INSINC report (1997) had already highlighted the 'enormous potential' of community networks and CRCs to 'contribute to social inclusion'. This report, like PAT 15, saw public libraries as potential partners and access points in local networks; not as 'the community focal point' or the place for the independent learner' envisaged in *Libraries for All* (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 1999) but as one of a multitude of agencies, working together. PAT 15 also expressed seven areas of concern about current developments, despite its recognition that "a large number of projects and initiatives [are] already in operation and planned". These are all relevant to libraries:

- Lack of a joined-up approach
- Poor promotion
- Unattractive or unsuitable content
- Access problems
- Lack of appropriately skilled staff
- Fragmented funding
- Costs

*Closing the Digital Divide* thus recognises that public libraries are a logical part of any network of local provision of ICT. However, the emphasis of the report on community outreach, local



involvement, accessibility of facility, free public access and support on site as essential components of a strategy for addressing exclusion presents the public library with many challenges. If they are to address “informational” exclusion, libraries have much to do beyond “wiring up”: it cannot be assumed that the networked public library will automatically be relevant to problems of exclusion in an “information” society. In order to achieve such relevance it is clear that libraries will need to engage in much more than technological change.

## 6. Conclusion

It is no surprise that so much attention is being paid to the potential of ICT to aid public libraries in tackling social exclusion. As we have seen in Section 2 New Labour has made the introduction of the Information Society a key goal in its modernisation of Britain, and the library profession has not been slow in extolling the role of libraries as a key provider in any information age. *New Library: the People's Network* (Library and Information Commission, 1997) has played a crucial part in convincing the Government of that potential and has successfully sold the image of thousands of information centres (i.e. the public library network) already with core skills and only waiting to be wired up. The Government's policy document *Our Information Age* (Central Office of Information, 1998) and its *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000) at least partially endorsed libraries' ability to be the accessible conduit to ICT for those without other access to PCs and the Internet.

However, our review in Sections 4 and 5 of this paper of recent public library ICT developments suggests that there are likely to be significant limitations to this projected role. This is not primarily, as is commonly supposed, because of lack of funding, especially now that NOF funding has come on stream. Instead, the lack of a public library focus on social exclusion is linked to strategies and practice that are concerned primarily with the mechanics of developing a “people's network” which involves little more than the passive provision of “access” to ICT through existing library service points. Underpinning this development is a questionable presumption that public libraries already engage with the socially excluded through the existing network of libraries. Exceptionally, as we have seen in our review of the Wolfson bids and other initiatives, public libraries have engaged in more targeted, proactive and community based ICT activities, some of which have achieved demonstrable success in engaging excluded communities and groups. However, many of these initiatives have been dogged by the perennial problem of lack of funding and sustainability related to their lack of mainstream status within local library provision. Funding for such targeted initiatives is often complex, uncertain and time limited.

Indeed, as Section 3 of this paper suggests, public libraries have not thus far been pre-eminent in utilising ICTs to empower excluded communities and social groups. Instead, a loosely defined “community networking” movement has led the way with the development of various kinds of ICT based community resource centres based on local partnerships and a mix of local authority, voluntary sector and sometimes private sector funding. PAT 15 in *Closing the Digital Divide* see these as a model for ICT facilities in deprived neighbourhoods, arguing that they “provide a

vehicle for people living in deprived neighbourhoods to reconnect with society in a variety of productive and positive ways” (Department of Trade and Industry, 2000). It is thus important to emphasise that it is primarily outside agencies and organisations - not the public library - who have successfully linked ICT, learning, local information provision and social exclusion.

There are, of course, examples of libraries working with these agencies to address the needs of socially excluded communities and social groups. However, we conclude that this practice needs to become far more common: public libraries need to view themselves as part of a federation of local agencies working to address social exclusion, and contribute as best local circumstances dictate. Libraries cannot and should not try to monopolise neighbourhood ICT provision or set themselves up as “the” place for independent learners. The most successful ICT projects, the literature suggests, are those where libraries have worked with other providers to engage with local people and socially excluded groups. Sometimes, this also means working in support of a service delivered elsewhere.

In the end, we conclude, public libraries have a choice between simply modernising their existing provision to incorporate ICT and the much more difficult option of using technological transition as a means towards developing a more socially inclusive service. Public libraries current preoccupation with “access” suggests that the former option is currently the one most likely to prevail, creating perhaps a library “grid” utilised by much the same clientele as at present. We would advocate, in contrast, more targeted, proactive service strategies linked to involvement in (and sometimes leadership of) of local partnerships and the development of community based ICT resource and skills centres. Such strategies, we believe, would go some way beyond access and towards social inclusion.

## Notes

1. The quotation is taken from Robins, K. and Webster, F. (1999) p.74. Chapter 3 of their book, *Times of the Technoculture*, provides an excellent expose of some of the hyperbole of the information revolution, and we are indebted to the authors for a number of examples used in this paper.
2. This passage is quoted at the beginning of *New Library, the People's Network*.
3. The phrase was first used, to our knowledge, by the authors of the INSINC report (National Working Party on Social Inclusion, 1997), but is now common parlance in policy circles.
4. Like Robins and Webster, we are sceptical of this term, but use it as shorthand for the bundle of claimed social changes which have accompanied the widespread use of IT
5. See Martin Dutch's Working Paper No. 10 in this series *UK Public Policy and Social Exclusion*.
6. See Dave Muddiman Working Paper No 1 in this series *Theories of Social Exclusion* for a

review of the widening gap between rich and poor.

7. See Shiraz Durrani's Working Paper No 6 in this series *Returning a Stare* for further exploration of the impact of globalism

8. Communities Online has a gateway web site at

9. See Jordan (1999) for a perceptive discussion of the distinctions between "online" and "offline" effects of networked communication.

10. Although it is perhaps not ironic that the report was commissioned under the previous Conservative administration.

11. This is an interesting contrast with the first developments, where charging was an expected part of the provision (Library Association Record, 1995) and the similar acceptance of some charges in *New Library: the Peoples Network*.

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