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| *Content type* | **Publication** |
| *Date* | 20 June 2011 |
| *Title* | **Older people and the internet** |
| *Excerpt* | This think-piece by Richard Berry develops a ‘system map’ of digital exclusion |
| *Body copy* | Older people are significantly less likely to have access to the internet than the general population. According to recent research findings, 79 per cent of households below the state pension age have internet access, while only 37 per cent of households above the state pension age do so. This difference gives rise to the notion of the ‘digital divide’, between those who enjoy access to the internet and those who are excluded.There have been a number of attempts to widen access to the internet, among older people and other excluded groups. There are ongoing upgrades of Britain’s technological infrastructure, increasing internet capacity throughout the country. There are initiatives to counter the financial barriers to inclusion, by providing subsidised equipment or free internet access, in people’s homes or in public places. The state has also supported the provision of training in ICT skills over a number of years.It is important that policy is clearly focused on the proven causes of digital exclusion. A distinction has been drawn between the first-order and second-order digital divides, largely defined by whether the reasons for exclusion are material or non-material. Survey findings reveal that among those who do not have access to the internet, most people cite non-material reasons such as lack of skills or lack of interest to explain why they are not online. Other research has highlighted the psychological barriers preventing older people from accessing the web. These reasons appear to be more influential than material factors such as cost or lack of physical infrastructure.However, the debate about the first- and second-order divides is not helpful in addressing exclusion. While the second-order factors appear most important, we cannot dismiss the material factors entirely. Furthermore, to subsume a wide range of second-order factors covering older people’s skills, psychology and interests into this single category is arbitrary. Finally, we also have to consider the content of the internet – which does not fit neatly into this framework – and the extent to which it meet the needs of older people.A new analytical framework for assessing the causes of the generational digital divide – and moving us toward solutions – should be based on the ‘system map’ approach. In this, a wide range of contributory factors are considered as part of the overall cause of an individual’s exclusion from the internet. The clarity this approach provides will help policy-makers devise better strategies for tackling the digital divide.The think-piece’s recommendations include:• Researchers should conduct more comprehensive studies into the influence of internet content on digital exclusion among older people. These should explore what types of content are likely to encourage older people to use the internet.• Website providers, including in the public, private and voluntary sectors, should assess whether their content meets standards of accessibility required by many older people, and where necessary take steps to ensure this is the case.• Policy-makers should develop a coherent, multi-faceted strategy to address the digital exclusion of older people, based on the best evidence about the complex causes of digital exclusion. The strategy should cover education and skills, financial issues, infrastructure, internet accessibility and other relevant factors. |
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