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Internet use translates into greater economic than social benefits in real world

Using the internet helps people benefit financially in the 'real world', but not necessarily socially, according to research from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), the University of Oxford and the University of Twente in the Netherlands.

The 'From digital skills to tangible outcomes' project looked at the tangible benefits people gain from using the internet and which groups of people profit, through a series of in-depth interviews and surveys in the UK and the Netherlands. (1)

The researchers found that 47 per cent of people questioned said that their internet use had translated into an economic benefit. In contrast, only 24 per cent said that the internet had improved their social lives offline.

In addition, only 25 per cent of respondents said that the internet had increased their sense of cultural belonging by helping them learn about issues such as ethnicity, religion or gender.

Dr Ellen Helsper, one of the researchers and an Associate Professor in Media and Communications at LSE, said: "Having access to and using technology does not necessarily mean that people are able to reap the benefits of it in their everyday lives. We need to make sure that people have the digital skills to take advantage of the opportunities that the internet and other technologies offer, so that no one is left behind."

The researchers found that just because a person took part in a certain online activity did not mean that they achieved the intended benefit or were satisfied with the outcome. For example, 'socialising' with others online did not automatically lead to lower levels of social isolation or greater feelings of belonging.

Furthermore, people were not always able to transfer the benefits they achieved from one area of internet use into another. For example, someone who was able to use the internet to save money or improve their work situation was not necessarily able to achieve benefits related to their personal health or increase their participation in political or social organisations and issues.

The differences that the researchers found between socio-cultural and socio-economic groups, in achieving and being satisfied with their use of the internet could often be explained by differences in skill levels.

Dr Helsper said: "The benefits that people get from engaging with technology are unequally distributed and reflect growing social and economic inequalities in the UK. However, the good news is that these skills can be acquired through informal and formal learning and this is something that can be addressed by well-designed, targeted training programmes led by government, industry, and charities already working in this area."

-ENDS-

Notes for Editors

1. Researchers undertook 25 in-depth interviews in the UK and the Netherlands which asked participants to reflect on the economic, social, cultural and individual health and well-being benefits that they got from engaging in a wide range of online activities. A questionnaire was then completed by a sample of 300 UK and 300 Dutch participants to understand how Internet skills and uses translated into tangible outcomes in everyday life. This was followed by a survey of 1,100 individuals representative of the Dutch population which was used to understand what the links are between social and economic exclusion and Internet skills, uses and outcomes.

An electronic copy of the report is available from the LSE press office. Post embargo it will be available at: <http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/?id=112>

For more information

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