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Debating the capacity of information and communication technology to promote inclusion

Jane Maidment and Selma Macfarlane

Introduction

Discussion around the use and impact of information and communication technology (ICT) has created polarised debates about the potential of ICT to generate inclusion or exclusion. Computer mediated communication is variously heralded as a means of transcending ‘sociocultural markers such as race and gender … lead[ing] to a utopian society’, and denigrated for creating ‘impoverished, low-trust relationships at best and social withdrawal, at worst’ (Markham 2005: 794). Similarly, it is argued that the plethora of information available via ICT can break down hierarchical access to information and power previously dependent on social position. Conversely, however, others observe that ICT has created new inequalities based on the information rich and the information poor, and one’s position in controlling, or being controlled by, technological advancements. As Markham (2005) comments, such universalised and dichotomised opinions have been usefully extended to include more specific, context-based analyses, acknowledging a complex range of processes and outcomes associated with ICT in
various settings. This chapter explores this diversity and some of the ways ICT has impacted on human service education, professional development, and the provision of services in specific contexts. We attempt to identify ways in which ICT may lead to social inclusion and/or exclusion for social groups with varying access to ICT.

The chapter begins with an exploration of the digital divide in the Australian context. This discussion is followed by an examination of online education, professional development and the capacity of ICT to enhance the well-being of practitioners. The chapter then focuses on the use of ICT in human services and the rise of computer mediated self help and support groups. The potential for ICT to promote and extend political participation is also explored as well as the role of ICT in global development. Throughout, the potential for inclusion and exclusion is highlighted, using examples, and critical analysis for exploring the inclusionary and exclusionary capacity of ICT.

The Australian context

The penetration of internet usage across Australia is currently estimated to be 72 per cent, indicating a 135 per cent rise since 2000 (Internet World Stats 2007). Even so there is ample evidence to indicate access to ICT delivery of information and services is extremely uneven across Australia, with factors such as location, educational status, income, ethnicity and age impacting upon access (Lloyd and Hellwig 2000). Those with poor English skills, Indigenous Australians, people over 55 and those living in remote parts of the country are less likely to use a computer at home or
access the internet (Daly 2005). This ‘yawning digital divide both within and across countries’ has been identified in earlier global research and analysis on internet use (Guillen and Suarez 2005: 681) illustrating world wide inequity and disparity between populations who have access to the benefits of ICT and those that do not.

Enhancing telecommunications to rural and remote regions is currently a hot topic on the Australian political agenda. Individual State governments have endeavoured to resource and strengthen ICT in differing ways to promote more accessible health and educational services (State Government of Victoria, Department of Human Services 2007; Way and Webb 2007). The focus on ICT for Federal government however, has been on the development of a strategic framework to enhance the ‘information economy’ underpinned by an ideology of competitive tendering for the telecommunications market (Pluss 2004). There is no surprise that the push for broadband access to telecommunications coverage throughout the country coincided with Australian politicians using the internet for the first time to deliver targeted lobbying during the election year of 2007. Even so, an audit of facilities to specific Indigenous communities has concluded there are significant barriers to developing better communication systems to these populations. These barriers include poor housing and physical obstacles created by isolation, while the harsh environment makes ongoing maintenance of equipment difficult (DCITA 2002 cited in Daly 2005). Access to ICT often depends on income, education (literacy, training), race/ethnicity, age, gender, family structure, geographic location and disability; groups with the least access in Australia have been described as the rural poor, rural and urban minorities, female-headed
households and young rural and urban low income households (Moffatt 1999). While the literature abounds with examples of ways in which practitioners working in rural and remote regions can use ICT to access additional professional development, it cannot be assumed that this is a universal experience.

**Online education, professional development and well being of practitioners**

This part of the discussion will focus on the delivery of education and professional development and support to students and practitioners located in disparate locations across the country. Particular attention will be given to identifying the enabling and inhibiting features of using differing forms of ICT for these purposes. The tensions inherent in juggling principles of social justice and equity with the pragmatic considerations of ‘being seen’ to deliver education and professional development will be highlighted.

Most professional bodies require practitioners to demonstrate continuing engagement with professional development activities in order to maintain accreditation and/or membership. However, for those living in rural and remote locations, potentially hundreds of kilometres away from an urban setting, accessing professional development is particularly difficult on a number of fronts. Two of the most significant inhibitors are: meeting the costs associated with travelling long distances, event registration and accommodation; and needing to employ qualified locums to provide service coverage during a worker’s absence in regions where few professionally qualified personnel actually
live (Taylor and Lee 2005). For practitioners in this situation the prospect of accessing professional development through ICT is appealing but not without its problems, and the cultural dimensions and implications associated with delivering education, via ICT, have remained relatively unexplored.

Even so, we know 22 per cent of the Australian population were born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007b) while 2.5 per cent are of Aboriginal descent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007c). In addition recent initiatives to boost the rural and remote health workforce in Australia have seen significant numbers of qualified personnel from overseas countries being wooed to practise in these regions (ABC News Feb. 5 2008; Roach et al. 2007). For many within these particular cohorts English is not the first language, resulting in a disconnect, where cultural and linguistic differences are simply not taken into account in the design or delivery of online learning. While professional development and higher education endeavours in this country continue to be delivered exclusively in English, an immediate cultural barrier exists for some in accessing these resources, in terms of having compromised speed in reading, writing and constructing ideas in English, mostly without the benefit of visual cues (Dillon et al. 2007: 156).

The dominance of English in virtual education contributes also to an ongoing marginalisation of local indigenous languages (Goodfellow et al. 2001). We note that the impact of ICT in terms of compromising cultural diversity is rarely addressed in the professional development or higher education literature.
These problems need to be weighed up against the obvious benefits reported by practitioners in using ICT to overcome the isolation experienced while working in rural and remote locations. There is ample evidence of the growing use of email, instant messaging, teleconferencing and videoconferencing for peer support and supervision by a range of disciplines (Russel and Perris 2003), resulting in significant savings in travel costs and professional time without compromising on quality of the supervision (McCarty and Clancy 2002). Recent research amongst Australian occupational therapists found that while practitioners in geographically isolated areas have less ready access to computer hardware than urban colleagues, levels of confidence and familiarity with using a range of ICT for professional consultation and education were highest amongst rural practitioners (Taylor and Lee 2005). These findings reflect those of earlier studies that note the rapid uptake of ICT in isolated regions where practitioners are more reliant upon these modes of communication for connecting with others to access professional advice and support (Australian New Zealand Telehealth Committee 2000). Meanwhile, practitioners in regional and urban locations are more likely to encounter colleagues in person at meetings, case conferences, and in-service education gatherings, and as such have less need for getting ‘online’ or video conferencing.

The blurring of domestic and professional worlds is a further confounding feature in analysing the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of ICT. While 24/7 accessibility (for some) is one of the frequently cited benefits of ICT, this level of connectedness generates an expectation that practitioners and educators will attend to work matters in times that have traditionally been considered ‘out of work hours’, being
available to work around the clock (Wynhausen 2008). In this respect elements of changing industrial relations, increased consumer expectations and ICT usage intersect, demonstrating that economic, political, social and educational dimensions associated with ICT accessibility cannot be separated out. Within a climate of strident economic rationalism, practitioners and educators come under increasing pressure to attend to client matters and professional development needs during evenings and weekends. Paradoxically the seemingly empowering features of accessible ICT can quickly become disempowering and particularly problematic in a climate of the global market economy.

For better or worse, the workplaces of first world human service practitioners have indeed been revolutionised by developments in ICT, as we explore in the following section.

**Human service databases: promoting social inclusion through developments in ICT?**

As human service/welfare organisations have grown, along with client numbers, the use of computer-based record keeping promised greater simplicity, storage capacity, uniformity and efficiency for workers, making it easier to calculate workloads and throughput, and generate statistics on client populations and service effectiveness. From social security to child protection, it is hard to imagine how large client caseloads could be managed today without the use of ICT. So how has the new ‘techno-habitat’ (Dyer-Witheford 1999, cited in Garrett 2005: 530) of social and welfare
workers impacted on practice, and on promoting a more socially inclusive and just society?

Databases are capable of generating large amounts of statistical information, which allows organisations to track large numbers of clients through their system, provide details necessary to lobby for and maintain funding, provide indicators around the occurrence and nature of social problems, and inform program planning to meet the needs of client groups (Donovan and Jackson 1991; Thorpe 1994). These enhanced capacities can potentially increase the capability of organisations to understand better and meet the needs of service users, promoting social inclusion through targeted (re)distribution of resources. At the same time, it is argued that if workers become overly reliant on computer-generated statistics, categories and procedures, professional knowledge and experience is devalued, with a number of negative outcomes. There are concerns that databases in large bureaucracies may mask the complexities of human experience, take time away from direct work with clients, enable the mis-use of client information, and problematically lump individuals into categories that obviate diversity within social groupings (Ahmad and Sheldon 1993; Thorpe 1994; Garrett 2005). Reducing complex human experiences to quick and easy individualised ‘solutions’ can minimise wider structural issues; this is worrying if inclusion is to be based on respect for diversity and acknowledgment of structural inequality (Garrett 2005). Australian social work academic Philip Mendes highlights that social inclusion is about process as well as outcome. He stresses the importance of developing processes that seek to include rather than to exclude, and that reflect a valuing of and respect for all members of a
community even if they hold conflicting views (2008: 99–100). This definition extends notions of social inclusion that focus only on outcomes: access to resources and participation in mainstream society.

Client databases allow for greater ease in accessing and sharing large amounts of information (Garrett 2005). Garrett uses the evocative term ‘digital shadows’ to describe the ways in which ‘data selves’ are created as indicators of a family’s or individual’s worth and deservedness, potentially eroding the civil liberties of users – or potential users – of child welfare services, in an attempt to create social order, within human services themselves, and more widely. Peterson (1994) critiques the role of technology in the surveillance and discipline functions of welfare organisations, which, he argues, may lead workers to objectify service recipients, rather than participate in more dialogic forms of engagement.

The wider socio-political context in which ICT has burgeoned is significant to a critical analysis. Advances in the use of ICT in human services have been accompanied by tighter targeting of welfare and human services aligned with neo-liberal/conservative discourse around the wastefulness of the welfare state. In such an environment, the focus is on individualised deviance or deficit, and the assessment of risks posed by individuals to the ‘good society’ is foregrounded. Bessant (2003) discusses the dominance of risk-based thinking in Australian social policy and human service agencies and the rise of computerised ‘risk instruments’ such as the Job Seekers Classification Index (JSCI) in the management of unemployed clients (see, for example, McDonald et al. 2003). Bessant critiques the technical rationality purportedly afforded by such instruments, suggesting that risk-informed
practice is often excessively oriented to control and domination, which minimises professional judgement and compromises the creation of respectful and trusting relationships (2003: 32). According to McDonald et al. (2003: 520), ‘The JSCI is a technology that reduces multiple interview responses into a single number and barriers to employment into multiple sites of psychological intervention, thus further transposing the problem of unemployment into the field of scientific knowledge and therapeutic rectification.’ This not only categorises the person in relation to their level of risk of remaining unemployed but also ignores the structural issues that may have led to the person’s exclusion from meaningful and empowered participation in the labour market. A form of social inclusion is generated that is top-down, authoritarian and simplistic, enabling the state to ‘police the socially marginalised’, based on a ‘narrow, normative and prescriptive view of the world and economic relationships’ (Garrett 2005: 543).

While the preceding discussion has raised some questions as to the emancipatory nature of ICT in particular contexts, the next section paints a more optimistic picture of ways in which ICT may open doors to knowledge sharing and enhanced accessibility of human services.

The use of ICT to enhance direct service provision

Some forms of ICT have undoubtedly expanded the parameters of direct service delivery for health and human services. For example, telephone and online counselling has burgeoned and appears to have provided emancipatory possibilities to many seeking confidential and easily
accessible help and assistance to the ICT literate. Australians are familiar with a national service to children and young people called the Kids Help Line – a free 24-hour telephone and online counselling service aimed at helping young people to ‘manage their own lives more effectively’ (Reid and Caswell 2005: 269). According to Reid and Caswell (2005: 272), over 400 young people accessed the service via email weekly, and more than 250 made contact via real-time web counselling. Online service users were mostly girls aged between 15 and 18 years, while boys were more likely to use the telephone component of the service. Despite little advertising, growth in demand for online counselling rose annually by over forty per cent since 1999, indicating that the service fulfils a needed role, with the most common issue raised both on the telephone and online being that of family relationships. Reid and Caswell (2005) conclude that the success of the service stems from its ease of use, particularly as many young people are familiar with computers and online techniques, ease of access as compared to physically attending a counselling session, control over time of access, and confidentiality. It is also a service available to people who are geographically isolated.

ICT has also created new avenues for isolated professionals to connect with the expertise of others. Telehealth practices allow client care to be conducted across distance, using a range of technologies, to conduct virtual visits, video-conference, and email information and advice. In Australia, Harrison and Lee (2006) observed that e-health provided health information to professionals and consumers via more than 100,000 websites, aimed at increased efficiency in health care, improved quality of care, and empowerment of patients/consumers (Harrison and Lee
2006). Internet sites provide almost limitless sources of health information (as compared to a brief visit with a practitioner); however, the sheer amount of information available from a variety of sources may make obtaining credible, accurate information difficult.

For human service workers across a wide spectrum of practice, ICT access can allow for easy communication with other social/welfare workers and agencies via emails, electronic circulation of documents and information sharing. The internet, as well as increasing numbers of e-journals and e-databases, allows workers to extend their knowledge around specific fields of practice, social policy, and social issues, by accessing professional mega-sites, organisational websites, policy information and knowledge relevant to specific fields of practice. Workers in isolated roles have the potential to connect with others via, for example, participation in internet discussion groups. These are all practices that enable access to resources at an almost unprecedented level, at least for those who are suitably resourced.

Access and activism

The capacity of ICT to engender social relationships and support – virtual communities – has been discussed by many authors. From rural jobseekers (McQuaid et al. 2004) to remote area youth (Notley and Tacchi 2005), to public housing tenants (Hopkins et al. 2004), to institutionalised elders (Mickus and Luz 2001), and transnational migrants (Panagakos and Horst 2006), it is suggested that ICT can fill a role in connecting people in supportive, enabling or
sustaining ways. But do these virtual communities actually enhance social inclusion, and if so, how?

One example that explores the capacity for ICT to promote social inclusion is related to transnational migration, a potentially isolating experience. Panagakos and Horst (2006) examined how the social worlds and networks of transnational migrants were mediated through ICT. Specifically, they explored how cheap long distance telephony, mobile phones and text messaging, the internet, emails, blogging and chat rooms were incorporated into the daily lives of transnational populations to maintain links with their previous homeland or with other new settlement areas. They observed that engagement with and access to ‘diasporic media’ (Karim 2003, cited in Panagakos and Horst 2006: 111) depended on location (variable infrastructure), gender (with women sometimes unable to access technology) and status. While concerns about surveillance and an over-reliance on online groups were identified in their case studies, the capacity of ICT to provide an alternative to mainstream media and communication channels was considered advantageous (Panagakos and Horst 2006). What this means in terms of social inclusion is of interest: social inclusion is often defined as social and financial inclusion in mainstream economic and political systems and opportunities (Mendes 2008: 167).

However, at times ICT may enable sub-cultures to build their own strong networks rather than assimilate to mainstream norms and systems. This raises important questions as to ways in which dominant versions of ‘social inclusion’ may be more about assimilation into dominant norms and values than self determination. As Spandler (2007: 12) puts it, ‘The demand for social inclusion is paradoxical in that it both expresses a genuine desire to tackle the consequences of
social inequality and yet at the same time could become co-opted as a modern form of moral and social governance which reproduces and legitimises the prevailing socio-economic order.’ We next explore some of the ways groups use ICT to resist co-option and construct alternative discourses: creating, perhaps, social inclusion on their own terms.

The internet has been lauded for its potential to create ‘virtual public spheres for democratic dialogue’ and information sharing (Jensen 2003: 29). Chen et al. (2006: 2) specify four core areas of electronic democracy: political equality, popular control of government, civil liberties and human rights, and quality of public debate. They suggest that ICT today provides new and unparalleled possibilities for many people to ‘participate in interactive content, and be a simultaneous producer and consumer of content’ (Chen et al. 2006: 5). Further, they observe, ‘if information is power, then the internet clearly can act as a democratising and equalising force … [and] a forum to those who might previously have been unable or unwilling to engage in debate on issues of concern to them’ (Chen et al. 2006: 8). So, how does ICT, and particularly the internet, create pathways for liberatory political engagement, information sharing and empowered dialogue?

In Australia, political action does indeed take place on the internet, with e-groups such as MoveOn.org, Getup.org.au and Indy Media increasingly mobilising political involvement. Getup uses new technology ‘to empower Australians to have their say on important national issues’ and boasted over 230,000 subscribers in 2007 (Getup 2007). During the 2007 federal election, Getup’s election blog
provided a discussion forum, as well as a ‘make your vote count’ interactive questionnaire matching political/policy sentiments with the most resonant party. Using ICT, political lobbying and organising can evolve across time and space. Information can be shared via websites and newsgroups, for example in support of asylum seekers (see Meikle 2004 –‘We are all boat people campaign’) and other social concerns. When the Howard federal government launched its controversial Crisis Intervention measures into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, grassroots organisations such as Women for Wik monitored the intervention and distributed weekly emails to subscribers across the country, providing links, media releases and updates on the intervention.

Activist social justice and advocacy groups appear to be using ICT to resist exclusionary and oppressive aspects of globalisation, such as the expansion of global capitalism, the exploitation of weaker states by multinational corporations and the erosion of indigenous cultures and environments. They demand inclusion in political dialogue based on their own interpretations of social reality and alternative visions for the present and future. McNutt and Menon (2008) suggest that ‘cyberactivism’ may be vital to the future of advocacy in human services, particularly in the current neo-liberal environment, which has created tough times for social welfare advocates. The internet, they observe, provides a new arena for global activism, allowing activists to ‘organise more supporters with fewer resources over greater distances’ and develop and share information (McNutt and Menon 2008: 33–34).
These examples suggest that ICT may indeed be capable of fostering and enabling dialogue and emancipatory projects in revolutionary ways. Srinivasan (2006) proposes that ICT has the potential to remove ‘the dichotomies of “oppressor-oppressed” [and] to allow a constructive dialogue wherein shared visions and aspirations emerge’ (355): a participatory and power sharing form of social inclusion. Srinivasan distinguishes between emancipatory community based ICT development, and that which leaves oppressive and unequal power structures intact or exacerbated. He critically questions assumptions around development and information access that do not acknowledge or ask who or what is driving the agenda. The imposition of dominant (Western) paradigms, he observes, can create dependency on the providers of technology and impose culturally imperialist agendas, including the type of information to be accessed and for what purpose. The antidote to this top down and oppressive approach is to adopt a process reliant on community input, local context and knowledge, and cultural appropriateness. Srinivasan (2006) describes the ‘Village Incubator project’ in which community processes and goals emerged over a period of reflection, facilitated by NGOs and ICT experts who provided video and other visual technologies but did not dictate how they were to be used. Through a process of community meetings and media created by community members, communities were engaged in a way that recognised development as a shared process aimed at uncovering deeper Indigenous wisdom and community directed vision (Friere 1968, cited in Srinivasan 2006).

Similarly, Puri and Sahay (2003) observe the failure of ICT projects that inferiorise Indigenous knowledge and leave oppressive power relationships intact. They refer to
Habermas’s ideal speech situation as a way of addressing ‘this problem of knowledge integration’ (183); ICT users, they say, must be actively involved in defining the agenda of development in the local context and how ICT is used to meet community defined goals. Indeed, this may provide a model or framework for critical analysis of specific and contextualised uses of ICT and its inclusionary and exclusionary capacities. The ‘ideal speech situation’ is a form of inclusionary communication based on equality of access and equality of participation in dialogue amongst interest groups (Habermas 1987).

Conclusion

Given the diverse implications of various forms and uses of ICT in specific contexts, polarised debates constructing ICT in fixed categories of ‘emancipatory’ or ‘oppressive’ (or inclusionary or exclusionary) seem fraught. Critical frameworks are crucial in examining the use and impact of ICT locally and globally. It is unlikely that the use of ICT will abate in the near future: those concerned with social justice and equality will need to engage critically in assessing its impact and inclusionary potential in specific contexts. Jacques Ellul’s ‘76 Reasonable Questions to Ask About any Technology’ also provides an interesting framework for critical reflection on the emancipatory or oppressive effects of ICT. Ellul’s questions ask us to consider the ecological, social, practical, moral, ethical, vocational, metaphysical, political and aesthetic value of any technology, including questions such as
What are its effects on the health of the planet and of the person? Does it preserve or reduce cultural diversity? Does it empower community members? Who does it benefit? Can it be repaired (by an ordinary person)? What is lost in using it? To what extent does it distance agent from effect? Does it concentrate or equalise power?

Such questions might help us understand the inclusionary and exclusionary capacities of ICT in specific contexts as we engage with the world at local and global levels.