AN INFORMATION SOCIETY FOR EVERYONE?

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Abstract / In 2000, a government bill set out Sweden's aim to become an information society for all its citizens, with an emphasis on building confidence, developing competence and providing access to new information and communication technologies (ICTs). This article grounds these policy objectives in a study of ICT use among Swedish working-class citizens. Following a discussion of the opportunities which ICT access and usage offer for the exercise of Swedish citizenship, the authors highlight respondent-identified obstacles that stand in the way of realizing this vision of the Internet as civic tool, including cost, workplace disparities, language competence and technical difficulties. The article concludes with several suggestions for overcoming these obstacles.

Keywords / citizen / ICT / social demand / Sweden / working class

In 2000, a Swedish government bill set out to make Sweden the first country in the world to become an 'information society' for all its citizens: 'Sweden will endeavour to be the first country to become an information society for all, in the sense of widespread competency in ICT and strong confidence in using this technology, and aiming to accomplish this ahead of other countries' (Government of Sweden, 2000: 24). This bill, *Regeringens proposition 1999/2000:86 'Ett informationssamhälle för alla'* [An Information Society for All], can be seen as the official policy for ICT development in Sweden. The Swedish government appears to have taken the position that it should and, presumably, could enact policy that is in keeping with the notion of 'social demand' as presented by the editors in the introduction to this theme issue of *Gazette* – that is, policy that promotes the civic and political uses of information and communication technology (ICT) to enhance democracy. While a normative proclamation of this kind is certainly laudable, it seems, nonetheless, to recreate a situation where policy goals are defined without any reference to the actual lived circumstances of citizens. The implication here is that however the success of the policy might be defined, nothing forces it to take into account any particular reference to the social reality of the citizens' lives. There is, we feel, a strong likelihood that if any evaluation of the policy were to take place, it would be based on far more abstract criteria. Our aim here is to take a first, small empirical step in probing the social reality of this policy of 'an information society for all'.

Here we define ICT policy in the Swedish context in terms of its expression by the Swedish government. This definition emphasizes formal production and distribution of policy through political and institutional locations. We further

consider policy a *process* rather than a fixed state (Hutchison, 1999), even where, for practical reasons, we concentrate on specific documents. Policy depends on a given political, social and cultural landscape – in our case, the Swedish one – and, similarly, is inevitably entwined with ideological considerations: certain interests may be furthered at the expense of others. Policy is thus more than regulation alone, although regulation is one means of implementing it. Finally, policy may be seen as a link between visions and reality. Our ambition here is to create such a link by bringing policy to meet the practices and reflections of citizens.

Dutch media researcher Cees Hamelink (2000: 8) has suggested that social needs tend to be put aside in the policy process: 'policymaking is driven by technological development and fails to adopt technology to social needs'. According to Hamelink, this failure relates to the fact that 'technology choice is a highly undemocratic process, not involving even minimal accountability to the public'. Our work is motivated in part by the desire to work towards rectifying this condition. The study on which this article is based incorporated the involvement of ICT users, members of the public, with the objective of bringing users' conceptualizations of, reflections on and actual use of the new ICTs' possibilities to bear on institutional policy. The study is thus aimed at grasping and giving voice to *social demand.*

The study's empirical basis is a set of lengthy and open-ended interviews with 30 computer- and Internet-using citizens. The respondents all hail from the Swedish working class and are labour union members. Ten of the interviewees are very active union members and hold various positions of responsibility in Kommunal, Sweden's largest single trade union, representing especially women in the public health and welfare sector.

Preferred Tasks in Swedish ICT Policy

How is the ICT policy's overall aim of making Sweden an information society for everyone to be achieved? Current policy prioritizes three targets: *confidence in ICTs*, meaning that all citizens should have trust in the ICT systems they use; *competence*, meaning that everyone be able to use the technology at a fundamental level; and *access* to services, meaning that citizens should be able to use these technologies to find and use information as well as communicate with one another. We deal briefly with each of the three targets.

Confidence

Confidence in ICTs need not require extensive technical skills or expensive equipment, according to the policy. But in order to build confidence, certain measures must be taken. The report points towards a more privacy-safe Internet using electronic signatures, for example, as a possible way towards building confidence in the new ICTs, and a broad coalition initiative for stimulating and developing a common electronic signature infrastructure – perhaps using smart cards – is proposed (Government of Sweden, 2000: 35–49).

Competence

The building of competence in using the new ICTs is to be accomplished through increased education capacity at the universities and through continued support for a special project called ITis (Information Technology in Schools). In addition, the increased use of the new ICTs in comprehensive schools is recommended as a measure to strengthen competence in these technologies in the future (Government of Sweden, 2000: 49–68).

Access

In order to increase citizens' access to ICTs, further actions are proposed. Government subsidies to municipalities as well as a national infrastructure programme, including a commercial backbone connecting the municipal capitals, aim to allow users to access readily the network with high-capacity connections. Other proposals include a new regulatory commission that should be charged with measuring market concentration to prevent local monopolization of broadband networks; a special strategy for facilitating access to public information and the development of electronic information services; and the gathering and publication of certain ICT statistics as part of the country's public statistics programme (Government of Sweden, 2000: 69–96).

The Fundamental Questions of Access and Use

Public access to use of new ICTs poses, of course, a fundamental question as to these technologies' democratic potential. Who has access to the technology? Are there significant differences between groups of citizens?

Over two-thirds, or 69 percent, of the Swedish population between ages 9 and 79 had access to a personal computer in their home in 2001, an increase of 27 percent since 1997 (Nordicom, 2002a). Statistics on Internet use were similarly high. More than half of the Swedish population (53 percent) had used the Internet on on least one occasion during the last quarter of 2000, considerably higher than in Germany (19 percent), France (15 percent) or Japan (21 percent). Together with Canada, Iceland and the US, Sweden was one of the most ICT-connected countries in the world.

Asymmetric Levels of Access

Although access to new ICTs in Sweden is relatively high in international comparison, within the country there are significant gaps between different groups of citizens. In 2001, men were more likely than women to have access to Internet in the home (65 vs 56 percent); more university graduates had access than those with only comprehensive school education (75 vs 48 percent); more younger people than elderly citizens (71 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds, against 51 percent of 55- to 64-year-olds); and a greater number of larger households had access than single households (81 vs 34 percent), to mention just a few distinct examples (Nordicom, 2002b).

These gaps had appeared to decrease a little over time. For example, residential internet access among women with low education increased from 5 to 26 percent between 1997 and 2001, while for men with university education access increased from 34 to 78 percent over the same period (Nordicom, 2002a). While access to ICT is important, it is also important to examine what characterizes people's use of these technologies: what kind of differences in use patterns may eventually be distinguished?

Distinct Differences in Usage Patterns

Several studies and research projects support the notion that different groups of citizens tend to use ICT in different ways and for different purposes. One such distinction is based on formal education: while 35 percent of the Swedish population used Internet on an average day in 2001, just 9 percent of those with only comprehensive school diplomas did so, against 52 percent of university degree holders. Indeed, university graduates increased their home Internet use from 33 percent on a typical day in 1998 to 52 percent in 2000; comprehensive school graduates' home Internet use increased from just 3 to 5 percent over the same period (Nordicom, 2002a).

Other distinct differences in usage patterns exist as well. For example, home email use increased with level of education, as did use of newsgroups or chat groups, and consultation of news services (Nordicom, 2002b). Thus, while the majority of Swedish citizens had access to a PC and to the Internet at home, there were significant gaps between different groups within the Swedish citizenry, both in terms of access and in terms of use patterns, which related to socioeconomic factors.

New ICTs, New Opportunities for the Citizen

In public as well as academic and policy debates, it is often claimed that new ICTs offer many new opportunities for citizens. But what are these new opportunities? To answer this question, we must first proceed to two important theoretical clarifications.

First, to address the formal characteristics of ICTs is not to make predictions about their social consequences. While it is beyond this article's scope to enter into an extensive recapitulation of the debate as to whether it is technologically deterministic to focus on forms of ICTs (Williams, 1992; Silverstone, 1991, 1994; Mackay, 1995, 1997), or naive not to analyse the political and economic forces that shape their development (Castells, 1999; Sussman, 1997; McChesney et al., 1998; Schiller, 1999), it is relevant here to underscore that a focus on the opportunities new ICTs offer to citizens is precisely that – a focus on *opportunities,* not an attempt to predict the social consequences of new ICTs, nor to accept uncritically the political and economic circumstances shaping the development of that same technology.

Second, what it means to be a citizen, or to act in the role of citizen, is notoriously disputed, partly because different academic fields take different views of citizenship (cf. Barber, 1998; Carter and Stokes, 1998) and partly

because the concept's meaning varies across political viewpoints (see Beiner, 1995; Heater, 1999; Stevenson, 2000) – to mention but a few of the polemics surrounding the concept. In this context, we take a somewhat ecumenical view of citizenship. A close reading of the opportunities for the citizen specified in *Ett informationssamhälle för alla* will suggest that the bill in fact draws from liberal (cf. Marshall, 1992; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Davis, 1999) as well as republican (cf. Walzer, 1995; Miller, 2000) and radical democratic (cf. Mouffe, 1992; Benhabib, 1996) conceptions of citizenship, and of what it means to act in the role of citizen (see also Dahlberg, 2001). Particularly because contemporary official thought in this regard is informed by several traditions (see Olsson, 2002), we find it more productive to maintain a pluralistic perspective than to argue for a single, exclusive version of citizenship.

Few scholars would object to the idea that citizens, in order to participate in and understand their contemporary society, need access to information of various kinds and from different points of view. Seen from this perspective, the Internet appears especially well suited to the citizen role. The global form of the Internet and its ability to collect and present various kinds of information in one place – the computer screen – adds a dimension beyond the abilities of traditional mass media, giving citizens the opportunity to keep up to date with relevant issues and to access a diverse supply of information (Hague and Loader, 1999; Campbell et al., 1999; Coleman, 1999, 2001).

By providing access to primary sources in a way that the traditional media cannot, the Internet can allow the citizen to bypass media professionals' interpretative filters and, instead, independently access traditional primary sources such as governments and officials (Bryan et al., 1998; Mulder, 1999). The interactive dimension reveals further opportunities offered by the Internet to citizens (Fidler, 1997; Jensen, 1998), potentially enlarging citizens' participation in political life in ways which may be understood in terms of vertical and horizontal axes.

Vertically, citizens are able to communicate more easily within formal democratic processes and interact with political and legal representatives of various kinds. The citizen can make contact with government and even call it to account (Ohlin, 1998), as well as interact with political representatives (Bellamy and Taylor, 1998), conduct dialogue with political parties (Mambrey et al., 1999), make her- or himself heard in political debate at the local level (Tsagarousianou et al., 1998) or – sometimes with the revision of legislation to permit it – vote on the Internet (Kitchin, 1998; Street, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000), to mention only a handful of the proposals advanced in the literature on this matter.

Horizontally, the Internet also offers opportunities for interaction among citizens themselves, beyond the formal democratic processes. This potential of the Internet has been acknowledged, for instance, in research on politically oriented newsgroups (see Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000). Internet-based newsgroups have been looked upon as small, new public spheres made possible by new technology's interactivity, in which citizens or groups of citizens can make their voices heard and debate mutual interests. Research on municipalities' home pages in Sweden (Ranerup, 2000) and the US (Raab et al., 1996; Schmitz, 1997) has highlighted similar opportunities.

Others have asserted even more robust versions of Internet-based public spheres (see Rheingold, 1999; Poster, 1995, 1997; Slevin, 2000; Sassi, 2001). The Internet creates extended spaces for debate between citizens, increasingly unbound from traditional time and space. Debate can proceed outside the boundaries of conventional political institutions, and often beyond classically 'political' areas of interest (see Baym, 2000). These public spheres are not only places for shared interests and argumentation, but also virtual spaces for the creation of solidarity among geographically distant individuals. In short, they are spaces for the creation and recreation of the culture-based civic competencies that citizens need to make democracy work (Dahlgren, 1999, 2000, 2003).

The Internet's use in establishing and preserving communities of citizens (Anderson, 1983; Slevin, 2000) becomes a logical extension in this context. For some scholars, communities are the foundation on which democracy is based (de Tocqueville, 1997). It is therefore unsurprising that the Internet's ability to assist in the preservation of already-existing communities (see Sassi, 2001) and enhance the creation of new ones at all levels, from local to global (Mitra, 1997; Slevin, 2000), has been the focus of tremendous attention in both the popular and academic debates on new ICTs (cf. Jones, 1994; Bromberg, 1996; Breslow, 1997; Fernback, 1997; Holmes, 1997; Smith and Kollock, 1999; Lövheim, 2002). Indeed, the goal of transforming these opportunities into realities underwrites the hopes expressed in the Swedish legislation in describing how the new ICTs can strengthen democracy (Government of Sweden, 2000).

Obstacles to the Vision of the Internet as Civic Tool

Between visions of how new ICTs are to be used by citizens and the actual uses to which the Internet is put lie several *obstacles* (van Dijk, 2000). This is also the picture which emerges in our study of 30 Swedish working-class users and their perceptions and uses of new ICTs.[1]

Specifying the major obstacles to the development of civic Internet uses among these working-class users is treated here as a way of elucidating the *social demand* of the Swedish working-class users. The central question thus becomes: what additional resources are needed in order for the computer and the Internet to become helpful tools for Swedish working-class users in their role as citizens, i.e. to make the transition from potential to actual use?

Between the opportunities that the new ICTs offer to citizens and the actual uses to which they are put among working-class users are four obstacles: (1) economic obstacles; (2) insufficient access to the skills necessary for handling the technology, partly due to very limited access to this technology in the workplace; (3) weak language skills; and (4) difficulties specifically related to the technical characteristics of the new ICT.

Economic Obstacles

Much of the policy debate around new ICTs has focused on issues of *access* (see Castells, 1999; Holderness, 1998). Which groups have the economic resources necessary to acquire the new ICTs, and which do not? As noted earlier, several

different asymmetries in terms of access have been identified, in terms both of social class (Murdock et al., 1994), and on a broader, geographic level, i.e. in which parts of the world do we find the 'information have-nots' (Haywood, 1998; Everard, 2000)? Yet while this reproduction of economic asymmetries with regard to the Internet has been thoroughly investigated, though by no means resolved (see Nordicom, 2002b), less interest has been paid to the costs attached to the ongoing use and maintenance of new ICTs, which also contribute to the reproduction of economic asymmetries. The question of access to the Internet is not only a question of being able to afford the necessary hardware, but also of being able to manage the subsequent costs.

That the economic costs attached to ongoing Internet use are a key factor comes through clearly in our study of Swedish working-class users who do have access to the technology per se. To illustrate this, we compare three of the study respondents. Two (KM/CM) have inexpensive, continuously connected Internet access in their apartment outside Stockholm, the capital city. The third respondent, KG, is connected to the Internet by modem, and claims that when connected to the Internet, he is continuously preoccupied with the high cost of every moment spent online. This difference is highlighted in the interview extracts that follow.

Fifteen years ago CM moved to Stockholm from her native country in Latin America. Now that she has cheap, continuously connected, or 'instant', access to the Internet, she can communicate with friends and family abroad more cheaply and more efficiently:

> Interviewer: What do you 'talk' about when you are chatting and mailing [with your friends and family]?
> CM: We talk about what we have done and . . .
> KM: . . . you can certainly see the difference today . . . You pay only 200 [Swedish crowns] a month [for instant Internet access] instead of calling them on the phone and talking with them for an hour. It is a huge difference . . .
> . . .
> Interviewer: So I guess the phone bill has decreased?
> KM: Yes, it has . . . You see, we have Star-Television [a cable television supplier in Sweden which also delivers Internet access via the television cable] and you get . . . They had an offer, that you could get instant Internet access 24 hours a day by paying only 200 [Swedish crowns] a month. We used to have Telia [the Swedish incumbent telephone operator] and then we never used the Internet before 6 o'clock [the fee is smaller after 6 p.m.]. Then we went for the offer from Star-Television, to get instant access to the Internet and now we pay only 200 [Swedish crowns].

Their continuous connection to the Internet enables CM and KM to spend unlimited time on the Net without any additional costs. For them, and especially for CM, this is considered a huge advantage, because she can maintain a link with friends and family in her native country on a much more regular basis.

KG, who like CM is an immigrant to Sweden and has a good number of friends and family in his native Asian country, has a rather different view of his ability to maintain these contacts. Although KG, who works as a bus driver, finds it both enjoyable as well as effective to use the Internet, he very seldom does so, because of the cost:

KG: Now when I am on the Internet, I think of the phone bills first. At the same time it is also kind of troublesome to write stuff like passwords and so on. Sometimes you also get disconnected, so that you have to connect to the Internet again, you do not want to take the time needed. With an instant connection to the Internet, I am quite sure I would spend more time on the Internet.

KG confirms that he would certainly use the Internet more frequently if he had access to a cheaper, continuous connection. This marks a striking difference between KM and CM's and KG's Internet use. While CM and KM need not pay attention to cost while they use the Internet, cost is the first thing that comes to KG's mind when he is online.

That the cost of using the Internet may vary heavily according to the type of Internet access connection raises an unusual question concerning ICT access. KG is connected to the Internet by modem and thereby prevented from more extensive Internet use, while KM's and CM's cable connection encourages more extended and varied use. These different kinds of Internet access connection raise the issue as to whether it is essential to guarantee citizens access to inexpensive modes of Internet connection: when the Internet is seen as a citizenship tool, the charging mechanisms and overall cost attached to Internet use appear a not unimportant obstacle to more expansive Internet use.

Gaps in Workplace Access

For the majority of Swedish academics and the white-collar classes, access to and regular use of the computer and Internet are considered the norm. In 2001 that was not true for the Swedish working class, including those affiliated with Landsorganisation i Sverige (LO, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation). Among LO's members, 39 percent used a computer at work in 2001 (as opposed to 30 percent in 1997); for white-collar workers, the equivalent figure is 86 percent (79 percent in 1997), and for those in the academics' union the figure was 90 percent in 2001 (Nelander et al., 2002). This class gap does not seem to be closing. A structural bias in terms of access to new ICTs between different groups thus carries over to the work domain. These biases, structured by differences in working conditions, are noted by union officials in interviews:

MLG: I think that a large proportion of the people can in one way or another get hold of Internet access. But there is a great difference between various groups in Swedish working life, in terms of their ability to have contact with the Internet through their work. A cleaner, for instance, has no need for a computer in his or her job.

IS: Among our members there are only a few that can communicate through a computer at work.

Some members of the Swedish workers' unions may in fact have access to a computer at work, and even an email address, but their working conditions are such that they can rarely, if ever, actually use these tools. BMJ, another union official, confirms this situation:

BMJ: All our members who work within the county council have got their own email address.

They thus have the opportunity to communicate on the Internet as such. But not all of them actually have the possibility to use it, due to their working conditions, so to say that they do have access to the Internet gives kind of a false picture.

Compared with ordinary members, union officials enjoy privileged access to computers and to the Internet, making their access comparable to Swedish academics and the white-collar strata. Among union officials the computer has become a natural means of assistance in conducting day-to-day business:

IS: Every day that I am at the union office I am also out on the Internet, especially on Kommunal's homepage. Then I also check the mail. At home I am not on the Internet that often, but about every other day anyway. The most important thing for me is to check the mail. I do that approximately four times a week. Occasionally I search for a resolution, or something, that has to do with our members, then I can pick that up by the Internet.

These union representatives often have cause to work on the Internet at home, like GD, for example:

GD: At home I use the computer as a typewriter, I do some work for the union at home. Nowadays I use the computer for writing more often than I did before. You get to learn more and become less afraid of the computer.

The officials within the union thus belong to a social grouping which is structurally favoured, because the skills and experiences they gain from the new ICT as a consequence of their roles inside the union stand out compared to the opportunities that their fellow members have in their working lives. As with academics and the white-collar strata, union officials' skills and experience with computers and Internet can be transferred to uses outside work life and union activities. In contrast, fellow union members from the rank and file have comparatively little access to, or skills in, using the computer and Internet. FD, a married mother of three, who lives in a suburb south of Stockholm, is typical. Without the opportunity to gain the necessary skills, the computer is difficult to use, for example when it comes to sending emails:

Interviewer: So you have an email address?
FD: Mmm . . . yes, but I do not really feel any need for it. Once I thought that I should try and see whether it worked or not, but the message never came through. I had to call them later and then they [the intended recipient] said, 'We haven't got any email from you. . .'
Interviewer: What was wrong?
FD: I think it had something to do with some kind of 'installation', or whatever it is called. When we got the computer we had a friend here who helped us set it up, but then, in order to send an email, you have to do this other stuff before you can start to use it and I am not quite sure that we managed to get it right.

Thus only once during the three years FD has had her computer has she tried to send an email, and then with discouraging results. This excerpt is only one of many examples of the difficulties encountered with computer use, but it illustrates how difficult even the simplest functions can be without the necessary preparation. It is also demonstrates the degree to which extensive computer use depends on specific experience and skills; other respondents confirmed this.

Without the opportunity to develop the skills necessary for handling the new ICTs at work, it is reasonable to conclude that computer and Internet use is limited. Empirical evidence bore this conclusion out. FD's example, particularly, suggests that some type of basic training should be available to those who require it to develop their capacities as ICT users, because without these skills, citizens risk falling behind in a society whose prerequisites for the role of citizen are changing rapidly. In this sense, asymmetric access to new ICTs in the workplace threatens to contribute to knowledge gaps between social groups.

Language Competence

'Language is another issue', suggests Australian humanist Jerry Everard. 'The Internet, for all its rhetoric, is primarily conducted in English. So for those who wish to access the Internet, a prerequisite is a good knowledge of English, which requires a Western-influenced education' (Everard, 2000: 36). Everard is here interested in the developing-country context, but the point also foregrounds a more complex set of problems addressed in the literature on the new ICTs: the general need for a minimal level of language skills (cf. Wilhelm, 2000).

It is well established that language skills vary between different social groups. British linguist Basil Bernstein (1975) tried to analyse these differences critically by means of the concepts of limited and elaborated language codes; for Bernstein, the differentiated linguistic skills which obtain across social classes contribute to power asymmetries. Though detailed analysis of language use in society and the consequent relations of power and disempowerment is beyond the scope of this article, language skill was clearly an obstacle to extended computer and Internet use for some respondents. Several, for example, identified themselves as having reading or writing difficulties, hampering their use of new ICTs, particularly interactive Internet features such as writing emails or joining a chat group.

TA, a 37-year-old truck driver, is one of those respondents. He has a reading and writing disability, he says, which makes it hard to take advantage of ICTs. In the following extract, TA's wife, RA, has just told the interviewer that she enjoys reading and writing instant message notes using the ICQ software:

> Interviewer: Do you also enjoy that? [to TA]
> TA: No, I . . . Sometimes I used to try to answer when it 'beeped' on her [RA]. Then I tried to chat for a while . . .
> RA: . . . until you did not fancy it anymore, because you could not keep up with the speed . . . (laughter)
> TA: No, I really cannot go at that speed . . .
> RA: (laughter) . . . he [TA] goes: 'I can't stand this shit', and then he is really upset in there (she points towards the room in which the computer is standing). He just goes: 'I am quitting from this shit', and then you just hear a click (RA mimics the sound of a computer being turned off).
> TA: Well, it is no fun when you can't keep up with their speed . . . It is hard to write with just one finger.
> Interviewer: One can learn to write fast using only one finger, can't one?
> TA: Yes, of course one can. . .
> RA: . . . yes, of course, but then one must have time to do it and one must feel like learning it, isn't that so? [Rhetorical question to TA.]

In TA's case, his poor ability to read and write becomes an almost insurmountable hurdle to using the computer and Internet as tools for communicating. Partly because typing is so difficult for him, particularly in terms of time – he must write at a fast speed – it is almost impossible for him to exchange messages with ICQ.

TB is another example of how weak language skills hinder extended and varied use of the ICTs. TB hardly ever uses the computer or Internet; asked how often he uses his computer to send emails, he answers: 'I never do. I can hardly spell. I am dyslexic, so it is difficult for me write. Well, I can write, but it takes too long.' Both TB and TA demonstrate some of the basic issues which must be dealt with before the vision of new ICTs as tools for civic information and communication can be turned into a reality. That the computer and the Internet offer a lot of opportunities to the citizen is obvious. But just as obvious is the fact that there are a number of obstacles that must be dealt with. For TA and TB, access to a fast channel for information and communication is not the most important issue: more important for them is to learn elementary reading and writing skills. These are difficulties that impede their ability to act as citizens.

Technical Difficulties

For the working-class respondents who formed the focus of our study, the computer and Internet resisted inclusion in the well-established routines and habits of everyday life in ways that the traditional mass media, such as television, did not (see Olsson, 2002). 'The computer is difficult', 'We are reluctant to use it', said BK and AK, for instance. AK is 50 years old and on sick leave from her work in childcare; BK is 51 years old and works as a housepainter. In the excerpt that follows, AK explains why she and her husband find the computer so difficult to use:

> AK: Well . . . First we have to get down on the floor and switch cables. Then we have to turn the computer on and wait for it to work its way through all the programmes and virus controls and so on. And then, when we have come that far, we have to press a button – 'start the Internet' – and then the modem dials a number and often the line is busy at the first attempt . . .
> BK: . . . yes, it is always busy. . .
> AK: . . . and then it is busy the second time too, but perhaps on the third attempt it contacts the host, and by then we have been waiting for almost 10 minutes . . .

Just to turn on the computer is considered a fairly complicated business, according to BK and AK. To turn on the modem and the computer and to let the computer launch Windows and wait for the computer to do its virus control seems complicated and time-consuming to them. Then, after that, they must also start up an Internet program and hope the modem will connect to the host computer. For them, using the computer and Internet is problematic.

Another respondent, KG, sees things similarly. He compares using the computer with the use of teletext, emphasizing that it is much easier to use teletext, for which he has established better-defined routines:

KG: It is easier with teletext. I think that many people use teletext everyday, because it is easier to use teletext and it doesn't have any additional costs. If it would be as simple to use the Internet as it is to use teletext, then people would use it more often. Then you wouldn't need to connect and all that, you would just use your remote control. It would be easier and faster.

As these examples suggest, beyond matters related to the difficulty in finding information or interacting with the Internet once connected, the computer and Internet's technical characteristics can themselves be obstacles to more extensive use.

Conclusion

In this study of how 30 Swedish working-class citizens use the computer and Internet as a point of departure, a number of obstacles to the vision of new ICTs as civic tool have been identified. These obstacles are of various kinds: some are economic; others have to do with weak user skills in general, and limited literacy in particular; still others are linked to the technical arrangement of the computer and Internet, which appear to generate specific problems for the working-class users interviewed. If it is to make the new ICTs a civic tool, government policy must provide at least a broad outline of how these obstacles are to be addressed, and try to identify what kinds of support are needed to help enhance the use of ICTs as a tool for citizens.

That obstacles have been identified among working-class users should not be seen exclusively as a discouraging conclusion, because it is an important step in the ongoing development of the new ICTs as civic tools. By defining these problems it becomes possible to formulate the *social demand* of the Swedish working-class users with reference to new ICTs: what additional resources are needed in order to make these technologies an accessible and useful instrument for civic practices? Pinpointing the difficulties is a first step in dealing with them. By way of conclusion, we therefore turn to how the four obstacles identified in the previous section can be overcome.

With reference to the first obstacle identified, economic barriers to Internet use have to decrease significantly or, indeed, be eliminated altogether. Users with access to continuous, flat-rate Internet connections, and whose Internet usage habits need therefore not be limited by pricing, are better positioned to learn to handle new ICTs than are those who connect via modem and metered call charges. The Internet use of the latter group is constantly associated with economic considerations.

In addressing this issue, several different solutions are worth considering. One is to develop principles for government subsidies that decrease the cost of Internet use for individual citizens. Another is to elaborate a legal framework for Internet access which, analogous to the public service broadcasting tradition, could for instance call for the state to own the infrastructure and for citizens to access the Internet by paying a flat licence fee. In any case, the exact composition of such a mechanism is of less importance than the design of an effective instrument to ensure the outcome – that the ongoing cost for citizens' Internet use be significantly decreased.

The second obstacle, associated to the lack of user skills, might also be dealt with through relatively straightforward initiatives. One route, for example, could be free-of-charge and comprehensive training for each citizen on how to use a computer and to search for information and communicate using the Internet. Such training, offered to citizens regardless of social position, age, gender and so forth, would focus on basic skills, allowing many users to revise their perception of the computer as difficult to use or hard to understand.

Reading and writing skills are fundamental to the successful use of the new ICTs. This poses significant obstacles to a specific segment of working-class users, especially where reading and writing difficulties exist. Here the measures to be taken are less obvious. Yet technical applications that depend less on reading and writing skills exist, for example, and can be further developed and disseminated. Another measure might be to offer special education to users with reading and writing difficulties, in which case both the training and the associated technical apparatuses would be available free of charge to users. They would be a state-sponsored benefit for those citizens who need them.

The fourth obstacle, the disparity between the vision of the new ICT as a civic technology and Swedish working-class users' perception and use of it, likewise does not lend itself to simple intervention. Even in this case, however, there are at least some conceivable ways to overcome the obstacle. One is to provide all users with access to an instant connection to the Internet, heavily reducing connection time. A further solution also takes the path of technological development: greater effort could be put into developing interfaces that make using the Internet a more human and less technical experience.

Some of these obstacles and suggested solutions are also discussed in the Swedish governmental policy document, but they derive from rather formalistic discussions on *competence* and *access.* In contrast with the bill's abstract formulations, such as 'user skills are essential' and 'it is important that all citizens have access', in this article we have attempted to ground the problems and possible measures for resolving them in a specific social context, that of the Swedish working class, and to frame them with a certain degree of clarity in terms of just which skills are needed.

With these as a point of departure, a number of concrete measures for shaping new ICTs into a civic tool can be proposed, varying from economic resources for improved Internet access, to specific modes of education enabling basic computer and Internet skills; from additional resources for groups with specific needs, for instance those with reading and writing difficulties, to initiatives that work towards making the new ICTs more user-friendly as a long-term objective. Though their time frames differ, none of these approaches to the obstacles enumerated is unreasonably burdensome. If the stated intentions of 'An Information Society for All' to guarantee access and ensure citizens sufficient user skills are meant seriously, not mere lip service from a government wanting to seem abreast of contemporary trends, then it is only a question of getting started with shaping the new ICT into a civic tool.

With help from economic resources, with guarantees of sufficient training in use of the technology, and with special support for some user groups, this

work can begin. These are important tasks for a government that is interested in the future of democracy. That such tasks might be politically difficult – allocating the necessary funding, overcoming countervailing ideologies – is no excuse for not taking these first steps.

Note

1. A series of 30 one-to-one interviews were conducted between August 2000 and August 2001. All material quoted has been translated from Swedish by the authors.

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