

The Internet In Non-User Eyes

Introduction

In the age of growing use of computer and new media technology the issue of uneven access to the Internet, or *digital divide*, is becoming a significant social issue. According to newest research (Batorski 2007), 40% of Poles have access to the Internet. It can be said that the people who can and know how to use it will be better prepared for the transfer from industrial to information society. They will be able to access the necessary information faster, they will be able to better their professional qualifications and will have greater chances to participate in public life with access to culture and a variety of services available *on-line*. At the same time, it is a paradox that development of socially useful technology which the Internet is results in the phenomenon of the *digital divide*. Every other Pole¹ does not use the Internet, even if people closest to them ie. family, friends, neighbours, co-workers are users. Non-users², the focus of our research, are people who for various reasons found themselves in a worse situation. The so called St. Mathew's effect ('the rich get richer') means that those with Internet access will continue to develop their skills and take advantage of new possibilities while the others will stay behind and it will, with time, be all that much harder to make up for lost time.

This issue of uneven access is present in sociological literature and in documents at the national and local level. However, most analyses focus on the problem of technical access. While it is an imperative issue, it is not the only determinant of access to participation in information society. According to Jan van Dijk (2005), there are four key aspects of access: material (possession of computer, software and quality of connection), motivational, one related to skills and pattern of usage.

In this text we will focus on issue of motivation which we consider key. It is assumed that with time material access will become less significant with decreasing prices of computers, EU funds for infrastructure and advanced programming. The goal of the research carried out here was to reconstruct the image of the Internet in the eyes of large city users, or people who have guaranteed technological access to the new technology. Even if they do not have it at home, they can go to an Internet café or the local library.

We will research internaut diversity but, most of all, looking at people who do not use the Internet will be fundamental for our purposes, especially their view of the Internet, in the eyes of non-users. This could be the first step in the creation of a political strategy aimed at solving this issue.

DIGITAL INEQUALITIES

Social scientists have come up with various definitions of digital inequalities. One valuable definition is that created by Batorski (2005) in a text on Internet users in the context of social inequalities. According to Fong, Wellman, Kew and Wilkes (2001: 2), "the phrase digital divide means the systematic differences in use of computers and the Internet between more and less developed countries, between people in different stages of their lives, part of different social groups (social/economic status, education, incomes, professions, wealth) between men and women and between different regions." (Fong et al. Cf. Batorski 2005). Batorski adds that it regards systematic differences which lead to social and economic

¹ Every other, while 13% are drop-outs.

² The phrase non-users means people who do use the Internet. The phrase will be discussed in depth later on in the article.

exclusion. It is not just about Internet use itself but the way it is used. This definition is useful as it relates to our issue of interest. For our purposes, however, we will make use of a definition which is more detailed and therefore more appropriate for empirical research.

According to Jan van Dijk (2005: 6 and on), the *digital divide* may be relatively defined as a collection of inequalities, of four different dimensions, in access to telecommunication technologies. The first, and key for our research, is *motivational access*. Contrary to popular opinion, not everyone is interested in this new medium (van Dijk 2005: 27; in Poland see Batorski 2005). As van Dijk states (2005: 28), this could be for various reasons, “from general lack of interest in new things, lack of time or money to (...) technophobia, fear of computers, lack of confidence or even not being able to imagine oneself in the context of using new technology.” The issue of motivational access will be further discussed later on. The second dimension is material access or the physical ability of using a computer connected to the Internet.³ The third and fourth are differences between users. The third dimension regards abilities and cultural competences enabling users to take advantage of the possibilities the Internet has to offer. The fourth and least connected to user patterns are factors such as range, diversity and time used on Internet surfing and using various applications.

As mentioned above, we are going to focus on motivational access. We are also going to assume that with progressively decreasing prices of Internet access, increasing availability to use computers in libraries, schools and universities and local government providing free wireless Internet, the issue of material access is becoming irrelevant. Therefore, the most key issue will remain that of motivation to become connected⁴. It is an essential first step in order to make use of available infrastructure and to gain the necessary skills to be able to use the Internet.

NON-USERS IN THEORY

It may seem that defining *non-users*, or people who do not use the Internet, would be simple. However, when looking into this issue, many doubts arise. The term *non-user* is strictly connected to the definition of Internet *user*, which is rather problematic. Seemingly, the simplest definition would be a person who answers ‘yes’ to the question ‘Have you ever used the Internet?’ Therefore, Internauts may be people who use the Web regularly and extensively (several hours a day) for many purposes (knowledge, shopping, correspondence, entertainment, social services) and those who may have once visited a site, found nothing interesting and haven’t used the Internet since. We would like the term *user* to mean current, and regular, not ex-users. Hence, more specific criteria need to be delineated in order to define the term more precisely.

Generally, there is great diversity among those who use and those who do not use the Internet. Regarding Internauts, regularity, range and extent of use should be taken into consideration. In case of non-users, we need to take into account motivation, willingness, fear, knowledge about Internet and its possibilities, previous experiences and, last but not least, the social background in which the Internet may be accessible or not and the presence of people who may help in case of technical difficulties.

³ It should be noted that the quality of access is influenced by several factors (place of use, speed of connection, computer memory range, quality of software and connection itself), therefore, it cannot be treated as only one variable.

⁴ Van Dijk states that together with Internet popularisation, two factors (motivational and material) will become of less importance in connection with the digital divide. In a situation where the majority of society wants to can be connected, a key role will be played by abilities and usage models. Based on the example of the West, it is a probable scenario also in Poland. For the time being, it is still an future issue. According to a survey, a number of respondents still declare that they have no intention of using the Internet.

Amanda Lenhart (2003) in the report, *The Ever-Shifting Internet Population*, divided people into six groups. Users are divided into three groups, 'biggest users', or those who have broadband connection at home, 'continuous' and 'intermittent'. Among non-users, there are also three groups. The first are 'dropouts' or those who have lost access to the Web for various reasons such as technical problems, high costs, lack of time, interest or abilities (cf. Katz and Rice, 2002: 68). In Poland, 13% of people who used the Web in 2005 were not connected in 2007 (Batorski 2007). The second group are 'net evaders' or people who are reluctant and avoid the Internet. This is an interesting group because it is comprised of people who technically should not have any difficulties with access. They often, for example, have access in their workplaces or even have connections at home. According to Lenhart, some of these people use the Internet with others' assistance while others claim to choose to remain offline as a protest against the overwhelming technology. In Poland, 11% have the Internet at home but do not use it (Batorski 2007). The third group are 'truly disconnected' or those who do not have any experiences, direct or indirect, with the Internet or do not even know of its existence.

NON-USERS IN RESEARCH

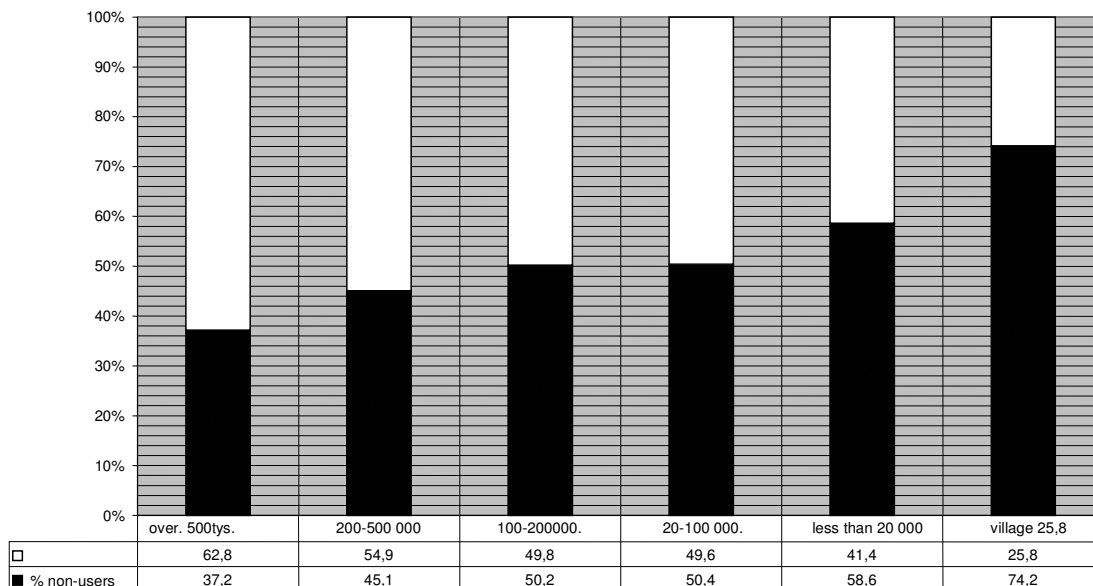
So far there is little research on non-users of the Internet. In most cases they are discussed in the context of research on the use of the Web, as a 'side effect' in such quantity analysis. It is worth citing, however, the socio-demographic characteristics of Polish non-users which can be treated as a starting point in a quality analysis.

In Poland, similarly to other countries, it is characteristics such as age, education, place of living and socio-economic status. Batorski (2007) uses these in his analysis of research on the use of new media carried out by Social Diagnosis. The general rule is – the younger the age, the bigger the town, and the higher the education, the greater the chance that someone will use the Internet.

Within the 16-24 age group, non-users are at 23.5% and this percentage increases with each age group (25-35 – 40.6%, 35-44 – 54.1%, 45-59 – 68.3%, 60-64 – 86.1% and 65+ - 96.4%). Among people who are studying, the percentage is lowest – 14.8% in comparison to all other groups. Among those who with higher education, the percentage of non-users is 23.3%, while in the group with secondary education this percentage is 54.6%. Among those with vocational/lower-secondary education non-users amount to 80.2%, and in the group with primary school or lower education – 96.2%. Another factor is the size of one's place of living. Therefore, Warsaw has the highest percentage of users. Generally, cities with a population of 500,000 have the lowest percentage of non-users – 37.2%. Cities between 200,000-500,000 inhabitants – 45.1%, 100,000-200,000 – 50.2%, 20,000-100,000 – 50.4% and less than 20,000 – 58.6%. In villages non-users amount to 74.2%. These results are included, in more detail, in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Percentage of non-users in relation to the size of place of living w zależności od wielkości miejscowości

(by author based on.: Batorski [2007])



Interpreting all these variables and especially the size of one's place of living is a difficult task to handle. First of all, access to the Internet is largely dictated by the number of inhabitants of a place. We can assume that in bigger cities material access is easier because there is better infrastructure and a larger number of Internet providers such as libraries, Internet cafes, etc. Secondly, there is also the so-called 'self-propelling' mechanism. The more users there are, the easier it is to get others interested and help them get started. Also, it makes more sense to have an e-mail address, use communicators and design a personal website.

* * *

Concluding the theoretical discussions and research summaries, we would like to focus on several factors which will aid us in precisely defining the goals of our research. Firstly, research on material access to the Internet has the longest history and initially began in the US in the mid 1990s (NTIA 1995). Therefore, we may conclude that this issue is rather well researched and present in the minds of policy makers. Secondly, there is more discussion on the competences and knowledge necessary to be able to successfully use the Internet (cf. Hagrittai 2002; Batorski 2005). Solutions in order to increase people's familiarity with the new medium are implemented in programmes by the EU, MSWiA and on the local government and non-government levels. Still the issue of non-users has not been researched extensively enough. The questions which naturally arise is the issue of lack of motivation and the image of the Internet in non-user eyes. Matters such as new technology, accessibility, attractiveness, aid in use, threats and opportunities need to be discussed in further detail.

RESEARCH METHOD

It is assumed that the Internet is a cultural artefact (Hine 2000), but its image in the eyes of people is shaped not only by individual experiences but also by a wide range of often contradictory information from, for example, advertising, the news (radio, TV, newspapers,

tabloids), schools, friends' and superiors' opinions, etc. The goal of this paper is to analyse the process of Internet image creation and its comparison to conclusions on the issue of digital exclusion (Warschauer 2002; 2003; van Dijk 2005).

We carried out two, two-hour group interviews in Warsaw, in November 2006. The people we interviewed were inhabitants of the capital city between the age of 29 and 58 who have never used the Internet. The first group included those who answered 'No' to a survey questions which asked about whether they would like to use the Internet in the future and if they think that in the future they will use the Web. The other group included those who answered 'Yes' to the above two questions.

We chose people who have not previously used the Internet because we also wanted to obtain a more whole view of the Web, including from these people's perspective, its image in the media, through stories from users and non-users. The image of the Internet through the eyes of dropouts is also a very interesting one but we are not going to focus on it for the purpose of our research.

We chose people who live in Warsaw as according to the results of earlier research presented above indicating that it is the best place as far as access to the Internet due to infrastructure and the potential to obtain technical help. Since we are interested in motivational access, we wished to see the Internet in the eyes of big city non-users, people who have relatively easy access and, therefore, theoretically greater chances to become users as opposed to those who live in the countryside. We were interested in what they know about the Web, their general opinions of it, as well as the threats and opportunities they see in connection with use. In the interviews we used questions directly diagnosing the discursive image of the Internet (how its understood, knowledge about it and its users and common activities there) and the experience of the Internet (contact with technology, its existence in non-users' life, their image of Internauts and their behaviour) as well as projection techniques.

In the classic form, rooted in the psychoanalytical paradigm, projection techniques show people's rejected or unconscious areas of personality. In social and marketing research, projection techniques are used to reach people's unconscious opinions and judgements about which they cannot openly speak or are unconscious of (Maison, 2001). In our research the projection technique was for non-users to imagine the Internet as a planet and to describe it in detail to show their view of Internet reality which they cannot possibly know from their own experience. In our research of collected data we focused on analysing the meaning of the obtained answers. The cited answers include names which are not real as they have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

RESULTS

Omnipresent Internet

All in all, it cannot be said that non-users are people who have no contact with the Internet. Even though they do not use it, it does not mean that it is not present in their lives. On the contrary, we can say that the Internet is quite deeply rooted in non-users' daily lives.

The Internet is omnipresent, (...). Even if one does not use it, there is always someone who says what they did on it, what they bought, about their chats, etc. So I think that it is present in our everyday lives, even if we do not use it personally. (...) it's people around us, co-workers, family, friends, colleagues, there is always someone using it.

The Internet does not create enclaves of 'excluded' people. Perhaps it is the specificity of a large city where there is greater access to the Web than in other places. Or perhaps it is the process of vanishing of demographic digital divide. We expected there to be a sharper and

more clear divide between users and non-users as far as background and age. Meanwhile, the Internet, regardless of age, education and status of non-users, is present in their daily lives and it is close, in the same house, often in the next room. The example of Eva illustrates this situation well. She lives in a small flat with two adult sons who are both Internauts. The Internet is very close to her, right in the next room. It is also an important element in the family's life as it takes up much space in their small flat/room,

I don't even go in there, the room is very small, two by four, with a bunk bed and chairs (...) the computer with all the boxes is on a stool.

In Eva's home the Internet is significant not only because of the space it takes up but because it is such a large part of her sons' lives. To her it is so close and yet she has no access to it. It is unobtainable to her although she hears so much about it,

They constantly talk about it (...) I don't go in, I don't interrupt them. I know they talk but I don't always know if they talk to each other or to that' thing'. I wouldn't even know how to ask about it. (...) I know that my one son has his own website and he set one up for the other one but what they have on them I have no idea. (...)

For our non-users it is an obvious fact that the Internet which is in their lives is indispensable,

They have to have it (...) my older son needs it for work and that's it.. (...) I don't interrupt if he sits at it late at night, 12 or 1 am .Maybe he's buying books or something, I don't ask.

The Internet's presence in the home means that all family members need to formulate an opinion about it, it often changes and re-defines relations between them, it alters the present order of things in the house, people's roles and norms. This way the Internet is different from all the other new technologies. It is like a new 'actor'. From our research and people's direct and indirect answers, the Internet is seen as having real power, able to redefine existing relations between people,

At my house there is always so much fighting over it, who gets to use it and when. They all want it at once, all the time. or ,

I don't interrupt if he sits at it late at night, 12 or 1 am .Maybe he's buying books or something, I don't ask.

In homes with the Internet, the users, although at home, are in a way often 'absent' or 'somewhere else' when they are surfing. They are present physically but fully absorbed by something else in non-user eyes. The Internauts are in between 'here' and 'there' which is all mysterious.

I think that Internet at home greatly limits our contacts with other family members. People on the Web are completely isolated from other family life, they have no idea what is going on in the next room. There is no eating of meals together, no conversation, no common entertainment, except for watching TV.

Because of it, there are many divorces, the husband doesn't know what the wife does and vice versa.

In non-user eyes regarding absence of users, there is no differentiation between computer and the Internet. They both equally cut users off from social reality. From this perspective, both of these technologies have the same status in non-user eyes and are treated identically,

- Marriages split up because of the computer, because when someone has it there is nothing else that interests him.

- But also thanks to computers and the Internet people get married!

It was commonly known that computers draw people's attention by games and work. But what the Internet does to draw people in was more ambiguous. When answering the question of what users do there, non-users did not have specific answers.

I don't know, I just know they sit for hours in front of it.

It can be said, therefore, that users just disappear in the Internet for hours.

The Internet is present in the lives of non-users, often in close proximity – in their homes, conversations with family members, friends and colleagues. However, this proximity does not equal familiarity. For non-users it is a world which is beyond them, it exists but rather 'virtually'. It is a world behind a screen which, at the same time, has great impact on their lives, although they do not have direct experiences with it. Non-users observe the Internet through users, their behaviours, stories, 'products' resulting from Web activity and what non-users directly get from the Internet via users.

My bus schedule changed and I didn't know what time it would arrive. Good thing my sons were at home and they checked it on the Internet so I knew and didn't have to wait.

We had to buy orthopaedic shoes for my child and we couldn't get them in the shops or anywhere else. Somebody told my son that you could get them on Allegro (...) he said, see mom, you can find everything there, I said, I don't believe it, shoes through a computer?! But it's true (...) he got them, within two days they were delivered, just what we needed, and the child started walking. We wouldn't be able to get them normally in the shops or through our health care system it would take three years.

In other words, the Internet is available to non-users indirectly, with the assistance of users, to aid them some way, in their absence or presence. What is interesting is that its image, collected piece by piece from different sources and through various experiences is surprisingly complete. We were surprised that non-users were able to mention a variety of functions (games, Allegro shopping, films and music accessibility, e-banking and e-mail (least known)).

INTERNET OPPORTUNITIES

Regarding Internet opportunities, non-users were not very sure as to how to categorize Internet activity or what direct opportunities could come from it, although they did know that it is beneficial.

Researcher: *Think about people who use the Internet, what do they say about it?
-That it is very necessary and useful to them.*

At the same time, there is talk of Internet not being particularly necessary or useful. What non-users see does not make them desire the Web. They do not see it as indispensable because they do not see it what it can do for them.

When I say that when we have our own flat and a computer, then will set up the Internet, she says – what do you need it for? (...) you have TV, you can get the news, you have a mobile, you can call me and if you want to socialize we can meet with someone.

[it is the same as] *with railroad, why use it if you can take the carriage?*

These tendencies are particularly visible in the group of people who said that they do not intend to use the Internet in the future,

For people who work and have little time the Internet may be good, but for someone like me, a pensioner, at home 24 hours a day, what do I need it for, I clean and when I go to pay the bills I always meet someone.

Non-users say that they do not need the Internet, although they do not like to say it directly. If they talk about their needs, they have to talk about them in the first person. They have to be active and make the decision themselves, 'I don't need it. If I did, I would have it.' Meanwhile, talking about usefulness shifts the focus back onto the technology, 'it is not useful, it does not help me in anything.' Perhaps this is a sign of defending themselves. The non-users are probably aware of the positive connotations regarding the use of the Internet in general discourse. Therefore, not using the Web requires some justification.

Maybe I don't need the Internet, but that aside, I know it's stupid, even small children know how to use it and I don't.

The little four year old sits there mesmerized by the screen but the old grandma doesn't know how.

In ten years it will be a source... thanks to the Internet we will be able to have more time for ourselves, it will take care of many household related duties like bills, etc. And if I want to eat an apple, they will deliver it to me thanks to Internet shopping. I don't know much about technology but if our computer is connected to the Web we'll be able to do things in the house even if we are abroad.

Of course, this image of Internet opportunities is an image created indirectly, as mentioned earlier, and it is one which is specific but also selective. People researched were able to mention Internet opportunities which they could directly benefit from.

As I mentioned, I asked my friend to teach me. He didn't ask why and I didn't really want to tell him but anyway, since I am a single individual, I want to find a website where I could find a woman, with a picture and a profile. Yes, I could buy a magazine with matrimonial classifieds but if it is also possible to use websites maybe I could do it too...

Aside from opportunities connected with establishing new relations, non-users also recognize possible financial opportunities,

My younger daughter's friend set up an Internet tea shop, he's studying now and it's his way of supporting himself, supposedly he makes decent money, just teas.

In addition to 'personal gains' those researched mentioned using the Internet as a certain socio-professional obligation or norm,

-If you want to be promoted as a teacher (certified level) it's a big plus if you have your own website (...) a friend showed me and when I asked why she had it, she said it was for that, to show her lesson plans, to inform about her research, etc. It's not an official requirement but it's a definite plus.

- Researcher: *Do you think you'll do it as well then?*

-Probably.

Everyone around uses the Internet, I feel left out not to be using it, everyone knows I'm a student, my friends access it while I have to keep going to the library old-style.

The 'conformist' effect also applies to children,

- In the past, when my boys did not have access at home, they were like lame ducks at school. They didn't know anything, couldn't take part in discussions, etc.

-Researcher: *What do you mean in discussions?*

-Find some material, something for the lessons, (...) they didn't know what was going on.

First questions that children are asked at school is whether they have a computer at home. If not, nobody will want to visit them because there'll be nothing to do.

The fourth motive is using the Internet as a tool which aids in the decision making process. It equips people with knowledge but also gives them 'something more' – something which tells them that they have made a right decision, after comparing all the options,

[Internet] makes life easier, meaning, if someone is looking for something. When Slawek needed an mp3 player he would have had to go to many shops, compare prices, information and instead he just entered a website and got all the necessary information with pictures and he could choose his wholesaler or a shop to buy in.

Shop assistants don't always give you good advice or tell you all the information.

Another reason for using the Internet could be for fun, although that was rated lower on the list. If one uses the Internet for fun only, he is not a true Internaut in non-user eyes. Children have such status, for example. They are a specific group of users whose needs and interests are rather widely recognized by non-users, predominantly for games, and some aid in schoolwork. In contrast to adults, children's access is more limited but requiring a lot more control as children can be irrational users of the new technology.