

(B)Locked sites: Cases of Internet use in 3 British prisons

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Word count: 7,996 (+ abstract, keywords, title, and author details)

Abstract

Based on a qualitative scoping exercise in three British prisons, this article discusses digital inequalities experienced by prisoners and the potential opportunities that digital media in prisons offers for offender rehabilitation and resettlement. As they are currently denied access to online and social media that most of us take for granted, physically cut off from their communities, and unable to communicate with family and friends in ways that have become normal in society, we argue that prisoners experience profound social isolation and constitute one of the most impoverished groups in the digital age. Our results show that prisoners display high levels of both curiosity and enthusiasms as well as fear and reservation toward Internet-enabled technologies, depending on age and gender as well as the length of their sentence. On release from prison, they are not only faced with prejudice and poorer job prospects than the average citizen due to their criminal record, but their digital exclusion during incarceration may have compound effects and lead to supercharged digital and social exclusion. We argue that secure access would be highly beneficial to prisoners who pose a low risk to society, especially during the rehabilitation and release phases.

Keywords: digital inequality; digital exclusion; Internet non-use; prisons; prisoners

1. Introduction

In an increasingly connected world, a large body of literature is concerned with those who are offline or barely online. Digital divides (Van Dijk, 2005) and digital inequalities (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004), and in recent years especially different levels of skills (Helsper & Eynon, 2013; Van Deursen, Van Dijk, & Peters, 2011), have been examined in-depth and across various settings since the Internet has become almost ubiquitous in Western countries. According to the latest data from the Oxford Internet Surveys, 78% of Britons were using the Internet in 2013, 18% were non-users, and 4% were ex-users who have used the Internet before but stopped (Dutton & Blank, 2013). However, almost all studies focus on the general public or specific societal populations, such as the elderly, children, or vulnerable groups; to date, no study has looked at those who are, in practice, forced to be largely offline due to institutionalized settings, as is the case with prisoners.

Criminal justice is increasingly reliant on new technology. From electronic monitoring to biometric kiosks, prison and probation services in advanced, industrial nations have embraced technology as a means of achieving financial efficiencies and effectiveness of service. To an extent, this is a reflection of developments in society at large. Anyone entering a corrections facility will be largely unfazed by biometric identity scans and airport style security systems. But what about those who are caught up in the system and may be spending many years inside prison? Are they benefitting from the rapid advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) that most of us experience? Or are they still “cavemen in an era of speed-of-light-technology” (Johnson, 2005, p. 263; Jewkes, 2008)?

Drawing on qualitative research conducted by the authors individually and collaboratively in three prisons in the United Kingdom, this article discusses the

potential impacts on prisoners of being denied access, or having only very limited and constrained access, to Internet enabled technologies that most of us take for granted. We will discuss digital and online media that some prison inmates are permitted; the benefits and opportunities they bring; and the ways in which online media are an effective resource in the exercise of “soft power” by prison staff (Crewe, 2007). The paradoxes of having to satisfy commitments to principles of less eligibility and public acceptability, while giving inmates a normal experience in custody and preparing them for release and resettlement, are ones that have not yet been resolved.

2. Background

2.1 Digital inequalities

Digital inequalities research has experienced a shift from examining a binary digital divide (Norris, 2001; Rogers, 2001) towards studying more detailed gradations of Internet use (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Selwyn, 2004), also called the second-level digital divide (Hargittai, 2002) that often focuses on differences in Internet skills (Van Deursen, Helsper, & Eynon, 2014) and different categories of Internet users (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). This shift towards digital inequalities and user types has led to a decline in non-user research with only few studies conducted in recent years (Klecun, 2008; Reisdorf, 2011; Reisdorf, Axelsson, & Söderholm, 2012). For example, Helsper’s (2011) work on the “digital underclass” shows that, although most Britons are now online, we find large differences in their usage patterns and their skills. These differences are mostly related to factors that influence traditional digital divides and inequalities, such as age, education, income, occupation, and disability. Van Deursen and Van Dijk’s results confirmed that “[b]esides education, age and gender are the most salient predictors for differences in Internet usage” (2014, p. 520), with those in already

more advantaged situations using the Internet for more capital enhancing activities. Equally, Zillien and Hargittai's (2009) study shows that the higher the social status, the more and broader the Internet use. Digital skills, such as using computers, searching the Internet for facts, sending emails, and more and more social networking, have become core skills to be competitive in the workforce. A lack of these skills has been shown to be a great disadvantage in the job market (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014).

If this is the case, then we need to ask how those who are completely disconnected are affected by this lack of connectivity and opportunities to maintain or even expand their digital skills. This is an especially interesting question for populations that are excluded by force, such as prisoners who—in most cases—have no, or extremely limited, access to Internet enabled technologies, but also other offline technologies that are considered normal everyday items in our fast-paced society, such as iPods and other touchscreen gadgets.

2.2 Internet in prisons

Research examining Internet access in prisons is extremely limited. Most studies in this area focus on specific services, such as libraries (Ings & Joslin, 2011; Payne & Sabath, 2007), health care provision (Anaraki, Plugge, & Hill, 2003) and health records (Adams & Pike, 2008). Another set of literature is concerned with issues surrounding education and ICT-use in prisons (Adams & Pike, 2008; Koudstaal, Cianchi, Knott & Koudstaal, 2009). While these authors emphasize the importance of education for lower reoffending rates and access to virtual learning platforms to achieve this, they do not consider any other potentially enhancing uses of the Internet for prison inmates, and how these could potentially contribute to less social isolation and a more successful rehabilitation process.

A number of scholars have considered the question of allowing or blocking Internet access from a legal perspective. For example, Hartmann (2000) analyses a bill passed in Arizona in July 2000, which “eliminates direct and indirect access to the Internet and email for all Arizona prison inmates” (p. 1423). According to her, the Supreme Court outline three legitimate penological reasons that allow prisons to interfere with First Amendment rights, which are “maintaining security inside the prison; preserving order; and rehabilitating prisoners” (p. 1425). Although Hartmann argues that the reasons for restricting direct access to the Internet are compelling, the restriction of proxy-use, i.e. having someone else use the Internet for an inmate, is unconstitutional in that it violates the First Amendment rights of individuals who are not incarcerated. In addition, Hartmann (2000) outlines a number of penological rationales for allowing direct access to the Internet for educational purposes, promoting literacy skills, promoting computer skills, and adequate access to legal materials, which are increasingly available in electronic format only (pp. 1434-1435). Her suggested solutions included limited and monitored access allowances, computer programs that limit access to certain websites (“whitelisting”), and a program that automatically monitors email correspondence. However, due to the theoretical and legal focus of this paper, these suggestions remain theoretical and have not been tested or examined in a real-life prison setting. Similar to Hartmann’s arguments, Espesito (2000) posits that there are certain advantages to allowing prisoners (some) direct access to the Internet and aligns these with the goals of the American penal system. He argues that restricting “prisoners from accessing the Internet is ... contrary to the general aim of encouraging inmates to pursue hobbies while in prison” (Espesito, 2000, p. 59), and he suggests that allowing limited access may contribute positively to prisoners’ rehabilitation process in the same way that educational opportunities and hobbies do.

Both abovementioned publications examined opportunities and risks of Internet access in prisons within a US context. In the United Kingdom, even fewer publications are concerned with Internet access in prisons, its risks and its opportunities for prisoners and prison staff alike. Jewkes (2008) summarizes the situation in the UK as one of prevailing security concerns and threats, notions of less eligibility and solitary confinement, which goes in line with nineteenth-century ideas of the correctional system. She outlines a number of ways in which Internet access would be beneficial for inmates during incarceration and how it would contribute to successful resettlement into our fast-paced society upon release. According to Jewkes (2008), prisoners experience a number of deprivations including “1) loss of stimulation; 2) loss of social support; and loss of communication” (p. 175). This aligns with Chatman’s (1999) observations of prisoners in a female high security prison in the US, which show that they enter a “small world” in which prisoners have to redefine social norms and worldviews. The limited access to outside sources leads to a separation of these two worlds and outside sources become less relevant (Chatman, 1991, 1999). Jewkes (2008) argues that these deprivations and the loss of connection to the outside world could be alleviated by granting prisoners access to the Internet—at least in a monitored and limited manner. However, she also argues that public fears and fears from prison staff and policymakers, who want to avoid bad press, are limiting the will to even consider giving inmates partial access to Internet technologies. She concludes that “for as long as prisoners’ access to the Internet is framed as a security issue, the repercussions are likely to involve greater insecurity for the community at large, as prisoners are released back into the community with significant skills deficits” (Jewkes, 2008, p. 184). Accordingly, we need to observe these transitions and examine them carefully as well as the possibilities

and opportunities that (limited) access may present to prisoners, successful rehabilitation, involvement in children's lives, etc.

2.3 The missing piece

Most prisons in the United Kingdom do not allow their inmates to access the Internet due to heightened security measures across the country. Additionally, inmates are often regarded as less eligible for privileges and deserving harsh punishment (Jewkes & Johnston, 2009, p. 171). Prisoners are blocked off from both the real world and the virtual world out of fear that they may commit cybercrimes or continue their criminal offline activities by communicating with victims, witnesses, or accomplices. Even if the incarceration period is fairly short (e.g. 12–18 months), studies of the general non-user population have shown that discontinued use of the Internet affects important digital skills (Eynon & Geniets, 2012). In addition, prisoners miss out on important distance learning opportunities that were previously provided in paper-based and face-to-face formats. As more and more universities (including the Open University, who is the main provider of education by distance learning in British prisons), move to deliver their courses purely online, prisoners lose access to further and higher education opportunities that could enable them to get a job and earn a living, and hence make the rehabilitation process easier and more successful. Our scoping exercise therefore investigates if and how ex-prisoners suffer from compound exclusion and inequality during their incarceration and in their rehabilitation process. Not only are they faced with prejudice and poorer job prospects than the average citizen due to their criminal record, but their digital exclusion during imprisonment may also lead to long-term lack of digital skills and educational opportunities, with a commensurate loss of confidence and social capital.

A second area that we seek to investigate is the social isolation that inmates suffer during their incarceration. Being cut off from family and friends and having limited opportunities for purposeful activity may lead to mental health issues and depression. The loss of social networks, the detrimental impacts that this may have on an individual's identity (e.g. as a partner, friend, or father) and the sense of loneliness and isolation may lead to feelings that society has given up on prisoners as active citizens. Based on the above assertions, we ask the following set of questions:

1. How do prisoners experience the lack of digital media during their incarceration?
2. How do prisoners experience the re-learning of digital skills during their rehabilitation phase?
3. Do prisoners experience compound exclusion after their release and in their rehabilitation process because of the lack of digital skills after having been unable to use the Internet during incarceration?
4. What are the potential advantages and risks of granting Internet access to prisoners during their incarceration?

3. Methodology

To shed light on our preliminary questions and to enable us to scope the field of research, we visited a number of low security and open prisons¹ in England and Northern Ireland as well as a work-out unit, which is designed to reintegrate prisoners

¹ British prisons have four security categories: Category A is a high-security prison for extremely dangerous offenders where escape is impossible; Category B is a high-security prison for dangerous offenders where escape is extremely difficult; Category C is a low security prison for prisoners "who cannot be trusted in open prison conditions, but will not necessarily have the intention ... to make any real attempt of escape from the prison" (In Brief, n.d., n.p.); Category D is an open prison for the least dangerous offenders, who live on site but often work in the community.

who are approaching the end of their sentence into society by allowing them to work in the community, while living in a step-down facility with strict rules and regulations.

3.1 Access to prisons

Gaining access to prisons is always notoriously difficult, and in times of austerity and negative press, governors may be even more reluctant than usual to allow researchers or journalists to visit correctional facilities. Accordingly, gaining access to the prisons that we initially planned to visit was difficult, and some of the prisons that we approached did not grant us access. Eventually, we were invited by a few prison governors who were intrigued by the topic, but these prisons can be considered at the forefront of innovation in at least actively considering the options and the potential positive impact that (some) Internet enabled technologies could provide to their prisoners and their rehabilitation process. We were invited on a two-day visit to Northern Ireland, where the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service showed us some of the pioneering work they are doing to introduce computers into cells and to teach prisoners transferable, technology-based skills. The Governor² of an open prison in England gave permission for us to sit in on an IT class and talk to the prisoners about what they think are the most pressing issues that require investigation.

3.2 (Non-)data collection

As gaining access was difficult, both invitations to visit prisons in Northern Ireland and England were extended on an ad hoc basis. Due to this short notice, we were not able to gain full ethics approval from the university to conduct a proper data collection as this

² The Governor of a British prison is the chief administrator of this specific prison and thereby responsible for managing staff, security, and disciplinary procedures. They also report to the Director General of each country included in the United Kingdom (i.e. Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England).

would have meant months of waiting and losing these research opportunities. However, as prison populations are vulnerable and issues surrounding prisoners, prisoner skills, and access to ICTs and the Internet are considered highly controversial topics, we refrained from collecting real data. This means that we did not audio-record any of the sessions with prisoners, prison staff, and prison governors, and we did not write notes in the prisons. In the beginning of each meeting we explained to the prisoners that their participation was voluntary and confidential and that no one would have to fear repercussions for not participating in the discussions. In four out of six cases, we were able to talk to groups of prisoners without any prison staff present. In the other two instances, we were talking to prisoners who were deemed more dangerous as they were serving long sentences for serious offences, so that a prison guard was present. Participation in those two groups was noticeably lower, which we acknowledged by not asking any potentially risky questions that could have lead to problems or misunderstandings between prisoners and prison staff. Generally, we made sure that we did not ask questions that could potentially put prisoners into uncomfortable situations. We kept questions very general and we did not probe on anything that prisoners could be sensitive about. According to these ethical limitations, our analysis and discussion will mainly rely on our observations and impressions that we wrote down after leaving the prisons.

The different groups of prisoners we were able to talk to in this scoping exercise included a group of women in a low security prison; a group of male young offenders in a prison that was recently converted into a college with a focus on educating and rehabilitating these young offenders, who are now called students in this facility; a group of male prisoners in a low security prison; a group of male prisoners in an open

prison; a group of male prisoners in a step-down work-out facility; and a few individual prisoners who were attending an IT class at an open prison.

In addition, we were granted the opportunity to talk to a number of prison guards, prison governors, and IT teachers who teach classes in low security prisons. Our conversations were mostly done one-on-one and in an informal setting in the staffs' offices or over lunch or coffee. Similar to the talks with the prisoners, we did not take notes during the conversations, but instead we relied on our observations and notes that we wrote down after leaving the prison facilities.

4. Findings and discussion

The types of access and experiences we witnessed across these different prisons were diverse, as were the attitudes we encountered from staff and prisoners alike. Although we enquired about a range of different technologies available in prisons, our discussion here will largely focus on Internet enabled technologies available to prisoners and related technologies that might enable prisoners to acquire skills that may be useful for the time after their release, such as touch-screen technology. In general, most Internet enabled technologies were met with opposition from prison officers. Many staff expressed fears that any Internet enabled device could be hacked or manipulated to gain full access to the Internet, which, in turn, would lead to serious security breaches. This concern was expressed repeatedly, despite the fact that Wi-Fi was not available at any of the facilities—not even for staff—and that most facilities were so remote that even mobile Internet connections were not an option. Nonetheless, some of the prisons we visited were piloting some (very limited and monitored) access to Internet enabled technologies.

4.1 Skype—a move in the right direction?

One online medium that appears to offer much to prisoners was Skype, particularly those for whom family visits are difficult or impossible. The Internet software that allows free video chats via a microphone and webcam to anyone who has a Skype account was piloted in two of the low security prisons we visited. Similar to the telephone system operated in prison, inmates could list a limited number of Skype contacts, which had to be linked to a phone number that was already registered with the prison; i.e. instead of adding more contacts to their list, inmates could add another means of communicating to their already existing contacts. That way, prison staff were able to make sure that only family members and close friends could be contacted via Skype. However, implementation was often less than straightforward and prisoners told us about mixed experiences with this pilot scheme.

Senior personnel within the prison service had told us of the success of its implementation, which happened just before the holidays and allowed prisoners to watch their children unwrap presents. One male prisoner told us that it was an invaluable way for keeping in contact with his family who live abroad, while another explained that it had made a big difference to his quality of life. Being able to speak to his family on Skype did not just bring immediate, short-term benefits, but he also reported that the positive feelings were a high that left him invigorated and able to face the challenges of lonely prison life for several days after the Skype call.

The implementation of Skype was not without problems. In the women's facility, the computer monitor was placed in the reception area due to the ease of installation there, because that is where the Internet cable was located. However, this area was only staffed at certain times, leading to prisoners not being able to use Skype

very often³. According to the prison's governor, the implementation of Skype was intended to be a bonus to expand the opportunities of remaining in contact with family, in addition to the physical visits the prisoners were entitled to. However, officers staffing the unit had interpreted it as being a substitute for real visits, so that one prisoner who used Skype for a family call then had to forfeit one of her visits. This incident alone deterred many of the other women from giving Skype a try in the first place.

In the men's facility, prison staff also compromised the potential value of using Skype. First of all, only those prisoners who were already in the open unit of this prison were allowed to use Skype—and only in a very limited manner. Staff showed us a rota on which prisoners sign up for a 15-minute session. If a prisoner was in a Skype session and wanted to chat for longer, they explained that he could do so if no one else was scheduled immediately after him. In practice, however, prisoners said that some officers were strict about the 15-minute rule and would end their sessions, even if no one else had signed up for a session after theirs. One individual described how he had been allowed to Skype his young daughter on Boxing Day. The link had taken a while to establish and his daughter was initially overwhelmed by the technology and shy at seeing her father for the first time since his incarceration. By the time she had relaxed and got used to it, the 15 minutes were almost up. She had to go to the toilet, and when she returned, the session was over and her father had already been asked to return to his cell, despite an empty timeslot after his session.

Prisoners who were able to utilize this service also complained about a lack of privacy, as the computer monitor and camera that they used was installed in a room next

³ Champion and Edgar (2013) found similar limiting factors with access to the Virtual Campus, with computer terminals placed in locations that prisoners had little or no access to.

to the staff office and the walls were thin. After facilitating the initial link-up, officers were also continuing to watch the interaction between the prisoner and their relative(s) on their own monitor in the staff office, which is not in line with the usual prison policy on monitoring phone calls, which is restricted, randomly applied, and predominantly intelligence-led instead of permanent and omnipresent. Even more problematic was the fact that anyone who entered the office or looked through the open door from the corridor could see the computer screen in the staff office. For some, the realization that fellow inmates might be able to see their homes, partners, and children was a barrier to using Skype, and, after initial enthusiasm when it was first introduced, they had abandoned it and gone back to using payphones instead, which are costly and require queuing up outside in the cold and rain.

With all these problems of privacy, personal security, and exertion of control by officers, it is perhaps little wonder that the rota we were shown had few names on it. Although everyone agreed that the *idea* of Skype for prisoners was an innovative, humane, and well-meaning intervention by senior management, its implementation by prison officers could have inhumane implications for prisoners and their families. This paradox led to lower uptake than expected.

4.2 ICTs, Internet, and education

The introduction and implementation of ICTs in prisons is a complex issue, and a mixed picture has emerged of availability and usage. Access currently seems to depend on which security category of prison an individual is held in, which wing they are in, where the prison is located, and whether it is publicly or privately operated. In addition to these formal structures, the informal culture of a prison or wing, the management style of senior personnel, and the personalities and attitudes of prison officers all influence

whether the implementation of Internet enabled technologies in prison is successful or not.

One constant among patchy and unpredictable access to Internet and ICTs is prison education, which provides basic level skills in common computer software, such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, to students across prisons. Although the quality of teaching is as dependent on the skills of the teacher as it is in any classroom setting, even the most competent and passionate tutors are severely constrained by the technology that is available in the prison classroom. According to one ICT tutor the technology that was available to him comprised of eight-year-old software that was installed on thirteen-year-old hardware—a lifetime in the age of ever-changing gadgets and apps that inundate the market every day. Despite these obstacles, the ICT classes we observed demonstrated that tutors do their best to make the basic skills that they teach relevant and engaging to students by, for example, assigning them tasks that are close to their interests, such as inputting Premier League soccer teams into a spreadsheet and calculating how the league tables change according to wins and losses (and the points associated with this). However, some prison teachers seem to overestimate the usefulness of the skills they are required to pass on. One tutor kept telling her students that if they wanted to start a business upon their release they had to master the Microsoft Office package. This had a hollow ring to it, given the low and out-dated tasks they had to work on. Mastering the MS Office suite is the bare minimum even acquiring a job, not to speak of becoming a successful small business owner, especially at a time when small businesses that do not have well-maintained social media sites are almost bound to fail (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). As another tutor told us, word-processing a CV that contains little more than the qualifications gained in prison, which included successful completion of accredited behavioural

programmes, such as anger management or alcohol awareness, rather than educational achievements, is not helpful in the quest for gainful employment. Although basic literacy and numeracy skills as well as basic IT skills are cornerstones of successfully gaining employment, how much more useful might it be to also teach prison inmates business start-up skills, how to build a website, or even how to establish an eBay shop?

4.3 Barriers: Internet technologies and prison staff

In some of the other facilities we visited, there appeared to be another story to tell about the ways in which new technologies are perceived and implemented by staff. For example, the Skype trial (and error) provides an interesting case study illustrating the potential disjuncture between attempts by prison services and management to normalize prison life and assist inmates in maintaining contact with family and, thus, making a successful transition from prison to society, and staff practices, which jeopardized these efforts and almost amounted to unauthorized exercise of “soft power” (Crewe, 2007). Some of the obstacles we encountered may be due to a lack of creative thinking; an example for this is Skype being available only in a restricted area because the Internet cable had been installed in that area. Some may be explained by carelessness or lack of thoughtfulness, e.g. the Skype monitor being in an office-style room with a prison officer—and, potentially, anyone else—watching from the next room. Some barriers might be the result of miscommunication, such as potentially insufficient clarity that Skype visits were supposed to be an additional service and not a substitute for real contact visits. On the other hand, all these failures of implementation might be regarded as consequences of the micro-culture of uniformed prison staff, who seem to firmly uphold the principles of public (un)acceptability and less eligibility, facilitated and made acceptable by macro policies and procedures which are risk-averse and resistant to change.

What was interesting to observe was the lack of challenge from the prisoners to the regressive media environment that they found themselves in. To our surprise, most prisoners seemed remarkably resigned about their “caveman” status (Johnson, 2005). In fact, in all the groups we spent time with, opinions were voiced that conformed to prevailing ideas about less eligibility and the idea that, as convicted offenders, they were undeserving consumers of digital media. Such expressions of support for these dominant ideologies are not uncommon among prisoners who have embarked on some kind of self-improvement, e.g. substance misuse programmes, where the desire to change can border on evangelistic (Crewe, 2007), but they are usually less evident in relation to goods and services, including traditional media, which, on the whole, prisoners view with a sense of entitlement (Jewkes, 2002). Yet the frequency with which sentiments of moral self-reproach were expressed in relation to new media suggests that their status as luxuries rather than necessities prevails among both senior prison officers and the prisoners themselves. This is problematic in an era where ICT and new media skills are considered key components of a rounded skills-set that allow a successful participation in society (Selwyn, 2004), and where less use and more narrow use are associated with digital inequalities and being virtually left behind (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). ICT deprivation must be considered equivalent to other social deprivations, such as low income, unemployment, low education, poor health, and social isolation. “To consider ICT deprivation as somehow less important underestimates the pace, depth and scale of technological change” (Helsper, 2008, cited in Champion & Edgar, 2013, p. 9). Moreover, the compound effects of ICT deprivation, in combination with other social deprivations, arguably lead to loss of confidence and social capital. A modern inconvenience of imprisonment thus becomes long-term deep exclusion from society.

4.4 What happens afterwards?

Not all prisoners we spoke to were comfortable with Internet enabled technologies. The aversion of some prisoners to digital and Internet technologies is unsurprising, especially for those who are older and those who have been incarcerated for a long time, and it is consistent with broader patterns in society. In an era when Internet and touchscreen technologies are constantly promoted as being socially desirable and ubiquitous, non-users are often older and reluctant to admit their disengagement. Men particularly struggle with admitting their lack of competence (Reisdorf et al., 2012), as they often see this skills deficit as a threat to their masculinity.

In their qualitative study of Internet non-users in the UK and Sweden, Reisdorf et al. (2012) found that it was not simply lack of economic resources that resulted in disengagement with the Internet. Many people who were not economically marginalized chose not to use the Internet for other reasons; for example, if they had lifestyles, hobbies, and/or jobs that can be conducted entirely offline, or simply due to an ideological resistance to the information society. They stated that they could not see how the Internet would add value to their lives—or at least not sufficient value to go to the effort of learning how to handle a new technology. However, upon probing these statements, many participants also expressed discomfort with the technology itself and relied on partners, family members, and colleagues to act as proxy-users and use the Internet on their behalf (Reisdorf et al., 2012). Others were unable to type or text because of illiteracy, visual impairment, or simply an aversion to the complexity of computers and mobile phones. Of those who had reluctantly overcome their anxieties, many had done so because their children had persuaded them.

All these concerns, barriers and limitations to ICT usage are magnified in the

prison environment amongst a population that is overwhelmingly male, suffers disproportionately from all forms of social exclusion (SEU, 2002), and ages more quickly than the population at large. While some of the younger individuals talked excitedly about catching up with the latest smartphones and apps upon their release, many of the older prisoners —particularly those who served long sentences and are now being prepared for release with home visits and work in the community—were apprehensive at the thought of engaging with digital media. In our meeting with male prisoners who had been incarcerated for a very long time and who were now being prepared for release, we discussed their thoughts about re-entering a world that, from a technology standpoint, is virtually unrecognizable from the one that some of them left up to 25 years ago. Many of these older, long-term prisoners struggled with terminology, sometimes referring to “apps” as “abs” or “amps” and they spoke of their discomfort at having to ask family members to show them how to use phones and tablets. A number of them reported that the omnipresence of new media technologies constantly reinforced feelings of stupidity, difference, and marginalization from the outside world and even within their own families, which reflects broader anxieties of non-users (Reisdorf et al., 2012). Several narratives were infused with a mixture of comedy and embarrassment as these prisoners, who were now eligible for home leave after a very long time of living in a “small world” (Chatman, 1991), explained how they had to ask their siblings, children, and nieces and nephews to show them how to use smartphones. They mimed efforts to master tiny keyboards, swipe tablet screens, and understand when to use the keyboard and when to touch the screen. Most of these men appeared to have families they were returning to after serving a life sentence⁴. They

⁴ In the United Kingdom, a life sentence does not necessarily mean that prisoners are locked up for life.

expressed frustration at not finding ICT skills intuitive to them and said their relatives had endless patience in showing them how to do it, and were grateful for such tuition in the privacy of the home.

These older, long-term prisoners' greater fears were reserved for new technologies in the public sphere, and commonly expressed fears among non-users in society at large were greatly exacerbated by having been almost entirely cut off from that society for a significant period of their lives. Internet enabled computers in libraries, touchscreen machines for buying train tickets, and automated banking and self-service checkouts at supermarkets were all heatedly discussed. The latter was the source of most consternation because they had already experienced checkouts where you scan barcodes and put your money in a machine, rather than giving your shopping and your cash or credit card to a person at a till, while on home visits. For these men who are trying to make the transition from two decades inside prison to life on the outside, the mixture of technology that can be difficult to use, the fear of appearing stupid and drawing attention to themselves and perhaps signaling in the process that they have been away from society for a long time, and the lack of a real person to interact with, led to an animated discussion about their feelings of being stuck in a former time; in fact, two of the men described themselves as "cavemen" (see also Johnson, 2005).

4.5 Summary: Supercharging digital exclusion

The likelihood of being incarcerated is strongly influenced by socio-economic status. Considering the length of a sentence, this can lead to what we call supercharged digital exclusion. In contrast to compound digital exclusion (Helsper, 2011), supercharged digital exclusion is not just compound through the already disadvantaged societal

background that many prisoners come from. In addition, this compound exclusion is supercharged through forced exclusion during incarceration.

For example, we found that younger prisoners who served shorter sentences were less worried about handling ICTs upon their release. On the other hand, those prisoners who had spent a long time in prison—and who are mostly middle-aged or older upon release—displayed discomfort at the thought of using the Internet and ICTs, such as smartphones or touchscreens in public places. As age and education are already strongly related to digital inequalities (Reisdorf, 2011; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014), spending a long time without access to ICTs and the Internet can make digital exclusion upon release even more pronounced. However, we must be careful not to overgeneralize or oversimplify the situation. Shorter sentences have a smaller impact on compound digital exclusion than long sentences in the same way that younger age and higher educational backgrounds of prisoners mitigate digital exclusion—especially for short-term prisoners. Similarly, it is questionable whether the very simple digital skills that some prisoners were able to pick up in IT classes can alleviate digital exclusion upon release. While basic digital skills are better than no skills, research has shown that the lack of more advanced digital skills leads to second-level divides (Hargittai, 2002; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2014) and differences in how people use the Internet (Zillien & Hargittai, 2009). For those prisoners who served long sentences and who had no or very low digital skills before incarceration, these IT classes are but a drop in the bucket of supercharged (digital) exclusion.

5. Conclusion

As this project was a small-scale scoping exercise, our intention in this paper was to explore salient issues and to formulate the parameters of a more substantial, comparative research study across Great Britain and potentially other European

countries. We aimed to find answers to four preliminary questions related to the availability of Internet enabled technologies and the lack thereof in the British prison system, how lack of Internet access affects prisoners during and after their incarceration, if and how they experience the (re-)learning of digital skills during the rehabilitation and reintegration phase, whether they face compound disadvantages upon their release and what the general potential benefits and risks are of giving prisoners access to Internet enabled technologies.

The findings to these questions are complex and will require more detailed research and analyses in a future study that collects data from a larger sample of prisoners across various types of prisons and security categories. Our preliminary results point to a paradox of balancing security concerns and penal power on the one hand, and enabling prisoners to lead a somewhat normal life and expand their basic (digital) skills to increase the chances of successful rehabilitation, finding employment upon release, and generally finding a way back into a society that is moving at a technological pace that may lead to challenges not only for those prisoners who served long sentences, but also for those who have fairly short incarceration periods.

Although some Internet enabled technologies, such as Skype, were available to some prisoners in two of the prisons we visited, the reality is that these prisons invited us *because* they were trialling Skype and wanted to show us how well it worked. At this point, we do not know how many prisons are (thinking of) running schemes like this, partly due to fears of public disagreement and partly because prisons do not like to open their doors to the public in any case. And even in those prisons where Skype was available, implementation was problematic; however, it is important to note that for those prisoners who had families living far away, being able to communicate with them via Skype and partaking in the lives of their children by more than just a (very

expensive) phone call was invaluable—especially for female prisoners, many of whom had children on the outside (Chatman, 1999). If issues of implementation can be overcome, making Skype available to a larger population of prisoners may contribute to decreasing social isolation and may provide a stronger family-connection that is so important for the successful rehabilitation of prisoners.

A second area we identified this scoping exercise was IT education in prisons, which included only the most basic skills related to the MS Office Suite. Due to lack of physical access to the Internet in IT classrooms—in most cases even on the instructor’s computer—IT tutors were only able to show students static pictures of websites and how they work. This was not part of the core curriculum, and only the most motivated tutors took it on themselves to introduce real-world materials and settings into the classroom.

In brief conversations with IT specialists, we were told that it would be possible to make restricted, education-led access to the Internet available to prisoners; indeed, some expressed the belief that prisoners could, should, and eventually *will* enjoy similar access to the Internet as we all do, i.e. for pleasure and leisure purposes, as well as for learning. However, our discussions with senior prison staff and prison officers also made clear that concerns about public perceptions and the Internet being seen as a way out of the intentional isolation of the prison setting are holding back willingness to think outside of the box and move forward with establishing the digital prison. The opportunities for Internet enabled technologies in prisons are wide ranging in significance and scope, and could potentially contribute to more successful rehabilitation, e.g. via maintaining family relationships, which is one of the main factors in aiding desistance from crime and via more opportunities for education in prisons, which would in turn reduce reoffending rates (Ministry of Justice, 2013). However,

perceived and actual security risks, public opinion, and the potential value of allowing prisoners to access the Internet are currently under-researched topics and are worthy of further investigation. Another issue that we were unable to cover in this scoping exercise are underground uses of digital devices. However, we would assume that these are limited mostly to use of mobile phones for calls and text messages in the prisons that we visited, first of all due to lack of Wi-Fi in prisons and secondly due to the remote location of these prisons, which lead to extremely poor mobile signals. In our on-going research, we plan to investigate all these issues. Only then may we understand the consequences of limiting prisoners' access to the Internet and the potential opportunities that Internet access would offer to individuals who have served a prison sentence.

In the wider scope of digital inequality research, this scoping exercise gives a valuable, albeit limited, insight into one of the (digitally) most deprived and under-researched populations. As most prisoners will be released back into society after they have served their sentence, it is important to acknowledge that they were most likely already part of digital excluded populations and are now suffering compound digital and general exclusion—especially those who served long sentences. Similar to policy recommendations in general digital divide literature, we argue that digital skills should be a core part of the training in prisons. As limited and secure access is possible, politicians need to reconfigure what the greater outcome of a punitive system should be—simply locking people away for the crimes they committed, or aiming to provide them with better skills and opportunities upon release back into society to prevent reoffending.

6. References

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