



Coronavirus has highlighted the UK's Digital Divide

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For the past four years, the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research ([CCHPR](#)) at the University of Cambridge has been [researching digital exclusion](#). While it is a well-known fact that [many elderly people are not online](#), the Centre's research highlights that digital exclusion is not just a generational issue. Digital exclusion is another facet of the deep inequalities which run through the social fabric of the UK, and is more widespread than many people are aware of. One thing is clear: the public health crisis currently gripping the UK stands to make the impacts of digital exclusion worse for the millions of people affected, and the poorest will be hit the hardest.

Since the onset of social distancing in the UK, some semblance of normality – or at least of productivity – has been possible to maintain only because of the networks of digital technologies and platforms already in place. Lockdown has certainly served to highlight our reliance on virtual means of staying in touch. Critically, it has also thrown into sharp definition the issue of digital exclusion, which has been a reality for the [22%](#) of the UK's population who lack basic digital skills since long before the Covid-19 outbreak.

As an aspect of deprivation in the UK, digital exclusion cannot be overlooked. The likelihood of having access to the internet from home increases along with income, such that only [51%](#) of households earning between £6000-10,000 had home internet access compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,001. The link between poverty and digital exclusion is clear: if you are poor, you have less chance of being online.

Children living in poverty are already significantly disadvantaged compared to their wealthier peers. Of those who have been eligible for free school meals, or who have been in care or adopted from care, only 25% achieved grades 9-5 in GCSE English and Maths in [2019](#), compared with 50% of all other pupils.

Now that many disadvantaged children are tasked with picking up all of their learning from home as part of coronavirus social distancing measures, and are unable to access the same online learning resources as children whose parents have access to IT, this gap is surely only set to grow further.

We spoke to five primary school head teachers working in Manchester recently, who shared their experiences of childhood digital exclusion. Several reported that only a handful of children are engaging in the online learning set by their teachers in recent weeks. For some households, wi-fi is just too expensive, as one head teacher explained.

"I was talking to one family on Friday, when I was delivering free meals, and I did take them a paper pack of work, because Mum said it was pay the wi-fi or feed the children this month... Sometimes people simply can't afford to pay for wi-fi," he said.

Lack of access to suitable devices is also causing problems for some children.

"The majority of children in school aren't accessing any of the online learning that we've set them. I know that some of them don't have reliable internet. Most of them who have anything have phones or tablets. They're often shared with siblings, so their access to something appropriate to work on is quite limited" said another head teacher.

And even where internet access is available, some parents don't have the necessary skills to help their children use the most appropriate learning platforms. These children may have to resort to using simple websites which they can access without help. As one head teacher said, some children whose parents aren't able to use interactive platforms have to access their tasks from the school website instead. These children miss out on valuable learning opportunities.

"We've already had children on the interactive platforms just clarifying things with their teachers about their learning, asking them quick questions, so that they can have feedback from their teachers. So the children that can't access that are going to have a bigger gap in their learning, because they're not going to have had the opportunity to interact with their teacher."

Providing children with paper-based alternatives is itself fraught with difficulty in the current circumstances. And while digital exclusion is always prevalent, the closures mean that some

measures that schools usually take to compensate for lack of internet access at home are no longer feasible. Disadvantaged children are losing out on their already limited chances to make up lost ground.

"If you can't get on the online platform, you're stuck with some sort of paper pack," said another head teacher. "And now the rules are you're not allowed out of the house other than for essential journeys, and I'm not entirely sure that coming to a school to pick up a pack of work is an essential journey... So they're just basically cut off really. Other than the fact that we have made either physical or phone contact with them, but that's all".

"Ordinarily, digital exclusion is not an issue here, because everything we set during normal school working we would run homework clubs for... So everything we do when school's running normally, the kids can usually do in after school clubs, so that everyone can do their homework."

For now, there are measures which can be taken to mitigate the impact of digital exclusion on children's learning. For instance, schools can keep in touch with digitally excluded families via phone calls or text messages to ensure they don't miss important updates. A vast array of educational resources and ideas for home learning have been made available online in recent weeks, many of which are [listed](#) on the gov.uk website. Collating those ideas into a short printed guidance sheet to be posted to those families known to be struggling to access online resources may help to fill the gap.

Given that digital exclusion is ultimately a feature of poverty, many affected families will be facing financial strain. There have recently been [calls to increase child benefit](#) to help families through the crisis. Such an increase may help to ease pressures on many families, who could be facing difficulty paying for their children's digital access. In the long term, strategies to close the digital divide, both through widening access and improving digital skills, will be required in order to build a more equitable society. Right now, measures taken in response to coronavirus are disrupting schemes which attempt to reduce digital exclusion, as people are unable to meet digital skills tutors for guidance, and cannot join courses in person to learn essential skills.

For adults facing digital exclusion, the challenges of social distancing are many. Our Cambridge Centre's [research](#) with New Horizons, a one-to-one coaching programme for people experiencing financial issues and digital exclusion in the East of England, reveals that digital exclusion creates additional problems for people already experiencing poverty: putting together a CV, applying for jobs, managing and keeping track of money, and applying for Universal Credit are just some of the essential activities which are made that much harder for the digitally excluded. As one New Horizons coach explained, in the context

of coronavirus, the tasks that were once difficult for the digitally excluded are now closer to impossible.

“Some of my clients are so digitally excluded it’s unbelievable,” he said. “In one couple that I work with, one of them has mobility issues so physically can’t use a keyboard, there’s no wi-fi, the 4-G is weak.

“They’re not on internet banking at all. If their building society decides to close for the coronavirus, they’ll have no money. They’d have to get a bus to central Cambridge, and she can’t leave him that long because of his disabilities.

“And this isn’t new. Digital exclusion was a problem before coronavirus, but this is compounding it.”

Even where a person has access to IT equipment at home, along with the necessary skills to use it, financial concerns can be prohibitive. As another New Horizons coach explained, for many digitally excluded adults, public libraries offer the opportunity to get online without placing additional strain on already stretched finances.

Libraries are, of course, closed until further notice, with many offering reassurances that resources are still available to their users online. But such online provision is of no use to those digitally excluded adults that depend on access to library facilities for their already limited online activities. For these people, it will be impossible to check emails, to order groceries, to apply for jobs, or even to access essential health guidance and benefits information online until the facilities reopen.

Digital exclusion is not new. It is yet another manifestation of the profound inequality which casts its shadow over the UK. For the people on the wrong side of the digital divide, the disadvantages associated with being unable to access or use IT have never been more pronounced. The pandemic has already changed the way we interact: it looks set to have a lasting effect on the way we communicate. Unless digital exclusion is taken seriously and addressed, millions of the poorest people in the UK will yet again suffer the consequences.