



SMARTPHONES: LIBERATION OR LIMITS?

As more people, especially the less well off, have only a smartphone to access the internet, there are signs that a new type of digital divide could develop. Ofcom's **ALISON PRESTON** describes new research carried out in the UK

This article is about the people who use their smartphone as their predominant way to go online. The number of people in this group is growing – research by Ofcom, the UK regulator, published this year shows that 16% of people in the UK say they use only a smartphone or tablet to go online, up from 6% the previous year. And 6% say they only use a smartphone – rising to 13% of those from the lowest socio-economic groups.

At Ofcom, we are keen to understand how people's media use and attitudes are evolving, and so we decided to explore this issue through in-depth research, to find out more about the motivations, and the strengths and drawbacks, of such behaviour. This article summarises the key findings from our published report.¹

Note that initially, we were going to focus on smartphone-only internet users. However, despite

Stopped in her tracks: older people may face more barriers with smartphones

respondents saying they were smartphone-only in screening interviews, once they began the detailed interview they would mention that they used another device in some way, at some time, even if by proxy. Therefore, the focus is on users who are smartphone by default, as distinct from smartphone-only.

WHAT DID WE DO?

We commissioned a research agency, Revealing Reality, to carry out a range of detailed interviews with 26 people from across the UK (Glasgow, Leeds, Belfast and Cardiff). These people came from a wide range of backgrounds, and we particularly wanted to look at vulnerable members of society, such as the homeless or recent migrants, to see what impact being smartphone-only had on their particular circumstances. ➔

◀ We classified participants into two main groups according to the reasons for which they became ‘smartphone by default’ internet users: ‘smartphone by choice’ and ‘smartphone by circumstance’. We identified two further sub-categories: those in ‘vulnerable circumstances’ who were ‘smartphone by circumstance’ as a result of difficult living conditions; and ‘microbusiness owners’, who could be in either group, but tended to be ‘smartphone by choice’ due to device portability and ease of use.

WHAT DID WE FIND OUT?

Smartphones can be both liberating and limiting. Across all of the participants, there were a number of common benefits to using smartphones as a principal means to go online. The mobility and immediacy of smartphones – a device that participants always had with them and switched on – meant that information searching and access were often more efficient than they might otherwise have been. Communication with friends and family was seen as almost universally improved by a number of apps and websites that maintain global contact. Navigation of local or new geographic areas was enhanced by navigation apps and the mobility of the device. Finally, viewing either instructional or entertaining video content meant respondents were able to learn and try new things, and access different types of content.

“In my work, I need to be in four places at once all the time. My smartphone allows me to do that. I couldn’t do it without having this in my pocket.”

Carl, 34, microbusiness owner (events manager and DJ), Samsung S5

“I’ve been in hostels so I haven’t talked to my son in ages. The good thing is that I asked him to be my friend on Facebook and he said yes. We can now stay in touch on there.”

Carly, 41, vulnerable circumstances (homeless), Samsung S4 Mini

In contrast, however, there were also participants who felt the impact of the limitations of being ‘smartphone by default’, especially those who were so as a result of circumstances.

Our research identified a number of drawbacks. One was that participants often felt under pressure to complete tasks quickly to prevent the erosion of their data allowances. Another was that many found creating, editing and sharing any document of length in a Microsoft Office application almost impossible. Respondents trying to amend and share their CVs, for example, often felt the impact of this limitation and felt the need to find a different device.

“It’s hard to see what I’ve written before on the small screen. I’m constantly scrolling up and trying to read it and then scrolling back down to write it. It’s so difficult I might as well just wait and try to use the library computers.”

Gary, 44, smartphone by circumstance, Microsoft Lumia 640

Collating or comparing information, products or services from a range of sources was also seen to be difficult on the small screens. In a similar vein, many respondents struggled to create information trails online, rarely using bookmark functions to save information sources, and instead trying to take screenshots or emailing links to themselves.

DO WELL-DESIGNED APPS HAVE POSITIVE IMPACTS?

Many apps and mobile-optimised websites have streamlined the user experience, making tasks easier and more efficient by doing the ‘hard work’. For example, navigation apps such as Google Maps and Citymapper plan out routes on behalf of respondents who simply need to input their start and end location. Banking apps were praised by users who felt they were often the most easy to use mechanism to view account details and conduct financial tasks.

“I mean banking, it’s so easy. I actually think the app is easier to use than the website. My account information is so nicely laid out.”

Roisin, 40, smartphone by choice, iPhone 5s

However, a relatively low understanding of the functionality of smartphones among respondents often meant a lack of experimentation on their devices. Few respondents were therefore actively reflecting on what they could do with their smartphone, or pushing it to really work for them.

DO SMARTPHONES OFFER MORE OR LESS CONTROL?

Smartphones can help put people back in control of their lives, but issues such as data scarcity may also lead to people putting off important tasks.



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The unprecedented ability to go online as a result of having a smartphone seemed to have a number of benefits, in particular helping people to feel in greater control of their lives, health, housing and finances. We saw a number

of examples where people were able to use their smartphones to improve their situation, such as Beth (aged 25) who had stopped going into her overdraft, and thus avoided paying the associated fees, since she was more easily able to look at her bank account on her app every day.

In contrast, the research also uncovered behaviours demonstrating that data poverty (perceived and real lack of mobile data allowance) was leading respondents to rush tasks, causing delays in completing tasks or, in the worst cases, abandoning activities like job applications. Concerns about using up their data packages meant that some respondents were rushing to complete tasks when they were not connected to WiFi. This trend was far more common among ‘smartphone by circumstance’ respondents relying on public WiFi, as they tended not to have home broadband connections.

“I need to register to vote but it didn’t tell me I needed to know my National Insurance number. I’ve already used up too much data doing the form in the first place.”

Charlie, 18, smartphone by circumstance, girlfriend’s Samsung S4

These self-limiting behaviours, coupled with the perceived role of the smartphone as a leisure or social device, may prevent some people from attempting to complete more serious or complex tasks on their smartphones. Furthermore, limited awareness of data packages and contracts imply that there are some barriers to smartphone users making the most appropriate purchasing decisions.

ARE SMARTPHONES SUPPORTING OR INHIBITING THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL SKILLS?

For the most digitally excluded, smartphones can offer access to a world otherwise off-limits, and a chance to learn new digital skills. However, heavy reliance on smartphones may inhibit users in developing alternative digital skills, such as typing.

For those who had had limited exposure to digital technology, the ability to buy an affordable smartphone with a call and data package offered interactions with the online and digital world that they had previously not been able to access. This was particularly true for the ‘vulnerable circumstances’ respondents, whose chaotic lives and challenging circumstances had placed digital literacy low down their priority list or made it almost impossible. This was also an issue for a minority of older respondents, especially for those who hadn’t engaged with technology during their working life. In this respect, their smartphone presented them with a steep learning trajectory. Respondents like Anne, 60, were excited about the new things they were learning about technology and what it could do for them.

However, the research also uncovered a range of people with greater experience of digital technology who demonstrated limited computing skills. Typing skills, for example, were at times very low – in particular among the younger respondents looking for work and the ‘smartphone by circumstance’ respondents who were not using keyboards at work. Furthermore, the low skills we witnessed in technological troubleshooting and file/information management seem to indicate that ‘smartphone by default’ internet users are not always developing some of the core skills which would potentially be beneficial in a range of work environments.

PARTICIPANTS’ EXPERIENCES

Finally, some direct examples from the participants illustrate the realities of living with smartphone-only access, and its impact on job seeking and accessing more personal information. Many participants felt that smartphones were not the best device for formal communication. This was due to various practical reasons including the screen size, but also because they tended to be seen as an ‘informal’ means of communication. These participants preferred to access another device such

as a PC or laptop, either in a library or at family or friends’ homes, even if this meant waiting some time to do so. Such delays had an impact on the productivity, as the following examples show.

“If it’s something important like government stuff or replying to formal emails I go to the library – I like to see them on a proper screen.”

Gerry, 42, smartphone by circumstance, iPhone 5s

Charlie, aged 18, would travel 90 minutes each way to her girlfriend’s family home to use her laptop for job applications. Beth, 25, from Cardiff, had recently been job searching, and had wanted to use a computer with a keyboard and mouse to write applications and amend her CV – the larger screen



Using public computers had further drawbacks for some participants.



size and input tools made her feel more in control of her applications. She would regularly travel by bus to her local library, about 20 minutes away, and book a slot to use the computers. These computers were only bookable for one hour at a

time, meaning that Beth had to leave the library for some time before booking another, later slot.

Using public computers had further drawbacks for some participants. In addition to the time needed to travel to a library, and the cost of so doing, some participants were also reluctant to carry out certain personal online activities there. For example, when Polly, 50, had a health scare, she did not want to ask library staff to help her decipher the information from health-related websites, because she was embarrassed about her own lack of knowledge.

“I feel like I should know some of these things. I don’t want to have to ask for help to just understand the information. It’s quite embarrassing.”

Polly, 50, vulnerable circumstances, Samsung S5

Chester also felt uncomfortable about the prospect of dealing with his finances in the public library.

“You don’t like doing everything in public do you? Some things are personal, and I’m a private person really.”

Chester, 50, smartphone by circumstance, Samsung S4

In summary, this project has identified and developed our understanding of a growing, and potentially vulnerable, group of consumers. They are vulnerable in their lack of understanding of mobile data use, which may lead to high or unexpected bills, or conversely to minimising use and narrowing their online capabilities. Such narrow use, and a lack of skills and accessibility generally, point to the need to address a potential continued digital divide.

REFERENCE

1 Ofcom (2016). ‘Smartphone by default’ internet users. bit.ly/29fARIY

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