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The Impact of Young People's Internet Use on Class Boundaries and Life Trajectories

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ABSTRACT

The article seeks to explore the significance of class membership among young people in the so-called internet age. Internet access and use in Britain has remained by and large concentrated in wealthier households, underlining, at an aggregate level, a clear link between individuals' socio-economic background and their use of the internet. A somewhat contradictory statement emerges, however, from recent claims made by techno-enthusiasts, and apparently young people themselves, about the existence of a digital generation. This generational label suggests that young people today are, irrespective of their background, growing up with a sense of digital expertise, where class boundaries have become obscured. The article discusses this apparent contradiction, based on a study of young internet users. The findings suggest that, while class boundaries can be affected by internet use, the impact of this use remains nonetheless short lived and unlikely to significantly impinge on young people's social mobility in the future.

KEY WORDS

class / internet / youth

Introduction

S ince the early 1990s UK government policies have advocated the importance of the internet in education, in reducing social exclusion, in bridging communities and in bringing equal opportunities to all, principles that have been reiterated in the government's recent digital strategy report

(see DTI/Strategy Unit, 2005). Although such a policy approach has been criticized for overstating the role of technology in determining or improving individuals' lives (Loader and Keeble, 2005), the goal of closing the digital divide remains important, since technological literacy and skills are unevenly distributed across socio-economic groups, and internet access and use, unlike mobile phones (Mori, 2005), have remained by and large concentrated in wealthier households in the UK (National Statistics, 2003). There is, at an aggregate level, a clear link between individuals' socio-economic background and their access to the internet, which is seen in the context of social policy design as reducing access to public services and having an adverse effect on the life chances, socialization, learning opportunities and career prospects of socially and economically disadvantaged groups (DTI/Strategy Unit, 2005). A somewhat contradictory statement emerges, however, from recent claims made by techno-enthusiasts (e.g. Tapscott, 1998), and apparently proudly by young people themselves (Livingstone and Bober, 2004: 8), about the existence of a digital or internet generation. This generational label suggests that young people today are, irrespective of their background, surrounded by digital and interactive technologies and growing up with a sense of digital expertise, especially compared to their parents who grew up with the 'passive' medium of television (Tapscott, 1998). Young people's digital expertise is certainly visible in the way they have led in the application of new technologies, such as text messaging (Ling and Yttri, 1999). Furthermore, young people are increasingly driving the content of the internet itself, and shaping the way information is shared and accessed. Indeed a recent poll for the *Guardian* (2005) newspaper found that nearly a third of young people aged 14–21 now have their own online content, mostly in the form of blogs and personal sites. The focus on young people as key users of technology is also undoubtedly associated with the fact that they are 'one of the most significant target markets for new media' (Buckingham, 2002: 79), resulting in more households with children having new technologies in their home, irrespective of their background (Buckingham, 2002: 79). The generational framework therefore calls into question and may even cast doubts on the existence of a digital divide, especially among the young, and potentially, too, on the perpetuation of this divide.

In order to understand whether or not young people's interaction with digital technologies will be sufficient to eradicate or even soften socio-economic divides within and beyond the internet, it is important to consider what impact young people's use of the internet has on class membership and on determining the opportunities afforded to individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds now and in the future. To this end, the article discusses findings of a study of young internet users, and considers the way in which differences in internet access and appropriation, at times rooted in socio-economic variables, remain, yet how also class boundaries can be affected by internet use. This

effect appears to remain nonetheless short-lived and unlikely to significantly impinge on young people's social mobility in the future.

It may be useful at this point to outline briefly how class is conceptualized in this article, and why. There is a certain difficulty in providing a stable or clearcut definition of class, not least because of its dynamic nature (Crompton, 1998; Woodin, 2005), and the changing relationship between classes and their outlooks and beliefs (Brooker, 1999; Jowell, 2000). These changes have been seen by some as a reflection of individualization, whereby individual actions have become less dependent on social class (Beck, 1992) than on the global networking of specific groups (Albrow, 1996; Castells, 1997). Others for their part have suggested that such changes mark the death of class (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Participation in these global networks and new social movements appears, however, to be largely confined to the middle classes (Betz, 1992). This, together with the 'visible landscape of class difference' (Lee and Wills, 1997: 95) which exists in Britain today, suggests that 'classes' might more appropriately be looked at as economic groups (Bottomore, 1991) around which the identities and cultures that are formed (Lawler, 2005) can be found in practices and accounts of practices (Savage, 2000). In other words, the use of occupational classifications is a helpful tool for exploring the significance of economic resources in defining use and non-use of the internet, and any group formation that exists through or independently of use. This is because these resources are also key to defining the 'cultural capital' imparted to young people (Savage and Egerton, 1997) and their participation in defined social and cultural sites, such as young people's schools or the neighbourhoods in which they live, thereby providing access to particular networks (Castells, 1997; MacDonald et al., 2005) and shaping their life trajectories.

The article starts by briefly reviewing the UK policy framework that has been applied to internet use in the youth context, and maps out the digital landscape in terms of in/exclusion in internet use and access. The second part draws on evidence from an empirical study of teenagers on the English south coast and seeks to demonstrate the complex ways in which internet use can indeed at a micro level soften class boundaries, yet is still often marked by differences based on individuals' socio-economic position, since the latter shapes opportunities, and thereby inclinations of use. Furthermore, data on the sample's predicted life trajectories would suggest that internet use might in fact have relatively little impact on what remain the stronger determinants of life chances, such as the education system and the inequalities it reinforces (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), lack of role models among marginalized groups, and class discrimination (Flecha, 1999; Jackson et al., 2005). It is suggested, therefore, that life trajectories are still strongly anchored in the opportunities afforded to young people and that these remain unequal even among a single age cohort, even if class identities might be affected temporarily by internet use, by allowing young people to have access to the same resources

and information or take part in similar activities and practices online, irrespective of their background.

The Socio-Economic Dimension of Digital Policies in the Youth Context

Access to the internet has been and continues to be unevenly distributed between lower and higher socio-economic groups in the UK (National Statistics, 2003). This situation has been a concern in government policy, as the internet is seen as vital to supporting learning, social inclusion, civic participation and democracy, and the UK's economic competitiveness (Selwyn, 2003). In the context of children and young people, this has led to an emphasis in policy design on the provision of digital resources, especially in schools. These efforts have been channelled mainly through the 'National Grid for Learning' strategy launched in 1997, and continued in the form of a package of funding initiatives under the umbrella of 'ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in Schools', and have included providing teachers with laptops, or ensuring that schools have internet connections and children receive basic training. This provision approach is, of course, justified by the fact that the unequal distribution of the internet can be attributed, in part at least, to the financial burden on poorer households of being online (Cawson and Lewis, 1999), and their lack of training, interest and confidence in the use of ICTs (Loader and Keeble, 2004; Warschauer, 2004). These policies have, however, tended to overestimate the equalizing impact of access on young people's lives, and have indeed often resulted in more qualitative digital divides. A recent review of government funding initiatives over the past five years concluded that despite the significant impact of the combined government initiatives, 'the gap between the best and worst ICT provision is unacceptably wide and increasing … [as] the quality, diversity and extent of pupils' experiences vary widely between schools' (Ofsted, 2004: 4). What is more, up until now, this focus on in-school provision has ignored the importance of home access on both quantity and quality of use, and thus in allowing students to really benefit from the internet for learning. Home access allows students to use the internet more and to access a broader range of content, since parents rarely impose stringent online content restrictions, which in schools often filter even legitimate content (Lawson and Comber, 2000).

Policies of access and provision do create opportunities of use, yet might be of limited use, in so far as they often neglect user support, interest and 'desire', all key to defining use (Silverstone, 1998) and in/exclusion beyond access (Loader and Keeble, 2004). This echoes the point made by Raymond Williams who noted that technological determinism fails to recognize how technologies and societies are interwoven, and the way in which technologies are 'constantly shaped by the social relations in which they enter' (1981). Use is socially shaped rather than purely technologically enabled, and can thereby remain strongly

socio-economically anchored through differences in opportunities of use, which can also be further influenced by individuals' inclinations. Public access and support sites, such as UK Online Centres, aimed at bridging the digital divide and often serving poorer neighbourhoods, illustrate how a technological emphasis is unlikely to succeed in reducing socio-economically rooted (digital) inequalities. These places have shown lower than expected levels of use (Loader and Keeble, 2004), for reasons ranging from the choice of venues in which centres are set up, to individuals' perceptions that ICTs are irrelevant to their needs and lifestyle.

In line with commercial stereotypes and popular myths (Lee, 2005; Selwyn, 2003), government policies and rhetoric have tended to assume a natural interest and aptness in the use of technology among the young. There is, of course, no denying that many young people are using the internet, and that it is increasingly becoming the technology of choice. Recent surveys seem to suggest, for instance, that teenagers are spending more time online now than using other media, especially for activities such as chatrooms, music downloads and music file sharing (Yahoo Finance, 2003). The key point, however, is that these statistics mask the other factors that might support or prevent use on the ground, and ignore therefore the 'social contexts' of use (Buckingham, 2002: 79). The construction of the young or of children as computer users, has, according to Selwyn (2003), been visible in political discourses over the past 20 years and has led to policies that have emphasized young people's technological ability and interest, encouraged use or conversely underlined the dangers of use. Selwyn identifies six themes in his analysis of ICT political discourses. The first is the natural child computer user, found in 'the early 1980s keyboard generation of the early Thatcher era replicated by the e-generation of the early 21st century Labour' (2003: 355). The second focuses more on the outcome of children's use of ICT, and underlines the perceived 'transformative capabilities of the use of IT when in the hands of children' (2003: 356), who thereby become successful child computer users. The third type of discursive narrative depicts an adult child computer user. Selwyn explains that in an educational context, a popular manifestation of this discourse has been the reversal of roles between teachers and pupils – 'with ignorant teachers having to learn from their far more adept students' (2003: 359). This high level of competency and interest can nonetheless become negatively stereotyped in the portrayal of the dangerous child: 'a child who is actively and aggressively using ICT at the ultimate risk of harming both themselves and others' (2003: 362), emblematized by the conception of the 'child computer addict'. Another theme Selwyn finds in political discourses on ICT relates to the 'victimized child computer user' who is positioned as 'an innocent user of technology who may be inadvertently exposed to undesirable violent or sexual material' (2003: 363). This theme is to an extent taken up in the sixth type of computer user, seen as 'needy'. Here the emphasis, however, is on children's lack of skills, and constructs 'children as learners and future learners' (2003: 364). It is interesting to note how these categories seemingly ignore specific issues around content aimed at children, and indeed

their use or rejection of it. As Buckingham points out: 'While parents are likely to invest in computers and software with educational benefits in mind, and while they often have access to good quality educational programmes, they are rarely used' (2002: 85).

Importantly, these techno-typological variations of the child do not appear, on the surface, to assume a particular socio-economic dimension to ICT use and non-use, although this is to an extent touched upon in the theme of the 'needy' child. Despite this ambivalence towards a socio-economic dimension to internet use, it has been shown that policies, especially those concerned with digital education, have emphasized the need to address unequal access, suggesting that it does remain an important barrier. As a result, important questions remain on the impact of being young on digital inclusion and socio-economic class membership now and in the future. This focus on digital inclusion as a form of social inclusion is seen as highly relevant since policy makers consider it to be an important socio-economic equalizer. In other words, I propose to consider how the internet might affect class boundaries and whether this could also translate into social mobility beyond school and internet use.

Class Membership in the Context of the Internet

The following sections present empirical data which reveal the complex ways in which young people's use of the internet can both reduce and harden socio-economic group differences. This is used to find out whether internet use and any class mobility it might afford impact on the life chances of young people from disadvantaged groups. The data are derived from a survey on internet access and use, carried out in four schools in the Brighton and Hove area, England, as well as a small number of in-depth interviews with heavier internet users, and participant observation to contextualize the schools. All data were collected between 2000 and 2001. In total, 398 pupils and students were randomly selected in five year groups (aged 13–19 years old), approximately half of whom were male (N = 197), to take part in the survey. Nine students seen as heavier internet users were identified in the course of the survey and took part in further in-depth discussions in order to understand in more detail the everyday life experiences of young people who used the internet most and for a variety of activities. The schools were selected with the aim of having comparable groups on the basis of age and gender. However, as the case study schools were strategically selected to represent different positions in the city's and the education system's social hierarchy, and to understand the interaction between young people's socio-economic background and their internet use (or non-use), stark differences were noted between the schools both in socio-economic and cultural terms. The schools selected consisted of one comprehensive secondary school (hereafter CSS), serving two council estates on the edge of the city, one private girls' school (PGS), renowned for attracting an international elite, one co-educational private school (CPS), which due to having been until recently a boys-only

school still has a disproportionate number of male pupils, many of whose parents live within a 50-mile radius of the school, and one sixth form college (SFC) lying in the city centre, which attracts students from the city itself and neighbouring towns and villages.

At the time of the study, there were in total 672 pupils at CSS, of which 40 percent were eligible for free school meals and the same proportion were on the Special Education Needs Register. Both these figures are far above the national averages and reflect the social and economic deprivation faced by many pupils at the school, who came from the neighbouring estates which are ranked among the 500 most deprived electoral wards in England. Their ambitions often seemed low and many leave this school without any career plans and become unemployed. The school itself appeared run down, and facilities, especially for ICT, were limited, as students only had access to the internet during their lessons. In contrast, students at PGS and CPS enjoyed a much more comfortable life, with what were clearly outstanding facilities and support for study, including ICT and extra-curricular activities. The pupils' ambitions were high, encouraged both by their parents and the standards set by the school, and commonly around 15 percent of these pupils go on to study at Oxford or Cambridge. SFC, for its part a much larger establishment with around 1200 students aged in the main between 16 and 19, had much more the feel of a university campus, as its students did not wear uniforms and were given much more freedom to come and go from the college as they pleased, or to smoke in designated areas. All SFC students have free unlimited access to the internet, though officially this is only for work purposes.

The socio-economic background of students attending the schools was explored during the survey, by asking respondents for details of their parents' occupation. This information was used to classify respondents into the social groupings A, B, C1, C2, D and E. This revealed that the majority of responses classifiable at PGS (100%, $N = 94$) and CPS (98.9%, $N = 95$) found students to be in groups AB. The concentrations were less marked at both SFC and CSS. The responses at SFC ($N = 79$) had a wider spread with 58 percent in AB, 39 percent in C1C2 and 3 percent in DE. At CSS ($N = 109$), 6.4 percent were in AB, 54.1 percent in C1C2 and 39.5 percent in DE.

The selection of cases from low and high socio-economic groups may seem at the outset to have a predetermined outcome since much is already known about inequalities of access, as noted in the introduction. However, far less is known about how this affects use and the use cultures created through particular (class-based) opportunities. Furthermore, statistics that point to a digital divide tell us little about what impact the internet does have on the lives of those young people from very different socio-economic backgrounds who do have similar levels or types of access and indeed use. It should be pointed out that the classification system used in this article is not seen as ideal in sociological research due to its imprecision, yet was deemed adequate in the context of this research, since respondents often had limited knowledge of their parents' occu-

pation and would have been in many instances unable to provide the level of detail recorded, for example, in national census data. Furthermore, a large part of the questionnaire explored processes of technological consumption for which this type of classification is seen as appropriate (Rose and O'Reilly, 1997: 171). This classification system is in any case used as a framework, rather than an end in itself, to explore the dynamic ways in which internet use can impact on individuals' apparent membership of, or top-down classification into, particular groupings. I argue that to understand young people's use of the internet, these groupings might become of greater analytical use if distinguished from two key prerequisites to use, which might or might not be related to individuals' socio-economic backgrounds, namely inclination and opportunity of use. Class membership is indeed believed to shape specific opportunities of use, and is at the same time associated with particular tastes and inclinations (Bourdieu, 1984), some of which may be shaped by the opportunities available to particular groups. These parameters of use, together with young people's life trajectories, are informative on the role of the internet in softening or hardening socio-economic divides in the so-called digital age, and on the relationship between class as a category to which individuals belong, and how this membership is acted out in real life situations.

The Role of Inclinations

As could be expected in light of the policies and initiatives discussed earlier, all respondents had at least basic access to the internet at school. All pupils, except one out of the 398 interviewed, had used the internet, and most, irrespective of their socio-economic background, did so on a relatively regular basis. Furthermore, most young people used the internet, even if to varying degrees, for similar activities, including schoolwork such as researching information for projects or using revision websites, communication-based activities such as email or chatrooms, searching for information on their personal interests, including sports and hobbies, or downloading music. The daily users usually explained their regular use in terms of enjoying using the internet for both leisure and work, while the weekly users, especially those in lower socio-economic groups, used it weekly during their IT lesson. Interestingly, it was found that despite the fact that certain groups had greater interest or access, other variables were also found to create differences within the group itself. Table 1 illustrates the point, by showing how rather than solely students' socio-economic profile, it is gender, and also to an extent a combination of gender and lower socio-economic status, which appears to impact on lower levels of use. It has been noted in a number of studies that girls do indeed have lower levels of use and access to technologies than boys, both in and out of school (Harding, 1997; Harris, 1999; McNamee, 1998; Roe and Muijis, 1998). This inequality is probably most visible in girls' and women's continuing under-representation in technology subjects and workplaces (Carter and Kirkup, 1990; Greenfield,

Table 1   Internet use frequency by socio-economic group and gender

		Daily	*Weekly*	*Monthly or less*	*Total (N)*
AB	M	42.6%	52.2%	4.9%	122
	F	62.2%	30.3%	7.6%	119
C1C2	M	25.6%	72.1%	2.3%	43
	F	12.8%	65.9%	21.3%	47
DE	M	19.0%	71.4%	9.5%	21
	F	8.3%	70.8%	20.8%	24

2002; McIlwee and Robinson, 1992). Yet, what the findings in Table 1 also suggest is that the significance of gender in relation to levels of use does vary in particular contexts, so that a gender variable alone may not predetermine certain technological uses (Cunningham, 1995; Thomas and Walkerdine, 2000). Use cultures may instead be established through individuals' 'social biographical situations' (Bakardjieva and Smith, 2001; Van Zoonen, 2002), an entanglement of factors, which include class, gender, family situation, and so on. There is an important question, however, on the extent to which these micro use cultures alter the 'bigger' picture of technological use, for instance by allowing girl gamers to gain access to the traditionally male territories of computer gaming, and IT work (Thomas and Walkerdine, 2000).

The results on levels of use could be interpreted as signalling that regularity of use itself represents an important variable in marking (new) social boundaries or sub-cultures, which might cut across groups. This was further evidenced by the fact that infrequent use was associated with more negative perceptions of the internet. When respondents were presented with pairs of words, such as interesting/boring, essential/non-essential or cool/nerdy, a smaller proportion of those who used the internet on a monthly basis or less thought that the internet was cool, interesting or essential, as presented in Table 2. Such differences were not necessarily observed when looking at results by gender or socio-economic background alone, pointing to a complex entanglement of factors that shape inclinations of use and use cultures. Indeed, when exploring this further in the interview data, it became apparent that young people from very different backgrounds who did have good access with few restrictions on use, such as parental control, did at times use the internet in similar ways especially for their schoolwork, to keep in touch with friends and family via email, to play games online or 'chat'. Interestingly, use was often influenced by guidance, support or encouragement from both teachers and parents, especially for schoolwork. However, such support was not systematically found across groups, and depended on key individuals, who are more often present in the lives of middle-class children (Sefton-Green, 1998). This might help explain differences in the favourite websites of the respondents found in Table 3, which shows a greater proportion of AB respondents favouring educational sites. Therefore, even though overall most young people use the internet frequently and even visit similar websites, either because they are youth relevant (such as pop band or

Table 2   Proportion of students who described the internet as cool, interesting and essential by frequency of use

	Cool	Interesting	Essential	Total (N)
Daily	91.7%	98.1%	59.2%	157
Weekly	90.5%	95.6%	49.5%	206
Monthly or less	76.5%	82.4%	29.4%	34

Table 3   Students' favourite websites by socio-economic group

	Communication	Music & entertainment	Sports & hobbies	Information & learning	Total (N)
AB	37.3%	20.5%	8.1%	34.1%	161
C1C2	8.8%	56.1%	15.8%	19.3%	57
DE	8.8%	52.9%	20.6%	17.7%	34

ringtone sites), or because they need to for their schoolwork, their preferences at an aggregate level do show variations which relate to their socio-economic position and the opportunities this membership creates.

The Role of Opportunities

Although internet use does in some instances appear to be defined by factors other than solely socio-economic background, it is clear that class membership was a strong determinant of digital inequality. The most visible inequality of digital opportunity both at home and at school could be found at the level of institutional provision and support, as well as when comparing home access by socio-economic group. Out-of-class availability was markedly better in the independent schools which provided open access IT rooms. Students at the comprehensive school in contrast often had few opportunities outside their weekly IT lessons to access the internet, and these students also had much lower levels of home access. Overall, as seen in Table 4, poorer households (most of them at the comprehensive school) were far less likely to have home access.

There were indications of some clear divides which reflected the concerns, but also opportunities available to individuals from different socio-economic groups, even perhaps the tastes that are appropriate for certain groups (Bourdieu, 1984), with more affluent parents reported using the internet for personal finance, most notably stocks and shares as well as real estate, whereas those in lower socio-economic groups were said to visit entertainment sites. This qualitative and socio-economically derived digital divide appeared to exist among students themselves, in part the result of the school they attended and the priorities and constraints within which the school needed to operate. More specifically, the comprehensive school, with truancy rates well above the

Table 4   Home access to the internet by socio-economic group

	Home Access	No Home Access	Total (N)
AB	92.5%	7.5%	241
C1C2	61.5%	38.5%	91
DE	33.3%	66.7%	45

national average, put much energy into trying to re-engage students, and to ensure, in common with other deprived schools, that 'their students pass the time as peacefully as possible while they try to teach them something' (Flecha, 1999: 76). This meant that CSS often had a more tolerant attitude towards the online activities of its students, whereas the independent schools applied stringent controls over what material could be accessed. Although CSS's strategies are successful in encouraging students to attend school in the first place, it does mean also that these students might be disadvantaged in comparison to their peers in private schools, where strong cultures of learning and academic achievement are reinforced. This divide, created through a stratified educational system, indeed resulted in proportionally more pupils in the lowest socio-economic groups than in the highest groups reporting using the internet at school to play games (30.3% AB versus 71.1% DE) or to download music (11.6% AB versus 48.9% DE), and less for reading the news (51.9% AB versus 8.9% DE). This also reflects, to an extent, the differences noted earlier in students' favourite websites.

Limitations in opportunities of use were, however, apparent in different forms across all socio-economic groups, and due to the strategies developed by young people to address these, contexts of use, duration and place tended to vary in line with class membership. As has been noted, the higher socio-economic groups tended to suffer more from strict internet monitoring and website barring within the school, resulting in higher levels of use at home, seldom regulated by parents, especially to access recreational websites. Among these groups, there were also sub-cultural formations within the school, based around students' ability to visit sites deemed unsuitable by the school. Those in lower socio-economic groups for their part often had limited access and support within and outside of school, so that they sought out alternative access points, resulting in more frequent use by low socio-economic groups at a friends' house. It is difficult to ascertain why this might be, although it is unlikely that these differences are simply to be explained by children in more affluent homes choosing not to spend time using media and technologies with friends, since they too sought to use the internet in groups when possible, especially at school. Having higher levels of home access, it is true that these children did not really need to use the internet at their friends' house. Yet, it might be that those in higher socio-economic groups did not use the internet there as often because they could not. In contrast to those young people in the lower

socio-economic groups who lived on two neighbouring council estates, these students lived often at some distance from their school friends, a situation caused by the private boarding schools they attended. Interestingly, therefore, the ways in which opportunities shape behaviour allows us to perhaps better understand the proposition made by Lawler (2005), that class is not something that we simply belong to, but also something that we do. These findings could also suggest that differences in behaviour are rooted in opportunities that are socio-economically anchored rather than in inclinations.

This more complex 'opportunity' rather than 'inclination' driven divide was also noted in the interviews, as the experiences of the heavier internet users who had home access did not always appear to vary widely between socio-economic groups, with all facing regulatory issues at home – from parents, in relation to cost, or negotiating use with siblings. In other words, as suggested by Warschauer (2004), all socio-economic groups suffer from constraints, so that the digital divide cannot simply be looked at as a bi-polar split. This redefinition of a digital divide which affects individuals from distinct backgrounds should not, however, be interpreted as a softening of socio-economic divides between teenagers in the UK through the use and appropriation of what is widely seen as an increasingly important technology in society, whether for communication, information or access to services. A plural digital divide does not mean that inequalities come in equal measure. Socio-economic background still plays an important role in shaping young people's access to and use of the internet, and this tends to disadvantage those from poorer families more.

The Impact on Life Trajectories

Beyond, and in many instances in spite of, their use of the internet, there are some real questions anyway as to the impact of the internet in altering the life chances of young people. The samples taken in each school suggest a lack of upward social mobility, especially for the poorer young people. The socio-economic status and educational attainment of parents continue to be strong determinants in shaping children's educational and career ambitions, as they are provided with material resources as well as cultural capital (Savage and Egerton, 1997). There are indeed both cultural and financial barriers in aspiring to higher education (George and Wilding, 1999; Gorard et al., 2006; Sargant and Aldridge, 2002). A lack of educational role models was certainly evident in the households of the poorest respondents, with lower levels of attainment by parents and of interest in the family's educational achievement by children, including many respondents not knowing when their parents left full-time education. This situation contrasts sharply with the cultures of achievement and excellence which are beamed at children from the wealthier families both within the home and at school. Perceived competence can thereby become engrained in the lives of young people through the very different priorities for students, teachers and parents from different backgrounds.

Table 5   Intention to pursue education by socio-economic group

	Yes	No	Total (N)
AB	97.9%	0.8%	238
C1C2	84.6%	14.3%	90
DE	71.1%	24.4%	43

Table 6   Students' future socio-economic group (SEG) based on career intentions, by current socio-economic group

Current SEG	Future SEG based on career intentions					Total (N)
	A	**B**	**C1**	**C2**	**D**	
A	72.3%	26.7%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%	101
B	45.3%	43.4%	7.5%	1.9%	1.9%	53
C1	3.7%	40.7%	44.4%	11.1%	0.0%	27
C2	2.3%	37.2%	32.6%	25.6%	2.3%	43
D	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%	15
E	0.0%	32.0%	20.0%	48.0%	0.0%	25

Educational goals among the respondents were found in the survey data to follow very much the path of the parents, and Table 5 shows how a greater proportion of students in the higher socio-economic groups reported intending to pursue their studies. Similarly, in terms of career choices, many students followed in the steps of their parents, and were often clearly set on careers which would offer limited class mobility. Students were asked details of their intended careers, and based on this information it was found that there was – at least in terms of their aspirations, as seen in Table 6 – an apparent link between the class in which the young people grew up and that which they were likely to be in, in the future, if they pursued the careers stated during the survey. There is some upward mobility for all in terms of career plans, yet the figures appear to show that the aspirations of AB respondents steer them towards mostly A careers, whereas the lower groups are aiming for B, C1 and C2 careers. Of course these findings do not predetermine individuals' future class positions, but might be seen as a useful indicator of students' intentions and choice of direction, which are believed to impact on careers (Garg et al., 2002). Undoubtedly the schools attended by students played an important part in shaping these aspirations, as the independent schools prided themselves on preparing their students for the top universities. However, it is also worth remembering that young people's home environment and the area they are growing up in do affect their outlook on life and attitudes. As one teacher at CSS explained: 'The children [here] use very bad language, but then you see at parents' meetings the parents use very bad language too. This is a difficult area.'

Within this cycle of class reproduction, it is difficult to see what impact use and access to the internet can really have. This is not to say that the digital divide does not matter. Quite to the contrary, those who do not have access to the resources and services are likely to be further disadvantaged, so addressing this issue remains an important social policy aim. At the same time, the data do appear to suggest serious limitations in the internet's ability to create equal opportunities for all.

Conclusion

The data from the school case studies reveal that socio-economic groups still matter in the internet age, since at a basic level imbalances between groups are found in terms of access, level of support and training, types of uses and use cultures, reflecting the impact and interrelationship between economic, cultural and social capital. Blurring boundaries between socio-economic groups, especially in relation to some young people's online activities or perceptions of the internet, are clearly limited in their impact. Even if and when activity formations resulting from internet use break down social boundaries, their significance is debatable, since they are perhaps little different from the collective identities which, although complex, are created through the medium of television (Drummond et al., 1993), differing mainly in how the technology is used or accessed (Browning, 1996). The result is a temporary and very limited flexibility in the class membership of young people. This flexibility is above all the result of a consumption process, which itself offers means of social mobility even if superficial and cultural rather than economic. Importantly, too, as the data described in this article suggest, class might not be a determinant of inclination or quality of use per se, but it does shape use because of the conditions in which different socio-economic groups act out their everyday lives, thus providing particular opportunities of use whether in quantitative or qualitative terms. Internet use therefore becomes inscribed with class through practices that may be related to inclinations and/or opportunities. Much of this is perpetuated and supported through our interpretation of class and its behaviour. The interaction of class defined as an economic group, and any distinctive form of behaviour associated with it at an aggregate level, results in those activities or actions coming to be located in class terms as, for example, middle or lower class.

For those instances where it is possible to see qualitatively similar patterns of use across groups, questions still need to be asked about their significance. In any case, the sharing of certain values or the acquisition of basic internet skills appears to be insufficient in making a real impact on the lives of disadvantaged groups. Educational background for one, both in relation to level of attainment and place of study, has become particularly important in the current climate of educational expansion, which weakens its impact on social mobility (Jackson et al., 2002). This underlines a need to question the impact and limitations of the provision of seemingly equal digital resources on class membership, and whether

a resource provision policy approach, even if still in some instances and at a basic level important, really translates into inclusion and class movements. The impact of the internet is indeed much more temporary and limited, and is unable to deal with the wider range of disadvantages suffered by young people from poorer backgrounds which need to be addressed alongside digital in/exclusion.

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