

## DiTV: Including the excluded?

*By Andrew Swartz, (first published 15 March 2004, UsabilityNews.com)*

About seven years ago I moved from urban California to semi-rural Yorkshire, where I promptly fell in with a group of avid amblers. It didn't take long to be seduced by the charms of the footpaths, and in no time I was experimenting with new routes and discovering how easy it was ... to get lost.

I would get intrigued by a glimpse of new lambs (not something you see a lot of in urban California) or diverted by a yellow burst of a flowering shrub, or sometimes by the ostentatious display of some ground bird that looks like a miniature peacock, which I think might have been a pheasant.

And once the pleasure and intrigue of the moment is past, I look up and discover that it's possible to know exactly where I am (just past the lambs and the gorse and ten feet away from the amazing plumage) and at the same time be completely lost – where is that pub that we were planning to meet at?

The same is true of my work. I work for a consultancy that studies the usability of websites and gadgets for big brands and large government entities, and am easily absorbed in the intricacies of beautiful new technologies, and the strange bits of human behaviours that such study uncovers. It's a great way to spend the work week.

But every once in a while I like to look up and see where I am on the larger map. Usability isn't always about navigation, orientation, font sizes, and which button should go where. Sometimes it's about who has access to the technology at all, who finds themselves excluded, and what effect this has on their lives. While I'm considering the data about why no one notices the Register button on a website, sometimes I try to remember that perhaps half the population is not likely to get on the web on a regular basis – no matter how much money or time it might save them, no matter how much they may need the information that's there.

And I'm certainly not the only one who thinks about this. Most of my colleagues in the usability profession seem to care about technological social exclusion, and the UK government spends a lot of time and attention on the issues as well.

The UK government, for example, would like to make the delivery of its online services more universally available. As an ideal, they would like to address the problems of social exclusion and the digital divide. And as a practicality, they would like to find less expensive and more efficient ways to deliver services.

This coincides well with the desires of the socially excluded who would like better sources of information, more efficient ways to interact with government agencies, and more dignified ways to claim benefits. For those who have mobility problems, including the disabled, the elderly, and those who cannot afford transit, online services could be a godsend.

At first glance, the web seems like a good medium for delivering online services to these communities, but it has become clear that there are practical problems limiting availability of the web for the socially excluded, at least as delivered over PCs. Internet uptake seems to be hitting a ceiling, levelling off at something under 60% of UK homes. The use of public internet kiosks and internet cafes has had limited success, as have attempts to put free or cheap PCs in the homes of the socially excluded.

Of course, there is another route for accessing online services – digital TV. The penetration of DiTV is going up and up, and the government is hoping that it will be nearly universal in the UK by the end of the decade. Could DiTV be the answer to delivering online services to the socially excluded?

This is a question that intrigued us. I asked some members of our group to study this problem. Marie Markowski led the project, and Ben Dawson collected most of the data, assisted by Gemma Wisdom. We mostly funded the project ourselves as part of our manager Owen Daly-Jones's corporate responsibility programme, and the Department for Work and Pensions also kindly provided funding and advice.

The researchers visited a range of socially excluded households in the London area, conducting lengthy interviews and asking the participants to try out some government-related tasks using their interactive TVs. It wasn't easy research – there is a significant level of distrust of government in these households, and perhaps a fear that they will not be treated with dignity and their views not taken seriously. But the results were intriguing, showing a great deal of promise and a long distance still to go.

### *Promising results*

The participants supported the basic proposition of delivering government services via DiTV. They do want to access government services online, and they feel that online services would be quicker to use, offer more complete information, and insulate them from human interactions that they feel are sometimes lacking in respect.

### *A long distance to go*

While DiTV has great promise for delivering government services to the socially excluded, it became clear that there is still a long way to go. There are five major issues to be addressed before DiTV can become a major tool in conquering the digital divide:

- **Awareness.** Participants in our study were impressed by even the limited amount of information that is already available, but none knew it existed until we showed it to them. One asked, 'Why wasn't I told about this before?'
- **Cost.** Accessing interactive information via Sky requires a phone call via a modem. This caused some concerns for the participants, who are all having to budget carefully.
- **Keyboard.** Filling out long forms was too difficult using a normal remote control and SMS-style text entry. Keyboards are essential. One user said, 'I wouldn't do it if there wasn't a keyboard.' Of course, this is not just a problem for the socially excluded. We find the same problem with other commercial DiTV research that we carried out.
- **Recordkeeping.** The participants felt they needed to keep detailed, accurate records of their communications with the government in order to protect themselves in case the information they submitted were to become lost. The DiTV systems in their homes had no way of printing or saving these records or obtaining receipts. This too is consistent with studies we have conducted of other groups who interact with the government, ranging from accountants to farmers.
- **Joined-up experience.** Some participants will use online services in conjunction with other services. They would like to be able to do research online and use what they find when dealing with government officials. This is similar to studies we have carried out with other complex interactions, ranging from insurance purchases to mobile- phone shopping. The more

government can integrate its online services with more traditional interactions, the more satisfied the users will be, and the less expensive it will be to deliver the services.

In short, DiTV is an enormously promising channel for the delivery of services to those who may otherwise be left out of the online world. Once we address some key issues, it will provide an important foundation for bridging the digital divide.

*If you are interested in more information on this research, or if you have data or stories of your own that you would like to share, please contact me at [andrew.swartz@serco.com](mailto:andrew.swartz@serco.com).*

### **About ExperienceLab**

ExperienceLab (formerly Serco Usability Services), are a global experience design research agency. They help organisations optimise their customer experiences, from web to TV and mobile, from advertising to physical environments. They've been doing this for a while, pretty much since the first computers and networks were created, so they know a thing or two about how to make people, processes and technologies work in harmony.

ExperienceLab use a wide range of techniques to tailor a research solution that fits your business objective, including ideation sessions, proposition analysis, customer needs mapping, usability testing, benchmarking and touch point integration studies. As a co-founder of the UXalliance we also provide research on a global scale.

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