

Opinion Technology

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The Guardian view on digital exclusion: online must not be the only option Editorial

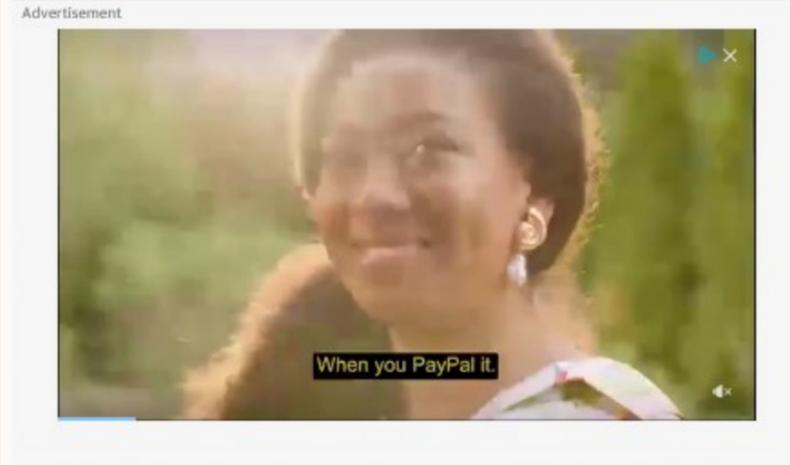
The interests of a significant minority are being neglected as everyday tasks are conducted via smartphones and tablets



'Technology should not be allowed to drive people to the side of their own lives, as anecdotal evidence suggests is increasingly the case.' Photograph: Lauren Hurley/PA

On the eve of this week's rail strikes, it was reported that industry bosses are planning to phase out paper train tickets and shut almost 1,000 station ticket offices in England. The government says nothing has been decided. But the transport secretary, Grant Shapps, has made no secret of his desire to see savings delivered in this way; some stations, Mr Shapps likes to point out, sell only a handful of tickets each week and the vast majority of transactions have moved online.

Irrespective of the outcome of the current standoff with the RMT union, the direction of travel is clear. In the name of modernisation and cost-cutting, station ticket offices are likely to follow many high street bank branches and rural post offices into the vaults of sepia-tinted memory. For those of us who have grown used to the advantages of organising travel via a smartphone, there will be little to mourn. But for people without online access or skills - who tend to be older, poorer and more vulnerable - another small social barrier will have been erected.



From GP appointments to payment apps for parking, more and more key services are now delivered digitally. Local councils, cash-strapped and in search of efficiency savings, are moving inexorably online in the way they do business. BT plans to phase out traditional landlines by 2025. As this revolution takes place, unjustified assumptions are being made about the ability of some users to cope. In the case of health and social care, it will often be those most in need of assistance who are least able to navigate a digital route to accessing it. A recent Ofcom report estimated that around 6% of households - 1.5m homes - have no internet access. Millions more of us remain irregular and unconfident users of the internet. As digital technology becomes the gatekeeper to swathes of everyday life - a process accelerated by the pandemic - a significant minority risks exclusion and isolation.

The inexorable shift online is inevitable, but its fallout needs to be managed with more care. Technology should not be allowed to drive people to the side of their own lives, as anecdotal evidence suggests is increasingly the case. Ros Altmann, the former pensions minister and Conservative peer, recently wrote of being contacted by an elderly woman who no longer drives to her local park, because she cannot download the car parking app required. As the sheer range and complexity of digital requirements expands, the desperate recruitment of middle-aged sons and daughters as unpaid consultants has become a phenomenon of our times. Meanwhile, the growing rarity of person-to-person interactions while making transactions - or just seeking advice and information - can exacerbate a sense of isolation among the lonely.

The debate over ticket offices offers an opportunity to reflect more broadly on the increasing role of technology in our social landscape. Clearly, much more needs to be invested in helping marginalised groups gain easy online access. But a diversity of provision also needs to be protected. Some people will never become comfortable using smartphones or tablets to get vital tasks done. Alternative and viable offline options must be maintained for important services. Contactable telephone numbers and staffed public access points should always be available. This will cost more. But that is the price of being fair to those who find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide.

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