Blind and partially sighted young people, social networking and technology

Authors: Rachel Hewett; Graeme Douglas; Adam Ramli and Sue Keil*

Aim

In recent years there has been an enormous growth in the use of both social networking websites (eg Facebook and MySpace) and mobile phones, particularly amongst teenagers. Indeed, given the convergence of technology in the form of smart phones, "post-PC" mobile technology is often used to access social networking sites. This research explores how young people with visual impairment (VI) are included in these developments.

Method

The research is part of a five-year longitudinal project which follows the transition journey of young people with VI as they move from compulsory education into FE, training and employment. 70 young people (15-17 years old) took part in a 30 minute telephone-based survey.

Key results

High levels of inclusion

Almost all (99 per cent) of the young people reported that they had access to the internet at home, and 87 per cent had access through their own computer. Similarly, almost all (99 per cent) had a mobile phone and three quarters reported having a "smart phone" (and commonly used it to access the internet). The majority (91 per cent) reported they had set up their own profile on a social networking site (Facebook was most common), and over half of these accessed their site every day, most commonly for social interaction with their friends (in keeping with general youth culture).
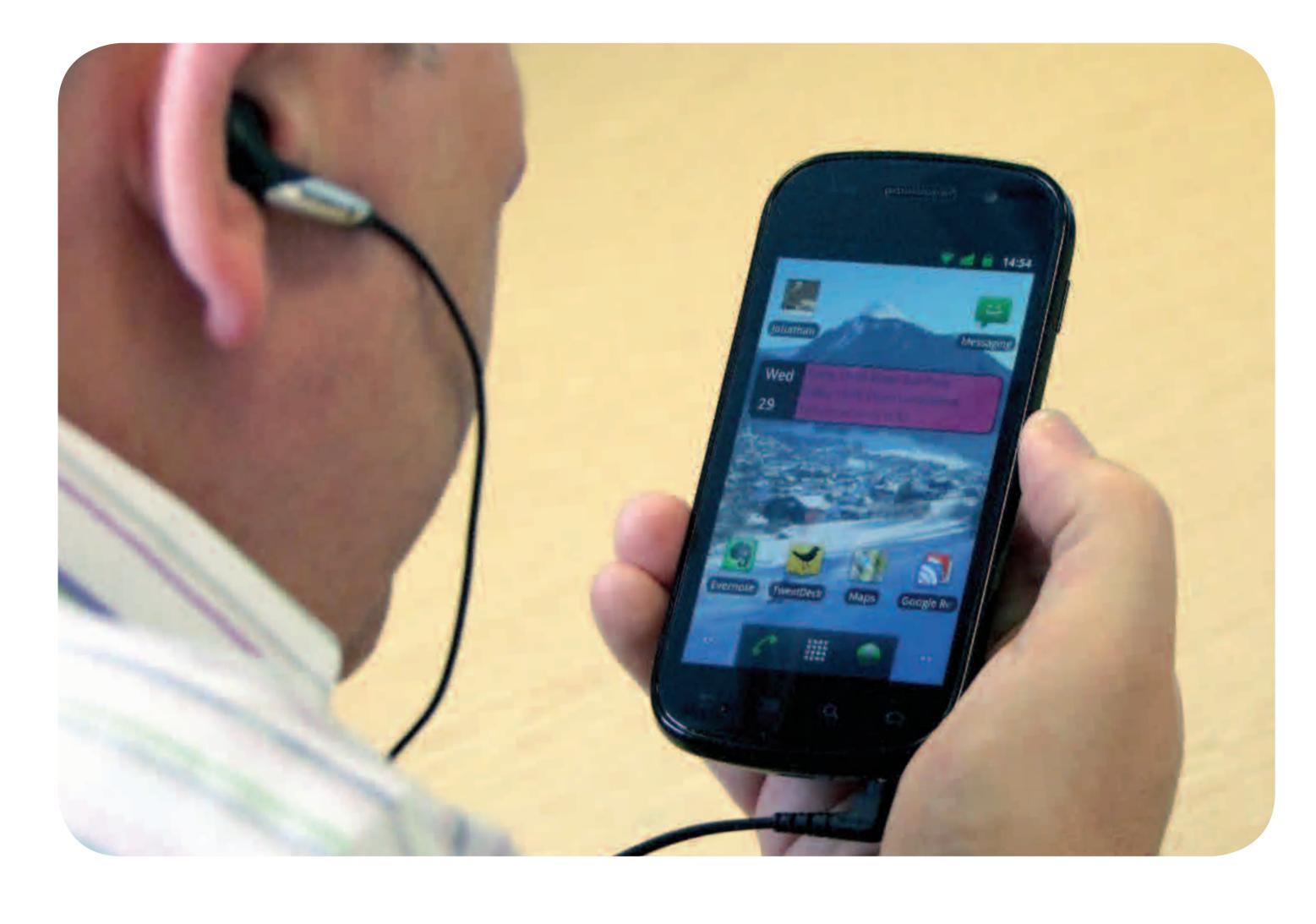
Some accessibility issues

Reports of accessibility difficulties were relatively rare and generally workarounds were found. Nevertheless, accessibility difficulties were most commonly reported amongst those with the most severe VI. There is evidence that some of the young people may not be fully aware of the accessibility options available on mobile phones which may mean that they are not using the technology in the optimum way or discounting phones which could suit them:

"Companies could release or publicise more accessibility tools."

Visual Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (VICTAR)
Department of Disability Inclusion and Special Needs (DISN)
School of Education
University of Birmingham
Birmingham B15 2TT

* Evidence and Service Impact Team
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
58-72 John Bright Street
Birmingham B1 1BN

Discussion

Independence skills

Independence skills are commonly identified as critical foundations for successful transition of young people with VI from education to adulthood (including employment). Literature commonly laments poor levels of independent curriculum access amongst this group (eg poor take-up of low vision aids and computer use in the classroom, and high reliance on enlarged print). This study provides evidence that many young people appear to be independently accessing information on their own terms for the purposes of social interaction and they are commonly using mainstream mobile technology. This is encouraging for the young people's transition journeys (in terms of social inclusion and independence).

Potential for curriculum access

There was evidence that many of the young people used mobile and social networking technologies in relation to their education – many described browsing college or university groups and networks; 80 per cent described communicating with friends about lessons and homework:

"Just like what's the homework and things – nothing important."

"Would discuss when assignments are due. If [I] need help, is very useful for getting in touch."

Given the range of functions many smart phones offer (eg large backlit screens, zoom functions, speech technology, camera facilities), this technology may also have more direct applications in the classroom for curriculum access (eg as a low vision aid).

RNIB supporting blind and partially sighted people

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM