

# Towards a digital health service?

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# TOWARDS A DIGITAL HEALTH SERVICE?

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## Why read this?

The proliferation of digital communications channels poses significant issues for public sector organisations – more so for the NHS than any other.

Huge investment in technological infrastructures is a high profile issue, but equally important is how patients themselves use digital media to interact with the health service. Digi-diagnosis is becoming commonplace (and poses its own set of problems as well as opportunities). Two-way digital dialogue between practitioners and patients is relatively uncommon. This is set to change with the advent of video-conferencing and other technical enablers that are becoming more readily used – but without doubt a robust NHS digital communications platform is still a way off.

This white paper gives a snapshot of emerging trends and usage of digital media in the healthcare arena. It is intended as a thought starter for those healthcare professionals looking to improve the way they communicate to their patients and their colleagues. We do hope that you find it useful.

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## Section 1 – Issues Addressed

### Digital communications

1. Demographics of online usage in all age groups
2. How do people use online communications and what information are they generally looking for?
3. The rise of digital usage
4. The Elderly and their use of online channels
5. Evidence from the Darzi Report

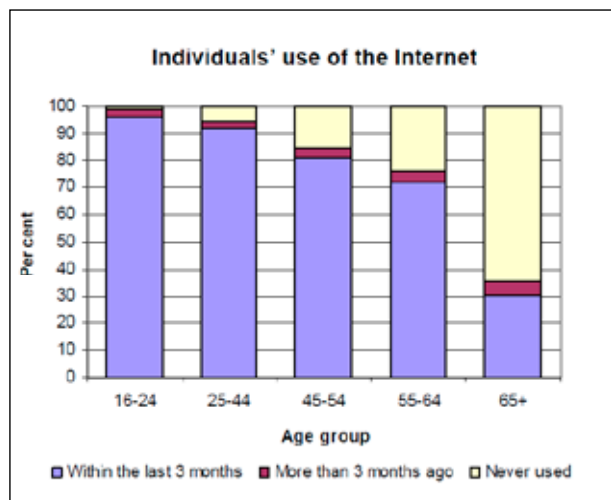
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## Section 2 - Digital Communications

### 1. Demographics of online usage in all age groups

In 2009, 37.4 million adults (76 % of the UK adult population) accessed the Internet in the three months prior to interview. This was an increase of 10.3 % (3.5 million adults) from 2008. Subsequently, the number of adults who had never accessed the Internet fell to 10.2 million adults (21 %) in 2009. There has been growth in Internet access by all age groups. Although the youngest age group (those aged 16-24) had the highest level of access, at 96 %, the largest increase in the proportion of those accessing the Internet was in the oldest age group (65 plus). Access by those aged 65 plus increased proportionally by 15 %, compared with an increase of 3 % for the 16-24 age groups. Men were 8 percentage points more likely to have accessed the Internet in the last three months than women (80 % compared with 72 %).

Fig 1.



The most popular activity for recent Internet users was sending and receiving emails, at 90 %. However, 2009 also saw a boom in social networking. 40 % of recent Internet users stated that they posted messages to chat sites, blogs and newsgroups (up from 20 % in 2008). There was an increase from 24 % to 40 % of recent Internet users who stated they upload created content.

The use of the Internet for online audiovisual activities also saw significant developments in 2009. An increasing number of broadcasters made their content available

to web viewers or listeners in 2009, highlighted by the 42 % of recent users listening to web radio or watching web television. This increased from 34 % in 2008. Telephoning over the Internet (or making video calls using webcams) was also a popular activity in 2009, with 21 % communicating over this medium.

Fig 2

Per cent	16-24	25-44	45-54	55-64	65+	All
Sending/receiving emails	94	92	88	86	82	90
Finding information about goods and services	84	83	80	81	75	78
Using services related to travel and accommodation	53	75	72	72	65	69
Internet banking	50	61	55	48	43	54
Reading or downloading online news, newspapers, magazines	48	58	52	47	44	52
Playing or downloading games, images, films or music	70	46	35	26	19	44
Listening to web radio or watching web TV	53	48	35	34	25	42
Seeking health related information	31	45	47	44	38	42
Uploading self created content	54	44	34	29	21	40
Posting messages to chat sites, blogs, newsgroups etc	71	45	25	19	..	40
Consulting the Internet with the purpose of learning	41	39	36	32	28	37
Looking for information about education, training or courses	53	38	36	21	15	36
Downloading software	48	39	31	25	25	36
Looking for a job or sending a job application	50	33	27	12	..	30
Telephoning over the Internet/video calls (via webcam)	25	23	19	19	13	21
Selling goods or services over the Internet	19	23	17	13	..	19
Doing an online course	..	9	10	..	..	8

Base: UK adults who accessed the Internet in the last three months

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/iahi0809.pdf>  
Office for National Statistics, Internet Access Households and Individuals, August 2009

### 2. How do people use online communications and what information are they generally looking for?

Looking for advice – research from the NHS Choices Annual Report 2009 suggests that 54% of visitors are using the site for medical information (similar usage to Net Doctor/Patient.co.uk).

NHS Choices, Annual Report, 2009

As part of Patient Choice, the trust sites will have to provide the following:

- Help find local services
- Give healthy living tips and campaign information, but with a local flavour and emphasis
- Communicate Darzi reforms like polyclinics, and the Choice agenda
- Engage, consult and listen to views and experiences, and publish feedback
- Make commissioning/providing PCT businesses invisible

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## 3. The rise of digital usage

The online health market – and particularly the NHS Choices Website has undergone rapid growth as more people gain access to and regularly use digital technology. The NHS choices website has over taken other leading health websites (patient.co.uk 4.8 % and Net Doctor 5.5%)

The site now achieves 7m site visits per month (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3

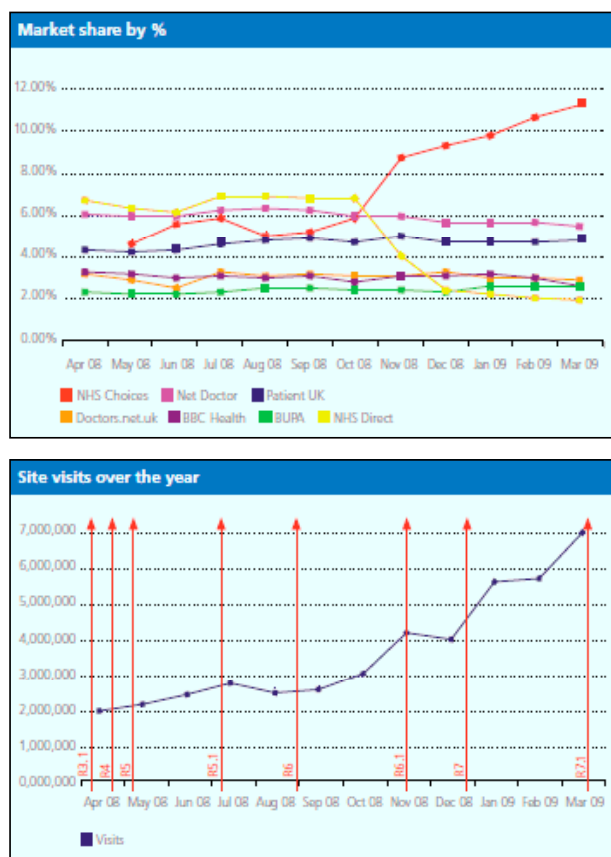
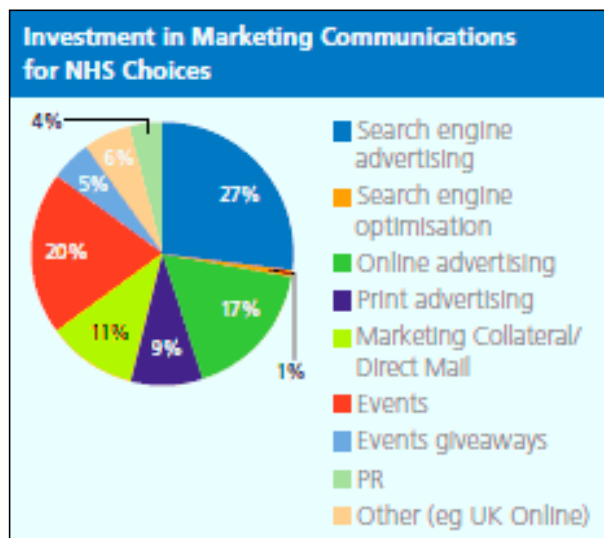


Fig. 4 shows that 50% of the total marketing communications budget for NHS Choices was invested in online activity – a combination between SEO, online advertising and search engine advertising, compared to only 9% on print advertising and 25% on community events.

Fig. 4



This investment into the online strategy brought 3.1 million impressions to the site and 10.6 million clicks. As this is the main site that Trusts will have to follow this gives a good gauge of the type of percentage investment Trusts should be allocating to online activity in order to promote themselves.

*NHS Choices, Annual Report, 2009*

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## 4. The Elderly and their use of online channels

There has been an increase of 15% of those over 65 using the internet between 2007 and 2008. This group were initially a surprise user of the internet and were named 'Silver Surfers'. Increasingly it will become more and more important for NHS Trusts and Local Councils to be able to contact their older members via the internet. Councils are preparing for this by holding internet classes for people over 65 in their areas – see Fig 3.

Fig. 3



have told them and discuss issues from an informed position. The challenge is ensuring that people are able to access reliable information. Evidence shows that clinicians have sometimes been slower in exploiting the potential of new information sources, such as the internet, than others. If that trend continues, there is a danger that people will have to navigate through myth and hearsay, rather than gain easy access to evidence-based medical knowledge.

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_085828.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_085828.pdf) High Quality Care for All Report, Professor the Lord Darzi of Denham KBE, Published date: 30 June 2008

## 5. Evidence from Darzi Report

### Challenge 3: Health in an age of information and connectivity

1. Across society, the internet has transformed our relationship with information. High-speed web access is found in millions of homes. By 2012, 74 % of UK homes are expected to have broadband internet access, transforming how people will seek and use information in their lives.
2. The implications for health and healthcare are profound. It is easier to access information on how to stay healthy than ever before. People are able to quickly and conveniently find information about treatment and diseases in a way that was not previously possible. They want and are able to engage with others online, sharing information and experiences. They want to do their own research, reflect on what their clinicians

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## CONCLUSION

Digital communication is becoming a reality that will continue to provide the NHS with challenges. It is unlikely that it will become a centralized remit, and will probably develop on an ad hoc basis as per individual organisations' needs and budgets. One significant challenge is how best to utilize this technology for the benefit of patient and health provider alike. Another is how to keep pace with not only the technology but the changing habits of people using it.

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# Appendix 1

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## Bibliography

- <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pfdir/iahi0809.pdf>  
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