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13 Minding the digital gap: why understanding digital inequality matters

Eszter Hargittai

A large body of literature exists looking at differential rates of Internet diffusion both across and within countries (e.g., see Billon *et al.*, 2009 for a review of the international comparative literature; and DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004 for a review of mainly US-based studies). An important shift in this work over the past decade has been the recognition that inequalities related to digital media¹ use will exist beyond mere issues of connectivity (e.g., Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004; Hargittai, 2002; Mossberger *et al.*, 2003; van Dijk, 2005). That is, even after people gain access to the Internet and cross the so-called digital divide, differences will remain in how they use the medium, namely, how skilled they are at it, how free they are to use it in different situations and toward what purposes they put it. Ultimately, the question for scholars of social stratification is whether the increasing diffusion of this new resource will exacerbate or lessen inequities across the population (Hargittai, 2008). But a concern about this matter should not be restricted to those specifically interested in matters of social inequality, given that differentiated adoption of various information and communication technologies has consequences for numerous areas of media studies.

Many of the questions being asked about whether or how digital media are changing our world and our lives assume universal outcomes across population segments. That is, regardless of the attributes of the actors under consideration (whether individuals, organizations, industries, etc.), many inquiries tend to assume that there is one overarching answer that applies to all cases. Questions such as 'What are the Internet's political effects?', 'Are digital media democratizing the public sphere?', 'How are new media changing cultural consumption?', 'What is the relationship between playing video games and one's health?', 'How do virtual worlds influence identity expression and development?', 'Are notions and expectations of privacy changing?' often disregard that the answers may not apply uniformly across different strata of the population. Such an overarching approach has little basis in empirical evidence yet continues to inform much scholarship and public debate. It is reflected both in questions being asked and methodologies employed to study them. By framing our approach to the study of digital media in such a way

– whether intentionally or not – work becomes deterministic, because it suggests that new media result in certain generalizable outcomes regardless of the particular contexts in which their uses are examined.

Take for example one of the questions from above: ‘Are digital media democratizing the public sphere?’ It would be wrong to assume that there is a response to this question that is universally applicable to everybody yet the way it is phrased suggests such expectations. It may be that for some segments of the population (i.e., those in more privileged positions), new opportunities offered by information and communication technologies (or ICTs) are having a democratizing effect by allowing easier access to participation in public debates. However, it may be that for some segments of the population, new media have made little difference. If the overall conclusion we then draw is that ‘yes, digital media are democratizing the public sphere’, based on the fact that we find positive associations for *particular* population segments (i.e., the already privileged) then we are ignoring the situation of those who are seeing no such outcomes and walking away with a mistaken conclusion. Indeed, by offering different opportunities to different groups, ICTs may be *increasing* inequalities on the whole.

In order to produce findings that represent a diverse set of users, investigations must take a more careful approach to the study of ICTs than is currently often the case. Of course, plenty of scholarship over the decades has suggested the importance of taking nuanced approaches to the study of media’s social, political, economic and cultural implications both in the realm of traditional media (e.g., Cook *et al.*, 1975; Liebes and Katz, 1993; Morley, 1980; Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974) and ICTs (see many of the citations later in this chapter). It is important to recognize that some work does take more refined approaches and learn from such projects. Nonetheless, many ongoing questions and debates about digital media ignore such refined approaches and thus an explicit consideration of this matter seems warranted. Although the particular focus here is on questions of social inequality as related to digital media uses, the overall argument advocates recognizing and staying conscious of differentiated ICT uses in all areas of inquiry about digital media usage if we are to avoid overly simplistic approaches to the study of their social, political, economic and cultural implications.

Since the mid-1990s, there has been widespread recognition of the fact that ICTs are not spreading equally across the population, whether in an international or national context. Some work has considered this inequality at the global level (e.g., Hargittai, 1999; Norris, 2001; Ono and Zavodny, 2007; Wilson, 2004), while much other research has focused on inequities within national borders (e.g., Bimber, 2000; Bucy, 2000; Compaine, 2001; National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 1995). Initial investigations – most widely known under the term ‘digital divide’ – simply asked who had access to the Internet and who did not, or who was using it at all versus who was not. Subsequent

work introduced more refined approaches by considering differentiated uses (e.g., Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Bonfadelli, 2002; DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004; Howard *et al.*, 2001; Jackson *et al.*, 2008; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Norris, 2001; van Dijk 2005; Wilson, 2000) also expanding investigations to other technologies such as mobile and gaming devices (e.g., Lenhart *et al.*, 2008; Rice and Katz, 2003). While variation in basic usage rates continues to exist and consequently remains an important area of inquiry (Jones and Fox, 2009; Zhang *et al.*, 2008), the goal here is to focus on refined studies of digital inequality, that is, differences that remain among users even after we control for basic access and usage.

The term ‘digital inequality’ is an alternative to the more widely-used ‘digital divide’ and serves to highlight that inequality cannot simply be seen as a dichotomous notion when it comes to ICT usage (DiMaggio *et al.*, 2004). Rather, it is essential to acknowledge and incorporate into our studies the diverse aspects of inequality – especially differentiated contexts of usage and variation in skills – related to digital media uses if we are to have a realistic understanding of the many diverse ways in which people are incorporating new media into their lives across population groups. Beyond arguing that these are important considerations for scholars primarily focused on the study of social stratification, the goal here is to emphasize that the reality of digital inequality – at this point documented by sufficient empirical evidence to be accepted as reality (e.g., DiMaggio and Bonikowski, 2008; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007; Zillien and Hargittai, 2009) – should be of concern to and be considered by investigators focusing on other areas of inquiry as well. Research in numerous domains needs to be conscious of – and when possible should avoid – assumptions about the universality of processes being examined. And while it is not possible to include these considerations front-and-centre in every project, they need to be at least part of the discussions enumerating the more general implications of findings.

What are the nuanced approaches to understanding ICT usage beyond access? They concern both the technical and the social contexts in which people engage with digital media. Related to these is an additional important factor: people’s level of skill with ICTs. These then all in turn influence how people incorporate digital media into their lives (i.e., their types of uses), which can range from the mundane to the serious with different potential implications for beneficial (or in some cases problematic) outcomes in people’s lives.

The mix of one’s technical resources and social circumstances regarding ICT usage results in a context that will be more or less optimal for various types of digital media usage and will influence the extent to which a user is likely to engage with digital media in the most advantageous ways. Not surprisingly, better technical resources are likely to be more supportive of diverse uses than outdated equipment and slow connections. Access to more advanced hardware is likely to benefit the user when trying to

access websites using state-of-the-art technology. Additionally, easy access to equipment (e.g., computers one does not have to share with many other household members) as well as lack of monitoring (whether technical or social) is likely to lead to more freedom in using the Internet, resulting in more exploration, more advanced skills and more diverse uses (e.g., Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; Hassani, 2006; Lim, 2009; Zillien and Hargittai, 2009).

Although less research has focused on the social context of people's Internet uses, there is some evidence that people rely on their networks to navigate the Web (Frohlich and Kraut, 2003; Kiesler *et al.*, 2000). Not surprisingly, it helps to have people nearby who know how to troubleshoot issues that come up during one's online activities. Moreover, beyond situations involving specific problems, a user can also benefit from know-how passed along informally in everyday life from those in one's networks. In sum, both technical and social aspects of a user's environment influence whether the particular usage context will enable or constrain one's ICT uses.

An important aspect of people's digital media uses that has been shown to be unequally distributed across the population concerns people's skills in using information and communication technologies (Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai, 2002; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2009). While many online actions may seem trivial to the experienced user, most online activities require some level of know-how, which is why skill is an essential factor to understanding how people incorporate ICTs into their lives. Consider the need to access support networks when one runs into a situation requiring assistance. Even if one lacks knowledgeable people in one's surroundings, one may be able to draw on helpful advice from online sources. However, recognizing that such support is available on the Web and being able to find it and tap into it effectively requires a certain level of skill that is not uniformly distributed among people.

In a different vein, a certain level of know-how is important in order to sidestep potential negative consequences of Internet use. While in some circles it may be baffling that anyone would fall for scams such as those coming in through emails promising instant access to millions of dollars from far-away lands, indeed there are people out there who respond to such messages and suffer the consequences (Hinde, 2002). While fraud of this type is certainly not restricted to the Internet age, the low cost of email and ease of access to mailing lists has made their proliferation quicker. Such phenomena can have problematic consequences for those not savvy enough to hunt down information that would make them rethink their responses to such solicitations. Consequently, while online skills can improve the ways in which people take advantage of their Internet uses, they can also help prevent people from engaging in potentially risky online behaviour.

Many users also lack skills that limit the extent to which they can benefit from their usage optimally. From knowing how best to handle large

volumes of email or send a message to someone maximizing chances for a response (Bunz, 2004; van Dijk, 2005), to appreciating what material is available online and being able to find it efficiently (e.g., Eastin and LaRose, 2000; Hargittai, 2002; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2009); from knowing how to contribute to online content production (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Jenkins *et al.*, 2006), to knowing where and how to find relevant contacts; from having the ability to evaluate content credibility (e.g., Metzger, 2007) to being vigilant about privacy and security concerns and also recognizing one's legal rights in the online environment (Palfrey *et al.*, 2009), informed uses of digital media rely on many important skills (Hargittai, 2007). The factors enumerated earlier – the technical and social contexts of usage – all influence users' online abilities and what they are able to accomplish using digital media.

Antecedent to all of these factors, however, is the social position that a user inhabits. Figure 13.1 presents a graphical representation of the relationships between the factors enumerated in this piece. One's demographic characteristics and socio-economic background are likely to influence the technical and social contexts of usage in addition to one's skills. These all, in turn, have implications for how one uses information and communication technologies. Finally, usage feeds back into additional skills leading to a potentially reinforcing effect.

Prevalent in popular accounts of digital media use is the assumption that young people are universally savvy with information and

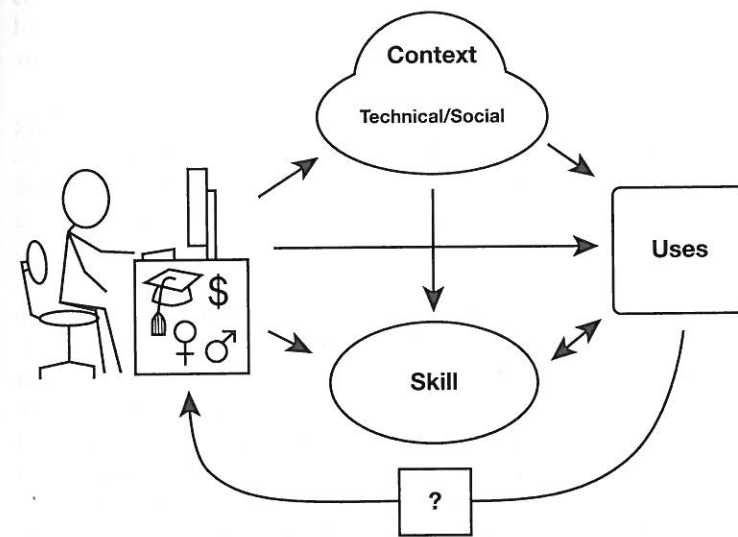


Figure 13.1 The relationship of factors that influence people's ICT uses and their implications for people's social status and well-being

communication technologies (Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1998). However, as critiques of that perspective have pointed out, such approaches tend to lack empirical evidence (Bennett *et al.*, 2008). Although the majority of youth are now online in many countries and thus access differences (i.e., the so-called 'digital divide') are no longer the main barrier to benefiting from digital media for this particular segment of the population, know-how and actual uses exhibit considerable differences even among universally wired youth (e.g., many cohorts at American universities). Far from being randomly distributed, online skills and uses vary by socio-economic status suggesting that rather than meeting its potential to level the playing field, the Internet may be contributing to increasing social inequality (Hargittai, 2010).

Take, for example, a group of over one thousand students in the first-year cohort of an urban public university in the midwestern United States surveyed about their Web uses in 2007. When asked to rate their level of understanding, on a five-point scale, of such Internet-related items as 'reload', 'advanced search' and 'bookmark', most suggested that they had anywhere from a good to full understanding of what these terms mean. However, asked to rate their level of understanding of terms like 'RSS' and 'social bookmarking', most indicated that they have anywhere from no to little understanding of the items. These same questions were posed to the 2009 first-year cohort at this same university and while average knowledge of the more recent Web terms had gone up slightly (at the level of the hundredth decimal point for the group as a whole), for the most part the results were consistent with those from two years earlier. While most students understand terms that have been around for over a decade, many remain unaware of more recent Web functionalities despite those having been around for several years themselves.

In addition to affording more and more opportunities for finding diverse types of content, an important aspect of recent Web developments concerns increasing opportunities for people to contribute to online materials and conversations themselves (e.g., Benkler, 2006). Research on youth has suggested that many are indeed taking part in such activities online (Ito *et al.*, 2009; Jenkins *et al.*, 2006; Palfrey and Gasser, 2008; Resnick, 2007). The question remains, however, to what extent these types of engagement are widespread. Based on the same cohort of first-year college students surveyed in 2009 mentioned above, findings suggest that active participation is quite limited even among a group of highly wired young adults. For example, less than half of the group indicated contributions to sites through writing reviews or voting on content posted by others. Moreover, such engagement is not randomly distributed across the group. Rather, those from more privileged backgrounds (i.e., students whose parents have higher levels of education) report taking part in such activities considerably more than those from less educated families. Work on the data from the 2007 study found that students also differ in the

extent to which they are sharing content they create online (Hargittai and Walejko 2008). Results such as these suggest caution when interpreting the outcome of any study that does not represent the online behaviour of a wide range of users. Returning to the example mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, while data on students who contribute to online content and conversation may suggest that ICTs are democratizing the public sphere, considering data about the participation of a wide range of students makes the answer less obvious.

Disparities in people's ICT abilities and uses have the potential to augment social inequalities rather than lessen them. Those who know how to navigate the Web's vast landscape and how to use digital media to address their needs can reap significant benefits from their uses while those who lack skills in these domains will miss out on opportunities. The Matthew Effect – 'unto every one that hath shall be given' – introduced by Robert Merton (Merton, 1979: 445) to sociological investigations applies well to this domain like many others. Findings from this emerging field suggest that initial advantages translate into increasing returns over time for the digitally connected and digitally skilled (DiMaggio and Bonikowski, 2008). The implications of these findings are far from limited to work focused on questions of social stratification. Rather, investigations across all domains of digital media research must remain conscious of this fact if they are to avoid incorrect generalizations of findings across all population segments concerning the social, political, economic and cultural implications of ICTs.

Note

- 1 I use 'digital media' and 'information and communication technologies' interchangeably to refer mainly to the Internet, but also the use of mobile and other devices (e.g., games).

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