"Afterword: Why Digital Inclusion Now?"

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The Persistence of Inclusion

Globally the diffusion, uses, implications of digital technology continues to deepen and broaden, and we can see many ways in which these socio-technical transformations are being registered, and imagined.

For instance, statistics on Internet and mobile phones are widely used as key indicators of social progress and participation, from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to the United Nations Social Development Goals (SDGs), and beyond. Online communities, the World Wide Web, blogs, mobile apps, chat and messaging technologies, and social media platforms receive considerable attention for their role in creating and sustaining social identities and relations. Cultural and linguistic implications of digital technologies are widely debated, and are the subject of particular design, implementation, and technology work in their own right. New directions in technologies, such as the "sharing economy" platforms, driverless cars, the Internet of Things, algorithms, and artificial intelligence (AI) are widely dissected and debated for their part in supporting new communicative, informational, economic, political, and relationship architectures.

As we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century, around the world researchers, governments and policymakers, civil society, businesses, scientists, engineers and technologists, and various institutions and sectors are devoting focussed attention to very different situations faced by different groups, individuals, and interests in their societies when it comes to digital technology.

Amidst the clamour of the new, we recall that digital technologies have important long and short-run histories, and the question of the digital surfaced particularly in the 1990s. This was also the rough timeframe when the problematic of the "digital divide" surfaced. Critiqued remorselessly from its inception, surprisingly the digital divide has proven resilient and flexible — as a "good enough" label of convenience for researchers and policymakers concerned to understand and advance the set of concerns it has come to represent. At the International Communication Association (ICA) annual conference, the Partnership for Progress on the Digital Divide has typically organized a pre-conference, steadily more international each passing year. The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) has a dedicated Digital Divide Working Group (https://iamcr.org/s-wg/working-group/DID). So, while issuing ritual declaimers on the shortcomings of digital divide as a concept, those with common concern tend to see out and find each other regardless.s

Two decades or so after the first wave of interest in digital divide, and over a decade since benchmark research, research, policy, and initiative continues. In the present scene, it is striking that the longstanding term "inclusion" has come to the fore (not for the first time)

as a widely referenced way to address new forms of inequality, exclusion, injustice, and lack of diversity.

Like the digital divide, *social* inclusion stretches back to at least the 1970s and 1980s, with particular interest growing in Europe and the UK (Australian Government, 2008; Armstrong, 2010). A high water mark was the Blair government's establishment of a Social Exclusion Unit in 1997 (UK Government, 2004), as well as creation of various social inclusion initiatives around the world. Mark Warschauer turned to social inclusion as a useful way to reframe and reorient discussion of the digital divide in his 2003 book. In a way that remains relevant some fifteen years on, Warschauer, citing Manuel Castells (1997), suggested that "one could argue that the concept of social inclusion reflects particularly well the imperatives of the current information era, in which issues of identity, language, social participation, community, and civil society have come to the fore" (Warschauer, 2003, p. 9). At this time also, digital inclusion gained in prominence as as a way to provide a focus on the digital dimensions of social inclusion, while finessing the limitations of the digital divide (Helsper, 2008, pp. 22ff; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Selwyn & Facer, 2007).

A decade later, there has been a resurgence of interest in digital inclusion (Park, 2017; Robinson et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2014), including an effort to propose a digital inclusion index (Thomas et al., 2017). So: why digital inclusion, now? What are its uses, why is it becoming the handy ready reckoner or moniker for the new frontiers and struggles over social justice and inequality in relation to emerging technology? This is the high-stakes scene that this *Digital Inclusion* volume addresses.

What Digital Inclusion Offers

In the opening chapter, "Digital Inclusion: Empowering People Through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)", the editors, Massimo Ragnedda and Bruce Mutsvairo, helpfully lay out the imperatives that underlie digital inclusion, the multi-dimensional dynamics it entails, and the expanding domains it compromises. Against this backdrop, they posit the need for international and comparative work in this area as the key aim of this volume. As such this is a further instalment in the important reconsideration and fortalization of digital inequality research that Ragnedda, and collaborators, have provided us across various works (Ragnedda, 2017; Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013 and 2017) What emerges from the following chapters is a powerful and rich illustration of the yield of such research.

In the first place, the book puts the international coordinates of digital inclusion firmly on the agenda. If nothing else, it has become plain in the past decade that digital technologies are woven into complex global, regional, and local societies, infrastructures, cultures, and environments. While this volume leads with digital inclusion in advanced countries (Europe, US, Australia), this is only one quadrant of three other sprawling, diverse, and equally contested and variegated groups (BRICS, Middle East, and Africa), to which could be added various other regions. It is telling that South Africa is grouped with Brazil and China, as part of BRICS — and that Africa is the focus of another section, featuring Cameroon and Ghana, and also providing a critical reprise of one of the darlings of the techno-boosterist set, Kenya (celebrated for its incubation of mobile payment technology, m-pesa, and the citizen journalism crowdsourcing platform, Ushadi).

As it turns out, the "advanced countries" are a mix of "have-less" and excluded groups and contexts also. As Massimo Ragnedda shows us in chapter 2, across different parts of Europe, we find considerable differences in Internet access, use, literacy, and implications of digital inequalities. As Ragnedda notes, there have been notable advances in bridging the first level of the digital divide (access to and entry-level membership into the digital realm), as well as the second level (skills, literacy) and third level (social and economic benefits deriving from effective use) of the digital divide. However, especially with the later phases of improving digital participation, we can find that digital inequalities give way to "new forms of marginalization or digital discrimination" that further exacerbate "disparities and inequalities within advanced countries" (Ragnedda). Other challenges come into view as part of gaining a comprehensive picture of the large canvas of the social inequalities forged with digitalization — especially the many layers of social inclusion, brought about due to the complexities of digital ecosystems, but also the forced reliance for all members of society on digital technologies, platforms, knowledge, and skills for achieving full participation.

This scenario of the enlistment of citizens and non-citizens alike into digital societies is something that is sketched out further by Sue Malta and Ralene Wilding in "Not So Ubiquitous" (chapter 3), their rich account of digital inclusion and older people in the Australia context. As well as charting the diverse lives and situations of older people, depending on gender, age, health, income, geographical location (especially rural and remote versus metropolitan) as well as the politics and realities for members of particular groups or designations (indigenous people, for instance), Malta and Wilding especially underscore the burden for older people of inexorable changes to policy and service landscapes — think of "digital government", for instance — that require mastery of digital technologies. Against the neoliberal and other kinds of politics of digital "inclusion", we find richly indicated in the various contributions to this volume the kinds of everyday appropriation, uses, and innovation of technology that often goes under the policy and research radar.

These concerns are powerfully put on the agenda in Bianca Reisdorf and Colin Rhinesmith's account of digital inclusion research in the U.S. context (chapter 2), in which they argue for an "asset-based approach" to digital inclusion. That is, instead of taking a negative approach to communities reductively framed as marginalized or excluded (sometimes termed as "deficit" approach), Reisdorf and Rhinesmith argue for approaches adequate to proper understanding of people's encounters with technology, that can affirmatively identify the resources they might offer for promoting digital inclusion. In their chapter, racially coded stratification emerges, once again, as a key, difficult-to-address, "intersectional" factor in digital inequalities. They discuss how community assets have been utilized in U.S. policy to address digital exclusion, through programs on low-cost broadband, digital literacy training, public access computing (not least through the crucial, and still underrated roles of libraries).

Just as the imperatives digital inclusion have grown, and the consequences of forms of exclusion mounted, so too have the complexities users are engaging with, as technological development takes new directions. We see this clearly in from the emergent dynamics in South Africa discussed by Lorenzo Dalvit (chapter 4) and Brazil and elsewhere, analysed by Andrea Limberto (chapter 5). With the advent of the "more-mobile" Internet, in many countries, but especially in the global south, digital inclusion necessitates close

examination of the new ecologies users encounter. Dalvit evocatively conceptualizes these as "fluencies" — digital, device, network, and social and emotional. These fluencies are woven into the issues of digital proficiency, appropriation, and dependency. One important issue that is raised specifically here is language, where speakers of isiXhosa in the rural locale Dalvit studies, are trying to master devices, software, and protocols that assume English. Again, we see here the uneven and challenging process of "localization" of technology into different languages, especially in the face of rapid technology change.

In Limberto's discussion of Whatsapp in Brazil, we find another excellent case study of the new realities of digital inclusion for what is a crucial technology in many countries now. Here we see users piecing together coverage and access via patchy Wi-Fi, as well as mobile networks. Such infrastructural "making-do" is salient emerges in Norbert Wildermuth's study of digital divides in Kenya (chapter 12). In such contributions, we see demonstrated the importance of close study of the worlds of users, and how it is necessary to "follow" users as they traverse private and commercial as well as public networks and institutions. Such research connecting the dots remains vital, given service provision and public policy too often still tends to be fragmented — as well as not giving sufficient emphasis or development to how to develop and deploy particular resources (such as WiFi, libraries, or the capabilities and resources of communities and users themselves).

An important issue for wider consideration that arises from various contributions is the role of neglected populations when it comes to digital inclusion. One of these are immigrants, whose forms and contexts vary widely — but for whom social inclusion is often fraught, and for whom digital inclusion is very much a precarious accomplishment. In Israel, for instance, Schetjer et al.'s chapter charts the distinct issues for the different generations of Jewish immigrants (with the non-immigrant Palestinians) still at a lower level of digital inclusion even in comparison to first generation Jewish immigrations). The massive waves of Syrian refugees arriving in Jordan since 2011 put particular strains on the digital inclusion programmes studied in Hanna Kreitem's rich study (chapter 8).

In addition to the important insights that this volume adds to the new agenda for digital inclusion research and policy, there are important reminders about the need to take a long view — and the crucial lessons such an evolutionary view has to offer. Jianbin Jin and colleagues study of the longitudinal trajectories of China's digital divide, from 1997, 2001, and especially 2011-2016 (chapter 60, is an exemplary account — that should inspire other such efforts across various other countries. It charts the progress made (in terms of diminution of the geographical divide between urban and rural settings, for instance), yet issues persisting (such as the access divide being displaced by the "usage" divide). Add to which new complex and dynamic scenarios have emerged, associated with the innovations in applications and changes in infrastructure. Importantly, Jin and co-authors point to the disparate in the online of commercial transactions, where thresholds to participation would appear to be higher than in other areas (such as information). The great value of a sophisticated "macro" or general perspective is also amply demonstrated in Amit Schetjer, Orit Ben-Harush, and Noam Tirosh's consideration of the persistence of digital exclusion in Israel from 2002-2013. Schetjer and his co-author take up and expand van Dijk's dynamic digital exclusion model and rethink it via a fascinating discussion of the various cleavages in Israeli society (national, ethnic, political, religious observance, and class). Here also we find highlighted the highly significant role that such multifaceted dynamics play in digital inclusion.

The Right and Wrong Sides of Digital Inclusion

Overall, then, this volume provides important advances in research and conceptualisation of digital inclusion and digital divides. In many ways, it shows the strong, consequential and damaging relationships between forms of exclusion associated with digital technologies, and broader patterns of social inequality. In ways that still require consideration and debate, the studies show the powerful yet often subtle contribution of digital inclusion to the *constitution* and *perpetuation of* social exclusion. Add to which, the volume offers a wealth of evidence for the persistence, over long periods of time, of digital exclusion. All in all, I can see why digital inclusion remains a key concept in this area, and a surprisingly productive one.

Across all the contributions, it does appear digital inclusion does offer a more capacious framework for identifying and puzzling out the issues in inequalities posed by technology. Perhaps the lack of clarity still concerning inclusion is part of its continuing usefulness. Digital inclusion might be vague — but it still gestures towards the imperative to address social inequality and injustice. As the studies show, there is enduring, indeed greater, relevance of work in this area — which is often questioned from those who feel that hang wringing over digital inclusion is increasing irrelevance in a world of digital plenitude (and so markets, crowds, and others will sort divides out), or from those who feel that the main game in addressing inequality is about squarely focussing on the "first order" issues of income, education, work, and social disparities (rather than "second order" digital technology issues).

With the development, synthesis, and push for greater conceptualization, rigour, and ambition in the research agenda and programmes in the areas of digital inclusion, divides, and inequality to which the editors have made an important contribution, we can see clearly where work is urgently needed. There are understudied groups and locations; there are longstanding issues that have been given some attention — gender, race, and class, come to mind (and I would add disability as well, among various other issues) — but remain often in the background, lacking the conceptual and empirical attention, so need to be put front-and-centre;

Crucially, there are the new frontiers of digital inclusion, across data, automation, mobilities, next generation Internet and mobile technologies, where concerns and being articulated, and calls for research and debate being voiced (e.g. Eubanks, 2017). Here technology companies, policymakers, civil society, and communities themselves are turning to digital inclusion as a "rough guide" to navigating emerging landscapes of technology, promise, and inequality.

In this sense, digital inclusion can fulfil the aspiration articulated in the sub-title of this volume — being on the "right side" of the digital divide, and advancing social participation in relation to the relations of these important contemporary technologies. That said, this is a good point to bring back into the problems that inclusion carries: Who or what is included, and who or what is excluded? What are the terms of inclusion, and its power relations? Do we have to be included? What does the enlistment into digital technologies, as new nodes of power, governance, and control, entail? (Bollmer, 2016). All difficult and necessary questions that need to be raised as an integral part of digital inclusion research, if it is to go to the next level of development — as a critical resource for

understanding and negotiating the worlds of technologies being imagined, made, and contested.

Acknowledgement

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