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Max Weber and Digital Divide Studies

Introduction

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Seminal sociologist Max Weber rarely wrote about media dynamics; however, the Weberian perspective offers rich potential for the analysis of various media issues, including the study of digital divides. In particular, the contribution of a Weberian school of thought to the field seems to be the addition of noneconomic and nontechnical concerns to the study of digital inequalities, most notably the importance of status and legitimacy and group affiliations and political relations as areas of focus. This piece introduces the Special Section on Max Weber and digital divide studies and clarifies the inspiration behind it. It briefly presents the article contributions, while summarizing their arguments, and offers a broad discussion of Weber's relevance to digital divide studies as a way of understanding the individual articles as a shared intellectual effort.

Keywords: digital divide, digital inequality, Max Weber, social stratification

Much of the literature on stratification in the digital sphere (i.e., on digital divides and digital inequalities) has focused on the fundamental material and technical inequalities present in the digital domain (e.g., see the following scholars for discussion of the limitations of first-level digital divide studies: Castells, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; Stanley, 2003; van Dijk, 2005). More recently, others have examined the role that digital skills (or digital literacy) play in inclusion and exclusion from the digital sphere (e.g., see the following scholars for discussion of second-level digital divides: Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; van Dijk, 2013; van Deursen & van Dijk 2013). One area that needs scholarly attention is the exploration of theoretical approaches to study digital inequalities and their connections to the social sphere. To broaden the scope, the articles in this Special Section of *International Journal of Communication* draw on the

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sociology of Max Weber to formulate new perspectives on stratification in the digital sphere. The manuscripts collected add to the small body of existing studies linking Weber's ideas to the digital divide, a connection first suggested by Witte and Mannon (2010) and subsequently developed in Ragnedda and Muschert (2013), especially in chapters by Wessels (2013); Mesch, Talmud, and Kolobov (2013); and Alzouma (2013). However, this Special Section enters into the *field* (in the Bourdieusian sense) of digital divide studies as the first collection of scholarship to focus exclusively on the relevance of Max Weber's theory of social stratification to digital divide studies.

Engaging the sociology of Max Weber brings with it the potential for examination of new dimensions of digital sociology. The result is a hefty scholarly exchange regarding how social stratification in the digital age is reproduced not only by class dynamics (economic aspects) but also by status and prestige (cultural aspects) and group affiliations (sociopolitical aspects). Indeed, the idea of this Special Section is to investigate how online activities and digital skills and participation vary according to crucial sociological dimensions in order to explain these in concrete terms in relation to the dynamics of social class, status, and power. To this end, we have invited contributors to explore the importance of status and political influence in a digital society, allowing for the exploration of such topics as occupational prestige in digital participation (or exclusion) and the influence of group affiliations (political or otherwise) upon digital divides. Each article can stand on its own, but we also encourage the reader to understand these pieces as contributions to a shared effort to understand less technical, less economic (and thus more social) aspects of digital inequalities.

How else to promote such an endeavor than by revisiting aspects of Max Weber's sociology? There is a need to investigate digital divides in relation to dynamics of social class (lifestyle and culture), social status (prestige and market influence), and power (political impact and legitimacy)—all concepts well analyzed by Max Weber. On April 21, 2014, the 150th anniversary of Max Weber's birth, we launched the call for participation in this special section. The intention was to pay homage to this seminal scholar and to further explore how the Weberian perspective remains valuable to the study of contemporary phenomena such as digital divides. Exploring the Weberian approach makes it possible to elucidate the roles of status and prestige hierarchies in digital participation, the influence of worldview (*Weltanschauung*) on digital participation, and the role of digital participation on individual and group life chances. More specifically, we have chosen the Weberian approach because it provides an understanding of inclusion and exclusion that goes beyond a narrower class-based analysis. This is, of course, not intended to denigrate the contributions of Marxist and neo-Marxist scholarship to digital divide studies; instead, a Weberian approach may add additional complexity to the Marxist approach for which economy and class conflict are the foundations of social life. Weber was "critically respectful" (Collins, 1986, p. 37) of the Marxist idea, and he proposed to move past this oversimplification by exploring multidimensional aspects of inequality and the complexity of sociological processes (Bendix, 1962). While the relevance of class cannot be denied, a nuanced approach to stratification in digital contexts might also include aspects related to the differential rewards experienced by groups and individuals in such areas as market influence, political power, and social status and prestige.

As in "real life," social stratification in the digital sphere is the result of this complex interplay of three factors: Each society exhibits inequalities among individuals and groups, giving rise to social strata

in the practice of social relations, and inequalities present in the social structures are not presumably disconnected from the digital inequalities present in the digital sphere (Helsper, 2012; van Dijk, 2005). Thus, digital and social inequalities must by definition be deeply intertwined. Bonfadelli (2002), for instance, argues that previous social inequalities not only affect digital divides but exacerbate pre-existing social inequalities. Furthermore, several patterns that characterize and shape social structures, such as education, skills, income, occupation, and gender, influence access to and use of the Internet (Rice & Katz, 2003; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2013). However, the picture is more complicated, and more dynamics play a role here. Indeed, this is not a simple matter of social inequalities already existing in society being reproduced and reinforced online; it is more a matter of a recurring cycle between social and digital inequalities. Namely, social inequalities are the root of digital inequalities, seen as the different skills for using information sources and the opportunities, that are the major cause of digital divides (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Selwyn, 2004; Smith & Curtain, 1997); at the same time, digital divides increase and reinforce social inequalities already present in a stratified social sphere.

This sort of nuance and complexity is precisely why Weber's perspectives on stratification are essential to understanding contemporary dynamics observed in digital spheres. The key distinctions Weber identified about inequality continue to be relevant in a digital age, although we have barely scratched the surface of what may be analytically possible to explore via this train of thought. Of course, much more remains to be done and further investigation is necessary, but this Special Section is the first step in this direction, initiating a scholarly discussion of the importance of status and prestige and group affiliation in relation to digital inequalities. Each of the articles that follow offers fresh insight into the connections between social and digital inequalities.

The first article, "Examining Internet Use Through a Weberian Lens," by Grant Blank and Darja Groselj, provides a theoretical discussion of Weber's notion of stratification, which is further tested by empirical analysis. Based on survey data collected from 1,396 adult Internet users from England, Scotland, and Wales, the authors examine proxy variables for Weber's notions of class, status, and party, ultimately analyzing the relationship between these factors and respondents' amount and variety of Internet use. Although all Internet users are hypothetically able to practice such use as they choose, analysis indicates that all three of Weber's aspects of stratification are generally significantly associated patterns of Internet use. As the discussion develops, the authors highlight a nuanced view of the effect of the Weberian dimensions, as the status and power dimensions seem more related to aspects of use that enhance social capital (participation in formal, bureaucratic, and large-scale social institutions). That is, those of higher status and power seem more likely to use the Internet more extensively and in various ways to enhance their social positions. Alternately, dimensions of class seem more salient in their influence on informal participation, such as through social media sites, blogs, and infotainment, such that those with higher class positions are, on average, more likely to use the Internet for gossip, rumor, and informal discourse.

The second article, "'Middle Classes' Under Transformation in a Digitizing World," by Dimitar Blagoev, examines the uses of digital technologies by members of middle classes to enhance their life chances. Such a discussion examines the interrelations between the tendency for social relations to migrate or expand in the digital sphere and the fundamental aspects of Weber's notions of class and life

chances. From a sociohistorical perspective, this nuanced discussion traces the development of both the network society and class relations. In expanding the network of social relations, digital technologies offer new opportunities for the enhancement of life chances, especially (as the author posits) for members of the middle class. Among these dynamics, one identifies two trends: First, middle classes are integrated in a globalizing process of information sharing, especially with regard to class identity and consumption. Second, the members of the middle class may feel encumbered by the global reach of the social network, which can stimulate the counter trend for local action (as termed *glocality*).

In the next article, "Authentication, Status, and Power in a Digitally Organized Society," Bridgette Wessels explores the increasing salience of status and group affiliation structured through digital networks. This theoretical discussion is integrated with—and supported by—an empirical community study of a former coal-mining town in the United Kingdom. In such post-industrial economies in transition (or, some might argue, decay), many individuals occupy tenuous class positions. However, this article also clarifies the connections between digital inclusion or exclusion and one's social status and group affiliations. This is set against a backdrop of national policy since the mid-1990s, which has increasingly transferred public services into digital portals, which in turn, in many cases, has led to constrained access to services provided through nondigital channels. The article clearly demonstrates that status is created or maintained by information contained in one's online dossiers in relevant databases. Those who are "thin filed," meaning that they lack sufficient information in their database profiles, are at great risk of losing status and power, as they may be denied access to public services and participation, financial services, and other forms of participation in the economy, society, and politics.

Last, the Special Section concludes with the article, "A Weberian Analysis of Global Digital Divides," by Ralph Schroeder. This piece uses Weber's writing on technology to offer a perspective on the ability of the media (both traditional and new forms) to shape the relations between elite classes and non-elite masses. The discussion is undergirded by a comparative view of four nations: China, India, Sweden, and the United States, with the focus on both the cultural and the political aspects of media content. The article concludes that cultural aspects of media are rather less dominated by elites than is the political sphere. Although participation in the consumer-oriented culture benefits elites, who tend to profit most from mass consumption, non-elite groups seem to have greater access to bottom-up platforms offering them greater opportunities for cultural expression (as a whole). In contrast, it seems that the elite classes maintain a stronger hold on political media, although this iteration of the imbalance varies by nation.

Overall, this Special Section offers a finely crafted, nuanced, theoretical discussion of Max Weber's theory of stratification and its applications for contemporary debates on digital divides. It is our hope that this section and its constituent articles will stimulate thinking about the future of digital divide studies for a multifaceted discussion of stratification in the digital sphere that will ultimately contribute to both academic and policy debates on the subject.

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