Gender Inclusion in the Information Society

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INTRODUCTION

Strategies of Inclusion Gender and the Information Society (SIGIS) was a European study exploring initiatives to include more women in the information society.[1] This article summarises its main conclusions. The work started from the premise that overall more women than men are excluded from the information society, both as users and as designers of new information and communications technologies (ICTs). Our literature review (Sørensen & Stewart, 2002) confirmed that there is still a gender gap in terms of ownership of some ICT products and, to a lesser extent, in terms of access and use. Gender cuts across other dynamics in the digital divide—income, occupation and age being generally more significant than gender—with other factors (e.g., ethnic minorities, lone parent families) also intervening. Although the trend with respect to the use of ICT products is one of a closing gender gap, it is clear that diffusion alone is not sufficient to close the gap all together; inclusion efforts are still warranted in this area. By contrast, the literature review revealed a persistent and sizeable gender gap within computer specialisms and professions designing ICTs. The proportion of women entering computer science and engineering courses in most countries is static or in decline, in spite of sustained inclusion efforts. So, the overall picture across Europe is a contradictory one: optimistic with respect to what we call women *and* ICT (users), and pessimistic with respect to women *in* ICT (professionals).

BACKGROUND

The SIGIS project involved case studies of different types of inclusion strategies, backed up by a sizeable cross-cutting analysis (Faulkner, 2004; Rommes, van Slooten, van Oost, & Oudshoorn, 2004; Sørensen 2004). We investigated 30 different public and private sector initiatives which included women in the design or use of ICT (Lie & Sørensen, 2003; MacKeough & Preston, 2004); a further 18 "user studies" solicited end user experiences of selected strategies (Oudshoorn, Rommes, & van Slooten, 2003). These initiatives covered a range of everyday settings: school and university education in ICT, basic and vocational ICT training for socially excluded groups, support networks for professional women in ICT sectors, and the design of new ICT products for female markets. Some of the inclusion strategies were targeted at women while others were intended "for everybody," but all were successful to some degree. The SIGIS project therefore reveals that gender inclusion in the information society can occur through various strategies.

SOME GENERAL FEATURES OF DIGITAL INCLUSION

The so-called digital divide is typically seen as being produced through processes of exclusion, often related to entrenched social inequalities. Our starting point in the SIGIS project was that inclusion is not "just" a mirror image of exclusion. Stopping exclusion is not the same as achieving inclusion. So, inclusion activities should not "just" be directed at curbing exclusion mechanisms; they should also use explicitly positive measures. Too strong a focus on exclusion mechanisms may make inclusion seem impossible. Thus, our main interest has been on inclusion as a social process in its own right.

This said, there are several obvious areas in which mechanisms of digital exclusion need to be

addressed through inclusion measures. First of these is *resources*. Statistical evidence on the digital divide reminds us that some people are digitally excluded because they are poor. The community-based ICT initiatives we studied confirm that resource barriers to digital inclusion can only be overcome through the provision of free access to and training in ICT, including free childcare where appropriate. Second, people must acquire *skills and knowledge* in using ICTs if they are to participate in the information society at any level. Less obviously, SIGIS cases reveal that informal learning (see below) is a vital feature of how people acquire ICT competence, even when they receive formal training. Third, *confidence building* and ICT skill building often go hand in hand; so confidence-building measures are key ingredients for success in ICT training. Fourth, diverse strategies confirm the importance of finding ICT applications or content *relevant to people's lives*. It is what the technology can do that makes ICT interesting to people—be it pursuing an existing hobby on the Internet, or communicating with distant family by e-mail. Many ICT trainers fail to appreciate this and teach ICT as "merely skills," rather than foregrounding the uses of ICT.

Making ICTs relevant can result in a process we have called *self-inclusion*. A dramatic example of this is the Lupus Web site, which provides information and advice to people (mostly women) who suffer from a rare auto-immune disease. Through its forums and chat rooms, these women developed a vibrant virtual community, providing mutual solidarity and support in learning about and living with this disease (Fortunati, 2004a). Similarly, all the Web magazines we studied succeeded in turning many women readers with no prior experience of the Internet into enthusiastic users, by addressing topics like health and fashion found in conventional women's magazines.

In sum, because digital exclusion is multi-dimensional, inclusion strategies (gender or otherwise) generally require a *heterogeneous* package of measures—heterogeneous in the sense of extending well beyond just making technology available. This simple but crucial message is still not fully grasped in some policy circles.

CHALLENGING GENDER BINARIES AND ESSENTIALISMS

Essentialist and binary understandings of femininity and masculinity (see definitions) are remarkably pervasive and tenacious. However, people's accounts of themselves are typically far more gender differentiated than their actual practices. For example, girl participants in a Norwegian computer party are seen (and see themselves) as "just users" or "chatterers," where the boys are described as "programmers" and "games players." Yet they are all skilful and enthusiastic users, and most do all of these things.

Across all of the inclusion strategies studied, the SIGIS team found a profound tension between embracing gender differentiated stereotypes and challenging them—not least because of the tendency for perceptions of gender difference to be exaggerated. On the one hand, drawing on gender essentialisms and binaries (although simplifying) can be effective in engaging otherwise excluded groups of women—as occurred with the Web magazines. On the other hand, strategies that draw on gender binaries and essentialisms risk exacerbating gender inequality, by ghettoising or stereotyping women. As we demonstrate later in relation to ICT product design, strategies that start from *plural* understandings of gender can be more inclusive.

Another effective strategy is to combine any appeal to gender stereotypes with efforts to move beyond or "destabilise" some of those stereotypes. This strategy was pursued by designers of the Web magazines, "Donna Moderna" in Italy and "Libelle" in the Netherlands (Fortunati, 2004b; MacKeough & Preston, 2004). They started from the "lowest common denominator" assumption that "women are computer reticent or incompetent and need user-friendly interfaces." At the same time, however, they made concerted and creative efforts to help their customers gain ICT skills—by creating interactive discussion sites and virtual communities for readers to learn through. These Web magazines are women-centred in the sense that they speak to "the modern woman," and so encourage self-inclusion by creating the motivation and opportunity for readers

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