Chapter XXXII
Social Capital and the Gendering of Differential IT Use

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INTRODUCTION

Public information technology, as a term, implicitly suggests universal access by citizens to information through the use of technology. The concepts of social capital and the digital divide intersect in access to public information technology. Social inclusion or exclusion occurs as a consequence of the ways in which societies are stratified according to race, gender, (dis)ability, ethnicity and class. This chapter focuses on one aspect of stratification, gender and theorizes the gendering of differential access and use of information technologies. An understanding of gendered participation relevant to access to public information technology within the policy contexts for electronic government and social inclusion is important to inform public information technology policy, and service planning and delivery that are premised on the notion of universal access.

BACKGROUND

Social capital is a multi-dimensional concept being applied in public policy for social services, health, crime prevention, and education for improved health and well-being resulting from social connectedness and local/state government participation (Baum, 2000; Wilkinson, 1996). There is no absolute definition but, broadly defined, and based on Bourdieu's perspective (1986), it refers to the resources that accrue to individuals from their participation in social networks—social capital being a symbolic or intangible resource present in social life along with material resources. Putnam's (1993) perspective extends social capital to a society level resource built from neighborhood community and civic participation by citizens. It is argued that information and communications technology (ICT) that enables social networking and civic participation, includes access to public information services, facilitates the development of social capital for individuals and communities (Phipps, 2000).

The opposite of social connectedness is the social isolation or marginalization of individuals and groups. While there are benefits resulting from the use of ICT in the delivery of government services, including ready access to public health information, there is also an amplification of inequality—producing a new societal divide—the 'digital divide' (Loader, 1998; Norris, 2000, 2001; NTIA, 1995, 1998). The digital divide can

be considered as a metaphor for social exclusion relevant to public information access and use or, specifically, exclusion from infrastructure and services to which people have rights as citizens in a democratic, information-enabled society. Social inclusion or exclusion is a contemporary social policy theme specifically evident in the policies of British and Australian labor governments. For example, the labor government policies of the South Australia Government (2002) and the United Kingdom (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998, 2005) for social inclusion/exclusion aim to improve social connectedness, civic participation and community engagement in public service planning and decision-making and to improve government service delivery by 'joined-up' approaches.

Gender is an important social category to consider when exploring the barriers and opportunities for access to universal IT services. Social sciences scholars have demonstrated that gender and technology are intricately linked given that the design and use of IT is gendered (Bryant, 2003; Cockburn & First-Dillic, 1994; Webster, 1995). These perspectives involve understanding "technological innovation as being complete only once the technology is in use" (Cockburn & First-Dillic, 1994, p. 514). In other words, the design and application of IT occur in the context of existing gender relations and therefore access to and use of public information technology will be gendered.

THEORISING THE GENDERING OF DIFFERENTIAL ACCESS AND USE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The development of knowledge about gender and technology design and use shows two opposing arguments recurring among feminists (Bryant, 2003). The first, stemming from second-wave feminism, is based on a strand of eco-feminism that claims a special bond between nature and women. This argument emphasizes that both nature and women are dominated by technology, capitalism and industrial development (e.g., Merchant, 1980).

However this perspective which assumes a special bond between nature and women (e.g., Mies & Shiva, 1997) has been criticized for its essentialist view of women (e.g., Kemp & Squire, 1997). Similarly, technological deterministic arguments have been used to suggest that masculine science and technology dominate women's use and access to IT (e.g., Webster, 1995a, 1995b). Further explanations for whether men or women used IT in the workplace and accessed public information has tended to reproduce essentialist and binary arguments about men's dominance of technology and women's connection to nature (Bryant, 2003). Indeed in the context of empirical data these arguments are problematic. For example, Sadie Plant (1997, p. 37) has demonstrated that women historically have worked closely with computers. She explains:

...when computers were real machines women wrote the software on which they ran...Hardware, software...before their beginnings and beyond their ends, women have been the simulators, assemblers, and programmers of the digital machine.

Nevertheless, Plant shows that while women have not been absent from technological work they remain underrepresented in decision-making and design positions of new technologies. Consequently, it could be suggested that Plant's argument demonstrates that gender and technology are not explicable with regard to women's lack of interest in technology or male technological prowess but are implicated in gendered dynamics associated with global economies and therefore power and change.

TRENDS AND FUTURE IMPLICAITONS FOR A CONTINUING IT GENDER GAP

Thus, following Cockburn and First-Dillic, the theoretical position taken in this chapter is that the design and use of technology occur within existing gender relations and it is these which need to be explored in specific contexts to understand

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