

Chapter 29

From Inclusive Spaces to Inclusionary Texts: How E-Participation Can Help Overcome Social Exclusion

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ABSTRACT

This account explores the use of ICT to overcome social exclusion by means of eParticipation initiatives in two spheres-health promotion and local democratic participation. They offer a contrast in terms of how we think about inclusion because the intended outcomes of their e-enablement may differ. Their construction as private or public goods affects the scope for intermediaries to act as agents of digital inclusion. In eHealth, digital inclusion is often a recruitment issue, since online discussion serves as a meeting-place where people provide mutual support to others who are co-present, whereas in local eDemocracy, inclusion is a representation issue, since online discussion is a narrative, reflecting on the political life of a territorial community. As a textual Internet is more amenable to intermediation than a spatial Internet, the possibilities for deploying ICT for social inclusion were enhanced when members of the eHealth virtual community began to 'publicise' the discursive goods they produced, which became translatable into community health benefits via intermediation and channel integration.

INTRODUCTION

It is often stated that digital inclusion or eInclusion is, or is becoming, a prerequisite for social inclusion. For example, Castells wrote that in the network society “to be switched off is to be sentenced to marginality” (2001, p.277). The Digital Inclusion Panel set up by the Office of the e-Envoy in the

UK reported that “As digital communications and transactions become commonplace in many areas of daily life, people who are digitally engaged will more likely be socially engaged, and vice versa.” (Office of the e-Envoy, 2004, p.34) Although there is little or no longitudinal research to demonstrate a causal relationship between digital and social inclusion (Helsper, 2008, p.17), similar assumptions are frequently internalised by users and non-users of the Internet alike, in terms of a general sense

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that not ‘having’ the Internet means ‘being left out’ or ‘missing out’. On the other hand they are implicitly challenged by the attitudes of other non-users, particularly those who have ‘dropped out’ of Internet usage not on cost grounds but stating ‘lack of interest’ or ‘no need’ to use information and communication technologies (ICT) and the Internet (Lenhart et al, 2003). Some people, that is to say, have tried the Internet, and their subjective experience is that without it they are not ‘missing out’ on anything of great significance to their lives.

The argument in this chapter questions the logic of a simple equation between digital exclusion and social exclusion, pointing to the need to qualify what it means to be ‘switched on’, ‘wired up’ or ‘digitally engaged’ in the information society. We need to remember that these are socio-technical rather than merely technological concepts, and we also need to examine critically the nature of the intended benefits of ICT use. Firstly, if we are concerned with “benefits realisation” rather than access and use, intermediation becomes a possibility for reaching the ‘digitally unengaged’, as recognised by the Digital Inclusion Panel (Office of the e-Envoy, 2004, pp.28,41). Secondly, people use ICT in a variety of settings, which act as ‘translation landscapes’ where offline and online channels intersect, so whatever information or communication processes are occurring via the Internet tend to spill over into physical settings and may be transmitted to other actors via face-to-face communication and other analogue media. The possibilities for such channel integration become more apparent when we imagine the Internet not as space but as text: whereas we commonly regard our experiences in places as unique and non-transferrable, texts are translatable and relayable. Thirdly, considering participative uses of ICT, technology offers new possibilities for producing and distributing all sorts of goods and values, and the network geometries for the distribution and consumption of different goods are not the same. In particular, when ICT is deployed to produce

public goods, the consumers or beneficiaries may not need to be connected either to the Internet or to the participative process through which the public good was produced.

The aim of this chapter is to explore how these variables affect the way we might understand social inclusion when eParticipation is performed for different purposes, in different locations and in different domains. Specifically, it attempts to draw out both the differences and the commonalities between manifestations of the digital divide in the spheres of health promotion and local democracy.

BACKGROUND

This paper was inspired by the author’s personal experience as a researcher on two projects. Elsewhere (Smith et al, 2010) recruitment problems encountered in an online health promotion intervention aimed at older people with heart disease have been described. These were such that it was literally impossible to give away 180 personal computers with a year’s free Internet access. Moreover, the 108 volunteers recruited were not demographically representative, being better educated and economically better off than the priority population as a whole, indicating self-selection. This prompted reflection on the implications for social exclusion of the spread of the Internet (to rapidly become the pre-eminent information and communication conduit for a range of purposes). Given that the intervention was also designed to resemble the ‘expert patient programme’ model of healthcare, the fact that it proved so difficult to ‘market’ among a socially disadvantaged priority population, even with a substantial incentive, also raises questions about the implications of the promotion of behaviour-oriented self-care approaches, which has been characteristic of recent health policy reforms in many countries. Findings from a focus group of people who chose not to take part suggested that there was resistance to

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