

# Chapter 107

## E–Inclusion: European Perspectives Beyond the Digital Divide

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### INTRODUCTION

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) is part of a reshaping of socio-economic life that is resulting in new forms of inclusion and exclusion. The use of ICT in economic activity is situated within global capitalism that is based on a networked organisation of production processes and patterns of consumption. This networked organisation of social and economic life is facilitated by an infrastructure based on ICT, which form part of an e-economy and information society (Castells, 2001). In order for economies to be competitive in a global market they need to be connected into the ICT infrastructure and they require a labour force that has the education and skills to work in an e-economy. From the point of view of ordinary people their life chances are linked to having the capability to work in the e-economy to

ensure employment. Furthermore as ICT becomes embedded in political and cultural communication, individuals need access and skills in ICT to participate in their societies. These dimensions of change are creating concerns in policy-making communities and user groups regarding ensuring inclusion in the e-economy and for social cohesion more generally as societies undergo change. The focus of academics and policy-making groups first addressed the concept of a digital divide between those who have access to ICT and those that do not. However, this idea has now been extended into the concept of e-inclusion. In this article, the author first outlines the background to the emergence of the term and its definition and provides the policy response by the European Union. She then considers the problems, controversies and issues of the concept. This is followed by a discussion of some possible solutions, policy recommendations, and suggests areas of further research. The article concludes by

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## **E-Inclusion**

emphasizing the multi-dimensional dynamic of e-inclusion that requires co-ordinated action by policy-makers, industry and user communities.

### **BACKGROUND**

The term e-inclusion was officially coined in policy discourse in a European Union Ministerial Declaration signed in Riga on 11 June 2006. In this Declaration e-inclusion (with 'e' standing for electronic) is defined as:

*both inclusive Information and Communication Technologies and the use of ICT to achieve wider inclusion objectives. It focuses on participation of all individuals and communities in all aspects of the information society. eInclusion policy therefore, aims at reducing gaps in ICT usage and promoting the use of ICT to overcome exclusion, and improve economic performance, employment opportunities, quality of life, social participation and cohesion (European Commission, 2006, p. 1).*

The rationale behind the term is that strategies that seek to promote e-inclusion should aim to prevent social and economic exclusion, especially of already disadvantaged people, due to divergences in knowledge and use of ICT. The history of the term is rooted in both academic and policy concerns about a digital divide that distinguishes between those who have access to ICT and those who do not and how that divide reinforces existing inequalities.

There is a specific European approach to the development of ICT in European Society. The vision is one of European Information Society that involves 'achieving ubiquitous and accessible information resources as a foundation for economic growth and development [in which] information is becoming a central feature of social and cultural life' (Mansell & Steinmuller, 2000, p. 453).

This vision is articulated in policy documents as early as the 1994 Report of the Members of the High Level Group on the Information Society, which set a strategy for the development of ICT in the Europe Union. The report stated that the widespread use of ICT has the potential to 'build a more equal and balanced society', 'reinforce social cohesion' and provide a 'wider choice of services' (1994: 6). The main risk is creating a two-tier society of haves and have-nots, in which only some have access to ICT and the skills to use it, and thus enjoy its benefits (1994: 6). Given this scenario policy focuses on ensuring ICT access and skills for all. The Riga Declaration in 2006 supports the priority of ensuring equal access to ICT as well as providing opportunities for people to develop the relevant skills to use it in order to participate fully in society.

It is possible to trace the emergence of e-inclusion from the idea of a digital divide, which shows that the use of ICT is unequal in society (Castells, 2001). Research shows that those who are well educated and have high socio-economic status are the early adopters of ICT (Castells, 2001; Haddon, 2004). Furthermore, those who speak English are better positioned to take advantage of ICT because English is the language of the World Wide Web (Castells, 2001). Users from this social background are better positioned through advantages in education, economic and cultural capital to participate in an e-economy. Castells (2001) argues that the digital divide is not simply about those who have access to ICT and those who not. He states that the digital divide refers to the difference between actors with varying levels of capacity of Internet usage that 'adds a fundamental cleavage to existing sources of inequality and social exclusion in a complex interaction' (Castells, 2001, p. 247). Changes in the demographics of society, such as an ageing population, the desires of those with disabilities to participate in society and the rise of multi-cultural society interact with the dynamics of inclusion. Furthermore, the needs

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