# Chapter 3
# 'Digital Inclusion':
## Are We All Talking about the Same Thing?

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## ABSTRACT

*In the past twenty years, there has been increasing involvement of governments, societies and communities in initiatives for bridging the digital gap, aiming economic and social development. These efforts are generally called 'digital inclusion' policies and projects. The expression 'digital inclusion' combines defining terms such as 'digital divide' and 'social inclusion', together with the assumptions, ideologies and value systems they carry. However, the comprehension of this expression varies among different agents involved. Identifying defining terms and analyzing their corresponding views is essential for improving scientific approach to any theme. This chapter scrutinizes definitions of 'digital inclusion', 'social exclusion' and related topics from specialized and academic bibliography, as well as from the field, in order to contribute qualifying academic and policy making debates. It proposes that the approaches to 'digital inclusion' are connected to concept views about society and social dynamics, State, market, civil society relationships and public policies. The notion of 'Information Society' and the purposes of disseminating digital information and communication technologies (ICT) are also present, thus framing 'digital inclusion' in different ways. The text concludes that scientific approaches must consider these aspects for addressing 'digital inclusion' as an object of analysis in a more consistent basis.*

## INTRODUCTION

The present text consists of an attempt to define and explore the concepts of 'digital inclusion' and 'digital divide' from the perspective of the Social

Policy field. 'Digital inclusion' is an expression that combines terms such as 'digital divide' and 'social inclusion'. Each of these terms carries assumptions, ideologies and value systems. The purpose of this text is to bring and debate definitions on 'digital inclusion', 'social exclusion' and related topics from specialized and academic

bibliography, as well as from the field. In doing so, it might contribute to qualify academic and policy making debates related to the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development.

Treating 'digital inclusion' from the field of Social Policies demands discussing issues that are usually taken for granted, or less discussed, if one views the question exclusively from a technological perspective. The central idea is to see how terms such as 'digital inclusion' and 'digital divide' can carry different conceptual views. These terms are embraced by quotation marks to reinforce the need to make explicit the ideas, interests and approaches that permeate them. As will be shown, there is a deep relation between these expressions and the contexts from which they emerge.

From a Social Policy theoretical framework, addressing 'digital inclusion' concepts demands considering 'social inclusion' and 'social exclusion' theories. The background section exposes notions that hopefully will clarify this debate.

The substantial core of this chapter are the many different views on 'digital divide' and 'digital inclusion' used in policy making and analysis. The main section presents what has been considered the most important definitions for addressing 'digital inclusion' from a Social Policy perspective. It describes and analyzes the context in which the terms 'social exclusion' and 'digital inclusion' emerge. It also presents how the mainstream approaches differ in their views of the concepts, and how this relates to public policies paradigms.

In the future trends section, some of the questions that may arise from the discussion of 'digital inclusion' as a multi-faced concept are presented. Finally, in the conclusion, the author's perspective is situated among the many controversial theories presented along the text. In doing so, the chapter tries to contribute to the scientific analysis concerning 'digital inclusion' and development.

## BACKGROUND

As in any other field of thought, 'digital inclusion' concepts are influenced by interests, actors and value systems. Theoretical approaches on the theme vary according to different understandings about: (a) society and social dynamics; (b) State, market, civil society relationships and the role of public policies; (c) the purpose(s) of disseminating digital information and communication technologies (ICT), which are usually related to neologisms such as 'Information', 'Knowledge' or 'Network' Societies; (d) the reciprocal influence of each one of these aspects to one another, and how they connect to form different frameworks to approach 'digital inclusion'.

It is important to level some understandings about how this article will consider the above mentioned elements. Social sciences do not offer a monolithic block of theories, especially regarding public policies analysis. That is why the most important considerations about Modern and Post Modern social science approaches that form the article background are now explained in a very simple way.

Modern social sciences theories tend to treat society and social dynamics comprehension based on two main approaches. One of them sees social cohesion and integration as the main purpose of investigating social relations. This approach is present in Émile Durkheim's notions of 'social order' and 'anomie', considered the first steps of sociology as an academic field of thought. The French school of social theories is based on this view.

Another approach understands societies as a permanent struggle between actors. In this last case, there is a subdivision. The liberal perspective considers individual competition for economic resources as main engine of social relations. The Anglo-Saxon school of thought quite often uses this approach. On the other hand, there are Marxist perspectives, that see social classes dispute (capital *versus* labor) as of core importance for

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