

The digital production gap: The digital divide and Web 2.0 collide

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Abstract

How does class intersect with claims of digital democracy? Most digital inequality research focuses on digital consumption or participation, but this study uses a production lens to examine who is creating digital content for the public sphere. My results point to a class-based gap among producers of online content. A critical mechanism of this inequality is control of digital tools and an elite Internet-in-practice and information habitus to use the Internet. Using survey data of American adults, I apply a logit analysis of 10 production activities—from Web sites and blogs to discussion forums and social media sites. Even among people who are already online, a digital production gap challenges theories that the Internet creates an egalitarian public sphere. Instead, digital production inequality suggests that elite voices still dominate in the new digital commons.

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1. Introduction

User-generated content tools, such as blogs, video-sharing, and other social media sites, have made it possible for ordinary people to create and distribute online content for the public to view, but who are these digital voices and whose voice is missing? As this mass cultural production of electronic content grows, new empirical and theoretical questions emerge about digital inequality from a *production* lens, building on the existing *consumption* and *participation* frameworks.

Drawing on national surveys of 41,602 people from 2000 to 2008, I find that a class-based digital production gap exists, even among people who are online. Consistent control of digital production tools and a context to use those tools mediate the difference between college and high school educated Americans, as to whether or not they create online content.¹ These explanations for digital inequality are more important for production than for consumption.

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¹ This study does not examine the volume or nature of the content.

As the news media, academic research and public decision-making increasingly rely on Internet applications and content (Castells, 2000), an under-representation of the working class online creates an imbalance of views and perspectives. Without the voices of the poor, American citizens, particularly the political elite, can more easily ignore issues vital to these marginalized communities (Artz, 2003; Kendall, 2005).

Digital inequality scholarship has expanded from a divide based simply on computer ownership to a range of inequalities in access and use of various digital technologies (DiMaggio et al., 2004; Selwyn, 2004; Van Dijk, 2005). Internet research has also moved in the direction of understanding how skills, social networks and other resources mediate digital information usage (Hargittai, 2008; Mossberger et al., 2003; Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2010). Much of this research has focused on the *consumption* of digital content. Some researchers have recently taken up the socioeconomic *participation* gap (Correa, 2010; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2006), especially content sharing among youth or with social networking sites (i.e., Hargittai, 2007), or with electoral participation in politics and voting (Mossberger et al., 2008; Norris, 2001). However, scholars have not fully examined empirically the extent to which poor and working class adults engage in the *production* of online content for the *public's* consumption, not just for one's social network.

The theory that I explore is that the Internet promotes a democratic and diverse public sphere in which elite voices no longer dominate. Since traditional media outlets have ignored, mediated and stereotyped the poor and working class (Artz, 2003; Iyengar, 1990, 1991; Kendall, 2005) will the digital commons offer them a new voice? In place of the one-to-many model of content distribution by the mainstream media, some researchers (i.e., Benkler, 2006) argue that the Internet is inverting this model into a more democratic market place of ideas. Rather than people consuming information from just a few corporate media outlets, citizens can create their own content, as well as receive news and entertainment from millions of online outlets and citizen journalists. To refine this theory of online democracy and diversity, I test the hypothesis that a digital production gap exists by evaluating the effects of class on self-reports of ten production activities. These online uses, such as building Web sites, writing blogs or posting videos, result in content for the public's consumption.

In this paper, I bring to digital divide research an analysis of digital production inequality, expanding on the literatures that analyze gaps in access, consumption, and participation. These findings add digital content production to our understanding of how class affects cultural production, affirms the existence of a digital production gap, compares the mechanisms of this production inequality with consumption, and contributes a class perspective to the theoretical conversation of digital democracy discourse.

2. The state of knowledge

Scholarship on digital inequality has rarely employed an analysis of online productive practices based on class differences. I will provide a brief explanation and history of digital divide research, as well as what factors lead to engagement with digital technology. Then, I will show how digital democracy is an inadequate lens to understand digital production inequality. Finally, I will explain my framework for analyzing digital production.

2.1. From the digital divide and consumption to digital inequality and production

Digital divide theories often reflect the technological practices of the time period. Consumption, or basic online access, was the initial and prevalent inequality measure in

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