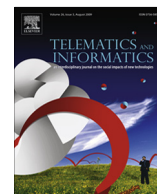




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Participation, citizenship and internet use among South African youth



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ABSTRACT

A limitation of early studies on Internet penetration was the focus on physical access as sole measure of digital inequalities. Current studies explore a wide range of inequalities in patterns of use and skills. Through a survey of 1,044 university students in South Africa, this study examines the pattern of Internet use among these students, their various online activities and what these activities reveal about their use of the Internet to participate as citizens in society. Using a descriptive survey analysis method, this study reveals that various forms of inequalities influence Internet use among many young people: types of Internet access, condition of access, cost of access, family income, race, and geography influence patterns of Internet use. For many students, these forms of inequalities affect the frequency of use and the amount of online activities in which they engage. As a result, a full experience of participation and citizenship through digital means is compromised for many youth.

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1. Introduction

A limitation of early studies on digital inequality is the sole focus on physical access with least attention to the types and circumstances of this access. Analysis of the impact of technology must take cognizance of its pattern of penetration, its uses, and the know-how or skill people possess to effectively adopt new technology for participation in society (Van Dijk, 2005; Mossberger et al., 2003, 2008; DiMaggio et al. 2004; Warschauer, 2003). As a result, studying how people use the Internet to engage in various online activities and distinguishing between people who create online content and those who merely consume are current research interests in studying digital inequality (Hargittai, 2008; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008). This paper largely explores the pattern of Internet uses among youth in South Africa.

Young people are heavy users of the Internet and other forms of digital communication technologies. In the United States, for example, a Pew Research Center report reveals that 93% of teen ages 12–17 go online, as do 93% of young adults ages 18–29 (Pew Research Center, 2009). The study also reveals that three quarters (74%) of all adults ages 18 and older go online, and for more than a decade teens and young adults have been consistently the two groups most likely to go online. A study in the Netherlands about Internet, young people, and political participation finds that a variety of Internet uses are positively related to different forms of political participation (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011). In Africa young people are increasingly gaining access to the Internet. For example, in South Africa 67% of young people ages 16–24 is reported to have used the Internet, the highest rate among all age groups (Insights Africa, 2012).

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Analyses of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) use in developing countries often reveal that despite many social concerns, there is the realization that ICTs are powerful tools to spread knowledge and information, provide employment, and increase participation among young people (Halewood and Kenny, 2008). These uses address how young people apply Internet technologies and applications for social-cultural and political activities that define citizenship. For example, Ybarra et al. (2006) examine Internet use among Ugandan adolescents and reveal that more than one in three adolescents already are comfortable using the computer/Internet as a resource for health information. Studies show that Internet uses facilitate young people's political participation (Forrester and Matusitz, 2010; Calenda and Mosca, 2007; Collin, 2008), social-cultural participation (Tillfors et al., 2008; Chigona et al., 2008), and educational activities (Isaacs et al., 2004; Evoh, 2007). Current studies in South Africa largely focus on single uses of the Internet by the youth, for example, for political participation (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2014; Forrester and Matusitz, 2010), and educational activities (Bosch, 2009), without critical attention to the social, economic, and geographical fissures that describe the demographics of South African youth. There is thus a need for a study that explores young people's uses of the Internet for variety of activities, while teasing out the contours of socioeconomic stratification among this population, and the implications for participation and citizenship.

This study examines pattern of Internet use among university students in South Africa. Although this population group is not completely representative of all the youth in South Africa, some of whom are not in universities, the availability of Internet access in colleges makes this population relevant to this study. Most universities in South Africa provide public Internet access to students at computer labs, students increasingly use their cell phones to go online, some come from homes with household Internet connections, and the diverse nature of this group is representative of the diversity of South African youth demographics and the population in general. Specifically, this study examines four core questions: (1) How does the condition of Internet access shape the frequency of use and types of Internet uses among students? (2) What are the online activities in which they engage? (3) What do these online activities reveal about their uses of the Internet to participate as citizens in society? (4) What does the use pattern reveal about the nature of social inequalities experienced by this population group of South African youth?

2. Participation and digital citizenship

The concept of participation is essential in theorizing citizenship. From its seminal use in democratic theory, participation has materialized as a philosophic framework that has been applied to studies in many fields, such as politics, spatial planning, development and social change, arts and museums, and communications (Carpentier, 2011). The concept of participation is critical in understanding the role of the individual in connection with the community and the society as a whole. It is an important concept in the study of democracy and democratic theory (Pateman, 1970; Held, 2006), it has been used to study social inclusion and citizenship (Mertens and Servaes, 2011), especially juxtaposed against the concept of alienation (Mejos, 2007).

In democratic theory Carpentier (2011) identifies a minimalist and maximalist views of participation. Minimalist participation reduces the political role of citizenry to the election process that results in representation and delegation of power. Maximalist democratic participation is more substantial, multidirectional, and not limited solely to election of representatives. Similarly, Thomas (1994) identifies micro- and macro- participation, where macro-participation concerns the national political spheres of a country, and micro-participation concerns the local spheres of school, family, workplace, church, and community. The concept of participation is a critical aspect of the study and process of communication and media through theories of audience participation and communication rights (Carpentier, 2011). The concept is a prominent framework in the theories, processes and the studies of communication for development and social change (Servaes, 1999; Servaes and Malikhao, 2008; Huesca, 2008). Here the emphasis is on the equality of participants in decision-making and their empowerment to be actively involved in shaping phenomenon that affects their being, individuality, community, and cultural identities.

With the current regime of Internet technologies and Web 2.0, the concept of participation becomes strongly articulated in the discourses of new media and citizenship (Chadwick, 2006; Jenkins, 2008; Kann et al., 2007). First, the analysis is on the participatory culture that new media and the Internet engender through collaborative authoring and the interactive aspect of social media. This culture is important for citizenship values of openness and democracy. As Jenkins (2008) notes, participatory culture contrasts with older ideas of a passive public and media spectatorship, it creates a 'current moment of media change [that] is affirming the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture' (136). Second, new media and the Internet allow citizens to participate in many aspects of society. As Carpentier (2011) observes, for example, it leads to clusters of debate on citizens' participation in institutionalized politics, through many e-concepts (such as e-government, e-democracy, e-campaigning).

The concept of participation as applied here takes the maximalist approach; referring to the ability of citizens to gain access to resources that facilitate their inclusion and decision-making process in all spheres of society. It involves the ability to participate in the economic, political, cultural, and social spheres of society as they relate to everyday practices. Specifically, it is how the Internet has become additional resource for the individual to participate effectively toward full citizenship in society. Mertens and Servaes (2011) note citizenship is beyond the legal and political ideologies; citizenship should also be a social citizenship, which implies social participation.

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