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Unrealized potential: Exploring the digital disability divide

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ABSTRACT

While the digital inequality literature has considered differences in the online experiences of many population segments, relatively little work has examined how people with disabilities (PWD) have incorporated digital media into their lives. Based on a national survey of American adults, this paper explores this question through considering both barriers to Internet use and the possibilities the Internet offers PWD. Findings indicate barriers for many PWD to accessing the Internet. Those with five of six types of disabilities measured are considerably less likely to be online than those who are not disabled. People who are deaf or hearing impaired to do not lag in Internet access once we account for demographics, Web use skills, and Internet experiences. However, the study also finds evidence that once online, PWD engage in a range of uses of the Internet as much as people without disability. Moreover, PWD take distinct interest in certain online activities, such as sharing their own content and reviewing products and services, pointing to ways they may go online to adapt and respond to the wider inaccessible society. These findings indicate great potential for the Internet for people with disabilities and suggest that moving more of them online holds the potential for considerable gains among this group.

1. Introduction

Among the ways in which social inequality plays out in contemporary society, increasing attention is being paid to access and use of digital technologies (see Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013 for a review of related literature). Digital media are viewed as increasingly important resources for participating in a range of domains in today's world and considerable research has documented how digital inequality plays out across society. Lack of basic access to or skills for exploiting these resources can have important effects on one's relationships, work life, and overall quality of life (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004). Disability is a major site of diversity and inequality in society, but analysis of it as such has lagged behind that of other social factors when it comes to digital media uses (for exceptions, see Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Newell, 2003; Jaeger, 2012; Vicente & López, 2010). Incorporating this variable into investigations of digital inequality is important because, unlike other social statuses, disability is one that most everyone can expect to occupy at some point in their lives (Siebers, 2008).

People with disabilities (PWD) are stigmatized and excluded in many domains of life, with consequences for their health and wealth (Shifrer, 2013; Hatzenbuehler, Phelan, & Link, 2013). In addition to being a marginalized status in its own right, disability also tends to overlap with other disadvantaged positions in society, multiplying exclusion. PWD are

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disproportionately represented among people with lower socioeconomic status and racial/ethnic minorities (Brault, 2012; Warner & Brown, 2011). While digital media have the potential to level the playing field for those with disabilities, relatively little research examines how PWD compare to others in incorporating such resources into their everyday lives. This paper addresses this gap in the literature.

2. Digital inequality

Digital inequalities map onto other inequalities within society. Thus, those in lower socioeconomic status groups as well as those from racial and ethnic minority groups are less likely to use the Internet than those in more privileged socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups (Bonfadelli, 2002; NTIA, 2013; Robinson et al., 2015; Witte & Mannon, 2010). While there was in the past a gender gap regarding rates of Internet access, that gap has closed in the United States and several other countries (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013; Robinson et al., 2015). Older people continue to be less likely to own a computer or have Internet access than their younger counterparts (NTIA, 2013). These differences in access can have concrete consequences for people's lives. For instance, DiMaggio and Bonikowski (2008) found that, among U.S. workers, use of the Internet is associated with increased wages over time, whether that use is in the workplace or at home. Internet access is also associated with benefits throughout the life course, such as better educational outcomes, increased chances of securing employment, higher income, and better maintenance of social networks in old age (for a review, see Robinson et al., 2015).

With increasing diffusion of Internet access, concern over inequality in access to the Internet has spread to encompass how members of different social groups who are online vary in their experience on the Internet and how this affects inequality (DiMaggio et al., 2004). Aside from technical access to the Internet, other factors underlying digital inequality include differences in autonomy of use (the ability to use the Internet when and where they choose), availability of support, skills, and purposes of Internet use (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2013). Those in more privileged positions generally have more autonomy, support, and skill, and they benefit from the Internet in ways that those lower in the hierarchy do not.

These distinctions are more complicated than simply reproducing inequality. For instance, although racial/ethnic minorities are less likely to be online, when on the Internet, they are more likely to create certain types of content, rather than simply consume content passively, possibly offering an avenue for reducing inequality (Robinson et al., 2015). Regarding gender, though access rates do not differ between men and women, women use the Internet less, use it for different purposes, and view their own online skills lower than men do (Hargittai & Shafer, 2006; Robinson et al., 2015). As we will see, when we turn to the realm of disability, we find that ICTs can both reinforce inequality and offer PWD a way to overcome societal barriers.

3. The digital disability divide

When we look more closely at the relationship between disability and the Internet, we see that it is a story of both exclusion and possibility. While PWD face many barriers to taking advantage of the online world, Internet use nonetheless offers many means both to participate in society more fully and to create alternatives to wider exclusion in the world.

Underlying digital exclusion of PWD is the design of technology and the pace of technological change. The most widely-used hardware, software, and Web content vary considerably in their accessibility to people with a range of disabilities (Lazar & Jaeger, 2011). There are a number of mandated and recommended guidelines for making computers and the Web accessible within certain domains of society, such as Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act in the U.S., and the World Wide Web Consortium's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (W3C, nd). However, the creators and merchants of new online hardware and software tend not to include PWD in their designs (Ellis & Kent, 2011). Instead, much of the focus tends to be on assistive technology – after-the-fact, add-on solutions such as screen readers, speech-to-text programs and other accessibility additions to work stations, which can be quite resource-intensive to obtain and make use of – with implementation uneven within and across domains (Farrelly, 2011; Jaeger, 2006; Piper, Weibel, & Hollan, 2014; Wentz, Jaeger, & Lazar, 2011). Even with such assistive technology, however, users often find themselves limited in the range of options available and lacking the training, support or assistance needed to make use of them (Harris, 2014). Further, with the fast-paced development and evolution of digital media, there is the risk that by the time an assistive solution has made a given technology accessible, it may already be obsolete (Jaeger, 2012; Weber, 2006). An alternative advocated by many is universal design or universal usability, in which products and environments are designed from the outset to be accessible for all people, to the greatest extent possible (Meiselwitz, Wentz, & Lazar, 2009; The Center for Universal Design, 1997).

Within this relatively inaccessible environment, differences between people with and without disabilities are evident in a number of aspects of Internet use and experience. People with disabilities lag those without disabilities in basic computer and Internet access (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006; NTIA, 2013; Vicente & López, 2010). Using data from the 2011 U.S. Current Population Survey, a report from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (2013) showed that 53% of PWD had a computer, 48% used the Internet, and 46% had access to high-speed broadband Internet. These were far behind the numbers for those without disabilities: 79% owned computers, 76% accessed the Internet, and 73% had broadband access. Most data sets about people's online activities and Web-use skills either do not measure disability status or do not have enough people with disabilities to allow for a deeper investigation of how PWD compare to others regarding their Internet uses.