

## Is it time to rethink ‘digital inequality’ (again)?

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### **Abstract**

Digital inequality scholarship has rightly criticized the concept of the ‘digital divide’ for oversimplifying and distorting relations between digital media and social inequalities. Instead of focusing on binary conceptualizations of access, digital inequality scholars recommend studying ‘differentiated use,’ which depends on access, but which is mediated by additional factors such as skill. Despite these advances, much digital inequality scholarship retains many of the limitations of the digital divide framework it criticizes. As such, scholars thwart their honorable aims and paradoxically risk contributing to the reproduction of historical structures of power and privilege. This short paper identifies three persistent shortcomings with prevailing views about digital inequality: slippage between ‘digital inequalities’ and ‘social inequalities’; unacknowledged normativity; and a deficit model of difference. The paper ends with brief recommendations for how scholars and practitioners can move beyond these limitations.

### **Keywords**

digital inequality; digital divide; social inequality; skill; education

### **Digital Inequality in the Twenty-First Century**

Over roughly the past decade, scholars concerned with relations between digital media and social inequalities rightly criticized the concept of the ‘digital divide’ for oversimplifying and distorting relations between digital media and social inequalities (e.g. DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Selwyn, 2004; van Dijk, 2005; Warschauer, 2003). These scholars argued that the metaphor of the digital divide bifurcated persons into two categories – the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ – and defined inequality too narrowly by focusing on differences in access to digital media content, tools, and infrastructures. In subsequent years, a research agenda centered on ‘digital inequality’ largely replaced earlier academic discourses about the digital divide. This agenda reframed digital inequality in terms of ‘differentiated use’ (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Celeste, & Shafer, 2004), an outcome that depended on, but could not be reduced to, differences in access.

In attempting to account for differentiated use, a consensus emerged that digital ‘skills,’ or related concepts such as ‘literacies’ or ‘cultural capital’, were important contributors to differentiated use, and hence digital inequality (e.g. Brandtweiner, Donat, & Kerschbaum, 2010; Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010; Gilbert, 2010; Halford & Savage, 2010; Hargittai, 2002; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, & Weigel, 2006; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Mossberger et al., 2003; Tondeur, Sinnaeve, van Houtte, & van Braak, 2011; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011; Warschauer, 2003; Zhang, 2010). By implication, policy-makers, foundations, and educators should attempt to provide digital skills as well as access to those who do not yet have them.

While digital inequality scholarship has significantly improved digital divide discourse, the ‘digital inequality’ framework continues to suffer from several limitations that can thwart researchers’, policy-makers’, and educators’ well-intentioned efforts to combat social inequalities. There are three interrelated limitations that I highlight in this short paper: conceptual slippage between ‘digital inequality’ and ‘social inequality’; unacknowledged normativity; and a deficit model of difference.

### *Slippage Between Digital Inequalities and Social Inequalities*

Much digital inequality scholarship fails to sufficiently account for how differentiated use contributes to the making and remaking of social inequalities – whether specified in terms of social class

asymmetries, gender privilege, racialization, exclusions from sites of power, etc. Scholars often substitute digital inequalities for social inequalities, rather than showing the role of the former in making and remaking the latter. There is no harm in documenting how differences in digital media use correspond with historical and emergent structures of privilege; doing so helps scholars better understand what social inequalities look like. The mistake is suggesting, implicitly or explicitly, that differences in digital media use play a salient role in making and remaking social inequalities. To understand the roles of digital media in producing social inequalities, scholars should first attempt to document and theorize the processes by which social inequalities are being made and remade, and only then attempt to understand the roles of digital media in those processes. Without paying attention to the broader constellation of factors and processes that produce privilege, scholars risk diagnosing symptoms as causes.

#### *Unacknowledged Normativity*

A related limitation of digital inequality scholarship is the tendency to slip between descriptive and normative accounts. On the one hand, digital inequality scholarship can be read as merely descriptive: it documents differences in use and attempts to account for those differences. On the other hand, normative ideas about use are entailed in those accounts: some uses of digital media are seen as beneficial, others are stigmatized or simply not documented. While all empirical and theoretical work entails normative commitments, scholars can be more clear about those commitments, especially when digital media's contributions to the production of social inequalities – the presumed object of shared concern – has not been clearly established.

#### *Deficit Models of Difference*

The unacknowledged normativity of much digital inequality research also tends to produce a deficit model of difference. Despite ongoing criticisms of the digital divide metaphor, digital inequality research is rife with images of chasms and gaps. More recently, these have taken the form of the 'participation gap' (Jenkins et al., 2006), the 'participation divide' (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008), or the 'production gap' (Schradie, 2011). Continuum models of digital inequality, such as Livingstone and Helsper (2007), also implicitly rely on a gap metaphor, but graduated steps now bridge the binary poles of the chasm. There are several limitations of such a framing. For one, by focusing solely on deficits, researchers and educators overlook the 'repertoires of practice' (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003) and 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that exist among persons and collectives that researchers locate on the wrong side of the divide. Some of these cultural resources undoubtedly involve digital media, but not necessarily in ways anticipated by digital inequality scholars. Other resources likely have little or nothing to do with digital media, and, as such, they remain beyond the vision of much digital inequality scholarship. Second, deficit models provide ideological support to well-intentioned interventions that can paradoxically discipline, control, or exclude difference. All deficit models imply that those on the wrong side of the gap should be more like those on the right side. When informed by such models, interventions, however well-intentioned, risk becoming missionary projects that attempt to mold persons into a normative type.

#### *What to do?*

Scholars and reformers can take several practical steps to address these limitations. First, if scholars are concerned with relations between digital media and social inequalities, they can first try to understand how social inequalities are being made and remade, and only then look at the role of digital media in those broader processes. Historical and ethnographic approaches would be especially helpful for providing more holistic and contextualized accounts. Second, those who wish to intervene on behalf of less-privileged persons and groups can involve those they aim to help in a more collaborative and participatory manner. Instead of attempting to lead or force persons across various digital chasms, educators and other care workers can help recognize, honor, translate, and support the repertoires of practice and aspirational trajectories of persons as they make their lives in a historically structured everyday world.

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