

Digital discrimination

Limited access, limited literacy and lack of motivation and skills in using digital technologies means a low degree of inclusion in a digital society. In an advanced society, such as Europe, which is increasingly dependent on digital technologies and where more and more services, knowledge and information are online, being digitally excluded means sitting on the wrong side of the digital divide (Ragnedda and Ruiu 2016). To reduce marginalization, it is indispensable to promote equal access to and use of technologies (Castells 2001).

Digital inclusion also means the capacity to engage and participate in social networks and local communities (Wessels 2008) and to actively engage with information in the digital world. Digital inclusion policies aim to narrow down the digital divide, not only by proposing funding for technologies and enhancing technological infrastructures but also by proposing training in the use of digital technologies, by providing services designed specifically for those who are socially and digitally excluded and via any other opportunities specifically thought to target those who are at the margins of the digital arena.

Thus, digital inclusion policies should not only focus on the barriers that prevent an individual from accessing the Internet but must consider, among the other issues, factors such as skills, attitudes and different levels of engagement with technologies (Selwyn 2004; van Dijk 2005; Warschauer 2004). In addition, researchers and policymakers are now analysing the digital inclusion process in relation to the information available online (Selwyn and Facer 2007), the range of software that individuals would wish to access (Abbott 2007) and the digital literacies and skills required by individuals in a broader sense (Crawford and Irving 2007; Wessels 2008).

The spread of technologies may reduce the number of people that are totally excluded from the digital realm but this will not solve the phenomenon of digital inequalities. Rather, it will rather increase it. Indeed, as we will see later, digital inequalities in terms of skills, competences, motivations and purpose of use (second level of the digital divide) will increase, while the social and economic benefits deriving from an efficient use of the Internet might reinforce social inequalities. This is what we might define as the third level of the digital divide (Ragnedda 2017).

Digital inequalities are generating new forms of marginalization or digital discrimination that further exacerbate social disparities and inequalities within advanced countries. Indeed, socially disadvantaged citizens are less likely to use the Internet and, above all, to gain social benefits from it.

In this respect, we can split the Member States into three main groups. The first group includes countries such as the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, the UK and Luxemburg, where the vast majority of the populations (more than 90%) use the Internet regularly. In this group, Internet penetration is really high and the first level of the digital divide has almost been bridged. However, as mentioned, this does not mean that digital inequalities do not exist in these countries. It is rather the opposite, as more and more services, information and knowledge move online, the capacity, confidence and skills in using digital technologies become important matters of inequalities. The second group are made of countries such as Estonia and Germany, which are quickly achieving the same results as the first group and are rapidly moving toward bridging the first level of the digital divide. In the third group, we can include countries such as Bulgaria (58%) and Romania (56%) that are clearly below the EU average despite their efforts to increase Internet penetration (European Commission 2017). However, a lot more needs to be done to reduce the number of digitally excluded people in countries where the number of non-Internet users accounts for 30% or more of the population.

Citizens use the Internet to engage in a wide range of activities, such as consumer content, shopping, online banking services, communication, social networking, job searches and much more. All of these activities are captured by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), which is a composite index that tracks the development of EU Member States in digital competitiveness and summarizes the relevant indicators of Europe's digital performance. More specifically, the DESI focuses on five dimensions, namely: Connectivity, Human Capital, Use of Internet, Integration of Digital Technology and Digital Public Services. According to the third indicator (Use of Internet), the majority of people in Europe use the Internet for news-related activities (68%), shopping (65%), social networking (63%) and banking (57%). Other activities are quite popular, such as looking for videos, games and music (49%) and video on demand (41%). Evidently, there are differences across countries in Europe. Denmark, Sweden and Belgium, for instance, have the most active Internet users in Europe, while Italy, Romania, Hungary and Greece are at the bottom of this ranking.

The main reason for not having Internet access is that citizens think that they do not need it. Indeed, around 46% of citizens who do not use the Internet believe that there is no need to use it (European Commission 2017) and, consequently, there is neither a motivation to acquire technologies nor to subscribe to the Internet. There are complicated reasons as to why in some countries with a high level of Internet penetration Internet use is seen as more important than in other countries. This may depend on the available content (in some countries almost every public service is online), on the perception of technologies (for several reasons, some countries adopted new technologies earlier than others), on the services provided via the Internet and so forth. As more activities and services move online there is increasing pressure from citizens for the necessity to access the Internet.

Digital discrimination entails treating individuals unfairly, unethically, or just differently based on their personal data that is automatically processed by an algorithm. Digital discrimination often reproduces the existing instances of discrimination in the offline world by either inheriting the biases of prior decision-makers, or simply reflecting widespread prejudices in society.

We might not realize it, but computer algorithms are everywhere.

Automated decision systems (“ADS”) – software tools or processes that aid human decision-making – are widely used by governments and private industry in a growing number of fields including the criminal, education, and health care systems.

The problem is, these ADS are often steeped in bias that is cloaked in the veneer of objective, data-based calculations – which disproportionately harm people of color and other marginalized populations. What data goes into them, and how they reach their decisions are usually shielded from the public. They risk severely undermining the civil, human, and privacy rights.

Online marketplaces often contain information not only about products, but also about the people selling the products. In an effort to facilitate trust, many platforms encourage sellers to provide personal profiles and even to post pictures of themselves. However, these features may also facilitate discrimination based on sellers' race, gender, age, or other aspects of appearance. In this paper, we test for racial discrimination against landlords in the online rental marketplace Airbnb.com. Using a new data set combining pictures of all New York City landlords on Airbnb with their rental prices and information about quality of the rentals, we show that non-black hosts charge approximately 12% more than black hosts for the equivalent rental. These effects are robust when controlling for all information visible in the Airbnb marketplace. These findings highlight the prevalence of discrimination in online marketplaces, suggesting an important unintended consequence of a seemingly-routine mechanism for building trust.

Digital technologies provide new means to advocate for, defend, and exercise human rights and affect all types of rights - civil and political, as well as cultural, economic and social rights. They shape how people access and share information, form their opinions, debate, and mobilise – they have deeply transformed the “public square”. But they are equally used to suppress, limit and violate rights, for instance through surveillance, censorship, online harassment, algorithmic bias and automated decision-making systems. The misuse of digital technologies also disproportionately affects marginalized individuals and groups, leading to inequality and discrimination - both online and offline.

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