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Ilse Mariën Jernej A. Prodnik

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Digital inclusion and user (dis)empowerment: a critical perspective

Ilse Mariën and Jernej A. Prodnik

Ilse Mariëni is a researcher at Minds SMIT, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Brussels, Belgium. Jernej A. Prodnik is based at Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic.

Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to highlight the main limitations of the emancipatory potentials of digital inclusion policies and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Increasingly, empowerment is put forward as one of the main goals of digital inclusion. By applying user-centric and participatory approaches, assumptions are made that individuals will be empowered and, as such, will be re-included in society.

Design/methodology/approach – These assumptions, however, tend to ignore the social, economic, political and technical conditions within which individual choices are made and within which individuals must inevitably act. Instead of attempting to narrow the existing social gap between class-divided societies, and of probing the limitations given at the macro-level by questioning the wider social structure, digital inclusion policies tend to individualize problems that are in fact social in their nature.

Findings – This contribution will, therefore, aim to identify the key causes of structural (dis)empowerment and how these resonate to digital inclusion. The article positions itself within the political economy of communication research tradition and aims to confront the structural consequences of social inequalities, existing social hierarchies and power structures against mechanisms of digital inequalities and against the implementation of digital inclusion policies.

Originality/value – By proceeding from a critical perspective, it aims to demonstrate the limitations of user-centric and micro-level approaches, while questioning their normative interpretations of digital empowerment which tend to be reductionist in their essence and instrumental in their aims.

Keywords Capitalism, Social inequality, Digital inequality, Digital inclusion, Empowerment, Political economy of communication

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This article aims to highlight the main limitations of the emancipatory potentials of digital inclusion policies and information and communication technologies (ICTs). Increasingly, empowerment and participation in society are put forward as the main goals of digital inclusion (Stewart *et al.*, 2013). By applying user-centric and participatory approaches, the assumption is made that individuals will be empowered and, as such, will be re-included in society (Steyn and Johanson, 2011). Moreover, the normative framework of digital inclusion policies is highly based upon individual choices and occurring wants and needs that coincide with individual ICT practices and routines (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006). The ultimate goal of digital inclusion is claimed to be the development of capital-enhancing user practices that are based upon free and fully informed digital choices (Heeley and Damodaran, 2009). These assumptions, however, tend to, a large extent, disregard the social, economic, political and technical conditions within which individual choices are made and within which individuals must inevitably act. Instead of attempting to narrow the existing social gap within class-divided societies, and of probing the limitations given at the macro-level by questioning the wider social structure, digital inclusion policies tend to individualize problems that are in fact social in their nature. To put it in the words of Adorno

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and Horkheimer (2002, p. 121), they thus try to “turn the socially perpetuated wretchedness into remediable individual cases”.

The article positions itself within the critical political economy of communication research tradition (Mosco, 2004, 2009; Fuchs, 2008, 2011a) and aims to confront the structural consequences of social inequalities, existing social hierarchies and power asymmetries against the mechanisms of digital inequalities and against the implementation of digital inclusion policies. It is grounded within the overall knowledge and insights both authors have developed throughout their theoretical and empirical work. By proceeding from a critical perspective, it aims to demonstrate the limitations of user-centric and micro-level approaches, while questioning the normative definitions of digital empowerment which tend to be reductionist in their essence and instrumental in their aims. Hence, this article addresses the following questions:

- How are structural causes of social and digital inequalities intertwined in the class-divided capitalist information society?
- To what an extent are processes of structural disempowerment and class inequalities at a macro-level at odds with inclusion and empowerment policies that are being implemented at a mezzo and, especially, micro-level of society?

The Internet in the wider social context and mechanisms of digital exclusion

Structural causes of digital exclusion: the Internet in capitalist societies

From the perspective of critical political economy of communication, it is possible to discern several defining processes on the Internet such as user surveillance, privatization, marketization and concentration and commodification of both content and also of the users and their activities. These processes produce severe inequalities, often hamper possibilities of political engagement, participation and activism of citizens; limit equal access to information; and restrict citizens from being fully included in the public life. These tendencies are producing new asymmetries and hierarchies on the Internet, thus, reproducing or even reinforcing the already existing divides present in class societies. For example, most of the Internet is now for-profit-oriented, controlled by corporations in very much closed and, in some cases, even oligopolized markets (Bellamy and McChesney, 2011; Fuchs, 2011b; Winseck, 2011; Freedman, 2012; McChesney, 2013; Yong Jin, 2013).

Even though the rise of the Internet brought with itself new “winners”, for example, Google or Facebook, this did not bring along any serious dispersal of power, like the techno-utopians expected (Curran, 2012). Moreover, power asymmetries and monopolization is, in the case of highly-connected markets on the Internet, even more likely, while the barriers to entry to the web-market can be even higher than on other capitalist markets (Hindman, 2011). Dominant web-companies such as Facebook and Google use collective cooperation, participation and activities of the users and their communication as a form of free labour that is canalized in their private financial gain (Terranova, 2000; Fuchs, 2011a, 2011b; Prodnik, 2012; Scholz, 2013). It is in fact the activities and content produced by the users of the most popular social networks that are the key ingredient and preliminary condition for continuing existence and financial success of these companies. While there are also obvious social gains for the users of these platforms like connecting with friends, new potentials for political organization and novel sources of information, it should be pointed out that from a critical political economy perspective, economic models of these companies leave the actual producers of the content out of the vast financial gains and thus further intensify the existing asymmetries. To put it shortly, although it was hoped we would see the exact opposite developments, it now seems that the Internet has accelerated some of the tendencies that were already present within capitalist societies earlier, including further expansion of commodification and even increased social inequalities (Schiller, 1999; Mosco, 2004; Fisher, 2010; Fuchs, 2011a, 2011b; Prodnik, 2012, 2014; McChesney, 2013).

According to [van Dijk \(2005\)](#) it is clear that the so-called *Mattheus effect* – the rich get richer, the poor get poorer – is an inherent characteristic of today's digital society. He emphasizes that most advantaged groups in society – highly educated, high income, high job status, continuous Internet access and high level of digital skills – are continuously able to gain direct benefits from the use of ICTs, whereas disadvantaged groups – low educated, low income, low job status, problematic Internet access and low digital skills levels – are, at all levels, lagging behind. The *Mattheus effect* is in fact very consistent with both how the capitalist system develops and operates and also with the structure of the Internet itself. It is not only the wider social context (re)producing social asymmetries but it is also the link structure of the Internet itself that leads to the winners-take-all patterns and niche dominance, which becomes a general rule of the online sphere. This is especially evident in Hindman's concept of *Googlearchy*, which is defined by the rule of the most heavily linked. Because of the rule of *Googlearchy*, "the number of highly visible sites is small by any measure" while "most online content receives no links, attracts no eyeballs, and has minimum political relevance" ([Hindman, 2009](#), p. 54). Likewise, the most powerful and influential individuals online are those who are already a part of the social elite, and this is especially so when it comes to political engagement, participation and activism ([Curran, 2012](#)). [Hindman's \(2011, p. 18\)](#) study, which focussed on the democratic potentials of the Internet, contrary to the common beliefs, found that "powerful hierarchies shaping a medium that continues to be celebrated for its openness". In some cases, these asymmetries were proven to be even larger than in the case of the traditional mass-media. In his analysis of the online worlds, [Winseck \(2011\)](#) mentions a similar tendency to Hindman; he points at the evolution of networks towards concentration, conceptualizing this process as a *power law* inherent to the so-called "network effects".

Various studies focussing on the Internet have shown that the digitization of society leads to, or reinforces, mechanisms of social inequalities ([van Dijk, 2005](#); [Fuchs, 2008](#); [Helsper, 2008, 2011, 2012](#); [Steyaert and Gould, 2009](#)). It is clear that people in capitalist societies neither have equal opportunities nor equal possibilities to participate in the political decision-making processes, and neither are they engaged in the public life at large nor influencing society and relations they are a part of via their (digital) communicative practices. Having Internet access as such does not diminish these vast inequalities within digital spaces that are part and parcel of a globally integrated capitalist political economic system ([Harvey, 2003](#); [Negri and Hardt, 2000, 2009](#); [Fuchs, 2011b](#)). [Steyn and Johanson \(2011, p. 54\)](#) refer to inequality as an inherent aspect of capitalist societies and state that "no distributive nor equal opportunities policies will ever be enough for promoting freedom to all individuals under the capitalist mode of production". Hence, fundamental questions regarding the provision of solutions for these structural causes need to be answered. Can solutions to ensure the use of ICTs amongst disadvantaged groups, such as the provision of qualitative and affordable access or the development of digital skills, be left to the market or to the micro-level efforts of civil society?

Structural barriers set against individual agency

The processes mentioned above that (re)produce structural inequalities should, in our opinion, be accompanied by a questioning of the action radius of individual agency. Can individuals activities conform with the digitization of society and ensure their civic, economic, political or societal participation and inclusion, or, on the contrary, are processes of digitization leading to increased levels of disempowerment at an individual level?

In today's society, digitization has become the new social norm that defines the organization and evolution of public and commercial services. The rationalization of commercial services into digital solutions such as Internet banking has led to a situation in which responsibilities for accessing and using digital services have shifted from an institutional level – that of the bank itself – towards a micro-level – that of the individual user.

Through digitized services, the responsibilities and workload of private companies is being brought down, whereas individuals are accounted for acquiring material access (e.g. home PC, secure Internet access [. . .]) and the necessary skills and awareness. There is, however, a tendency to ignore individuals who do not have the access or the competencies to deal with these digital environments. This, consequently, increases and reinforces mechanisms of exclusion (Helsper, 2011). It also implies that the ongoing and rapid digitization of society is leading to the disempowerment of a vast part of the population.

Many, and especially those who are digitally excluded, feel the pressure to assimilate with the dominant culture of digitization (Jehoel-Gijsbers and Vrooman, 2007; Vranken *et al.*, 2007). There is, however, the matter of choice. Not all individuals want to become fully engaged with ICTs. Some authors therefore make the clear distinction between digital exclusion, referring to the “obstacles imposed by the social, economic, geographical or physical situation of individuals, such as not being able to afford a computer” and digital choice, to be understood as “the personal choices of individuals shaped by an individual’s cultural or social characteristics” (Dutton *et al.*, 2009, p. 16).

According to Helsper (2011) there is, however, no such thing as a free informed choice. Individual choices are partly determined by the individual’s social and cultural capital, while also being restricted by the surrounding structures at macro- and meso-levels. Citizens are also constrained by what could be called *objective circumstances*, whether they wish so or not. Overcoming these constraints is often not down to one’s own skill-set, knowledge, enthusiasm or desires, but emanates from the wider social structure. Or to put it even more bluntly: if Internet users want to preserve their social ties and stay in touch with their colleagues and friends, there is little choice but to use the social networking site (SNS) that everyone else uses, which is what Trottier and Lyon (2011, p. 98) have defined as *soft coercion*. Even if users, for example, might be concerned about privacy matters, which is the most problematic issue connected to SNS’s, overcoming the risk of being excluded can take precedence over other disadvantages such as ignorance, lack of competence and awareness (Taddicken, 2011). Similarly, if users want to search the web, there are few alternatives to the dominant search engines that simultaneously sell their private data. The so-called free choices of individuals are in that sense always limited by the contextual circumstances.

Recent studies highlight the highly individualised experience of digital and social exclusion. Qualitative research shows that differences in usage patterns or digital skills do not determine whether feelings of exclusion submerge, but that the individualized negative experiences with ICTs have a significant influence (Brotcorne *et al.*, 2010; Schurmans and Mariën, 2013). However, while individuals may not feel excluded as such, they are nevertheless subject to mechanisms of exclusion that distinguishes them from the accepted norms in society. Recent research on youth not in education, employment or training (NEETs) – individuals not in education, employment or training – showed that several individuals did not feel digitally excluded because they found alternative ways of coping with the different barriers they were encountering. For example, they used various public and private Internet access points and were able to develop their skills in an autonomous way through a trial-and-error approach. Having quality broadband access at home, which is considered to be a given in most Western European societies, however, appeared to be a major issue for these individuals because of a lack of sustainable financial means. Hence, structural mechanisms of inequality are clearly at play (Schurmans and Mariën, 2013). Helsper (2012, p. 28) claims that these exceptions, individuals who manage to deal significantly with ICTs in spite of various barriers they encounter, might be the most interesting cases to study to gain insights and information about the inclusion processes:

The characteristics of the unexpectedly included will aid theorization about which resources and impact mediators are the most important in breaking the rich-get-richer cycle where digital exclusion reinforces or perpetuates offline exclusion.

According to [Brants and Frissen \(2003\)](#), every reflection about the relation between digital and social exclusion should start from determining whether digital exclusion is the direct result of a disadvantaged societal position such as a lack of financial means or competences or whether digital exclusion, just the opposite, even creates and reinforces existing mechanisms of social exclusion.

Digital inclusion: towards effective and sustainable processes of empowerment?

The misfits of access and market-oriented policies

In contrast with traditional media as landline phones or television, no universal service policy was applied to the distribution of the Internet or any new ICTs. The diffusion of these ICTs were (and still are), in most Western countries, left to the market, and are, as such, primarily driven by commercial interests ([van Dijk, 2005](#); [Winseck, 2011](#); [Fuchs, 2008, 2011a, 2011b](#); [Curran, 2012](#); [McChesney, 2013](#)). This has led to a series of perverse effects, such as the emergence of socio-spatial inequalities not only between but also within rural and urban communities ([Crang et al., 2006](#); [Curran, 2012](#)). As [Graham \(2002, p. 34\)](#) emphasized a decade ago:

The societal diffusion of ICTs remains starkly uneven at all scales. [. . .] In cities, clusters and enclaves of “superconnected” people, firms and institutions [. . .] and their intense information services, often rest cheek-by-jowl with large numbers of people with non-existent or rudimentary communications technologies and very poor access to electronic information. The social and economic cores and peripheries of the global information “age”, rather than being continents apart, now often lie geographically adjacent to each other within individual cities, in both the North and the South.

This uneven development is also reflected in the fact that private companies are cherry picking, meaning that they concentrate their investments in socio-spatial regions that promise a certain return-on-investment. The lack of broadband access in rural areas, for example, is not caused by a lack of interest from consumers, but created by a lack of interest of private companies as the investments needed are significantly higher than the potential returns ([Steyaert and Gould, 2009](#)). Similar observations were made by [Graham \(2002\)](#), who claimed that “liberalization” of the telecommunication markets intensified the uneven distribution of ICTs. This created a situation in which high income areas have become the automatic and obvious place for investments in innovative infrastructures and services, whereas the poorer and disadvantaged areas are left aside. This demonstrates that the capitalist market is failing to address the uneven distribution of ICTs and, moreover, was (and still is) creating and reinforcing a vast number of structural inequalities ([Pena-Lopez, 2009](#); [Fuchs, 2008, 2011a](#)). Moreover, it highlights the need for structural public policy interventions to redeem these vast inequalities.

Initial public policy interventions at the end of 1990s and at the start of 2000s focussed on providing access to those without access. These interventions were based on the technodeterministic assumption that mere access would directly lead to a take-up and use of ICTs and automatic acquirement and development of digital skills ([Selwyn, 2004](#)). Several studies have, however, shown the limits of these access- and market-driven approaches ([Mariën et al., 2010](#); [Sinclair and Bramley, 2010](#); [van Dijk, 2005](#)). While access remains a primordial condition for the use of ICTs, once barriers of access are diminished, inequalities regarding skills and usage patterns remain. As [Witte and Mannon \(2010, p. 147\)](#) clarify:

In the end, poor and rich alike might have access to the Internet, but only a privileged few are able to turn to the Internet as an asset, a lifestyle, and an incentive.

Moreover, differences in skills, attitude and support networks lead to segmented usage patterns and substantial discrepancies in the ability of individuals to develop capital-enhancing usage patterns ([Zillien and Hargittai, 2009](#); [van Deursen and van Dijk, 2013](#)). In other words, public policies should address the current market failures by

ensuring high-quality access to all, but should in addition also focus on providing the necessary training opportunities and support infrastructures (Steyn and Johanson, 2011). A similar reflection is made by Hargittai (2008) who states that additional investments and interventions at the level of training and social support are needed to enable individuals to reap the benefits of ICTs. Several studies, therefore, suggest policymakers to move away from dominant market interest and invest in the development of digital skills across the overall population through formal and informal training and, simultaneously, put pressure on private companies to invest in user-driven and user-friendly ICTs (Mansell, 2002; Communities and Local Government, 2008a; Tsatsou, 2011).

Gradually, the notion of digital inclusion has come to the fore in policy and research and, moreover, was conceptualized beyond the mere provision of access. Instead, digital inclusion is seen as the process through which direct barriers to ICTs (e.g. access, motivation, support, digital skills [. . .]) are brought down and through which individuals are enabled to regain a sense of power on their life, and increase their ability to participate in various life domains (e.g. employment, education, culture, politics [. . .]) (Brants and Frissen, 2003; Haché and Centeno, 2011). Various studies tried to make digital inclusion policies more concrete and shifted attention towards the need for an active consumption of ICTs, instead of the mere consumption of content (Tsatsou, 2011). They refer to digital inclusion as a process through which individuals move from being a novice user to a digital innovator (Heeley and Damodaran, 2009). The assumption is made that empowered citizens are “makers and shapers of the technologies available to them and the rest of society” or that “in a truly inclusive digital society, citizens need to be actively engaged in the creation of sociotechnical systems”. (Damodaran and Olphert, 2006, p. 51). Moreover, this renewed sense of empowerment and agency is claimed to be achieved through the development of the so-called *capital-enhancing* uses of ICTs (Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008).

Notions about empowerment, inclusion and capital-enhancing usage patterns however raise fundamental questions about the normative presumptions that are present in digital inclusion policies and their discourse. What exactly is meant by capital-enhancing user practices and why would this be seen as an important public policy goal? What is the concrete significance and outcome meant by these concepts? Whose empowerment and empowerment for *what*? Or, to go even further, how are atomized individual users supposed to *change* technologies they use, or even actively transform the platforms available to them? What kinds and levels of inclusion? and What exactly defines the added value of ICTs? More yet, added value for whom, owners of the Web 2.0 platforms and SNS's that extract user's labour, which was mentioned above? Or an individual's experience of the inclusion and participation goals which were set by policymakers? For example, gaming and other entertainment-based ICTs are easily considered as inferior and seldom seen as suitable policy goals. However, these types of usage patterns can bring added value on other, less visible levels such as managing collaboration, strategic planning or interactive communication (Bleumers *et al.*, 2012). In most cases, reflections and strategies for digital inclusion are made in terms of economic and social benefits that are distinctive of instrumental reasoning – which is, according to Fuchs (2008, p. 189), “the very logic that modern class societies are built upon” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002) – such as productivity growth, reduction of the cost of social exclusion, re-integration in the labour market or increased participation in education (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006; Brants and Frissen, 2003; Steyn and Johanson, 2011; Wright and Wadhwa, 2010).

The normative discrepancy between individual's freedom of choice on which ICTs to use and the policy goals defined by governments also highlights the limits of digital inclusion approaches. Where does the free choice of individuals to not engage with ICTs and the intervention radius of policy end? Or as Brants and Frissen (2003, p. 8) remark:

Inherent in the in/exclusion dichotomy is that being socially excluded is defined as bad and inclusion the preferred state of being, worth striving for and putting an effort into. Emphasising human agency runs the risk that inclusion will not only be seen as a right, but also as an

obligation: empowerment as an opportunity to participate is propagated as a necessity to be active too.

Also from a policy perspective, there are limits to free choice. Is a push approach justified when someone chooses not to use ICTs or does not wish to develop his digital skills, but shows limited social and economic participation in society? or Should free choice to not engage with ICTs be respected, no matter what?

The limits of user-centric approaches for digital inclusion

Alongside the failures of access-driven approaches, more user-centric approaches to digital inclusion have emerged. These user-centric strategies were highly driven by the fact that many of the access-driven initiatives failed to generate the necessary engagement of individuals (Sinclair and Bramley, 2010). From a theoretical point of view, domestication research showed that the adoption and domestication of ICTs were highly determined by individual practices and their daily wants and needs and, hence, by the ICT-related character of the various social contexts in which individuals need to function on a regular basis (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006; Mariën *et al.*, 2010). From a more practical perspective, bottom-up approaches – developed by civil society organizations and based upon a free and demand-driven approach led by individuals – showed to be successful towards engaging non-users, unmotivated and disengaged learners and disadvantaged groups (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006; Mariën *et al.*, 2010). By using personal interests, direct needs or daily practices of participants as a hook for engagement with ICTs in public computer and open learning spaces, along with a highly personalized and customized pedagogical approach (e.g. small groups, low pace, one-on-one coaching by peers, visual learning materials, *ad hoc* training [. . .]), these initiatives succeed in providing an immediate added value (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006; Mariën *et al.*, 2010; Haché and Centeno, 2011). Consequently, user-centric approaches became a central element of digital inclusion practices:

“Ofcom (2009)” concluded that for any options to work among those who are currently not interested in the Internet, awakening personal interest is a prerequisite. One way of generating interest among Internet resisters is to take a more personal approach, by demonstrating the potential relevance of the Internet in a person’s life (Wright and Wadhwa, 2010, p. 149).

Many of these user-centric initiatives are built upon participatory and action-oriented approaches. By actively engaging with individuals, or their community, the underlying reasoning is that the provided solutions will be much more in line with day-to-day reality and particular circumstances instead of being driven by top-down policy goals, and hence, the chances for long-term and sustainable changes are more important and readily achievable (Sinclair and Bramley, 2010; Haché and Centeno, 2011; Steyn and Johanson, 2011). An important consequence of this need to respect individual choices and preferences is that there is no “one size fits all solution” for digital inclusion:

It is important to note that neither the needs of the different disadvantaged groups, nor the respective benefits for each group, are necessarily the same. What is crucial, and most successful, is that programmes focus on the individual needs of participants; the actual applications and their benefits rather than the ICTs (Communities and Local Government, 2008b, p. 38).

This emphasis on user-centric approaches is, however, accompanied by a number of risks. Citizen-centred initiatives tend to ignore the social, economic, political and technical conditions within which individual choices are made and within which individuals inevitably act. It is the wider social context that, in many ways, limits the possibilities that individuals have in digital environments. This is especially so when taking into account vast power asymmetries and social inequalities that are part and parcel of class-divided capitalist societies. Because of the mutual influence between

digital and social exclusion, achieving digital inclusion would demand for a complex set of interventions and a whole range of preconditions that need to be fulfilled. More so, as pointed out by Tsatsou (2011, p. 326):

Digital inclusion is not a solution to the multi-dimensional problem of social exclusion and should be seen as a facilitator or result of the dialogue and interdependencies between socio-cultural traits of and policy and regulatory practices in the information society.

From a policy perspective, there is too much emphasis on human agency and too little attention for the macro-level context in which structural inequalities, inherent to capitalist societies, emerge (Brants and Frissen, 2003). Realizing long-term processes of digital and social inclusion is, in reality, extremely challenging and resource-intensive and asks for highly coordinated, straightforward and well thought through public policy interventions in which stakeholders from various backgrounds – policy, public service, private sector and civil society – jointly focus and work towards similar goals (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006; Heeley and Damodaran, 2009; Wright and Wadhwa, 2010; IMLS *et al.*, 2011). This implies that the strategic goals of digital inclusion initiatives and strategies, including the user-centric approaches, need to be embedded across public policy domains such as employment, welfare, poverty, integration and education and, ideally, organized by a structural overarching entity (Bianchi *et al.*, 2006). A sustainable digital inclusion approach should also include a structural recognition and funding of the bottom-up civil society approaches that have emerged throughout the past few years to address market failures (Boeltzig and Pilling, 2007; Steyaert and Gould, 2009; Mariën *et al.*, 2010; Haché and Centeno, 2011). Digital inclusion also requires an open and evolutive policy planning that allows for *ad hoc* interventions as ICTs evolve frequently and rapidly and, hence, continuously create new cycles of digital exclusion mechanisms (van Dijk, 2005; Bianchi *et al.*, 2006; Notley and Foth, 2008). Unsurprisingly, in the vast majority of Western capitalist societies, these various preconditions are often set as policy goals but rarely accounted for (Mariën *et al.*, 2010).

Needless to say, it is especially the lack of an overarching strategic and theoretical framework for digital inclusion that hampers the development of a sustainable and structural policy approach (Helsper, 2012). Currently, knowledge and insights gathered on digital inclusion practices are mainly based upon case studies and success stories translated into best practices. In many cases, however, these best practices are difficult to transfer to other individuals, social groups or into different social contexts. Insufficient background information is available on the preconditions and contextual factors needed to ensure transferability and scalability of such practices. Consequently, at the European level, calls for more evidence-based policies are emerging. This evolution, however, is subject to a number of questions about the inability to measure processes of inclusion and empowerment. Currently, civil society organizations believe they have an impact because of noticeable changes in the daily lives of their disadvantaged participants. Quantifying or measuring such progress remains difficult because digital inclusion is never the sole driver of social inclusion and it is difficult to extract the impact of digital inclusion out of the equation. Organizations, moreover, fear that, at the policy level, impact assessment and evidence-based policies will lead to financing mechanisms based on narrowly defined outputs. This would put pressure on organizations to justify their social and economic return on investment and the need to implement an instrumental *cost and benefit* approach. It is clear that, in this case, the weakest individuals – because they are more difficult to engage, motivate and support – will be the first victims (Mariën and Van Audenhove, 2010; Mariën *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

This article questioned to what extent processes of structural (dis)empowerment and class inequalities are at odds with strategies of digital inclusion and empowerment policies. It shows

that digital inequalities are an inherent aspect of Western capitalist societies. Moreover, they are a structural issue that requires fundamental and structural changes and public policy interventions, amongst other politics of redistribution. The emergence of ICTs and the ongoing digitization of all life domains have led to both structural mechanisms of empowerment and of disempowerment. Moreover, the level of digital skills and the ability to use ICTs to one's own social, economic, cultural or political benefit, has proven to define one's capacity to become empowered. Highly skilled and autonomous individuals and groups, such as ICT developers, hackers, open source movements or piracy movements, are increasingly becoming empowered, as they – more than governments and policymakers – are able to question and undermine the traditional and new power institutions in place. Low and unskilled individuals, on the contrary, are experiencing an increased sense of disempowerment, as they have no power or influence on the processes of digitization or on the overall presence and integration of ICTs in all life domains. As such, the ongoing and widespread digitization of Western capitalist societies, often led by a market-driven reasoning of commodification and cutting down costs, is creating and, in many cases, reinforcing existing social and digital inequalities.

It also remains difficult for most individuals – the average and the highly skilled included – to have a defining influence on the operational characteristics of the key platforms they use online today, to be fully included in the public life via the Internet or to be empowered in the sphere of politics. Even though all media technologies are in themselves antagonistic, meaning they offer both repressive and emancipatory potentials, structural inequalities in which they are embedded seriously hamper alternative uses that would go against the dominant relations in society (Fuchs, 2008, 2011a). It is especially difficult for users – and even groups of users – to go against the logic under which the Internet has developed in the recent decades. Obstacles, which users collide against, are a result of processes such as user surveillance, corporate control over the majority of the Internet, privatization, concentration and commodification of both users and the content (which, in most cases, was produced by users within these online environments).

In spite of the structural nature of digital and social inequalities, the article indicates that the distribution of ICTs tends to be mostly market-driven, which has led to a series of perverse effects such as an uneven distribution of ICTs and the emergence of socio-spatial inequalities. Consequently, solutions for market failures, in terms of alternative places of qualitative access or informal training opportunities, are mainly left to the *ad hoc* initiatives of civil society organizations and so-called digital inclusion policies. However, both approaches tend to focus mainly at the micro-level solutions and hardly question the wider context. The bottom-up approaches by civil society organizations are solely providing solutions on a case-by-case basis because of their project-based and short-term funding. Digital inclusion initiatives are also mainly driven by user-centric and participatory approaches to ensure engagement and take-up of ICTs. However, these *ad hoc* and user-centric initiatives do not, and cannot, diminish the vast social and digital inequality structures that are created in the Western capitalist system with its increasingly vast inequalities. Moreover, the emergence and relative success of user-centric approaches has led to a situation in which too much emphasis is placed upon these micro-level solutions and in which digital inclusion policies are translated into individual cases that need to be resolved, but without intervention at the meso- or macro-levels. This forces individuals to become the main actors for their own inclusion and empowerment. Problems that are social in nature thus become highly individualised. Needless to say, such a rational, autonomous and extremely agency-driven strategy only works for people with significant levels of social, economic and cultural capital. Even in these cases, however, the “objective” social circumstances and social structures remain intact. These, as already mentioned, include both the crude logic of the capitalist market, under which the Internet has been developing, and the social totality in which we live. There are thus inequalities existing both *within* societies and also *between* different societies.

These issues can be seen as some of the many contradictions connected to digital exclusion/inclusion debates: even if particular individual cases are solved, the inequalities

continue to be reproduced at a wider social level, which, again, leads to mechanisms of individual exclusion. A fundamental question, therefore, remains: is a system where everyone has a truly all-encompassing access to digital environments that are not based on exploitation and surveillance of their users possible within capitalism? The article shows that the vast majority of current digital inclusion policies are first and foremost subordinated to one underlying and instrumental goal – so the capitalist system and the labour market function better.

All the questions and reflections raised above add to the fact that there is a stringent need to move towards more balanced digital inclusion strategies. Namely, towards public policy interventions at various levels through which large-scale mechanisms of digital and social exclusion inherent in the capitalist societies are addressed. They must go beyond access- and market-driven strategies and move our societies away from the processes of disempowerment that emerge at a macro-level, the key reason being vast social inequalities brought about by the unbridled capitalism. At the wider social level, the interventions should therefore be aimed at wealth redistribution within societies. At the meso- and micro-levels, these public policies should foremost focus on ensuring qualitative access to the Internet to all, through providing a universal service to the Internet, especially in remote or disadvantaged areas, or through indirect measures such as an automatically assigned discount telecommunications rate for low-income households. In addition, public policy interventions should focus on delivering a broad range of formal and informal education and training opportunities, aimed at the population at large, so as to ensure that all individuals are enabled to develop the necessary skills to deal with the ongoing digitization of society, the low-educated, the non-motivated, the low-skilled and the non-users included. Even so important is the necessity to go beyond the *ad hoc* character of bottom-up approaches and the enablement of structural interventions at a micro-level, amongst others by recognizing and structurally funding civil society organizations active in the field through the establishment of long-term social programs. Overall, digital inclusion policies should consist of an overarching and simultaneous strategy that aims to address digital and social exclusion mechanisms at the same time. This implies that a sincere questioning of the capitalist system is even so important, along with the various normative viewpoints such a questioning would entail.

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About the authors

Ilse Mariën is currently working at iMinds SMIT, a research centre attached to the Free University of Brussels (VUB) where she is involved in several projects related to social implications and policy aspects of new media. She also aims to finish her PhD on digital inclusion policies by 2014. The main goal of this doctoral research project is to develop alternative policy approaches to counter digital exclusion based on a critical analysis of the transitions in digital divide theory; and in-depth empirical research on grassroots initiatives aimed at combating the digital exclusion of at-risk groups; and digital inclusion policies in Flanders. Ilse Mariën is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: ilse.marien@vub.ac.be

Jernej A. Prodnik is a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute of Communication Studies and Journalism at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague (the PolCoRe research group), and a researcher at the Social Communication Research Centre, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana (Slovenia). He completed his PhD in media and communication studies at the University of Ljubljana in 2013 under the title Political Economy of Communication and Structural Transformations of Capitalism. His principal research interests include critique of political economy (with a focus on media and communication) and the wider social context of technological changes and democratic potentials brought about by new technologies.

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