"Digital inequalities and vulnerability among Internet users"

Valenduc, Gérard

ABSTRACT

The paper addresses issues related to the "second-order digital divide", i.e. inequalities in Internet usage, once the access barrier is overcome. In a first step, the concepts of digital competences and digital vulnerability are highlighted. The second step is based on empirical investigation carried out in Belgium, through biographical interviews of Internet users between 20 and 60 years old, in 2009-2010. It draws a typology of Internet users' profiles and trajectories, describing the motivations, the diversity of usage framework and the dynamics of engagement of users. The third step explains how the constructed typology can explain the development of digital and/or social vulnerability and the consequences in terms of inequalities and social justice.
Digital inequalities and vulnerability among Internet users

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Conceptual approach

- Existing knowledge
  - The concept of second order DD
    - Assumption of a shift from inequalities in access to inequalities in use
    - Few (qualitative) empirical studies
    - Initial hypothesis: second order DD = issue of skills (digital skills and generic skills)
    - Cognitive and social resources more determinant than material resources
Conceptual approach

- Conceptual framework centred on usage
  - Usage = social practices built up on use
    - Usage territory: nature and conditions of ICT uses
    - Usage framework: place in life and meaning of usages
    - Usage trajectory: time dimension and dynamics of usages
  - Renewed insight on social issues related to the digital divide
    - Social integration through 5 spheres (productive - social/relational - consumption - civic - self-development)
    - Digital inequalities = inequalities in relation to the social norm of the information society
    - Emphasis on resources, capabilities and choices, beyond skills
    - Vulnerability, risks and opportunities, rather than exclusion

Methodology

- Qualitative analysis
  - In-depth interviews (68)
    - Individual trajectory: starting point, evolution, current usages, learning process, meanings, expectations
    - Balanced sample: age (20-60), M/F, education levels, socio-professional status
  - Typological analysis
    - From individual stories to users profiles
    - From description to interpretation
  - Transversal analysis
    - From a typology of users and trajectories to an analysis in terms of integration / vulnerability
### Results

#### Typology of users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived usefulness</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Low</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strong constraint</strong></td>
<td>Type 1 The conscientious apprentice (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Type 2 The distant skilful user (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium constraint</strong></td>
<td>Type 3 The clairvoyant follower (6)</td>
<td>Type 4 The assiduous user by default (4)</td>
<td>Type 5 The resigned sceptic (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low or no constraint</strong></td>
<td>Type 6 The expert routine user (15)</td>
<td>Type 7 The seduced curious (9)</td>
<td>Type 8 The conformist consumer (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Social integration
- 5 spheres of social integration
- Interaction with ICT but uneven and not concomitantly
  - The "good student of the information society" = 1 out of 8 interviewees
  - Self-development very often impacted by Internet use
  - Wide variety of uses and purposes in communication
  - Amplification of existing civic engagements but no new civic dynamics

#### Vulnerability
- Indicators of vulnerability
  - Level of autonomy, digital skills, available support, risky behaviours, symbolic value and meaning of ICT, capability to make choices
Results: vulnerability

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- No specific vulnerability (48% of the sample)
- Low vulnerability
- More significant vulnerability (31% of the sample)
- Social instead of digital vulnerability

Conclusions and recommendations

- **Questioning existing policies**
  - Policies aimed at improving the supply of e-services
    - User practices become less sensitive to supply policies and from pre-formatted behaviours
  - Policies targeted to "groups at risk" (socially)
    - Less relevant in terms of second order digital divide
    - Need for redefining the targets (+ suggestions)

- **De-coupling digital / social inequalities**
  - Digital integration does not guarantee social integration
    - Need for embedding digital inclusion policies within wider social policies
  - Nevertheless, unequal distribution of factors of vulnerability
    - According to gender, age and professional activity
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www.belspo.be/ta

Publication in French (book):
Diversité et vulnérabilité des les usages des TIC - La fracture numérique au second degré (2010)
Périne Brotcorne, Lotte Damhuis, Véronique Laurent, Gérard Valenduc, Patricia Vendramin
Academia Press, Gent/Brussels

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