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Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue on Inequality in the Digital Environment

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Abstract: The purpose of this special issue is to explore social inequalities in the digital environment. The motivation for this issue is derived from the disproportionate focus on technological and economic aspects of the Information Society to the detriment of sociological and cultural aspects. The research presented here falls along three dimensions of inequality. Two papers explore the ways that race orders interaction online. A second pair of papers explores the experiences of technology users with physical and mental disabilities. A final paper looks at gender, and the higher rates of intimate partner violence experienced by women online. Taken as a whole, these five papers highlight some of the ways that the digital environment can reproduce or mitigate inequalities that have been molded and routinized in the physical environment.

Keywords: digital divide; digital inequality; social stratification

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Since the 1970's, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become increasingly important to organizations and people. These technologies have increased our ability to process information (the microprocessor computer chip, the personal computer) and communicate information (satellites, e-mail, and mobile phone). These technologies have spread horizontally across the globe, and vertically into more aspects of everyday life, creating what is often called the Information Society.

Scholars have worked to understand the transformations that have coincided with the wide scale adoption of ICTs. Several scholars have produced models of the Information Society that can be considered canonical. These models succumb, in my view, to a degree of *techno-economic determinism*. By this I mean that the understandings they provide imply that the most important changes in the information society are technological and economic, and that other transformations in other spheres of life necessarily follow. Daniel Bell's classic work *The Coming of the Post-Industrial*

Society pointed out the decline of manufacturing in the United States and the shift of economic growth to the information industry [1]. Manuel Castells' *Network Society* trilogy added to this notion, famously exploring the battle between the regions, corporations, and people highly interconnected in the "space of flows", and people less involved with ICTs in the "space of places" [2]. More recently, Yochai Benkler, in his *Wealth of Networks* wrote that the proliferation of the Internet and the personal computer has given rise to a "networked information economy" where individuals have freedom to produce both for market and for non-market purposes [3]. The media is also complicit. Through the media we are bombarded with messages about companies producing the latest "must have" gadget, the most recent advances in processing power, which nations are best positioned to grow in the global information economy, and so on.

To be sure, this particular lens through which to understand our times is not incorrect. Instead, it is incomplete. If we can think of the interconnected information and communication technologies that dominate our Information Society—the computers, the mobile phones, the computerized appliances, and the Internet that runs through all of these technologies - as creating a new environment, then we can conceptualize a distinct space where social interaction can occur. We can explore this "digital environment", and judge the extent to which micro and macro level social processes from the physical environment are rearticulated in this new environment. Some of these social processes are:

- *How we develop our individual and group identiti*es. Our racial, ethnic, religious, national, and regional identities are constructed by who we communicate with and the information we process. Because manipulating information and communication with others is not limited by space and time in the digital environment, individuals have the ability to construct identities that are contrary or even contradictory to those they have developed in the physical environment. This freedom can support deviant behavior, but it can also nurture self-expression to a level never before imagined.
- *The production and consumption of cultural products*. The diversification of cultural products available in the marketplace has been conceptualized neatly by Chris Anderson's "long tail" concept, where online stores can offer a wide array of products because there are no space limits in the digital environment [4]. But this also works for non-market cultural products. The digital environment, with its low costs of entry and maintenance, allows people to produce cultural artifacts without the necessity of profit. At the same time people are—at least in the abstract—able to consume a wider array of cultural products because they are free, or low cost, and available any time and any place.
- *How belief systems are constructed, adopted, and revised*. The frames through which people understand their world—including the various "isms" like racism, sexism, and nationalism—are no longer created solely through government bodies and a handful of media organizations. The distributed architecture of ICTs opens up belief production to a wider array of people and organizations. This is in general a positive development that supports democracy and free speech. However, it is not an unequivocal good, as Cass Sunstein [5] and Eli Pariser [6] have argued with their notions of a "daily me" and "filter bubble" respectively. Sunstein and Pariser's work suggest that there is a downside to this proliferation of beliefs, as the lack of a common narrative or perspective can lead to conflict.

- *The development of various non-economic capitals (social and cultural)*. Social scientists are well aware of the effects that social and cultural capital has on the ability of individuals to achieve their goals. Because ICTs change the manner in which people form connections and gain information, how these forms of capital are acquired and who possesses these capitals may also change. The cultural capital that one can acquire is no longer restricted to one's access to institutions or people rooted in physical proximity. The development of one's social networks may now incorporate people who cut across class, racial, and regional lines. Thus, many groups formerly excluded from flows of capital may now have access.
- *New forms of deviance and social control*. Norms of communication, decorum, and presentation of self were developed and standardized in the physical environment. These same norms are not as effective for regulating behavior in the digital environment. The growth of cyberbullying, flaming and other instances of disingenuousness speak to a reshuffling of norms and mechanisms of social control. For example, scholars have spent a great deal of time exploring the rise of racist hate speech in an environment where social controls are at a minimum, among them being Jesse Daniels in her work *CyberRacism* [7].
- *The ability of social institutions to perform their historical functions*. ICTs present both challenges and opportunities to the institutions that order society. Brick and mortar schools face challenges from groups offering instruction online, but have the resources to make the biggest digital footprints. Law enforcement must reckon with new forms of deviance, but at the same time have more powerful tools of surveillance and information gathering. Governments find it difficult to control information flows on a distributed medium like the Internet, yet the wholesale move of essential communication onto this one medium presents a convenient way for governments to block and censor [8].
- *The reproduction or mitigation of social inequalities*. In Western countries non-white peoples and women have had fewer privileges, less prestige, and less power than white males. These privileges have been codified in laws and routinized in everyday behavior. However, the digital environment is a new space, where laws are irrelevant, and anonymity can make the granting or prohibiting of social privileges difficult.

Certainly scholars explore these topics and many more. However, it is my belief that the social processes above are underexplored in comparison to technological and economic processes in the information society. This special issue is one step towards rectifying this imbalance.

This special issue will explore the reproduction and mitigation of social inequalities. Given the emphasis on the digital environment, we re-label these social inequalities as digital inequalities. The five pieces of research in this special issue explores digital inequality along three major dimensions, race, gender, and disability. If there is one overriding question that permeates all five pieces is: In what ways are the historical inequalities shaped in the physical environment reproduced or mitigated in the digital environment?

Two papers explore racial inequality. Danielle Smith's [9] article "African Americans and Network Disadvantage: Enhancing Social Capital through Participation on Social Networking Sites", shows how African American with less social capital than whites in the physical environment use ICTs to redress this imbalance. Smith's article illustrates a means through which the unique properties of the

digital environment can be leveraged to overcome trenchant historical inequalities. While Smith's article points to ways the effects of race are mitigated, Rebecca J. West and Bhoomi K. Thakore [10] in their article "Racial Exclusion in the Online World" look at an example where racial inequalities are reproduced. Specifically, West and Thakore's work describes ways that white supremacist ideology maintains the marginalization of non-whites in the digital environment.

Two articles explore the experiences of people with physical or intellectual disabilities. Sylvia Söderström's article "Digital Differentiation in Young People's Internet Use—Eliminating or Reproducing Disability Stereotypes", explores how assistive technologies may, instead of mitigating differences between Norwegians with or without physical disabilities, exacerbate differences [11]. Söderström's methods give voice to a group that can be marginalized. Moreover, the findings from her study highlight the importance of technology designed to a person with disability's sense of self. Meanwhile, Darren Chadwick, Caroline Wesson and Chris Fullwood, in their review article "Internet Access by People with Intellectual Disabilities: Inequalities and Opportunities", have compiled research on the barriers that people with intellectual disabilities face, ways to work around those barriers, and the potential benefits of ICTs to people with those disabilities [12]. As they point out, the majority of people with intellectual disabilities are not using the Internet to the same degree as others. Thus, the exclusion that can characterize the lives of people with disabilities in the physical environment reasserts itself in the digital environment.

A fifth study, by Alison Marganski, explores the important issue of intimate partner violence online [13]. Marganski's article, "Virtual Relationship Violence and Perspectives on Punishment: Do Gender or Nationality Matter?" employs a survey administered to students in Poland and the United States to compare rates of intimate partner violence by gender. Marganski finds evidence that the disproportionate rates of intimate partner violence directed towards women found in the physical environment are reproduced in the digital environment. Marganski's findings are a call to social workers and professionals who work with youth to focus on the role of new technologies in perpetuating gender inequalities.

In conclusion, the purpose of this special issue is to highlight some of the changes in the non-economic social processes in our Information Society, particularly as they relate to inequality. It is important that scholars understand as much about these social processes as possible so that we can continue to have a culturally, intellectually, and socially vibrant digital environment in the 21st century.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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