

Digital differences – inequalities and online practices

SUSAN HALFORD: Hello. I'm Professor Susan Halford.

HUW DAVIES: And I'm Dr. Huw Davies.

JO DIXON: And I'm Jo Dixon.

SUSAN HALFORD: We're going to talk today about some of the social differences and inequalities that have a big impact on how we all use the Web. But, because the Web has become so widely embedded in people's everyday lives, it's often assumed that we all use the Web, and in fact even access the Web, in exactly the same way.

However, this clearly isn't the case. We know that, even in the UK, about 1 in 10 of the adult population has either never used the Web or hasn't used it at all in the last three months. Now, there may be all sorts of reasons for that, but research shows us that there are some really big biases, in terms of the types of people, the social groups, that are less likely to use the Web.

So older people, for instance, are much less likely to use the Web than younger people. Those who are in social classes 4 and 5, which are the categories that government statistics use to describe people in unskilled or semiskilled occupations, who may also have lower levels of education and lower income, those social classes 4 and 5 are less likely to have access to the Web at home or to use the Web as often.

JO DIXON: I agree. Take this MOOC, for example. It's designed to enable people to learn whenever they want, from wherever they want. But some types of disability, for example, could make it harder to get online anytime, anywhere. If you need specialised or highly personalised equipment in order to operate a web browser, you may be confined to your home, where the system's set up for you. You may not be able to take advantage of public

computers or the mobile internet. And this may make it harder to get support with learning-online skills, which in turn could make it more difficult to participate fully.

So, the availability and quality of internet access, and the types of equipment that people need or have available, can impact on their online behaviour at a profound level.

HUW DAVIES: I agree. For example, my research shows type of access, type of device, conditions of uses, and engagements online not only reproduce existing inequalities but also create new ones. I find, for example, young people who have poor credit ratings, young people who don't own their own home or get moved around a lot, often don't have a fixed broadband connection. They will have smartphones, usually secondhand, but they can't afford data contracts. They rely on public Wi-Fi.

In schools and college, they're often the same. The young people have access to laptops or a PC or printer to do homework or coursework. And of course, they only have cheap smartphones or cheap tablets and access to internet on buses or in fast-food restaurants. And these devices and environments are not conducive to homework.

I also spoke to young people who get intimidated, trolled, and bullied so much online they just leave the platform. This is often much more likely to happen to young women and young people from certain ethnic backgrounds. I've also met lots of young people and their families who have responded to moral panics in the media by withdrawing from the internet altogether. They only maybe use one app or platform, or maybe not use social media at all, because they so worry about fraud, being hacked, or interacting with hostile strangers, and so on.

SUSAN HALFORD: So, who does and doesn't have access to the Web isn't just a question of individual choice, individuals making a choice. But this is deeply patterned by social categories such as class, age, disability, and also sometimes by gender and ethnicity, as well. It's really well known in both government research and also in academic research that there's social differences in terms of who has access to the Web, who's even online. But it doesn't stop there.

If we look at what people do when they're online, and we look at the value that people get out of being online, we also see that there are some really big differences. So, some people

may be really good at using the Web to find out the best prices for services or goods, for example. Some people might set up businesses and be successful. Some people might become multibillionaires by setting up Facebook. Not many of us, probably.

But many people have a far more basic use of the Web. And, in some cases, even, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, exposing people to risks, for example, of fraud or maybe cyber stalking or cyber bullying online. So, the combination of technical skills perhaps with entrepreneurial skills and perhaps with wider social networks may mean that some people get a lot of value out of the Web and use it in very sophisticated ways, whereas other people get less value out of it or use it in different kinds of equally sophisticated ways but they may not make them billionaires, for instance.

JO DIXON: What's more, differences in levels of skills, trust, and motivation also lead to different outcomes. Online behaviours are linked to offline behaviours. A role in the family and in society, expectations that people have of us, and cultural values all impact on how we use the internet and how much we gain from it.