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# Does the Internet Deliver?

Eight Values as a Yardstick for the Production, Moderation and Regulation of Public Communication on the Internet



# 2 Equality or Inequality?




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# Equality or Inequality?

## IN SHORT

***The question of (in)equality arises in many forms on the Internet: it concerns access to the medium, its selective use and the outcomes achieved. A distinction must be made between the reception and the communication side. While access gaps have largely been reduced, selective use for reception and communication is likely to vary considerably. Political interest and media literacy are extremely relevant when it comes to explaining gaps. Whether it is possible to achieve advantages can ultimately only be seen from the effects, which have scarcely been researched on either side, however.***

The value "equality",[1] which is stressed in the democratic or republican tradition, demands that all societal groups have an equal opportunity to participate in the political process or in relevant activities in other social subsystems. The question of equality goes beyond the value of freedom, since other factors need to be taken into account. These include the motives, competences and other resources of the actors that are necessary to successfully participate in public communication. It is also important to pay attention to the various forms of participation and measurement indicators.

Do all societal groups have the same chances of successfully using the Internet? Could underprivileged groups ever be able to catch up with advantaged groups? Originally, research only dealt with knowledge gaps, i. e. with differences in news media reception and the resulting differences in knowledge growth for low-status and high-status groups. It was assumed that in the event of an increase in available knowledge, for example through a newly emerging medium, high-status groups could acquire this knowledge more quickly, thereby widening the gap. The emergence of knowledge gaps can be explained by socio-demographic variables (especially education), but also by other variables (such as topic interest and media literacy).[2] The team of authors led by Peter Van Aelst[3] considers their current evaluation of the state of research as overwhelming evidence of a growing gap in the use of news media, both online and offline. The high choice media environment made it easier to follow personal preferences. It is therefore easier to satisfy the demand of politically interested and uninterested people, which should result in greater gaps in knowledge.

In the case of the Internet, the question of social (in)equality effects must be broadened beyond the aspect of disparities in knowledge acquisition. Both the receptive and the communicative side of usage need to be taken into account in all facets. The *optimistic view* here is that the Internet reduces social inequality. At first glance, there is much to be said for this perspective: it offers easy access to an enormous pool of knowledge, and anyone can speak in public with little effort. Previously disadvantaged population groups should therefore find it easier to acquire valuable knowledge or influence the political process in their favour, than was the case with previous media.

However, the *pessimistic counterthesis* was adopted early and prominently: it states that the Internet leads to widening gaps, and thus to a *digital divide* in society. This is because privileged groups can more easily exploit possibilities afforded by the Internet. This further increases their advantage over other groups, thereby increasing social inequality.

For a long time, the discussion about the digital divide was limited to the question of technical access. It revolved exclusively around the question posed by former tennis player Boris Becker in a legendary commercial for AOL: "Am I already in?" Only the technical access was asked for, but not the specific use of the Internet and its outcomes. According to figures from OECD, in almost all countries the great majority of households has access to the Internet today, so the problem of *access gaps* has largely been resolved.[4]

But that would be an oversimplified way of looking at it: in addition to access, the question also focuses on how people use the Internet and what they achieve with it.[5] The effect is ultimately the only way to determine whether the Internet reinforces privileges or not. However, both *use* (*second-level digital divide*), and *outcomes* (*third-level digital divide*) have to be considered in a more differentiated manner than with the traditional mass media.[6] Specifically regarding use of the Internet, a distinction must first be drawn in terms of the assumption of roles ("Who acts as recipient or communicator?") and secondly in terms of the exercise of that role ("Which content is selected for reception? And which topic is selected for communication?"). This is followed by the question of the positive outcomes, i. e. what benefits can be derived from these activities.

## Use and Outcome Gaps on the Recipient Side

In the first instance, the *role of the recipient*: here we can observe *usage gaps*. In a representative panel survey (2002–2009), Martin Emmer, Gerhard Vowe and Jens Wolling found that the proportion of people using political information in Germany was "almost consistently higher among younger people, men, those with higher formal educational qualifications, higher earners, the gainfully employed and West Germans"[7]. Political interest and party affiliation also led to a stronger reception.[8] Not only in political communication, but in other areas of the Internet, there was a tendency for high status users to utilise it for information, while low status users tended to utilise it for entertainment.[9]

The receptive use of the Internet also results in *gaps in outcomes* as regards the "distribution of specific resources – such as information, social capital or opportunities for participation".[10] There is not much to be said about this due to the lack of suitable studies.[11] A somewhat older study conducted by Mirko Marr from Switzerland may be mentioned here. A survey showed that online users were better informed about political issues than offline users, that they knew people and facts better and could explain them correctly. The reasons for this, however, were "that Internet users are more politically active, use the political coverage of traditional mass media more effectively and do so on the basis of an interest profile that is more conducive to the inclusion of political information than that of non-users. The regular use of the Internet, on the other hand, is only partly to blame for the differences in knowledge"[12]. It was rather the traditional media – above all the daily newspapers – that gave Internet users a knowledge advantage. Hence, the Internet did little to improve political information here. A survey in the Netherlands, on the other hand, showed in the self-assessment a number of concrete advantages associated with using the Internet, e. g. in finding cheap offers of goods and services, friends or a new job.[13]

## Participation and Attention Gaps on the Side of Communicators

Unlike the press and radio, the Internet not only provides the opportunity of reception, but also to communicate for oneself. In the case of the *communicator role*, the question of social (in) equality (*democratic divide*) breaks down into at least three parts: who participates in political

communication? How much attention do communicators get for their contributions? And what do they do with it? Here, too, it is only the effect that reveals the privileged status. First, the question of *communicative participation*: according to the above-mentioned study by Emmer, Vowe and Wolling[14], age makes the main difference: younger people are more likely to express an opinion on political issues, whereas in the context of social media the differences between educational levels are "relatively small"[15]. Other studies confirm that there are no significant differences between educational groups in terms of communicative participation.[16] By contrast, a study from Switzerland found a democratic divide which was explained in this case by education, but also by variables such as income, Internet skills and political interest.[17]

The ability and willingness to communicate is only the first step. In order for a person to take public action with their voice, another condition must be met: their contributions must gain *attention*. While the mass media, press and radio, can normally guarantee a considerable amount of attention, this is not necessarily the case on the Internet: here there is an extremely unequal distribution of attention (*long tail*[18]), and mechanisms that will continue to favour previous winners in the competition for attention in future. Prominence is self-reinforcing: those who have already made a name for themselves, will be more noticed simply because of their fame.

Nevertheless, Yochai Benkler[19] takes an *optimistic view* in his book "The Wealth of Networks". He assumes that winners and losers in the competition for attention are not always the same actors. Ideally, the political process should run from "bottom to top", from the many small public groups to the single large public. The Internet will make it possible for not only a few powerful gatekeepers to decide on success, but rather for many distribution paths and diverse selection criteria regarding who gets noticed. The Internet provides greater chances for citizens to make their topics and opinions heard. The distribution of attention may be more fluid and no longer exclusively favour representatives of the elite.[20]

Matthew Hindman, who wants to expose digital democracy as a myth, represents the *pessimistic counterposition* to this. He investigated the distribution of attention within the Internet public in the USA. For this purpose, he calculated the size of the market share that the largest suppliers can win.[21] The ten largest news and media websites achieved an audience share of 29 per cent, while the top ten political sites reached 31 per cent. Contrary to popular belief, the concentration on the Internet is thus at least as high as in the old media: radio (seven per cent), daily newspapers (19 per cent) and magazines (27 per cent) accounted for significantly lower shares in some cases.

Hindman also answered the question of who will prevail in the competition for attention in the blogosphere. Among those blogs that had more than 2,000 visitors per week, almost two thirds had an elite university degree, more than a quarter were professors, and two thirds had a doctorate. In addition to 21 per cent for journalists, representatives of other elites (business, education, law and technology) were also strongly represented. The majority made a living from their writing and were self-employed, so that they had the time to blog several times a day. Moreover, these top blogs were almost exclusively run by white men.[22]

These results thus demonstrate an *attention gap*. It is also reinforced by search engine algorithms that favour high profile (linked) websites (*page rank*), and neglect citizens' activities in social media. In a content analysis of Google search results, Melanie Magin and her colleagues found that only three per cent of the first page of the hit list pointed to social media or a private individual.[23]

Professional journalism and the traditional mass media have a particularly strong amplifying effect when they quote from or refer to social media.[24] Here, too, we can also observe an orientation towards the elite. However, it is not enough just to measure attention. In addition, it should be recorded whether and how the issues and opinions of citizens are adopted in public discourse and how much they are able to influence the formation of individual and public opinion, and ultimately also political decisions and elections.[25]

1 McQuail (1992: 67–70, 99–140, 2003: 70, 79–81, 2013: 61–64).

2 As a research overview see Zillien/Haufs-Brusberg (2014).

3 Van Aelst et al. (2017: 16–18).

4 OECD (2019). See also Zillien/Haufs-Brusberg (2014: 77–81).

5 Zillien/Haufs-Brusberg (2014: 74–92).

6 Scheerder/van Deursen/van Dijk (2017).

7 Emmer/Vowe/Wolling (2011: 115). Translated from German.

8 According to Vonbun/Schönbach (2014: 204–207), political interest, political offline participation and general activities on the Internet most strongly explained passive and active political online use.

9 Zillien/Hargittai (2009); van Dijk (2012: 69–70); van Deursen/van Dijk (2015).

10 Zillien/Haufs-Brusberg (2014: 85–86); Scheerder/van Deursen/van Dijk (2017: 1614).

11 Van Dijk (2012: 70–71); Zillien/Haufs-Brusberg (2014: 89–90).

12 Marr (2005: 224). Translated from German.

13 Van Dijk (2012: 70–71).

14 Emmer/Vowe/Wolling (2011: 145, 195–198).

15 Emmer/Vowe/Wolling (2011: 198). Translated from German.

16 Schweiger (2017: 24–25).

17 Büchi/Vogler (2017).

18 Anderson (2008).

19 Benkler (2006: 271–272).

20 Castells (2007: 257) and Nye (2011: 113–151) also see a shift in power away from the traditional mass media and the state towards decentralisation and a broader distribution of power.

21 Hindman (2009: 90–91). As similar findings see Farrell/Drezner (2008).

22 Hindman (2009: 102–128).

23 Magin et al. (2015: 509).

24 Broersma/Graham (2012: 411–412); Wallsten (2015: 34); Skogerbø et al. (2016: 117).

25 Analyses of politicians' activities in social media show that they come into contact with only a few citizens (e. g. Nuernbergk/Conrad 2016: 9).

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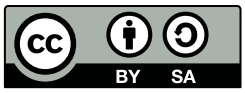




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