



Ellen Helsper

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## How to address 'digital' inequalities

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*In this interview, Professor Ellen Helsper explores the links between digital and social inequalities. We discuss: what are the lived consequences of digitisation, especially in relation to social inequalities that have historically existed? How should organisations intervening in this space respond? And how will the next wave of technologies – from generative AI to “smart” homes – change the landscape for digital inequalities?*

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**Ellen, if we start with the basic idea of digital inequalities, what's your approach to studying this topic?**

Central to the work we've been doing over the past few years is to take social and digital inequalities together, rather than treating the digital sphere as somehow distinct from the rest of our lives. As society becomes more "digital", then, we're interested to ask questions like: are people able to save money, to get good jobs, to participate civically and politically? Are they able to achieve higher levels of emotional, psychological and physical well-being? And when it comes to inequalities that have historically existed, does the digitisation of society amplify or ameliorate these?

Ultimately, then, we're interested in the outcomes for people in the *non*-digital realm – to see whether digitisation actually improves people's lives or not. For example, when it comes to health, a key question would be not so much whether people are going online (or not) to find health information, but whether they can translate that into better care outcomes.

**How does this differ from earlier approaches used to investigate the ways in which digital spaces and technologies affect society?**

Earlier on, people used to talk about the *digital divide* – the split between people who do and do not have access to certain tools and spaces. While that remains an important part of the picture, we are now looking beyond that, towards the idea of *digital inclusion*. That is, not just the access that people have, but also the skills needed to navigate this digital world in a way that opens up opportunities in the context of a person's life circumstances. This approach has been central to the **Digital Skills to Tangible Outcomes** (DiSTO) project, for instance.

And crucially, when we adopt this approach, beyond thinking about an individual's skills, we have to think about **systematic** differences between groups or geographical regions – and the lived experiences of these different groups – and how these affect how everything plays out.



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From your research, then, what determines whether someone can move from merely having access to a given technology to being able to fully realise its benefits?

The most consistent predictor of success, we found, is the level of education that somebody has. This finding is quite consistent around the world. It's one thing to have access to a sophisticated device like a laptop, or the basic skills to create content or navigate the web. But to reap the benefits, you really need the resources to be able to interpret that information critically – to understand why certain things have been produced in a certain way.

For example, we ran a study looking at unemployed people searching for jobs in Spain – and how this played out for people from different backgrounds.

If you start with the digital skills needed for job-hunting, first of all you need to understand where the most relevant jobs are posted amidst the vast quantities of online content. But more importantly, you need to understand what happens on these digital platforms when, for example, you submit an application form.

And what we've seen, over and over again, is that for the long-term unemployed, or for those with a history of negative relationships with formal education, if you get rejected, you'll likely think that it's because somebody has personally looked at you and said "we don't want this kind of person". You'll think that the system is basically telling you that you're not worth it.

Now compare this to somebody who has a higher level of education. They will more likely understand how the system works. They'll understand that it's an automated system and that there are 100 reasons why they may have been rejected. Perhaps they hadn't used the right keywords; perhaps the employer already had somebody in mind for the job; and so on. And with this understanding, they can move on, maybe tweaking their profile a little bit to make it more likely to get picked up. What's more, they don't lose heart because they've seen friends and family find jobs this way.

By contrast, those lacking an education are more likely to have a limited understanding of how the system works. They may get something like "job search burnout": they report that they spent so much time applying and trying to figure it out, but that the (digitally-mediated) system doesn't work for them when, for instance, they get rejected without being told why. And often, what follows is a withdrawal – a feeling that, you know what, I'm going to just look for jobs in my local neighbourhood, with people that look me in the face – real people who, even if they're not able to hire me, at least will make me feel seen and respected. And so they withdraw from the online process altogether.

**And turning to the ways in which governments and other organisations may try to help people to build their digital skills, what have we learnt so far about the best ways to design and implement interventions in this area?**

So far, interventions have quite often suffered from two main problems.

The first is that they're very much focused on formal courses and certifications – asking people to come into a centre to do a course, say, on basic skills for using the Internet. But when we're talking to people who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, we see that this basic set-up is often very off-putting. The people coming through the door are typically those who already have the confidence and interest to “take a course”, whereas the people we really want to reach – the ones who could benefit the most – tend to be put off by this very formal proposition. They think: *okay, so it's about “learning”, about “education”, about being “tech-savvy”. These are not for me.*

The other problem is that interventions tend to be very focussed on *individual* skills, when actually, we find that a lot of tech-related learning is social in nature. And it's informal. Rather than happening in the classroom, it's done in various social settings by looking at what other people are doing and saying, and absorbing new knowledge and skills that way.



*People focus on individual skills when a lot of tech-related learning is social in nature*



The best interventions, then, go to where the people are. They meet them where they are, in the context of whatever they're actually doing, or want to do, in their everyday lives. This “bottom-up” approach has been a key insight of the [Rethinking Media Literacy and Digital Skills in](#)

**Europe** (REMEDIS) project, where our focus has been squarely on the effectiveness of interventions in this space.

**What is a good example of this “bottom-up” approach ?**

One example from the UK takes the pub as a setting! So the intervention might involve joining a group of people and saying, for instance, “Hey, I heard you talking about [X or Y tech issue] – did you know that you can do that this way?”. Those with limited experience and confidence with tech may well respond: “I have no idea how I would do that on my phone” or “I’m not a tech person, I don’t even know how to turn on a computer”. And that, there, is the start of the conversation. Crucially, it’s a conversation that’s taking place in a familiar setting among like-minded people that they have a connection with.



*Digital Gwynedd event at the local Tafarn y Plu Pub by community organisation **Menter y Plu**. Photo © **Citizens Online***

Or to give another example, we did a project in Kuwait, where expat communities form a large share of the total population. Over there, often it’s religious centres that serve to bring people together – they might discuss everyday problems when sharing food after a service or ceremony, for instance. Or for Kuwaitis themselves, some of the best

opportunities for effective interventions could be made, for instance, during diwaniyas – traditional coffee or tea gatherings.

And so for people working in governments and civil society organisations operating in this space, these examples demonstrate this key insight – the importance of meeting people where they are.

**If we look beyond the issues linked to technologies like smartphones and PCs, what are your thoughts about inequalities relating to the uptake of the next generation of technological innovations?**

This is something we are thinking about because the future is going to look very different from how things are today. It's going to be a future that's shaped by Artificial Intelligence (including generative AI), the Internet of Things, "smart" homes, and so on.

The first upshot, when it comes to these more immersive digital environments, is that basic skills like knowing how to turn something on and operate it or how to browse the web, say, are going to become less important. That's because the new wave of smart technologies are in some sense going to do the thinking and the basic operating for us.

Instead, the focus will shift to other questions. There's often talk, for instance, about injustices stemming from the algorithms that are behind these technologies. Here, critical thinking will be crucial to navigate this new world effectively. People will need to ask: why is my smart fridge suggesting different food to me compared with what is being suggested to my neighbour? Why are the prices that my personal digital assistant is giving me different from the prices other people are offered? And so on. And the reason for these discrepancies, of course, is that the technology has a certain profile of you – based on some algorithm.

**So what can people do?**



The first step is awareness of these issues. But this, alone, won't get you very far because, as an individual, there isn't then anything you can do to change the system. What's more, there can be this disaffection that sets in, this helplessness. This is not helped by narratives such as "the tech people brought us these problems, so they'll have to fix them", or "governments need to regulate these companies better". Those points may be true, but they won't get people feeling very engaged or empowered to *do* something themselves.

And so, especially with these emergent technologies, when thinking about effective interventions, *collective action* is extremely important. And here, it's worth mentioning the numerous organisations working to fight poverty, or gender inequalities, or all other kinds of discrimination and marginalisation. These organisations really need to get up to speed with how these new technologies intersect with these issues, I believe, since this will prove to be one of the main areas where they will need to take action.



*With these emergent technologies, collective action is going to be extremely important*



You mentioned earlier the different lived experiences of people from different backgrounds. Presumably this will continue to be a crucial consideration when fighting inequality issues that are intertwined with these emerging technologies?



Very much so – and the **DiSTO** and **REMEDIS** projects highlight the importance of considering these differences in lived experience. And we also have to remember, here, that the people developing these technologies and algorithms represent a very small slice of the population. They are positioned in certain parts of the world (like Silicon Valley) and they tend to come from certain backgrounds. They bring their own, particular backgrounds to their work; they bring their own lived experiences.

And so unless it's appreciated that other stories need to be told, that other "data" needs to be fed into these algorithms at the very inception, then no matter what we do after the fact, ultimately, we're not going to change anything.

Again, then, this points to the need for much wider participation in the digital space: in *using* various new technologies, and discussing their pros and cons, but also in *creating* them in the first place.



*Photo: Diwaniya (photo courtesy of **NUKS USA**).*

*Interview conducted by Dan Nixon, Managing Editor of LSE Inequalities.*

*Professor Helsper's latest book, **The Digital Disconnect**, explores the relationship between digital and social inequalities, and the lived consequences of digitisation.*

*All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s). They do not represent the position of LSE Inequalities, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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## About the author



**Ellen Helsper**

Ellen Helsper is Professor of Digital Inequalities in the Department of Media and Communications, where she is also the director of the PhD programme at LSE. In addition, she is co-director of the Politics of Inequalities Research Programme in the International Inequalities Institute. Her current research interests include the links between social and digital inequalities; mediated interpersonal communication; participatory immersive digital spaces (VR, ER); and quantitative and qualitative methodological developments in media and communications research.



**Dan Nixon**

Dan Nixon is the Managing Editor of LSE Inequalities, having previously held editorial roles in various public sector and non-profit settings. His own work centres around the broad theme of “attention and society” and linking this to debates around technology and the environment. He has an academic background in disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, a particular interest being the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

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