

The social distribution of Internet use in Australia:
A case study

By

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Statement of originality

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Abstract

The spread of the Internet in advanced Western countries has been rapid and uneven, resulting in some alarming diagnoses of a 'digital divide': an allegedly widening gap between those with access to information and communication technologies and the accompanying advantages, and those without access. However, these diagnoses of a 'digital divide' are seldom based on comprehensive analyses of the new information and communication technologies and their social diffusion.

This study analyses the diffusion of the Internet in Australia within a broad theoretical framework covering technological and social change associated with diffusion of the Internet, and especially the changes in social hierarchy and privilege. The study is based on empirical analysis of Australian survey data on Internet use and on in-depth interviews of Internet users. The principal focus is a critical evaluation of the 'digital divide' thesis: the study considers the pattern and dynamics of Internet diffusion in Australia, the main social correlates of Internet adoption and use, and the social impacts of differential Internet use on the distribution of advantage and disadvantage. Although the study considers the process and consequences of Internet diffusion in Australia, the results can be generalised to other advanced societies in which Internet diffusion follows a similar pattern.

The main findings of this study contradict the popular conceptions of a 'digital divide' in Internet use in Australia. Internet use is becoming more widespread in Australia, with current patterns of use now crossing the boundaries between occupational classes, gender, and age groups. There is little evidence of any social 'divide' forming or any significant accumulation of privilege and disadvantage around Internet use. However, inequalities in access to the Internet, and the related advantages, persist on the basis of age, gender, education, income and occupational class, although they resemble 'digital stratification' rather than a 'digital divide'. Further, the analyses of Internet practices reveal the key roles of cultural, social and economic capital in distributing advantages associated with Internet-related activities in both the workplace and the home.

Cultural capital in particular appears as a central stratifying factor. Diffusion of the Internet occurs primarily within specific (techno) habitus, but also crosses between habitus along the lines marked by the dispersion of cultural capital.

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Table of contents

Chapter One: Technology and social change.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Information and communication technologies: the case of the Internet.....	4
The Internet and its uses	6
Distinctive features of the Internet	12
Debates on digital inequality: enthusiasts and sceptics	14
Government response to the ‘digital divide’	16
Reconsidering the ‘digital divide’	18
Theoretical and political limitations of the ‘digital divide’ concept.....	20
Understanding socio-technical relations.....	21
Changing technologies and dynamic social structure.....	22
Following Chapters.....	23
Chapter Two: Social diffusion of the Internet – a theoretical framework.....	24
Introduction.....	24
Classic accounts of technological diffusion: Tarde and Sorokin.....	25
The framework for a theoretical update.....	29
Contemporary views of diffusion	31
Globalisation and Internet diffusion	34
Weakening state barriers and strengthening interventions	35
Increasing interconnectivity and social differentiation.....	39
Conclusion: diffusion and the Internet	45
Chapter Three: ‘Complex’ social inequalities	48
Introduction.....	48
‘Complex’ social inequalities	48
Cultural and social capital	49
Habitus.....	53
Gender.....	54
Social hierarchy, techno-competence and ‘legitimate culture’.....	56
Beyond Bourdieu’s scheme: genderisation, generation and region.....	59
Genderised habitus.....	59
Techno-generations.....	61
Centres and peripheries.....	64
Conclusion	66
Chapter Four: Research methodology and data.....	68
Introduction.....	68
Research questions.....	68
Methods of inquiry and sources of data.....	69
Survey data	70
Interview data	72
Other sources of data	76
Research Design	77
Social distribution of Internet use – survey based research.....	77
The pattern and dynamics of Internet diffusion – survey based research..	78
Social correlates of Internet diffusion – survey based research	79
Nature of advantage of Internet use – qualitative research.....	86

‘Types’ of Internet use related to patterns of advantage – qualitative research	86
Measurement and analytical techniques of survey data	87
The advantages and limitations of the data.....	88
Chapter Five: The social distribution of Internet use in Australia.....	88
Introduction.....	88
Pattern and dynamics of Internet diffusion in Australia – frequency analysis	88
Social categories and geographical locations of Internet users – bivariate analysis	93
Income	93
Occupational class	96
Education	98
Gender.....	99
Age/generation/techno-generation.....	100
Region.....	103
Interactions between social categories and Internet use – crosstabulations	105
Income and education level	105
Income and gender.....	106
Income and age	106
Region and income	109
Occupational class and education level	109
Occupational class and gender.....	110
Education level and gender.....	111
Education level and age	112
Region and education level.....	112
Age and gender	113
Work status	114
Marital status	115
Housing status.....	116
Social Inequality and Internet use in Australia – regression analysis	117
Key correlates of Internet use in Australia 2001 – 2005	117
Internet use.....	118
Place of Internet use 2003-2005	121
Frequency of Internet Use 2001-2005	122
Gender differences in Internet use 2001-2005.....	125
The relative importance of correlates of Internet use 2001 – 2005	128
Conclusion: Internet Diffusion and Social Inequality in Australia	129
Pattern and dynamics of Internet diffusion in Australia – frequency analysis	129
Social categories and geographical locations of Internet users – bivariate analysis and crosstabulation	130
Social Inequality and Internet use in Australia – regression analysis	131
Chapter Six: The Internet as a resource.....	133
Introduction.....	133
Cultural capital in linkage society	134
Cultural capital and techno-competency	134
ICT as symbolic reference	137
The Internet and economic capital.....	143
Social capital in a network society	148

Political capital in popular democracy	154
Conclusion: the Internet as a resource	156
Chapter Seven: Internet types as ‘techno-habitus’	159
Introduction.....	159
Type One: Reluctants and Traditionalists.....	163
Reluctants	163
Traditionalists	166
Type Two: Popular Culture Addicts.....	168
Type Three: Communicators	170
Virtual social networkers.....	170
Instant messagers.....	174
Type Four: Administrators and the Civic-minded.....	175
Type Five: Explorer Learners	179
Type Six: Geeks and Nerds	182
Type Seven: Broadband Elite and Specialists	185
Conclusions: techno-habitus.....	187
Chapter Eight: Internet diffusion and social inequality in Australia.....	189
Introduction.....	189
Internet diffusion and social inequality in Australia.....	189
Internet diffusion and social inequality in Australia - the evidence	190
The changing nature of legitimate culture	193
Future research.....	195
References.....	198
Appendix 1: A History of the Internet in advanced Western countries	220
Appendix 2: New forms of representations in new media, especially the	
Internet	223
Appendix 3: Diffusion of innovations theories.....	224
Appendix 4: Limitations of contemporary diffusion theories	227
Appendix 5: Survey questions (dependent variables)	231
Appendix 6: Income Tables in full	234
Appendix 7: Statistical associations	241
Appendix 8: Interview Schedule.....	242
Glossary	245