

Ellen Helsper, *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities*. SAGE: London, 2021; 248 pp.; ISBN 978-1-5264-6339-5, £27.99 (pbk)

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Contemporary societies combine the omnipresence of digital technologies with large persisting inequalities. Ellen Helsper's book *The Digital Disconnect: The Social Causes and Consequences of Digital Inequalities* precisely examines the causes and consequences of socio-digital inequalities in today's world. In the book, socio-digital inequalities are conceptualized as "systematic differences between individuals from different backgrounds in the opportunities and abilities to translate digital engagement into benefits and avoid the harm" (p. 34). Helsper covers a wide range of theories and research, drawing on rich quantitative and qualitative evidence. This evidence is exceptionally supported by vignettes of real interviews with participants that exemplify how socio-digital inequalities operate across social class, gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, encompassing different geographical realities across both the Global North and South.

The book is arranged into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) offers an overview of previous scholarship on socio-digital inequalities. Chapter 1 examines how earlier studies thought about socio-digital inequalities by examining classical structure–agency debates, as well as theories focusing on individuals' capitals and capabilities. Helsper makes a strong case in favor of integrating a micro–macro approach that does not omit the meso level (e.g. communities, organizations, neighborhoods) while discussing the need of an analytical approach that takes intersectionality seriously. In Chapter 2, Helsper sets the bases for the study of socio-digital inequalities. Using the authors' own Correspondence Fields model, this chapter defines socio-digital inequalities as explained by the interrelation of economic, cultural, social, and—crucially—personal resources. It also reexamines the last decades of research on "digital divides," which the author prefers to name "digital inequalities," including access (level 1), skills and engagement (level 2), and outcomes (level 3).

Part II focuses on socio-digital inequalities in access (Chapter 3), skills (Chapter 4), and civic engagement (Chapter 5). In Chapter 3, Helsper shows that inequalities in access remain very much alive today. Indeed, we should move beyond simplistic binaries (i.e. connected vs disconnected) and see access as a gradation, considering that billions of people today face complex challenges to access technological infrastructures, digital devices, and high-speed broadband. In Chapter 4, Helsper makes the interesting argument that digital literacy involves not only getting technical competences on Information and Communications Technology (ICT), but also acquiring key "softer" skills that (unequally) allow people to benefit from using digital devices. In Chapter 5, the book explores socio-digital inequalities in civic and political participation, starting by contrasting the ICT-oriented approach against critical perspectives that focus on power and ideologies. As argued by Helsper, inequalities in online civic engagement are an extension of systemic inequalities in the offline world. However, as the author claims too, socio-digital processes (e.g. access, skills, production, algorithmic biases) also impact on gaps in political participation, both in the online and offline world.

Part III focuses on socio-digital inequalities related to psychological well-being (Chapters 6) and online content creation (Chapter 7) and ends with the Conclusions. Chapter 6 examines a crucial question: is digital engagement related to inequalities in

individuals' psychosocial well-being? The author highlights that "stereotypical patterns based on expectations about who has caring, socio-emotional, and relationship-building roles (. . .) are replicated online" (p. 93) while arguing that the "best way to deal with the issues around online interactions (. . .) is to tackle social and emotional problems offline" (p.94). In Chapter 7, Helsper argues that existing inequalities in online content creation result from existing offline structural inequalities. Yet, in turn, these inequalities in content creation shape widespread hegemonic messages, worldviews, and ideologies online, thus contributing to reproduce the stigmatization of disadvantaged groups and inequalities across gender, social class, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, and geographical location. As with digital literacy, Helsper persuasively claims that inequalities in content creation not only happen on the technical side of ICTs, but also with regard to rather personal and strategic decisions.

In the conclusions, the author outlines new avenues of research in those areas for which we have less empirical evidence, especially in relation to the topics covered in the last chapters of the book. Helsper concludes with an interesting statement that reflects well the evidence presented in the book: "digital societies will not become equitable until traditional socio- economic and socio-cultural inequalities are tackled" and "unless we try to reduce the unequal distribution of digital resources (i.e. access, literacy, and engagement types)" (p. 116). Accordingly, the author maintains that only by reducing inequalities in the social "and" digital world will social injustices be alleviated in our digitalized societies.

There are some topics of this book that should receive more attention in future scholarship. Helsper's book is very ambitious, focusing on a wide range of interesting questions. The book examines multiple axes of inequalities, such as gender, class, race, and sexual orientation, some of which—for reasons of space—receive less empirical attention. Future studies should more carefully address each of these domains separately. Also, the book provides an extensive analysis of how socio-digital inequalities can affect individuals from different backgrounds (micro level) by adopting a rich cross-national approach (macro level). However, as Helsper recognizes at the end of the book, the role of online and offline groups in shaping socio-digital inequalities at the meso level (e.g. communities, schools, organizations, neighborhood) receives little attention in this book. Future studies in this field should pay more attention to the meso level.

To conclude, this is an indispensable book for anyone interested in the causes and consequences of socio-digital inequalities. Helsper's book brings a unique and authoritative approach; it revisits recent research in the field and uses real-world examples that help to connect abstract questions with practical problems. Academics across multiple disciplines in the social sciences, including media and communication scholars, should definitively consider this book as an essential guide to study socio-digital inequalities in contemporary societies.

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