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Digital inequalities and vulnerability among Internet users

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Conceptual approach

■ Existing knowledge

- The concept of second order DD
 - ✓ Assumption of a shift from inequalities in access to inequalities in use
 - ✓ Few (qualitative) empirical studies
 - ✓ Initial hypothesis: second order DD = issue of skills (digital skills and generic skills)
 - ✓ Cognitive and social resources more determinant than material resources



Conceptual approach

■ Conceptual framework centred on usage

- Usage = social practices built up on use
 - ✓ Usage territory: nature and conditions of ICT uses
 - ✓ Usage framework: place in life and meaning of usages
 - ✓ Usage trajectory: time dimension and dynamics of usages
- Renewed insight on social issues related to the digital divide
 - ✓ Social integration through 5 spheres (productive - social/relational - consumption - civic - self-development)
 - ✓ Digital inequalities = inequalities in relation to the social norm of the information society
 - ✓ Emphasis on resources, capabilities and choices, beyond skills
 - ✓ Vulnerability, risks and opportunities, rather than exclusion



Methodology

■ Qualitative analysis

- In-depth interviews (68)
 - ✓ Individual trajectory: starting point, evolution, current usages, learning process, meanings, expectations
 - ✓ Balanced sample: age (20-60), M/F, education levels, socio-professional status
- Typological analysis
 - ✓ From individual stories to users profiles
 - ✓ From description to interpretation
- Transversal analysis
 - ✓ From a typology of users and trajectories to an analysis in terms of integration / vulnerability

Results

■ Typology of users

		Perceived usefulness		
		High	Medium	Low
Motivation / initial impetus	Strong constraint		Type 1 The conscientious apprentice (6)	Type 2 The distant skilful user (4)
	Medium constraint	Type 3 The clairvoyant follower (9)	Type 4 The assiduous user by default (4)	Type 5 The resigned sceptic (13)
	Low or no constraint	Type 6 The expert routine user (15)	Type 7 The seduced curious (9)	Type 8 The conformist consumer (8)

Results

■ Social integration

- 5 spheres of social integration
- Interaction with ICT but uneven and not concomitantly
 - ✓ The "good student of the information society" = 1 out of 8 interviewees
 - ✓ Self-development very often impacted by Internet use
 - ✓ Wide variety of uses and purposes in communication
 - ✓ Amplification of existing civic engagements but no new civic dynamics

■ Vulnerability

- Indicators of vulnerability
 - ✓ Level of autonomy, digital skills, available support, risky behaviours, symbolic value and meaning of ICT, capability to make choices

Results: vulnerability

		Perceived usefulness		
		High	Medium	Low
Motivation / initial impetus	Strong constraint		The conscientious apprentice	The distant skilful user
	Medium constraint	The clairvoyant follower	The assiduous user by default	The resigned sceptic
	Low or no constraint	The expert routine user	The seduced curious	The conformist consumer

No specific vulnerability (48% of the sample)
 Low vulnerability
 More significant vulnerability (31% of the sample)
 Social instead of digital vulnerability

Conclusions and recommendations

■ Questioning existing policies

- Policies aimed at improving the supply of e-services
 - ✓ User practices become less sensitive to supply policies and from pre-formatted behaviours
- Policies targeted to "groups at risk" (socially)
 - ✓ Less relevant in terms of second order digital divide
 - ✓ Need for redefining the targets (+ suggestions)

■ De-coupling digital / social inequalities

- Digital integration does not guarantee social integration
 - ✓ Need for embedding digital inclusion policies within wider social policies
- Nevertheless, unequal distribution of factors of vulnerability
 - ✓ According to gender, age and professional activity



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www.belspo.be/ta

Publication in French (book):

**Diversité et vulnérabilité des usages des TIC - La fracture numérique
au second degré (2010)**

*Périne Brotcorne, Lotte Damhuis, Véronique Laurent, Gérard Valenduc,
Patricia Vendramin*

Academia Press, Gent/Brussels

www.belspo.be/belspo/ta/publ/academia-usagesTIC-U1527.pdf

Résumé en français (téléchargeable):

Numéro spécial de la Lettre EMERIT, n°62 (2010)

www.ftu-namur.org/fichiers/emerit62.pdf

Downloadable summary in English:

www.ftu-namur.org/fichiers/FTU-Second_order_digital_divide-Synthesis.pdf