

(DD)² – The second order digital divide

The proposal aims at understanding the scientific scope, empirical foundations and societal issues of the “second order digital divide”, which concerns growing inequalities among ICT users as fast as the access gap is narrowing. The concept of second order digital divide is rather new in the agenda of social research about the Internet and its policy implications need an in-depth investigation, targeted to the Belgian context.

The overall goal is to anticipate future trends in the social differentiation of Internet usages, the associated risks of social inequalities and associated opportunities for improved social inclusion. The project will review hypotheses and research questions in this emerging research area, targeting them to the European context and the Belgian situation. Original empirical material will be collected through qualitative interviews, while existing survey results will be assessed from the angle of the second order divide. The prospective analysis will identify future trends and outline possible scenarios, leading to widening or narrowing the second order digital divide. Conclusions and policy recommendations will rely on these analyses and scenarios.

The proposal is structured in five work packages (WP), using specific methodologies.

1. Making the concept of second order digital divide more operational as regards empirical testing and policy implications. State of the art of current research and in-depth evaluation of hypotheses. Initial scientific workshop. Design of practical guidelines for empirical fieldwork.
2. Collection and analysis of qualitative empirical information. In-depth qualitative interviews of individuals, covering a wide variety of usage trajectories, according to opportunities and needs, material and cognitive resources, social capital, age and gender. Investigation of usage trajectories in six “fields of practices”: learning and training, leisure and games, health information, relation to labour market and professional development, consumption practices, relationships with administrations. Group interviews with “Internet facilitators”. Validation workshop.
3. Comparative and contextual analysis. Confrontation of qualitative analysis with Belgian and European quantitative survey data on usages. Suggestion of indicators for benchmarking the second order digital divide. Analysis of contextual factors in Belgium (digital inclusion as a component of wider social inclusion). Workshop with stakeholders.
4. Future trends and scenarios. Identification of factors of change and trends as regards risks of social inequalities and potential for social inclusion. Validation workshop.
5. Synthesis, conclusions, recommendations and final dissemination.

The dissemination strategy relies on interactive workshops at each step of the project methodology, involving the most concerned actors: the scientific community, the Internet facilitators, the concerned policy makers, the stakeholders of e-services developments and social inclusion policies. Presentation of results will be user-oriented: publishable final report, policy briefs, proposal for a conference after the end of the project.

The project looks beyond the current policies aiming at bridging the first order digital divide (unequal access) and explores issues and solutions related to the next steps in the diffusion of Internet (differentiated use). The anticipation of emerging social inequalities linked to Internet usages is at the core of the project. Expected results should feed the policy debate on digital exclusion and inclusion; they should also support more “inclusive” developments in the areas of e-government, e-learning, e-health and other e-services. The project aims at contributing to several policy debates and initiatives, namely: the national action plan against the digital divide (2005-2009); the Belgian commitments to the European “Riga declaration” (June 2006) on e-inclusion and to the i2010 action plan of the European Commission.

This research project is integrated in the programme “Society and the future” of the Federal Science Policy Office in Belgium. It is a two-year project (2008-2010); the final report will be delivered at the beginning of 2010.

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