



BREAKING DOWN THE DISABILITY DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Abstract

Scholarly work on digital inclusion and popular discourse commonly refer to a so-called “disability digital divide” – persons with disability, compared to the rest of the population, are less likely to use the Internet and generally engage in certain Internet activities at lower rates. However, there is little granularity in that understanding. I evaluate the validity of prior findings in the British context and challenge the prevalent frame of the “digital disability divide” with a mixed methods approach.

I use Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) data to show that disability affects the likelihood of Internet use in 2007-2011, controlling for various demographics and socioeconomic status, but this finding does not extend to 2013. Among current Internet users, I find that those who report a disability do not engage less online than the rest of the population. This finding controls for demographics and persists along three dimensions: amount, variety, and types of Internet use. However, the OxIS data treats disability as a binary. I analyze how this is over-simplistic. To supplement these findings, I use data from a web platform that helps persons with disability find work to show that different types of disability are associated with particular flavors of online engagement. Compared with the rest of the users, those with mental health conditions are more likely to have digital contact with staff. Those with long-standing illness or health conditions are less likely to complete an online workshop.

Statistical findings are backed up with semi-structured interviews with people with a range of disabilities in two U.K. cities in the East and West Midlands. I find diverse levels of agency over technology use. At the same time, there are accounts of Internet technologies being both enabling and further disabling as well. Researchers should not cast technology in a blanket of empowerment or persons with disability in a blanket of disadvantage. The “disability digital divide” narrative reinforces a bifurcation that ignores the idiosyncrasies and nuances in how a diverse population interacts with technology. It is fruitful to move away from that frame.

Keywords: *disability, internet, Oxford Internet Survey*

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