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## BUCKING THE TREND? UNDERSTANDING THE “OUTLIERS” IN DIGITAL INCLUSION RESEARCH

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In Britain, policy makers promote the Internet as a means to facilitate social mobility, through the provision of access to a wider range of learning, employment, networking and informational opportunities. Yet, research has shown that this is not the case: better off, better educated individuals use the Internet for a wider range of capital enhancing activities. Instead of improving the status quo, the Internet tends to reinforce and at times compound existing social inequalities (Halford and Savage 2010).

There has been a number of policy interventions designed to address digital inequality, typically focusing on providing access and supporting skills. Yet, like many well-intentioned policies designed to facilitate social mobility, such initiatives have not worked well as they do not account fully for the complexity of the issue. At the same time, the academic research on digital inclusion has been criticized for lacking a strong theoretical emphasis (Helsper, 2012; Van Dijk 2006).

At a time when many are concerned about growing social inequalities, and services and support are increasingly moving online, this presentation aims to re-examine this problem by focusing research on a largely ignored group of adults who despite being from less well-off backgrounds appear (based on national survey data) to be using the Internet to improve their circumstances for a range of “capital enhancing” activities. In other words, they “buck the trend” and seem to use the Internet against the odds.

Indeed, a few quantitative studies support this finding that a small, but significant, group of people from low socio-economic backgrounds may be using the Internet to improve their life circumstances. For example, Helsper identified a group she called the “unexpectedly digitally included” from the analysis of 3 independent surveys of Internet use and non use in Britain (Helsper, 2008). In a later study, Eynon and Helsper (2011) reported further evidence of the “unexpectedly digitally included” specifically in relation to the uptake of online learning opportunities. Yet, beyond identifying a few characteristics of this group (e.g. they tended to be parents) these quantitative surveys are unable to say a great deal about why this group are using the Internet or the meaning this use really had in their lives.

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Thus to date, we know very little about this fascinating group. What are the contexts and processes that lead these people to use the Internet “against the odds”? Are they deliberately using the Internet as a way to enhance their cultural, social and economic capital for themselves and for their family? What meaning does this kind of use of the Internet have in their lives? Has it, in their own terms, contributed to their social mobility?

This presentation will present data from in-depth interviews with 20 purposively sampled individuals who are part of this group to address these questions. In addition, the interviews will include discussion of a socioeconomic genogram and provide information about the meaning the Internet has in the participant’s lives (Bertaux and Thompson, 2006). Given the relative newness of the focus of this research, such a qualitative approach is appropriate. Indeed, qualitative research on Internet use by people from lower socio economic backgrounds (e.g. work by Bakardijeva and Smith, 2001; Clayton and McDonald, 2013; Mehrat and Merkel, 2004) highlights the significant complexity of this area, raising issues around the meaning and value of the Internet in people’s lives and what it really means to be digitally included.

In doing so, the presentation speaks directly to the theme of AoiR 15, looking at the intersections between digital haves and have nots and the experiences of a particular group of people who are outside the mainstream trends. It is hoped that analyses of this group offer us a new way to look at the relationships between digital inequality and social mobility, providing different perspectives on the processes at work and offering a new opportunity to contribute to theory and practice.

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