

Technology as freedom and 'unfreedom': capability theory and digital inclusion

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Today's presentation

1. How I got here
2. Research interests
 - Digital inclusion
 - Policy context – 'digital by default'
3. The capabilities approach and why I think it 'fits'
 - Intellectual origins
 - Links with Feminism
 - Operationalisation
 - Technology and the capabilities approach

How I got here

- Feminist geek
- Since 2001 working for international NGOs on technology and activism – focus on mobile phones
- Completed M.Res with Open University 2011
 - *Dissertation: ethnographic study of mobile phone use by young people in South London*
- Started PhD part-time in October 2011: NEET women and their phones: digital exclusion
- Research focus: engaging with policy makers

Digital inclusion

- Origins:

- Emerged to describe technological disparity between developed and developing countries
- Practical embodiment of theme of social exclusion: centre left govts 1990s

Selwyn, Neil 2004. Reconsidering Political and Popular Understandings of the Digital Divide. *New Media & Society*, 6, 341-362.

- Originally dichotomous but tech determinism of access = use now critiqued: “...complex mutually evolving relationship between a technology and broader social structures” ... use and non use now blurred
- Warschauer 2002. Reconceptualizing the Digital Divide. *First Monday; Volume 7, Number 7 - 1 July 2002*.
- See also Hargittai, E. & Hinnant, A. 2008. Digital Inequality Differences in Young Adults' Use of the Internet. *Communication Research*, 35, 602-621., Livingstone, Sonia & Helsper, Ellen 2007. Gradations in digital inclusion: children, young people and the digital divide. *New Media & Society*, 9, 671-696.
- Understand alongside ‘digital natives’
- Suggests some ‘missing stories’ which aren’t being told by current research (mainly quantitative) – what about phones? Social networking? What is the phone ‘doing’ in young people’s lives?

Digital Inclusion in the UK today

Some misapprehensions

- Everyone is online now apart from a few older people
- All young people are online either on their laptops or their phones
- All young people are 'digital natives': naturally good at using the internet
- You don't need to be literate or well educated to access information on the internet

Digital Inclusion in the UK today

Reality

- 82% of people are online, 97% of 16-24 year olds
- The Cabinet Office 2012. *Digital Landscape Research*.
- But 10% of people aged 17-23 describe themselves as lapsed internet users:
 - *“In our group of interviewees, these young people typically used the Internet in very narrow, infrequent and... unsatisfactory or unsuccessful ways”*
 - Importance of cognitive capacities
“Some interviewees had literacy difficulties, sometimes due to dyslexia or troubles with writing and / or remembering complex passwords. These core literacy skills had clear implications for the extent to which people engaged with the Internet. As Josh said, “At first I set up my email account, and I couldn’t get into it because I kept messing up my words for the passwords and that”.
- Eynon, R. & Geniets, A. 2012. *On the Periphery? Understanding Low and Discontinued Internet Use Amongst Young People in Britain*, Nominet Trust, .

Why it matters

Policy context

Government is making services Digital by Default: partly economic drivers:

“We estimate that moving services from offline to digital channels will save between £1.7 and £1.8 billion a year.”

Government and digital inclusion:

ideological shift, focus now on broadband rollout and ‘universal digitization’

Digital strategy: not concerned with “ways to increase the digital capability of UK citizens”

The Cabinet Office 2012. *Government Digital Strategy*.

Impact on marginalised groups:

“The drive for digitisation of government services could reinforce the social exclusion of a sizeable segment of the population”

Low Incomes Tax Reform Group of The Chartered Institute of Taxation

Impact on young unemployed people: Joseph Rowntree trust report
challenges for young people looking for work: jobseekers without constant access to the internet are at a disadvantage

Capability theory

What does it tell us?

- Give people the freedom to choose the lives they value: giving us analytical frameworks to appreciate how people's perceptions of their own situations and capacities might be constrained by poverty or social marginalisation.
 - In assessing an individual's freedom pay attention to both agency and well being:
 - *Agency* – ways in which people act and exercise their choice
 - *Well being* – individuals advantage including health, education
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Problems: hard to select the most important functionings as a measure for evaluating people's quality of life and their standing in society

Capability theory

Critique of utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism – search for a single criterion/principle to evaluate policies/institutions etc Doesn't intrinsically value the importance of individual freedom and rights
- Alexander, John M. 2008. *Capabilities and social justice : the political philosophy of Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum*, Aldershot, England ; Burlington, VT, Ashgate Pub. Ltd.
- *Women frequently exhibit “adaptive preferences,” preferences that have adjusted to their second-class status...Thus the utilitarian framework, which asks people what they currently prefer and how satisfied they are, proves inadequate to confront the most pressing issues of gender justice.*
- Nussbaum, M. 2003. *Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. Feminist economics*, 9, 33-59.

Capability theory

- Deeply embedded in development contexts – serving as the basis for indices such as the UNDP Human Development Report- ranks countries on 3 capabilities – life expectancy, literacy, standard of living.
- <http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/>
- Nussbaum proposes a systematic list of central capabilities:
 - *The capabilities approach will supply definite and useful guidance, and prove an ally in the pursuit of sex equality, only if we formulate a definite list of the most central capabilities, even one that is tentative and revisable, using capabilities so defined to elaborate a partial account of social justice, a set of basic entitlements without which no society can lay claim to justice.*
 - Includes:
 - *“Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.”*
- Nussbaum, M. 2003. Capabilities as fundamental entitlements: Sen and social justice. *Feminist Economics*, 9, 33-59.

Capability theory & technology

Literature

- Starting to use this approach to understand technology in the ICT4D contexts: e.g.
 - Special issue of Information Technology for Development : “Development as freedom – how the Capability Approach can be used in ICT4D research and practice”.
- ‘Technological justice: allowing us to understand technology as a means to achieving substantive human freedoms
 - “looking at computer technologies in terms of their contribution to people's abilities to define and lead lives that they value”.
- Johnstone, Justine 2007. Technology as empowerment: a capability approach to computer ethics. *Ethics & Information Technology*, 9, 73.

Capability theory operationalised

- In policy:
 - Equality and Human Rights Commission used Nussbaums develop The Equality Measurement Framework covering 10 domains of freedom and opportunity:
<http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/key-projects/equality-measurement-framework/>
 - Includes “capability to participate in decision-making, have a voice and influence”
- In ICT4D literature:
 - ‘Choice framework’ , ‘Empowerment framework’, ‘Sustainable livelihood framework’;
- Kleine, D. 2011. The capability approach and the 'medium of choice': steps towards conceptualising information and communication technologies for development. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 13, 119-130.

A good fit?

- Affordances and “Unfreedoms”:
 - Critique of technological determinism that implies technology is a liberatory force
 - Fit with affordances: approach which recognises what technology enables/inhibits
- Methodological fit with ethnographic approaches
 - The theory is essentially naturalistic and functionalist in orientation, capability analyses are able to integrate descriptive and normative dimensions in a way that is particularly appropriate to technological domains.”

Johnstone, Justine 2007. Technology as empowerment: a capability approach to computer ethics. *Ethics & Information Technology*, 9, 73.

Thank you!

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