

“Bridging the gap, or how internet narratives of children and teenagers with disability may inform policy initiatives and further participatory parity in Greece”



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Introduction

- internet experiences of children with disabilities = largely underexplored => lack in participatory parity regarding disenfranchised citizens.
- Disability perceived as 'specialist' subject.
- social exclusion leads to digital exclusion, cementing the notion of a 'disability divide' (Solomon, 2000).
- Our aim is to explore children's with disabilities internet experiences in order to draw attention of public debate upon this group.

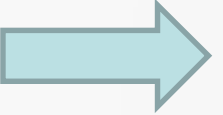
Research Questions

- Non-abled children who experience social exclusion, experience digital exclusion as well (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006).
- Non-abled children from lower SES, experience limitations to their internet access and the range of their digital activities compared with those more privileged (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007).
- Children use online technologies as a compensative mechanism to overcome the shortcomings of their impairment (Lidström, Ahlsten & Hemmingsson, 2010).

Research on people with disabilities in Greece

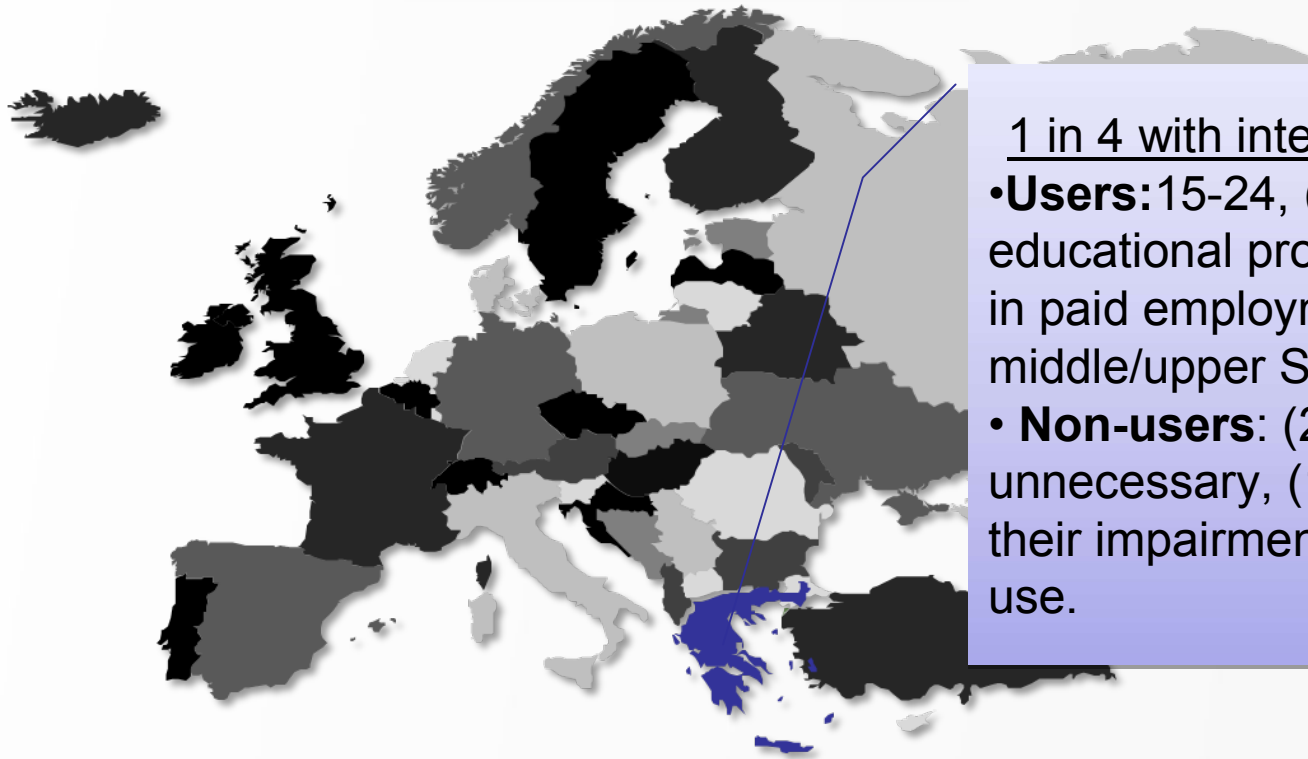
- There is no exact record of the population of people with disabilities (Stefanidis, 2004).

Absence of welfare state => *invisibility of impairment* in Greece.

- Lack of information, access difficulties (Pagourtzi, 2008)  shape a '*disability divide*' in Greece.
- Population examined (individuals 15 ys and above).

Lack of research for younger ages.

Breakdown of internet use



1 in 4 with internet access

- **Users:** 15-24, (18%) high educational profile (55%), in paid employment (32%); middle/upper SES (25%).
- **Non-users:** (28%) finds it unnecessary, (11%) blame their impairment for non-use.

Affordances of the internet for youth with disabilities


- Helps them preserve already existing social ties, while forging new ones
- transcending the stigma of disability (Gofman, 1963)
- disclosure of the disabled identity until the disabled person decides to come out themselves (Dobransky & Hargittai, 2006)
- ‘they construct a parallel world, wherein they can afford to have a private life, seeking friends and sexual partners’ (Löfgren-Mårtenson , 2008, p. 132).

Barriers in internet use


- hardware and software not always configured in a way suited to their abilities.
- high cost of adaptive assistive technology
- important obstacle = information gap



- lower levels of education



- reduce awareness



- ‘feelings of intimidation, computer anxiety and lack of interest more pronounced within disabled community’ (Vicente & Lopez, 2010 p.52)

Methodology and Sample

Convenient sampling of:

- 13 youngsters with mobility and/or cognitive difficulties, aged between 16-25.
- Fluidity of the age factor (biological and cognitive age did not coincide)
- 7 deaf children, aged 11-12.

Data collection

Familiar setting for children (Livingstone & Lemish, 2001)

Interviews with deaf children: at home, with the help of a Greek sign-language interpreter

Interviews with children facing mobility and/or cognitive difficulties: at school, in the presence of the school counselor, detailed notes were kept (no tape recording).

Method of information gathering : a '**being with**' approach (Morris, 2003, p.345).

Findings by gender

- Boys and girls use the internet primarily for communication, socialization and entertainment and less for educational purposes.
- Boys with disabilities seem to be more into online gaming than girls ≠ Girls are more inclined to listen to music, watch videos and go on SNSs when online.

Findings by SES

- low SES => difficulties in accessing the internet from home; joint computer use (with other family members); state provides home computer, with no internet connection though...

'I've learned [how to use a computer] at first grade [of high school]; I had a computer from the state in my previous school as well, when a guy from the Ministry [of Education] showed us how it works (...) I love it! I love painting the most! I want to have internet access, but my mom says later (...) I think everyone should learn how to use a computer, not just us, but normal children, too'.

Christina (17 yr.; cerebral palsy, 67% physical disability; severe cognitive impairment; low SES)

- disabled children from middle and high SES: home access; own various devices (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007); expert users; parents are (avid) internet users as well.

*I've got fb and twitter, though I'm not using twitter [at this point, the social worker asked him about Twitter, which he explained as something where you post comments and have followers but is boring (...)]. Yes, I set up my own account and it's private – I know my way round settings. I've got 2-3 different photos and my real name, not some alias...like 'sweetie'... that many people use and such crap!. **Sotiris (16 yr-old, severe motor disability; high SES)***

- Sibling mediation: those from lower SES usually rely on a sibling -or a cousin- to get things started and ‘fix’ problems for them

“Yes, I’ve got my own fb [account], my brothers set it up for me (...); yes, my name and photos are on it but I don’t know if they set it up on private.”

Haris (12 ys; deaf; low SES)

Findings by disability type



the internet compensates for the kinds of impediments children with different disabilities face.


Deaf children: the internet is a strong communicative tool; socialization with friends; a number of outdoor interests.

Children with cognitive and/or physical difficulties: being more homebound -> few of them engage in offline activities => going online fulfills a companionship and socialisation function

“I like watching videos ... games, well, not that much... my parents tell me not to ... I use Skype. I get in touch with India, and Greece, and the US ... the camera makes communication easy ... I like the internet... it helps me to communicate” Ioanna (11 ys; deaf; medium SES)

*“I play games ... there is one where it’s like you are driving – there’s a steering wheel and all (...). Yes, I run when I’m gaming, I run very fast!!”
Antonis (serious cognitive and physical impairment; high SES)*

Conclusions

- online practices of children with disabilities = **similar** to those of children and teenagers without (Livingstone et al, 2011c)
- the repertoires of internet practice and use, the domestication of technologies (Haddon, 2004) of children and teenagers with disabilities in Greece act by enabling them, affording them capabilities of agency and subjectivity.
- differentiated practices  social constraints that compromise their engagement in digital cultures.

Policy implications

children with disabilities are children with desires

- Inclusion in academic and policy agenda
- ‘digital convergence’ => a more democratic society in Greece

‘to be marginalized means to be put aside, not accounted for, not recognized and made unessential’ (Söderström 2009: 711).



Thank you for your attention