



Digital skills: unlocking the information society

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BOOK REVIEW

Digital skills: unlocking the information society, by Alexander J. A. M. van Deursen and Jan A. G. M. van Dijk, New York, USA, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 187 pp., CDN\$ 100 (hardcover), CDN\$ 79.99 (eBook), ISBN 978-1-137-43702-0

The concept of the ‘Information Society’ has been exhaustively analyzed for more than three decades with little common ground on what it is and what its impacts are. In this context, a book that promises to ‘unlock’ it deserves attention. *Digital skills: Unlocking the information society* is one of a series on digital education and learning published by Palgrave Macmillan. The authors, Jan A. G. M van Dijk and Alexander J. A. M van Deursen, have both published extensively on information society issues. Given their background and the book’s title, it is interesting that the ‘information society’ concept itself receives almost no critical analysis in their new book. The ‘unlocking’ in the title refers to increasing the level of digital skills, which they see as vital to full participation in the information society. From this educational perspective, the book is a valuable contribution to the literature because it provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of many aspects of digital skills.

Van Dijk and van Deursen begin by criticizing ‘digital divide’ discourse that defines technology access largely as material or physical access. Their analysis identifies four stages of access: motivation, material (physical) access, digital skills and then usage. This book focuses on the third stage, digital skills. In their criticism of the terms ‘digital literacy’ and ‘digital competency,’ the authors propose that ‘digital skills’ better describes how people interact with digital media. In their view, the six core digital skills are: operational, formal, information, communication, content creation and strategic skills. Their main argument, the rationale for their book, is that all these skills are essential for people to benefit from digital media use.

The chapter on defining Internet skills contains a typology of the specific skills involved in each of the six core digital skills. The typology would be useful for anyone designing a course in Internet skills. Many of the specific skills involve far more than technical proficiency; for example, specific communication skills include negotiation: ‘the ability to exchange meaning to reach decisions and realize transactions while understanding the meaning of others/partners’ (p. 36). Strategic skills involves developing an orientation toward a particular goal, and then taking the correct action and making the right decisions to reach the goal.

The authors posit that these digital skills are vital for full participation in the information society. Participation in their view includes economic, educational, political, social, cultural, spatial (geographical mobility) and institutional participation. Their rationale for full participation is presented in a forthright manner that does not encourage critical reflection on the nature and consequences of the information society. For example, economic participation is said to be necessary for participating in a market economy and obtaining cost savings on purchases. From this perspective, being able to purchase goods online at a cost savings is a benefit available to those with the appropriate digital skills. The fact that online purchases of goods at low prices may be a contributing factor to local or regional economic instability and loss of local employment is not mentioned. In another example, the benefits of spatial participation include being able to live a mobile life, which is available to ‘individuals in higher social classes [with] intellectual jobs with more spatial mobility and long-distance network connections that offer career opportunities’ (p. 50). These individuals stand in contrast to the ‘people from lower social classes [who] lead a much steadier and locally bound life [and] perform local and primarily manual work’ (p. 50). While this may be correct, this reinforcement of class stereotypes

lacks a critical analysis that would have fostered a deeper appreciation of the topic. The authors clearly state that inequality is a social challenge made more complex by divisions in levels of digital skills. They argue that 'those in the worst social positions and with the lowest personal qualifications can be placed in a better position and supported in personal development' with the development of their digital skills and that 'digital skills improvement is able to mitigate social and information inequality' (p. 59), adding that economic, social and cultural conditions need to be improved for the full benefits to be realized. Their analysis may be valuable for educators unfamiliar with these issues. However, it sheds no light on why economic inequality has grown significantly over the decades that digital tools became more widespread, or how increasing the digital skills of those in 'the worst social positions' will in any way improve that seemingly entrenched situation.

The authors have conducted extensive analysis of levels of Internet skills in the Netherlands and the chapter reviewing their research as well as related work in other countries is particularly interesting for revealing that many Internet users are operating at a basic level. However, some conclusions are hard to accept; for example, their statement that 'collective intelligence seems to only be suited for small portions of the Internet population' follows on from a very narrow discussion of how people gain knowledge from Internet interactions (p. 81). An important question not fully addressed is how many of these skills will become more developed naturally as familiarity with the technology is increased and the technology itself is improved. After all, the use of the Internet became widespread less than 20 years ago and instructional texts written a decade ago on how to use the Internet now seem endearingly outdated.

One of the solutions to the challenge of the skills gap is better design, including improving interface development and online content. The latter could be accomplished with attention to the perspectives and needs related to information skills, communication skills, creation skills and strategic skills. Their analysis found that these skill levels are quite low, but online content developers do not anticipate the problem, which makes it worse. Improvements could include, for example, prompts to the information creators to check if their content was created with the needs and interests of the intended audience in mind.

The other solution is, of course, learning digital skills. The chapter focused on this topic is particularly useful for educators and others designing policies and programs to improve digital skills. Their data indicate that away from work, most people learn digital skills informally, through self-study or informal assistance. This chapter also includes an analysis of the research on learning in public access centers and communities and a section on learning by disadvantaged groups.

Finally, van Dijk and van Deursen conclude with some policy strategies and recommendations. They rightfully point out that increasing the level of digital skills is the responsibility of many different stakeholders from governments to the digital technology industry and including labor organizations, schools and universities. The concluding chapter includes a helpful list of strategies and instruments for improving digital skills.

In a recent article critically analyzing research on digital skills, literacy and competencies, Potzsch (2016) concludes that to enable people to use and, if necessary, resist digital technologies, education must include knowledge at all levels about the technologies. This knowledge should include: technical infrastructure; surveillance and privacy; political economy, ownership and the exploitation of labor; the ecological implications of the digital industries; implications of information management applications; and problems of manipulation, attention management and affective design. From a critical perspective, for example, knowing about what the cloud is and who owns it could be considered a core digital skill. Discussion of this and these other issues is absent in the van Dijk and van Deursen book.

As an antidote to educational discourse about digital skills limited only to simple pedagogical solutions, *Digital skills: Unlocking the information society* is a welcome dose of realism. As such, it will be useful reading for educators in the digital field looking not only for a broad context in which to situate their practice but also new ideas for better designing programs and courses. However, the book will be of less interest to critical communication scholars concerned not with improving digital skills but rather with understanding how the 'skills' discourse reinforces dominant social and political structures.

Reference

Potzsch, H. (2016). Materialist perspectives on digital technologies: Informing debates on digital literacy and competence. *Nordicom Review*, 37(1), 119–132.

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