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Simeon Yates and Elinor Carmi (Eds.), **Digital Inclusion: International Policy and Research**, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 277 pp., $59.99 (hardcover).

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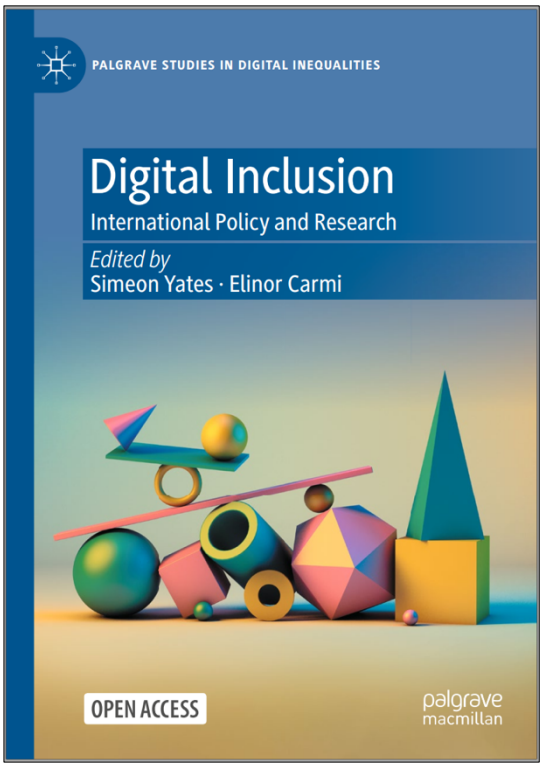

In the last two decades, "digital inclusion" has changed from a focus on Internet connectivity and device availability to an integrated concern encompassing digital skills, social equity, and empowered citizenship. The COVID-19 pandemic further illuminated how preexisting social inequalities are reflected and sometimes magnified by unequal access to digital tools and resources. ***Digital Inclusion: International Policy and Research*** responds to these evolving concerns with a breadth of case studies and theoretical perspectives that cut across continents and communities. This volume illuminates diverse strategies and policy approaches, placing them within real-world contexts while pointing toward future research and practice.

The edited volume is arranged into three sections: (1) "Policy and Place," which focuses on large-scale policy making and national or regional initiatives; (2) "COVID-19," dedicated to the ways the pandemic has reshaped digital inclusion strategies; and (3) "Digital Literacy," a set of chapters emphasizing targeted interventions, creative frameworks, and data literacy. This structure offers an accessible pathway for understanding how digital inclusion unfolds—from macro-level agendas through crisis-driven adaptations to more granular, community-specific approaches.

In the introduction, Yates and Carmi introduce the concept of "digital inclusion" by underscoring how the pandemic exposed long-standing inequities. They outline the book's three-part structure and clarify why the complexity of cross-national research, local interventions, and rapid COVID-19 response measures defies a simple, linear arrangement. The introduction frames the ensuing chapters as investigations into policy making, community-level initiatives, creative empowerment, and data literacy.

The opening section concentrates on institutional, governmental, and policy-level interventions designed to close the digital divide. Its chapters introduce case studies from regions as diverse as remote Australia, urban North America, and various locations in Europe, illustrating how geographic, political, and cultural factors can affect attempts to improve Internet access, digital literacy, and broader social equity.

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In chapter 1, Featherstone, focusing on Australia, examines how large-scale national policy responses can falter when confronted with historical inequities and infrastructural gaps—particularly in remote and indigenous communities. Highlighting that structural disadvantages did not simply vanish once basic broadband was offered, Featherstone's analysis reveals the nuanced layers of socioeconomic and cultural constraints that can limit otherwise well-intentioned government interventions.

Shifting to a South American context, Califano and Becerra in chapter 2 analyze how "legacy" public policies shaped pandemic-era digital inclusion strategies. Although new measures were rapidly introduced, inequalities persisted due to entrenched divides and scarce local resources. As in Australia, top-down initiatives proved insufficient when deeper social and economic inequities remained unaddressed—reinforcing the need for consistent, long-term community engagement.

Brown, Slater, and Warner-Mackintosh in chapter 3 examine the Connecting Scotland programme and illustrate how a national-level initiative can benefit from partnerships with local charities, volunteer organizations, and "trusted intermediaries" (p. 66). They discuss how frontline workers—who often grapple with digital exclusion themselves—become crucial "digital champions" (p. 67) in their communities once they receive proper resources and training. This case study also demonstrates how robust data collection and iterative feedback loops can help tailor inclusion efforts to populations most at risk.

Building on the policy thrust of the first section, the second section examines how COVID-19 catalyzed both creative solutions and unintended blind spots in digital inclusion initiatives. The spotlight falls on programs such as emergency device distributions for older adults, multilingual digital literacy workshops in immigrant communities, and new telehealth infrastructures designed to meet emergent needs.

Chapter 4 examines how COVID-19 restrictions revealed significant digital inclusion gaps for low-income and socially disadvantaged families in Australia. Students struggled with device access, data affordability, and required digital skills, which impacted their educational outcomes. The chapter discusses policy responses and sustainable solutions to address these digital inclusion challenges.

Chapter 5 analyzes a digital inclusion initiative by Telstra and RMIT University to address the "homework gap" (p.112) caused by lack of digital access. The study found that providing basic connections alone is insufficient—successful digital inclusion requires holistic support, including adequate devices and support for the broader family network.

Chapter 6 examines a project in Bremen, Germany, where iPads were distributed to all primary and secondary school students during COVID-19. While the initiative helped students better interact with teachers and structure their online learning, there were concerns about long-term device maintenance and surveillance issues.

Chapter 7 explores how citizen-created digital content, specifically Web comics on Instagram during COVID-19, supported health communication. The research found that these comics effectively

amplified public health messages, improved data comprehension, and encouraged more informed approaches to consuming and sharing digital media.

Although chapters 4 to 7 deal with different interventions and geographical contexts, these middle chapters collectively explore ways in which digital inclusion projects often bring benefits that still fall short of expectations, especially when broader socioeconomic or cultural obstacles remain. A recurring lesson is that neither well-funded programs nor creative outreach alone can dissolve barriers rooted in historic or structural inequalities. Local context—ranging from linguistic diversity to organizational capacity—plays a crucial role in whether such projects truly transform participants' digital opportunities.

The final set of chapters explores more specialized themes, including the ethics of data within marginalized communities and frameworks for fostering digital citizenship. Freire's (1970/1996) concept of critical consciousness is cited in several instances, underlining how conceptual lenses such as community empowerment and social justice can reshape digital inclusion programs to go beyond mere functional training. Discussions here highlight data literacy and how it intersects with questions of privacy, platform governance, and user agency (Carmi, Yates, Lockley, & Pawluczuk, 2020).

Focusing on a small group of women in rural India, chapter 8 investigates how new digital skills can increase visibility and authority in one's immediate community yet also expose participants to online harassment, reinforcing gender-based vulnerability. The authors demonstrate that while digital inclusion can yield empowering outcomes (e.g., greater self-confidence or social recognition), deeply embedded social norms—alongside threats in digital spaces—continue to constrain freedom. Their fine-grained qualitative study shows the importance of examining who gains meaningful power and voice once they become "digitally included" (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 15).

Chapter 9 explores how media literacy education (MLE) can help address the unequal distribution of abilities to participate in public debate, particularly focusing on disadvantaged youth in the Czech Republic. While the study found that the intervention successfully developed students' media competence, the impact on enhancing citizen participation remained ambiguous. The research emphasizes that social, economic, and cultural factors beyond digital media skills influence how young people translate these skills into active participation.

Chapter 10 examines a digital skills intervention program called Internet Saathi in India, focusing on developing women's digital capabilities. Through interviews with 17 Internet Saathis between 2016–2019, the study found that while participants gained social capital and recognition in their communities, they also faced new challenges such as online harassment. Despite gaining digital skills and family support, participants still struggled to overcome existing gendered social constraints. The research highlights that while digital inclusion brings benefits, it may not automatically overcome deeper societal and cultural barriers.

Concluding the volume, the editors propose a framework of "data citizenship" (p. 249). They argue that digital and data literacy must be grounded in an ethical and social understanding of how platforms operate, how data are collected, and how power circulates online. The chapter provides seven

guiding principles for designing inclusive data literacy interventions, stressing that equitable participation in a datafied society demands more than access or basic skills: It requires meaningful opportunities to engage critically with the infrastructures that shape everyday life.

Overall, this volume succeeds in demonstrating the complex, interconnected nature of digital inclusion. It goes beyond surface-level coverage to address literacy, community empowerment, and policy frameworks. Despite occasional gaps—such as deeper corporate/technology platform analysis, more explicit comparison across case studies, and an expanded discussion of long-term project sustainability—the editorial vision holds: Real progress toward digital equity demands acknowledging factors far beyond mere connectivity.

This volume offers insights tailored to a wide spectrum of readers. By featuring real-world data and cross-national examples, the volume sheds light on effective strategies—and sometimes pitfalls—of large-scale digital inclusion initiatives for policy makers and government agencies. Practitioners in community organizations and NGOs will find lessons on tailoring initiatives to local cultural contexts and adjusting to emergent conditions, such as pandemic disruptions. Grassroots perspectives illuminate how flexible, learner-centered methodologies can generate more meaningful outcomes. For scholars in digital media, communication, and education, this volume expands conventional "access-based" frameworks by placing digital initiatives in dialogue with debates on social justice, critical pedagogy, and political economy. Each chapter's methodological choices could serve as jumping-off points for future comparative or longitudinal studies.

References

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