Technology & Inequality- Call for evidence

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3. How can digital technologies be harnessed to improve the design of policies that tackle inequality and the equitable delivery of public services?

I have not carried out research in the UK but I have just finished a large ERC project on smartphones around the world (The Global Smartphone) and a similar study on the impact of social media.

I have three relevant conclusions.

1) A huge amount of investment is going into mHealth. Our studies show that in many countries relatively few people use these bespoke health apps and that is especially true of older people and less well-educated populations. Instead, we found that many such people prefer to adapt the apps they are comfortable with and use regularly and turn these into their own health apps. For example, we published 150 page manual on how people in Brazil use WhatsApp for health (UCL ASSA). There is little interest in this because no one gets credit for inventing something or makes money out of it, but our evidence is that this is far more important to most people than the digital health that is being created at vast expense. Furthermore, this is based on the creativity and ingenuity of ordinary people that we can learn from, rather than trying to impose our policy and creations upon them. I believe we could save considerable sums and be far more effective in helping lower-income populations by focusing more on this activity.

2) I have just completed a paper on the impact of googling for health information in the Irish town where I conducted fieldwork. My evidence is that this exacerbated class differences, because better-educated people learnt still more from this practice, while less educated people became still more anxious and misinformed as they tended to use whatever came up on google. We need much better kite marking and guidance for people to know what health advice has what imprimatur. But since people often reject claims to authority this has to be done with sensitivity to that additional problem.

3) Most of my team's work was with older people. In general, they suffered most from the digital divide when government services go online and they are intimated by digital technologies. Though we also found they gained greatly if they become comfortable with smartphones. We taught lessons to older people on smartphone use and gained considerable knowledge on the issues involved in this exercise. Other countries such as China have far more effective means for encouraging and teaching older people to use smartphones. Our evidence suggests the main inequality in digital use is becoming age rather than income.

Please note that all our evidence is qualitative from 16 months ethnographic fieldwork. We use no quantitative data.

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[Ageing with Smartphones in Ireland](#)

A theory of a theory of the smartphone