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Challenges of digitalisation in multicultural Finland

Digital divide

Digital information technology has become an essential part of our daily lives. Despite this, the so-called digital divide continues to exist. Digital divide has been described to originate from three kind of deficiencies: 1) material possibilities of an individual to access and use the Internet, 2) skills, competence and abilities to use the Internet, and 3) social and cultural benefits deriving from accessing and using the Internet (Regnedda and Muschert, 2017; Ragnedda, 2017; van Deursen and Helsper, 2015).

Interconnectness of social and digital exclusion

Social and digital exclusion have been shown to be interlinked in several ways. Socio-economic factors such as low education and low income have been associated with less digital information technology use (Helsper and Reisdorf, 2017). In fact, it has been noted that as more and more people get online, the social gap between the majority, and those who are still digitally excluded, widens (Medeiros et al., 2013). Those who are digitally excluded become even more socially excluded as non-use of digital information technologies has become more concentrated in the most socially vulnerable groups. Based on their empirical research in the UK and Sweden, Helsper and Reisdorf (2017) argue that we can now see an emergence of a “digital underclass”. The notion of the ‘vicious cycle’ has been used to describe a process within which social exclusion predicts digital exclusion, which in turn perpetuates and exacerbates social exclusion (Helsper, 2012).

Immigration and superdiversity

When rapidly digitising public services, not enough attention has been paid to the fact that due to immigration the Finnish population is getting more and more diverse linguistically, culturally, educationally and religion-wise. In 2019, the number of foreign-born permanent residents in Finland was 404,179 (Statistics Finland, 2020a). The fact that the Finnish population is rapidly becoming ethnically and linguistically increasingly diverse, and even “superdiverse”, applies particularly to the younger population and the bigger cities. In Helsinki, in 2019, 20.9% of 0- to 6-year-old children had some other language than Finnish or Swedish as their main language. In East Helsinki, almost 39% of under 16-year-olds had a foreign background, i.e. both of their parents or their only known parent had been born abroad (City of Helsinki, 2019). In addition, the proportion of families in which one parent is Finnish-born and the other one is migrant, is increasing. Also in these families the main language and the child’s native language can be other than Finnish or Swedish, and the child him-/herself could have been born abroad. It is not even always clear what the child’s native language actually is, and this applies not only to migrants (with or without a Finnish-born parent), but also to Finnish-born children of migrants (see Saukkonen, 2019).

Migrants as users of digital information technologies

The overwhelming majority of working-age migrants use the Internet daily and have a smartphone. In our study among Russian-speaking older adults, 94% of the 50-64-year-olds used the Internet daily and 92% had a smartphone (Kempainen et al., 2020a). In the FinMonik survey which was carried out in 2018-19 in 18

different languages among 20- to 64-year-old foreign born adults, 92% of the respondents had access to the Internet, 93% had a smartphone, and 88% reported that they had strong electronic identification (e-ID, e.g. online banking ID). The figures are lower than in the general population, however: in the FinSote survey in 2017-18, 98% of Finnish working age adults had an access to the Internet and strong electronic identification. (Vehko et al., 2020.)

In international studies, minority ethnic background (Ngyen et al., 2017; Werner et al., 2018), and migrant or refugee status (Alam and Imran, 2015; Ngyen et al., 2017) have been associated with less digital information technology use. Early findings from Finland support international observations about interconnectedness of multiple forms of marginalisation and social exclusion among working-age migrant adults (migrant parents). Our preliminary findings among over 50-year-old Russian migrants (Kemppainen et al., 2020a; Kemppainen et al., 2020b; Kouvonen et al., 2020) and among 20- to 64-year migrants from all migrant groups (Young et al., 2020) show that those migrants who have a low socioeconomic position (whether measured by labour market status, occupation, or income), poor Finnish language skills, poor health, and who lack Finnish education are at a higher risk of digital exclusion. Migrants who are employed, have higher education, and who come from the EU countries or North America are more likely to have an e-ID, which is necessary for accessing digital public services. Working-age women from the Middle East / North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa seem to be the most digitally disadvantaged: only 69% and 78% of them, respectively, report having an e-ID, compared to 98% of Finnish-born women. (Vehko et al., 2020.) A large proportion of women coming from these regions have a refugee background.

Migration related vulnerabilities in the use of digital public services

Especially in case of health and social welfare services, are those in the highest risk of social exclusion typically the ones that need them the most. In case of the public services, the inability to independently use them does not merely result from weak digital skills or the lack of e-ID, but links in complex ways with limited Finnish language skills, poor or non-existent reading and writing skills, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, later age at migration, and unfamiliarity with the Finnish system. The entanglements of these barriers vary individually, as do their consequences. Some barriers may block digital service use directly, others indirectly by fuelling a fear of making mistakes with severe, long-term consequences.

In this context, language deserves a special mention. As the surveys presented above show, most working-age migrants do not have problems of using a smartphone or other digital devices as such. In that case the language often becomes the main barrier of the service use, and the problem is the extremely high level of Finnish (/Swedish) that the use of digital public services requires. At the moment, most public services can be accessed only in official languages, although some also (at least partially) in English or Russian. Our preliminary findings from qualitative interviews from Arabic-speaking stay-at-home mothers (Nikkilä, 2020) showed that digital public services themselves were not the main problem for them; instead the problem was the high level of Finnish language skill their independent use required. The use of Google Translate helped somewhat, but the quality of translations is still of inferior quality. Therefore, for these migrant women, the management of their own and their children's everyday lives depended heavily on the social networks they had. Most participants did not have any Finnish friends. If they had a Finnish husband, or if their migrant husband spoke adequate Finnish, he typically took care of all everyday matters. Others sought help from third sector organisations. School age children were also helping, e.g. with reading and translating Wilma messages.

Furthermore, it is notable that there are migrant parents who cannot read or write at all, or their literacy skills (in their own language, Finnish, or some other language) are very basic. The number of these migrant parents is hard to estimate as not all of them attend literacy or integration courses, but is likely to be thousands. For these parents, even written translations in their home language would not be helpful. However, as also these migrant parents use smartphones, videos in different languages, such as those developed in TE Services (2020), could be helpful to reach them. In general, as a Unesco report highlights, simpler user interfaces with appropriate content can substantially improve the usability of a technology for

people with few digital skills and low literacy levels. These can include offering audio-assisted navigation or context-appropriate graphics in the mother tongue, or in second languages. (Zelezny-Green et al., 2018.)

The Finnish welfare state is largely built on the ideal of equal access of citizens and permanent residents to state-mandated services and benefits. However, the current situation in which a considerable minority of foreign-born parents do not have an e-ID, or have to rely on others in managing their and their children's everyday lives, leaves open the question if legislation-mandated social rights of these persons, and of their children, are being fulfilled.

Summary

When we talk about migrant parents and digital inequalities, the question is not mainly about their lack of digital skills, but more about other complexly interlinked dimensions of social exclusion. Relying always on digital support and advisory services, or spouse's or acquaintances' help in matters that concern one's or one's child's educational matters, social protection, or health care, may endanger personal privacy, force these people to possibly rely on incompetent advice, and potentially even expose them to abuse. One possibility to remedy this would be to establish a network of publicly funded local Citizens Advice offices with face-to-face, digital and phone services, offering advice broadly on any matters related to public services, work, law, housing, family, immigration etc.; somewhat similar to Citizens Advice in the UK (<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>).

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