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Söyleşiler

SCALING EQUITY AND THE UNDERCLASS IN THE DIGITAL: AN INTERVIEW WITH MASSIMO RAGNEDDA

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DİJİTAL EŞİTLİK İÇİN BİR ÖLÇÜM ÖNERİSİ: MASSIMO RAGNEDDA İLE SÖYLEŞİ

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We are delighted to introduce Dr. Massimo Ragnedda to you through an email interview we performed for the latest issue of Moment Journal. Ragnedda is a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University, UK and is co-vice chair of the Digital Divide Working Group (IAMCR). His main research field is digital divide and class-based digital inequalities with geographic focus. He authored more than a dozen books of which the latest are, *Enhancing Digital Equity-Connecting the Digital Underclass*, *The Third Digital Divide- A Weberian Approach to Digital Inequalities*, *Digital Capital: A Bourdieusian Perspective on the Digital Divide* (co-authored with Maria Laura Ruiu), *Digital Inequalities in the Global South* (co-edited with Anna Gladkova), *Mapping the Digital Divide in Africa* (co-edited with Bruce Mutsvairo), *Digital Inclusion- An international Comparative Analysis* (co-edited with Bruce Mutsvairo), *Theorizing the Digital Divide* (co-edited with Glenn W. Muschert). We are especially interested in his current work on possible indices for scaling and measuring digital capital across contexts. Here is a first-hand account of his brilliant contributions.

There are many studies in the literature on the role of the Internet to increase different types of capital. However, you have a new approach that defines digital capital as distinct. What is digital capital and why do we need it as a specific type of capital?

The idea of digital capital is based on the conceptualisation of capital provided by Bourdieu. In fact, our definition, encompasses all the attributes listed by Bourdieu in terms of accumulation, conversion and profitability. In the Internet-driven society, digital capital becomes a key component for interpreting social stratification and its related inequalities. More specifically, digital capital is the stocks of internalised ability and aptitude (digital competences) as well as externalised resources (digital devices), which can be accumulated, but also transformed and productively reinvested and converted into other forms of capital. The Bourdieusian lens - although he was reluctant to consider media technologies as a specific and autonomous subject of study - offers an opportunity to investigate the role of digital capital in explaining social inequalities.

The concept of digital capital moves well beyond the economic sphere and its orthodox meaning, to embrace the more immaterial and intangible goods and values. A parallelism might be represented by the development of the concept of social capital. This notion has been discussed, theorised and questioned since the very beginning of the advent of sociology, to describe an intangible form of capital that produce benefits and measurable outcomes. We use the concept of capital in a figurative sense to underline the tangible benefits, outside the economic sphere, which play a vital role in people's everyday life. We qualify digital capital as capital because, as other forms of capital, it requires some investment of effort and time to achieve what Bourdieu defines 'self-improvement'. Therefore, digital capital encompasses some of the key features that characterise any types of capital. Specifically, as a form of capital, digital capital (a) produces social benefits; (b) can be accumulated; (c) requires some investment and effort and (d) can be converted into other forms of capital.

Digital capital is, therefore, the 'historical accumulation' of both digital competencies (internalised abilities and attitudes) and digital devices (external resources), which in turn enhance the development and application of such knowledge to transform/transfer it to other forms of capital. This process involves a double loop that implies investing and transferring the existing offline capitals into digital capital, and in turn cumulating digital capital to be invested in the offline realm. This, evidently, has important

consequences on individuals' social position and *social status* by increasing life chances. Therefore, digital capital may be interpreted as a mediating capital that plays a vital role in transforming previous offline capitals (economic, social, cultural, political and personal) into digital activities and, in turn, in transforming these activities into other capitals.

You not only described digital capital theoretically but also developed an index that measures it empirically. How does defining and measuring digital capital as a distinct capital help us tackle digital inequalities?

Operationalising and measuring a capital might be complicated and might end up with different results and outcomes. These differences depend both on the different conceptualisations of the capital and different approaches proposed to operationalise it. The operationalisation of digital capital we have proposed focuses on the attributes included in the theoretical definition by combining existing but fragmented pieces of research that try to understand the relation between digital and social inequalities. Against this theoretical background, we propose a set of indicators of digital capital that can be used as an empirical model to measure the individual level of digital capital. Our model, based on an extensive literature review, integrates aspects related to the material and physical access to digital technologies (externalised resources) with the digital competencies (internalised ability) identified by the 'DigComp 2.1. The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens'. More specifically, the different indicators of digital access were identified by reviewing the literature on the first level of digital divide, which relates to inequalities in access and their impact on digital experience. The digital access component is split into four sub-components such as digital equipment, connectivity, time spent online and support. On the other side, the digital competences are defined following the classification proposed by the 'DigComp 2.1' that has become a reference for the development and strategic planning of digital competence initiatives at both European and Member State level. DigComp 2.1 is also the focal point of the European-wide indicator called 'Digital skills', used to monitor the digital economy and society. Moving from the conceptual reference model for the Digital Competence Framework, our proposed model captures, on top of the types of physical and material access, five areas of digital competences, namely (1) information, (2) communication, (3) safety, (4) content-creation and (5) problem-solving. Overall, DigComp 2.1 includes 21 different competences. In our model, we followed these competences, but some of them were merged and amended.

To sum up, we can say that the conceptualization and operationalization of digital capital is necessary because one of the main limitations shared by current definitions of technological/techno/digital/information capital is their lack of explanatory power of the convertibility of digital capital into other resources, such as economic, cultural, social and political capital. Therefore, the adoption of a new specific capital and its operationalization is appropriate to explore the digital experience of people, which in turn is embedded into a digital structure of society.

Sociology has an important theoretical background in understanding social inequalities. Today, we know that inequalities in the online and offline realms intertwine with each other. However, the digital divide scholars largely handled the issue as a technical problem for a long time. You have some important works which apply core social inequality theories for understanding and theorizing digital inequalities better. Do you think we can use sociology's body of knowledge well enough at this point?

Digital inequalities are essentially a social issue and should be analysed using sociological eyes. Sociology, indeed, more than any other discipline, is designed to address the issue of inequality in society, its pervasiveness and omnipresence. Sociology and sociologists, among them the fathers of sociology, namely Weber, Marx and Durkheim, have always paid attention to the inequality process, elaborating different theoretical approaches to attempt to better define and understand it. Their analysis and insights are still debated among contemporary sociologists and beyond the discipline. Specifically, in *“The third level of the digital divide. A Weberian approach to digital inequalities, Routledge, 2017”*, I used the Weberian lens to investigate digital inequalities, mainly because Weber’s multidimensional analysis of social stratification is a valuable theoretical tool to understand the digital divide. Sociology has a long and rich tradition in analysing the systems of inequalities in society, how such systems are reproduced, and which social strata are more privileged, in terms of rewards, than others. I found the Weberian lens particularly useful in ‘reading’ and understanding inequalities in the digital realm and how they are affected by and affect inequalities in offline society. The challenge was using concepts and methods that were elaborated more than a century ago in order to analyse problems that Weber could never even have imagined.

The pandemic made digital inequalities more visible. During Covid-19, the amount of time spent online, activities we do online, digital communication methods have changed. Due to physical distance requirements, some people have been spending more time online for education, shopping, communication, etc. Some of those who did not use the Internet have been pushed to cross motivational barriers and started to use the Internet. On the other hand, for some people, for those who do not have internet access in their households, those who need social support in order to use the internet but lost this support due to isolation, etc., the amount of time spent online has decreased. How do you think Covid-19 affects digital inequalities? Do you think these effects can be permanent?

The consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak in social, economic, psychological and health terms, are still under evaluation as the effects of the containment measures could last for years. However, something seems to be quite clear: Vulnerable people and vulnerable communities are those who suffer the most from this outbreak. This is not surprising, since both social and medical studies have repeatedly shown an interaction between social environment and health status. Access to the Internet is a new civil right and a public utility. In this sense, bridging the digital divide means treating Internet access as an essential service. For this reason, during the COVID-19 pandemic, several public and private initiatives around the world were promoted to tackle the digital divide and support digitally excluded people. However, the ways in which societies are organised tend to penalise already disadvantaged communities and citizens, therefore further reinforcing social inequalities. My feeling is that COVID-19 has reinforced already existing social and digital inequalities.

In your latest book titled Enhancing Digital Equity-Connecting the Digital Underclass, you look beyond traditional digital inequalities and focus on new digital inequalities. Issues such as algorithms, artificial intelligence, big data add new dimensions to digital inequalities and the inequalities are getting more and more complex. The more complex the problem, the harder the solution. Do you see any reason to be optimistic when there are many countries in the world that have not even fully resolved the access divide? In other words, what can prevent us from being pessimistic?

Not everybody thinks that the digital divide can be closed. Simplifying, we can say that in the literature there are two main theoretical approaches to the phenomenon: That of 'normalization' and that of 'stratification'. The first approach believes that the initial differences in access to ICTs gradually disappear as a result of socio-economic processes and the current gap will be gradually overcome as the technology is made available at lower cost and with much simpler interfaces, which will lead to a general levelling. The second hypothesis, that of stratification, argues that inequalities born with the introduction of new ICTs will add to those already existing, in a circular and cumulative process. Groups slower in adopting and properly using the new technologies will never be able to bridge the gap with the fastest, with the consequent growth of differential access and use. My position is somehow equidistant between the two approaches, since I believe that both are partially valid and neither completely exhaustive. Faced with the multiplicity of the differences highlighted, it is possible to imagine that the gap in access might be at some point filled, but in the meantime other gaps in terms of skills, motivation, digital capital and capacity to gain advantages from the Internet will perpetuate. Furthermore, with the advent of algorithms, artificial intelligence, IoT and big data social inequalities tend to discriminate those already at the margin of society, giving the rise to the digital underclass. They are strongly penalized by exclusion both from the digital realm and from social services, job opportunities or private services that implement biased algorithms to make their decisions. The advent and implementation of tools relying on algorithms to make decisions has further penalized specific social categories by normalizing inequalities, in the name of efficiency and rationalization. As scholars, we should deconstruct this narrative by highlighting the risks that automated process and predictive model bring with them, specifically in terms of reinforcing inequalities.

We thank Dr. Ragnedda for his sincere insight.