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THE WORK OF DIGITAL INCLUSION: EXPOSING THE DIGITAL LABOUR OF COMMUNITY WORKERS FOSTERING DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

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Introduction

Digital inclusion is increasingly being recognised as a human right, with growing calls for policy, programs, and advocacy to reduce structural disadvantages and disparities in digital access and inclusion (Sanders, 2021). Digital in/exclusion is also closely related to social in/exclusion, meaning that vulnerable populations (such as those with low incomes, low levels of education, or cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds) are more likely to experience digital disadvantage. Digital exclusion, in turn, further compounds disadvantage, by excluding people from the benefits and opportunities afforded by access to information, products, and services online (van Dijk, 2020).

While the experiences of people with low levels of digital inclusion have attracted increasing attention from scholars (e.g., Hargittai, 2021; Helsper, 2021), less attention has been paid within the digital inclusion literature to understanding a) how people are supported to access and use digital technologies in situ and b) the work involved in providing this support. Digital inclusion support can be provided in a myriad of formal and informal ways, including in-person or online technical support, device- and data-donation services, and forms of digital mentoring like digital literacy workshops (Dezuanni et al., 2019). We argue that these activities are forms of 'digital labour' and that the digital labour involved in supporting individuals towards achieving digital inclusion is under-recognised both in digital inclusion theory and practice.

Context of the study

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In this paper we present findings from a national-scale project that worked with disadvantaged communities to examine digital inclusion in low-income families and the role of social infrastructure (e.g., schools, libraries, charities, government services) in supporting digital participation. Over two and half years (2021–2023), project researchers conducted extended fieldwork with families, schools, and community organisations in seven communities—ranging from urban to periurban, regional, and remote—across Australia. The project focused on the digital inclusion implications of children’s home and school learning experiences, school leavers’ transitions into work, and parenting in digital times. Importantly, it included understanding how social infrastructure organisations are working to support local families to become digitally included—through, for example, digital literacy training, provision or subsidy of devices and data, and assistance in accessing information and services online.

This paper draws on interviews and workshops with community workers (e.g., teachers, librarians, social support workers) in an outer urban community with high representation of Pasifika and Indigenous people. This community, home to approximately 20,000 people, is in the lowest quintile of every measure on the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)’s Socio-Economic Index for Areas (ABS, 2023). The community’s unemployment rate is almost double the national rate, and household incomes are about 25% less per week than the average Australian household. While a quarter of all Australians hold a Bachelor’s degree, this is true of only 9% of this community’s population. Despite the significant challenges facing families in the community and the organisations that support them, the researchers were privileged to work with a vibrant and cohesive community sector in the area, giving rise to some of the specific findings of this paper.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative case study methodology to provide a detailed account of how digital labour is performed by social infrastructure workers in the context of digital inclusion and broader social services. This approach has been successfully employed in other studies of community-level digital inclusion in Australia (e.g., Alam & Imran, 2015) and abroad (e.g., Bürgin & Mayer, 2020). As an exemplar, Hughes et al. (2018) detail a case study focused on residents’ experiences of social living lab initiatives in the regional Australian city of Townsville, in the wider context of Australia’s National Broadband Network (NBN) implementation. In step with this study, we sought to explore the experiences of digital in/exclusion from multiple perspectives—at both the family and community levels—within a particular suburban community. More specifically, we combine intrinsic and instrumental case study approaches (Simons, 2014) to a) investigate and illuminate the complexity and uniqueness of this community’s particular challenges and opportunities for digital inclusion and b) gain broader insight into the issue of digital in/exclusion experienced by low-income Australian families, respectively. We pay particular attention to understanding the interactions between service providers and the families they support, including the types of activities involved in helping families become connected using digital technologies.

Analysis and findings

Data for our analysis was primarily drawn from interviews and a two-hour workshop the authors ran with community sector workers who actively work with families to provide tailored social services, such as support for job seeking and accessing government support (see Figure 1). In the course of this work, participants reported that they act as digital mentors for clients who often lack reliable, affordable access to digital devices and the internet along with the requisite skills to use digital technologies to perform everyday tasks. For example, social workers are often asked for advice on which internet and mobile plans are best, given the persistent budgetary constraints of low-income families. Furthermore, these workers are often asked by their clients to help them create accounts and login to banking and social services, which can present ethical challenges related to privacy. Participants also recounted that this work is generally unaccounted for in position descriptions, key performance indicators, training, and resourcing allocations. Similar experiences were reported by other social services workers in other communities in the broader research project.



Figure 1: Participants in the community sector workshop discussing digital inclusion in the local area.

In scholarly literature, such support has not conventionally been considered as a form of digital labour: this term has largely been applied to paid, unpaid, or underpaid online activity, platform-mediated ‘gig’ work, and formal employment within the digital media industries (Jarrett, 2022). More recently, digital labour has been expanded to encompass—often highly gendered—domestic digital labour (e.g., Sadowski et al., 2021), particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the digital labour of digital mentoring has not yet been accounted for.

In light of our results, our study extends the concept of digital labour to include work undertaken in the service and advocacy of digital inclusion in community contexts. Specifically, we articulate the activities, challenges, frustrations, and costs (in time and resources) that characterise digital inclusion support of low-income families, often beyond role expectations. In doing this, we seek to expand understandings of digital labour both as a category and concept. Overall, the paper demonstrates that digital inclusion initiatives must not only accommodate the intersecting socio-cultural needs of low-income families, but also include appropriate support and resourcing for community workers performing critical digital mentoring work.

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