A Comparative Approach to Digital Divide in Times of Coronavirus (COVID-19)

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The COVID-9 crisis highlights several societal issues. Among them, it reveals that digitization has a distinct influence on interpersonal communication. The crisis underscores the importance of access to the Internet and digital media in everyday life. The restrictions on the freedom of movement are offset through digital platforms for our basic needs. Interpersonal communication is increasingly taking place in the digital sphere, and the growing importance of digital spaces for the fulfillment of basic needs has become apparent. The significantly increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in order to access to information, medical treatment, food distribution, banking, public welfare and education systems has shown the importance and relevance of Internet access and digital literacy. Alongside the benefits of these digitization processes, there are also disadvantages in the widening of digital divides and inequalities. These have a direct influence on everyday social life and are embedded in social practices. We argue that while the COVID-19 crisis is a unique event, it reveals existing divides and inequalities that previously, in stable times, were easier to be ignored.

In order to apply the comparative approach to the issue of digital divides and inequalities during COVID-19 times, we take a closer look at three countries: Germany, Israel, and Mauritius in order to address the similarities and differences between the countries and across socio-cultural and generational groups. By doing so, we will reveal the relevance of digital divides at different levels of society and highlight the intersectional dimensions of social inequality and vulnerability.

Digital Divide and Inequality in Israel, Mauritius, and Germany

Digital divide refers to inequalities in access to and use of ICT and has been defined as the "gap between those who have and those who do not have access to computers and the Internet" (van Dijk 2006: 221). Research on the digital divide has long focused on material and technological access to computers and networks (van Dijk 2006). In the last decades, a growing number of scholars have adopted a social, psychological, and cultural approach for studying digital divide (e.g., Mossberger et al., 2003; Norris 2001; van Dijk, 2005; Witte and Mannon, 2010). Accordingly, digital divide is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes a set of multiple divides (Bruno et al., 2010), and access to media and technology is considered as "a process with many social, mental and technological causes and not as a single event of obtaining a particular technology" (van Dijk 2006: 224). It combines material access with a motivating access, access to skills and access to ICT.[1] "Digital inequalities continue to combine with race, class, gender, and other offline axes of inequality" (Robinson et al., 2015: 570), and as such reinforces prior and existing social inequalities in the digital

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[1] For more, see van Dijk (2006) as well as Schreeder, van Deursen and van Dijk (2017).

sphere. Thus, digital inequalities underscore and empower existing societal inequalities. Digital spaces replicate existing social divides and inequalities in everyday life and particularly in times of crisis.

The COVID-19 crisis is international with similarities and differences between continents, countries, and regions. At the same time, and as an outcome of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on a given society, it exerts a different level of influence on the need of individuals to use digital platforms. In order to examine the similarities and differences we will draw on digital divide and inequality during the COVID-19 crisis in three countries: Germany, Israel, and Mauritius. We will first look at the differences in access to digital media in each country and then at unique digital divides within the respective societies.

Israel

Israel is a country with broad access to ICT. The Israeli society is known for its relatively high percentage of people using digital technologies. It is even described as a "Start-Up Nation" (e.g., Senor & Singer, 2009). Despite this, there are significant socio-cultural and generational digital divides that overlap with prior inequalities in Israel. One group with a significant digital divide from the mainstream Israeli population: the ultra-Orthodox community. The uniqueness of this community is that there is a digital divide by choice (David & Baden, 2020). The ultra-Orthodox community is ranking among the lower level of the socio-economic status in Israel and its members have relatively low (non-religious) education levels. Furthermore, it has high unemployment rates in comparison to other groups of the society. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, instructions of the ministry of health and other governmental institutes were communicated mainly through digital media[2], so most of the community members received no official information. At the beginning of the spread of the virus (March/April 2020), the lack of access to digital media in the ultra-Orthodox community in Israel became apparent due to the fact that most of the COVID-19 cases were reported in this community. As a result of this failure, the health ministry has developed a campaign in the community media outlets and channels. In addition, employees of the health ministry met with rabbis and community leaders in order to transfer the information on the government guidelines to the members of the community.

Mauritius

In Mauritius, access to ICT differs greatly between different groups, and intersects with other social inequalities. Similar to other countries, the generational gap is the significant single factor to predict digital divide in Mauritius. However, the differences between young and old are much stronger. For example, among the 20- to 29-year olds, 91% use computers and the Internet, while only 20% among over 60-year-olds are digitally literate (CMPHS – Statistics Mauritius 2019). In addition, in urban and rural areas there is a high level of digital inequalities apart from other social inequalities, such as income and level of education. Thus, vulnerable groups and individuals have limited access to digital media and the Internet. The COVID-19 crisis highlights the relevance and dangers of such digital inequality. After the first COVID-19 case had been discovered, the Mauritian government imposed a strict curfew with supermarkets being closed overnight for ten days. As a result, supermarkets all over the country switched to online shopping and buying food was dependent on the access to ICT.

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[2] Since it is outside the scope of this work, it should be pointed out that the information were also published through mainstream media, but the ultra-Orthodox community does not use them either (to elaborate see, David & Baden, 2020)

This rapid transition to online shopping of basic goods (e.g., food) has the highest impact on the most vulnerable members of the population that have poorer access to ICT.

Germany

In Germany, notwithstanding the availability of ICT (BMVI 2020), digital divide and inequality also exist and intersect with other societal inquiries. One form of such divide relates to the limited access to the Internet infrastructure in rural areas in comparison to urban areas, or correlations with socio-economic status and social inequalities that are reproduced in the digital sphere (Zillien, 2013). During the COVID-19 crisis digital inequality intersects mainly with generational issues and immigration. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic most of the governmental services were only available in German. Thus, people who do not speak and read German had to face challenges in obtaining official information in clear and unmediated ways. Additionally, the COVID-19 warning app launched in July highlights the digital divide in Germany. Older people, who are among the particularly vulnerable groups of the COVID-19 pandemic, found themselves overburdened with the technical use of the app (Spiegel Online 2020). When the app was launched it was available only in German and English, and lately also in Turkish, with the aim to add other languages later (Rheinische Post 2020).

Concluding remarks

The three cases highlight different perspectives on digital divide, even though we can only scratch on the surface within this abstract. Despite the high penetration of the Internet in Israel, many of the ultra-Orthodox community members do not use it due to their leaders' commandments (David & Baden, 2020). In Mauritius, the (comparatively lower) Internet utilization rate varies considerably between ethnic communities and between rural and urban areas, and often intersects with income and educational inequalities. However, during the strict nationwide confinement, the provision of basic needs was almost exclusively regulated via digital platforms, and as a consequence thereof, the importance of access to ICT increased. In Germany, in spite of a largely good Internet access, there are cases of limited access to ICT for vulnerable individuals and groups (e.g., older people, immigrants, and refugees).

Access to the Internet has often been considered as a "privilege" provided on the basis of economic capital. In the last decade, there has been a growing debate on the right to (safe) Internet access as a human right (e.g., Skepys, 2012, Szoszkiewicz, 2018). We argue that the current pandemic situation emphasizes that access to the Internet should rather be understood as a "right" as it partly provides access to vital information, education, and social life. In this context of crisis, new dimensions of the digital divide on global and local scales, as well as inequalities, and vulnerabilities become visible and tangible; social barriers are created and reinforced. We would like to argue for a stronger critical perspective on digital inequalities, especially in the context of this global health crisis with all its social and spatial implications. We contend that it is part of our duty as academics to take a critical look at the various aspects of digital inequality and also to be aware of the dangers of reducing the importance of ethics in the context of life-saving measures by governments and corporations. Dealing with the necessary transparency and responsibility of digital platforms, neutral and democratically legitimized media regulation, or ways to prevent the misuse of and misinformation in digital media are also challenging topics for disciplines like media geography or communication studies.

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