Technology rules. Looking for small data in a big data world. #fightinequality

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"Who has access to information?" During a recent workshop everybody gave an ptimistic answer: everyone has access, if they want to. Don't they? Exploring this a little bit further, I was astonished by the way we take our own perspective for granted. The next question: "Who decides on new policies" suddenly brought on uneasiness and worry.

The Netherlands is one of the world leaders when it comes to individual use of internet technology. An estimate of 95,5 to 97% of the population has access. Looking into the statistics, the conclusion is that this gives me a limited perspective. Countries like Eritrea, Lesotho, Liberia are at the bottom of the list. Just enough to trick you into believing that everybody has access to the internet and the same information as we do, as you relax in your Gambian holiday resort. Noticeably, the site which provides these statistics does provide a specified table on the best scoring countries, but not on the lowest scoring ones. The first sign of colonial arrogance? Look at the world total of internet penetration figures: they barely touch 50%. This means that the answer to the original question "Who has access to information?" suddenly drops from 'everyone' to: 'half of the world population'.

One of the goals of the European Digital Agenda was, to decrease the population without internet access to 15%. And this target has almost been met: in 2015, it was 16%, measured in 28 participating European countries. Good work! A little bit more effort and everybody can enjoy the privileges and benefits of new technologies, can't they? No, they can't. Leaders of the pack, Denmark, Luxemburg and Finland showed, that 98% of their capital citizens used the internet. Exploring these data a little further, they show several digital divides. A region in Bulgaria scored lowest with only 51% access. Apparently, the divide crosses from north to south, east to west, rural regions to cities, old to young. Does everybody have access? No!

Up till now, I only used hard shell figures: access to the internet and internet use. However, these are worthless without digital skills. Being able to find, interpret and use information is crucial. We only seem to realise recently how hard this is. Can we still distinguish Facebook from "Fakebook"? There are lots of incentives for education to teach children about digital skills. In the Netherlands, 35% of 11-12 year old pupils participated in the popular programme "Mediamasters" through their primary schools. Statistics show that three quarters of adults search for information and news on the internet actively.

The paradigm is clear: everybody has to join. Internet technology is the new gold, the highest valued resource in our time. Never has there been such a massive effort to introduce a resource so far and wide and so quick. I remind you that even fresh water and electricity are still not available in every part of the world. More than 60 million girls do not have access to education, let alone education on media. Every majority leads to minorities. It's not about access alone, it is also about skills. The dominant reflex is, that the minorities have to be facilitated and dragged along to keep the momentum going. More connections, more access and more education. But in reality, the developments are so rapid, that only a limited group of young nerds can keep up.

That's why I'm interested in the small numbers behind the big ones. The question should not be limited to "Who has access?, but expanded to "Who do we leave behind?" Who are the drop-outs, the excluded, the minorities who are overlooked? Who can even catch up with all new opportunities,

like big data, wearables, injected chips, nano medication and … whatever? It's not just the people with less education, or the migrants or the citizens of developing countries. Students witness their teachers not being able to work with the smartboard in classrooms. In my profession as a social worker I witness that well educated practitioners feel left behind in the technological tornado that strikes their lives.

"Who decides on policies?" I always assumed it was everybody who wanted to participate and have a say, at least through voting. But the vote of the majority is always a limited vote – which we should be more aware of. If you belong to a dominant group, it is logical to you that others think alike and want the same things as you. But if you belong to a minority, you are capable of defining different perspectives. Applied to technological innovation, we may assume that everybody wants acces to the internet and everybody should benefit. This leads to decisions, policies and distribution of resources: we should serve those who are underprivileged, underserved, underdeveloped. But it is important to reflect on this point of view. There will always be people who won't be able to use technology and they are currently being victimised and rendered helpless and unempowered. The real fight againt inequality is not to give everybody access and education, but to hold the leading parties accountable for inclusion of the minorities in their decisions and policies. Otherwise, the current dominant paradigm will lead to a world created by and for the happy few.

Roughly a quarter of the Dutch population does not actively look for information or new on the internet. A new group of functional digital illiterates is not able to travel, sell or buy online, or apply for a job, because of the technological supremacy. Who are the ones, who don't produce big data, because they don't use devices? Which employees are not able to cope with the innovations at work?

To what extent do policy makers and leaders take the perspectives of the minorities into account and take responsibility for them as a consequence of their own choices? How social are new technologies?

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Eurostat (definitions)

Eurostat (data)

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