

Social inequality on the Internet also on the increase

November 18 2014, by Joost Bruysters

A total of 97% of Dutch people now have access to the internet. Unfortunately, this does not mean that 'the digital divide' in the Netherlands has now been bridged. On the contrary, social inequality is increasing on the internet, too. Through conducting a series of surveys, researchers at the University of Twente's CTIT research institute have shown that over recent years there has been an increase in the difference between the digital skills possessed by the more highly educated and those with a lower level of education. In addition, more highly qualified people, when compared to those with secondary or lower levels of education, increasingly focus on applications that improve their social position, and those with lower qualifications use the internet more as a medium for entertainment, relatively speaking. The consequence is the creation of an information elite on the internet, and that elite is suspiciously similar to the existing social elite.

The increase in [social inequality](#) is attracting a lot of interest, with a focus on income and wealth. The recent report entitled *Gescheiden Werelden* (Divided Worlds), published by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research and the country's Scientific Council for Government Policy, also identifies a cultural and political divide. Digital inequality is barely mentioned. The perception is that as 97% of Dutch people have access to the internet, the [digital divide](#) no longer exists. Through a series of surveys held among the adult population of the Netherlands, researchers at the University of Twente have now shown that internet use in the country is becoming increasingly unequal. This form of inequality reinforces existing economic, political and cultural differences.

Until now, it was thought that the internet would bring about a reduction in the existing differences, as knowledge on it is free and contacts are easy to establish. UT research carried out by Alexander van Deursen and Jan van Dijk has now shown that the difference in the digital skills possessed by those with lower and higher levels of education has increased over recent years. This is particularly true when it comes to the intrinsic skills required for searching for information and achieving things using the internet. In addition to this difference in skills, the way in which the internet is used is becoming increasingly unequal. Despite the fact that there is an increase in almost every way in which the internet is used across all strata of the population, separate worlds are clearly coming into being. The UT's researchers note that since 2010 there has been a trend for more highly educated people (compared to those with lower levels of education) increasingly focusing on applications that improve their position in society. Examples include taking online courses, participating in knowledge networks and consuming large quantities of news. By contrast, people with lower levels of education use the internet increasingly more often as an entertainment medium, relatively speaking, and use it to chat, play games, use Facebook and swap and buy things.

Existing differences on the labour market, in political participation and in participation in cultural life are only increasing as a result of internet use. An information elite is being created on the internet, and that elite is suspiciously similar to the existing social elite. Over the coming years, the researchers will be focusing on research that will help to formulate policy to counter this alarming trend.

More information: Alexander J.A.M. van Deursen, Jan A.G.M. van Dijk, Peter M. ten Klooster, "Increasing inequalities in what we do online: A longitudinal cross sectional analysis of Internet activities among the Dutch population (2010 to 2013) over gender, age, education, and income," *Telematics and Informatics*, Volume 32, Issue 2, May

2015, Pages 259-272, ISSN 0736-5853,
[dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2014.09.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2014.09.003).

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