

Democratization: Mixed results? Popular uses of the Internet

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Abstract:

Research conducted between 2014 and 2017 among French employees and workers brings to light how this fraction of the population (who was equipped later than the middle and upper classes with access to the Internet) has appropriated this new medium. Attention is drawn to differences in the preferred means of communication: personal e-mail services are not frequently used; websites and online media are consulted that require the least effort in terms of formal writing skills; and smartphones are used instead of computers. This democratization of access to the Internet has hardly changed forms of sociability; nor has it led to a broader cultural awareness. However it has clearly opened new opportunities for acquiring knowledge and led to a “re-symmetrization” of relations with “experts”.

In France, the Internet has been democratized over the past ten years, a process apparently related to the increasing use of smartphones for connection. Between 2006 and 2017, the proportion of nonmanual employees with an Internet connection at home rose from 42% to 93%, and of workers from 31% to 83% (CREDOC 2017).¹ These figures obviously do not tell us much about how a medium so based on writing and initially designed (and used) by persons with a higher education or socioeconomic status has managed to make room for people who have much less schooling and do not use writing skills much in their everyday lives. As a sociologist has rightly pointed out, the appropriation of culture and communication cannot “*be separated from the social conditions where they occur and thus from the ethos that characterizes a social group as such*” (PASSERON 1970).

I would like to shed light on facets of this democratization process by drawing on my research between 2014 and 2017 among “workers” and “employees” (PASQUIER 2018). This survey consisted of semidirective interviews with 50 persons (working in human services and living in three regions in France) and of an analysis of 46 Facebook accounts of workers and employees (the ANR Algopol research program). What happens when these tools, initially designed and used by individuals with a higher education and socioeconomic status, come into the hands of persons with neither of these traits? This question was the starting point of this research. Several remarks can be made.

A FIRST REMARK has to do with the socially differential appropriation of sociotechnical arrangements. Certain means of communication, for instance e-mail, have not passed the social barrier. E-mail is central to the interpersonal and business communications of white-collars, whereas, in my survey, the use of e-mail was forced and purely utilitarian (for on-line shopping or communications with administrative services). E-mail is like computers: it is part of the world of those “on top”, who use office software, have no problems with written communications, and accept a porous boundary between work and home. This aloofness of lower-income households from e-mail is

¹ This article, including any quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor’s approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites have been consulted in July 2019.

a problem for the “dematerialization” of public administrations, especially of contacts with welfare services.

In contrast, other tools have become indispensable, and might even be overused. For example: banking applications on smartphones are heavily used. By enabling people to constantly monitor their bank accounts, they allay anxiety. Other inventions have ended up being accepted, like Facebook, which allows for long conversations with persons close: *“The introduction of the electronic media was necessary so that a conversation (till then associated with orality) could, for the first time, be carried out in a written form: on the Internet, you speak with your hands and listen with your eyes”* (BEAUDOUIN 2002:201). In the households covered by my survey, Facebook was used in very specific ways. A Facebook account did not serve to enlarge networks of relationships, whether privately or professionally. It was mainly a means for communication within the family. People talked about their private lives, of course; but Facebook was not so much a place where individuals told about their lives as a means for circulating images and words borrowed from others in order to shore up a consensus about certain values — a sort of moral network.

SECOND REMARK: these two social groups do not explore the online world in the same way as the better educated. Respondents’ practices for exploring the Web were far from motivated by “curiosity”, which Nicolas Auray (2016) has seen as a key characteristic of online browsing, *i.e.*, the flexible exploration open to chance encounters observed among hackers, geeks and activists. Compared with young men with college degrees, respondents in the survey (and especially the women) had, let me emphasize, none of the skills that Auray described as necessary to the success of this openness to serendipity while browsing.²

But should online browsing be defined normatively? Or, should we, on the contrary, consider that it is linked to living conditions? This is the lesson to draw from Richard Hoggart (1957): individuals always have the right reasons for doing what they do in the way they do.

In some respects, browsing on the Internet was a time of relaxation, like other leisure activities at home (where television long held a monopoly in low-income households) — browsing to look at local ads on the website LeBonCoin or at the most recent messages on Facebook. Very often too, these persons with little educational capital found essential information on line: information about their rights at work, for helping their children with homework, or for gaining a more equal relationship with the “educated”. In several cases, the Internet provided intellectual ammunition, by offering access to specialized knowledge, that helped make up for the respondent’s shorter period of schooling. For instance, a handyman in a hospital became, by relentless online browsing, an expert on vintage handbags made by big name brands. He looked for them in yard sales and then sold them via his account with eBay to well-informed hobbyists, including some foreign collectors. Apart from wide open browsing out of curiosity, cybernauts might learn about “niches” that open new ways of relating to the world.

Nor does “participation” have the same meaning for respondents in my survey and for the educated. Participation was much more limited in low-income than upper middle-class households. Persons of the first sort visited forums to read answers to questions that they dared not ask on their own. They read the comments tagged onto newspaper articles but did not write any. They circulated photomontages but did not create any. This “participatory modesty” probably stemmed from a combination of factors. For one thing, it obviously has to do with the difficulty of having a “grip on

² Auray (2016) listed four types of skills for mastering the exploration of the Internet out of curiosity:

- 1) MANAGERIAL SKILLS for engaging in a dialog (accepting criticism, corrections, etc.), a “habitus” less “natural” in low-income households where people are less “exercised” in interactional civility;
- 2) HERMENEUTIC SKILLS for appraising a document’s sources (The least educated more often fall victim to scams and frauds on line);
- 3) TOPOLOGICAL SKILLS related to the new way of “following directions” on the Internet (This point gives an advantage to online gamers and is not, therefore, a disadvantage for persons from low-income households); and
- 4) SOCIAL SKILLS, “an aptitude to pursue a heterogeneity of encounters, to vary one’s world of relationships and build bridges [...] However the popular classes are characterized by a stiff resistance to requests for help in relations with persons whom they do not know and from whom they are far removed socially” (p. 136).

writing", to borrow from Valérie Beaudouin (2002), who noticed that persons with the lowest diplomas do not take part in activities that require sophisticated writing skills, in particular for formulating arguments (as on forums), and that they restrict their activities to procedures without memory "*involving writing skills far from acceptable standards*", such as chat rooms, instant messaging or Facebook (p. 205).

Furthermore, respondents in the survey were reluctant to "show off". When they did something they were proud of, they sent photos to those close to them but not to strangers. According to the very few studies made on the elite of online participation, their social profile corresponds to men with a level of education. Such were the cases of "*top-customer reviewers*" on Amazon (PINCH & KESSLER 2013) and influential bloggers (DUPUY-SALLE 2014). The race to online fame, which Beuscart and Mellet (2015) have described for the most popular YouTubers, did not attract the respondents in my survey.

This does not mean that respondents did not acquire skills... at their level. Learning how to describe a product in order to put it on sale on LeBonCoin or eBay, how to attract the attention of family members by posting on Facebook, or how to draft a post for a dating website... all these actions undeniably amounted to learning experiences in communications. Statistical surveys have overlooked the humble actions of participation of this sort and only focused on forms of participation deemed creative (such as creating a blog or website, producing a video, or uploading graphics or music).³

A FINAL REMARK: the Internet has undergone a segregative democratization. The most recent users are from low-income households. They communicate among themselves but very little with users who have a higher social or educational rank. This leads us to draw the conclusion that the Internet has not done much to alter a person's horizons of sociability. Marie Bergström's study (2014) of online dating services provides evidence of this: despite a degree of social mixing of their clientele, these websites have not at all deterred trends toward segreg homogamy in matchmaking. The selection of a match is, according to this study, made in reference to writing skills, spelling or the type of photographs uploaded.

To make a last point about the lower white-collars and workers in my survey: family ties laid at the center of networks of online relations. Academics have discussed the reasons for the persistence of "familialism" in low-income households: the massive entry of women in the labor market and the longer period of schooling for their children have jarred the strict distribution of roles between men and women that researchers from the 1920s to the 1980s emphasized (YOUNG & WILLMOTT 1957, SCHWARTZ 1990). In the households in my survey however, the potential of individualization due to the new technology was limited as much as possible: the couple shared an e-mail address; electronic tools were used with other members of the household present; and respondents had the obligation to mark family members as friends on their Facebook accounts. This transparency of practices was a principle associated with concern for preserving the family's privacy from outsiders. The upcoming generations might undo this familialism, but the adults interviewed clearly stated that they did as much as possible to maintain the family group, a task not made easy by the Internet.

The findings about cultural openness were similar: the conclusion cannot be drawn that the Internet has done much to change matters. Cybnauts search on YouTube to find something they already like — in fact, something that those close to them also like. Evidence of this came from the sharing of hyperlinks (to clips or trailers of popular entertainers) on Facebook accounts: the search for a consensus trumped a diffusion of cultural diversity. This does not characterize low-income households alone. In general, the economists who have studied culture and entertainment have emphasized the limited effects of what has been called the "long tail" distribution in relation to the Internet (BENGHOZI & BENHAMOU 2008). Through the Internet, users have access to a vast offer,

³ Participation of this sort was the focus of, for instance, Jen Schradie's survey (2011) on the "*digital participation gap*" or Olivier Donnat's study (2009:190) of culture practices in France.

often for free; but consumption is still highly concentrated on a few bestsellers. In my survey, evidence of this was the very low rate of circulation of articles from national as compared with local newspapers.

The new opportunities were being put to use for knowledge and know-how: browsing to find information about one's job, health or the children's homework or acquiring new know-how through tutorials or in-depth searches on a particular topic of interest. My survey turned up many examples of this opening toward the world via Internet searches. Some persons acquired skills that, though sometimes marginal or peculiar, enabled them to adopt new practices — always gratifying and, in some cases, moneymaking. We should not, therefore, have a condescending opinion of the Internet, as often happened in studies about the relation of low-income households to television. People want to know, to learn. The fact that online searches for information are sometimes clumsy or are bungled owing to the criteria used does not mean that we should overlook them. It is important that we not attribute powers to the Net that it does not have. Laura Robinson (2012) has shown how much the family's informational environment affects a pupil's capacity for improving his/her use of the Internet for school work. When children have parents who have taught them to sort information and provided them with other aids, such as books, they have a considerable "*informational advantage*" for assessing the relevance of the information found on line. In families without diplomas, this support is missing, of course. But an even bigger problem is the belief that the ease of using the Internet is itself a promise of future success. The mirrors of modernity are the major obstacle to a real entry into the knowledge society.

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