Chapter 3.4

The Myth of the Digital Divide

Valerie Frissen

After an initially somewhat one-sided emphasis on the technological and economic dimensions of the information revolution, the *social* implications of ICT developments have in recent years become more central in discussions about the information society. The fact is that obtaining an integral vision of the information society requires us to make a certain effort to examine the social imbedding of ICT and the potential social consequences of ICT developments. This stronger accent on social questions has also highlighted the importance of gaining an insight into the *user* side of ICT. Conquering the user is in fact the "last frontier" on the path towards an information society, a path on which economic interests – disguised as social questions – certainly play a far from unimportant role.[1]

> To me, information is all about openness, accessibility, connectivity, networking, democratisation, decentralization, and as a result social transformation. Information is power; at times people don't like to share it. Information is not about telecom, telephones and communications. It is about empowering people.
>
> *Sam Pitroda (2001)*[2]

ICT and its social consequences

Information gives people power

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1 Good examples of this are the participation of the Media Plaza corporate platform in an action to stimulate electronic voting or the *Mission Statement* of The Internet Society: "To assure the open development, evolution and use of the Internet for the benefit of all people throughout the world." See www.mediaplaza.nl and www.isoc.nl

2 Pitroda, Sam (2001): Telecommunication and development in India: Speech to the Alcatel Foundation, Berlin, November 7th 2001.

> " **A whiff of political correctness hangs over the dichotomy discussion.** "

Social dichotomy and exclusion

A prominent place in the debate on the social implications of ICT developments is taken by the topic of "social dichotomy and exclusion." A whiff of political correctness hangs over the dichotomy discussion. Visibly, no party interested in ensuring its place in the forward march of the nations can escape, sooner or later, the need to pay lip service to the importance of avoiding the menacing dichotomy between information "haves" and "have-nots."

"Digibetism"

Having made the necessary obeisance, one quickly moves on to the other items on the agenda. A number of things stand out here. First of all, there is no disputing that there is indeed a very real threat of a dichotomy. Worst still, this dichotomy is not just a new form of social inequality ("digibetism"), but rather reinforces existing social inequalities in society by manifesting itself to the detriment of those groups which already only too often get the short end of the stick: persons on low incomes, the unemployed, older persons, women, foreigners, in short the well-known social victim groups. Noticeable also is that this discussion continues to turn in a circle without anything much happening, without structural solutions being suggested or developed, quite apart from any well-intentioned experiments. Now and then, yes, we discuss new forms of universal access or philosophise about an ICT basic package for every citizen,[3] but in practice we scarcely find any policy that is directed at realising equal access for everyone. With a pinch of ill will one could even demonstrate that, in those social areas, like education, where access to good ICT provision is an absolute must, policy is so poor that the ICT infrastructure approaches that of a developing country. What does appear to have had an unexpected but significant impact on the accessibility of information provision are recent market developments, such as the sudden very strong growth in the number of mobile telephones and Internet connections among Dutch consumers or the stiff competition between those offering free Internet access.[4]

Unexpected market developments

In short, whilst public discussion on ICT accessibility remains at the stage of fretting and a certain paternalistic head-shaking, market developments are again making this discussion hopelessly outdated. The penetration rates for mobile telephones, the Internet and personal computers have now reached a high general level in Europe. According to Bert Mulder, adviser to the Second Chamber of Dutch Parliament on ICT developments, the average Dutch citizen himself invests more in advanced ICT equipment than the average company, not to mention the government.[5] Inequalities in access to ICT appear to be disappearing on their own.

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3 See Van Dijk 1998

4 These observations refer to developments in the Netherlands.

5 In a column in the newsletter of the Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek (www.publiek-politiek.nl/nmbb/5/inhoudi.htm).

The question that is central to this article is not, however, whether the discussion about dichotomy and exclusion is still on the agenda, but whether it is being carried out from the right *starting points*. ICT developments and the resulting virtual world need also to reflect the basic democratic values in society – such as freedom of information, equality of opportunity to take part in society, and the provision of high-quality information in a variety of media formats. In this sense a discussion on ICT access for citizens is a very relevant issue and obviously a public task. In order to be able to fulfil this task, it is meaningful, however, to take a closer look at a number of assumptions that underlie the discussion about dichotomy and exclusion/inclusion.

1998 saw the publication in the Netherlands of the book "From Forum to Supermarket? Citizens and consumers in the information society." The book established that, even today, little detailed policy-relevant information exists on users in their role as consumers and citizens, even though there is certainly no shortage of normative assumptions about consumers. A frequently heard position, for example, is that the blessings of the information revolution will not automatically accrue to everyone, and that socially weaker citizens in particular are in danger of becoming the pariahs of the modern information society. Their lack of financial resources, knowledge, skills or "cultural capital" is said to prevent them from plucking the fruits of ICT developments, so reinforcing their disadvantage and existing forms of inequality. This can produce a divide between information-poor and information-rich, with the threat, in a certain sense, of a new form of social injustice. In a society in which ever greater importance is being accorded to information and communication and thus to ICT, the social participation of these groups comes under pressure, thereby in essence endangering democracy.

How far are these assumptions supported by actual knowledge of what is happening among ICT (non)users? To answer this we need not only data on the number of Internet connections or on PC ownership, but above everything else answers to questions like: what factors determine acceptance or non-acceptance of innovations among users? What do specific user groups actually do with ICT in their daily lives, and why do they do it? How do users react to the unlimited possibilities that ICT offers them according to the generally bloated rhetoric of technological discourse? This means asking questions like: is it legitimate to interpret information "poverty" more or less self-evidently in terms of *social injustice*? Can information poverty also represent a conscious user choice or the expression of a certain diversity in the use of ICT? What do differences in the handling of ICT signify for *social participation*?

The debate on dichotomy in the information society is in fact full of assumptions about specific (non-)user groups on the one hand and social

The right starting points for the discussion?

Assumptions about the origins of the digital divide

"Information poverty" – a free choice or social injustice?

participation and citizenship on the other. In this discussion I shall be subjecting these two types of assumption to critical analysis. This article will therefore:

– analyse assumptions about potentially *excluded groups* in the information society and about the *use* (and non-use) of ICT and related factors;

– analyse assumptions about citizens' *social and political participation* and the significance of ICT for this.

3.4.1
The Divide between Information Haves and Have-nots

Drowning in the digital delta

Clear differences can be established between citizens when it comes, for example, to the ownership of hardware, the number of Internet connections, or access to networks. The report "Drowning in the Digital Delta" from 1999, based on various research data, observes that foreigners, older people, the less educated, lower income groups, unemployed persons and women (in particular single women and single-parent families) do indeed trail behind on the electronic highway. The front runners are young people, the highly educated, those in work, high income groups and families with children. Leaving aside minor differences, this picture is confirmed in various investigations.

Analytic differences and normative inequalities

Looking for explanations for these differences, the report concludes that, apart from personal features such as gender, level of education and ethnic background, this inferiority can be explained by financial, practical, psychological and social elements. The differences established in access between users are interpreted in this study, and in general also in other discussions, with little further reflection, as a *divide*. Here we are talking not only about *differences* but also about *inequality* of access, with an implicit, but unmistakable normative colouring being given to the empirical facts. This calls for some further analysis and remarks.

"Divide" as a static concept, the diffusion of the Internet as a dynamic process

First of all, a number of remarks about the assumed victims: The term "divide" suggests that the observed differences are static in nature. In fact, sufficient empirical indications exist that this is not the case. Certain groups of citizens are, it is true, not in the vanguard, but they are quickly catching up, as is occurring with women and senior citizens. History also shows us that "early adopters" of innovations are always young, white, male and well educated, and that other user groups are reached in the course of time, with only a very small portion being "left behind." This is referred to as the S-curve for the diffusion of technological innovations.[6] The recent development of the market is showing that we are right now at a turning point in this curve,

6 See Rogers 1996

marked in general by the attainment of a "critical mass." This curve means – at least according to Rogers – that the large majority of users will finally be reached. If not, we cannot speak of successful innovation.

This S-curve, which suggests that these differences in access are part of a natural, ongoing process, does not mean that this development is therefore without its problems. The one-sided composition of the early adopter category points to a more fundamental problem, the problem that in the design and development phase of innovation a one-sided user image is being used with all design and marketing strategies directed initially in an economic-technological direction. This means that exclusion begins at a very early stage, and is more or less part and parcel of technological development itself. In most discussions about dichotomy, the development process of technology itself remains untouched, and the problem is seen to lie unilaterally with victims, who are required to make a "catching-up effort." That this generally works only when the market is substantially expanding and that account has to be taken of a wider diversity of consumer needs, is self-evident. Attempts in the past to get socially fragile groups in front of computers have thus also, unfortunately, proved unsuccessful because their starting point was unsound. People should not have to adapt to technology, but technology to people.

Based on this thought, policy that wishes to prevent exclusions will have to direct itself more at *culture policy* objectives, that is, stimulating and protecting diversity and pluriformity of design and use, rather than new forms of universal access. Universal service provision as a policy issue is no longer relevant. We may also reasonably assume that this access is regulated via the market. In the longer term we shall probably see not only free Internet access, but also free decoders and perhaps even PCs, in the same way that we see free mobile phone sets for mobile phone subscribers. On the market it is no longer a question of selling items of equipment or network connections, but of what people will be doing with this technology. In short, "content is the message." Policy will also have to be increasingly directed at this.

A second comment relating to figures on "victims" is the large variations in ICT ownership and access within these categories of purported victims, variations which we are in danger of missing in these quantitative generalisations. Although this is to a certain extent an unavoidable problem of this type of – in itself valuable – research, it is nonetheless good to maintain a certain caution, since socially weak groups are repeatedly in danger of being stigmatised in this way. Information about what people in socially disadvantaged groups do with ICT may well provide starting points as interesting for policy as a one-sided focus on those who do nothing with it. Seniorweb and Webgrrls[7] are well-known and good examples of this, as is the intensive use

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7 www.seniorweb.nl, www.webgrrls.nl

Marketing strategies directed at early adopters

Market expansion by taking account of a broader range of consumer needs

Not hardware but functionality is decisive

Heterogeneity of "victims"

of Internet by young people from the Antilles and Surinam.[8] More detailed information about those people who are *not* connected or have nothing to do with ICT may well provide surprising insights: in essence we still know very little about the reasons for "exclusion." In many cases it is assumed, just like that, that this is due to structural factors, such as a lack of financial resources, knowledge or skills. A number of comments can also be made about these assumptions.

Good reasons for non-use

Research in this area is often based on a circular argument. Because certain groups, such as the less well educated, older people, the unemployed and low income groups are less frequently connected, the explanation for this is sought more or less self-evidently in a lack of knowledge or experience with computers or in a lack of financial resources. In very few cases have these groups been closely questioned about their reasons for being without computers or Internet connections. The fact is that non-users often have very good reasons for this. More about this later. According to Breemen and Terstroot,[9] the following factors influence the adoption and use of computers and Internet:

Six factors determining acceptance and use of Internet

1. *Financial factors:* this relates to the ability to pay for new media and the Internet. Higher-income individuals/households more often own ICT equipment such as computers, modems and Internet connections and also replace them more frequently and acquire more expensive and newer products.

2. *Knowledge and skills:* the skills required in order to use computers and computer applications break down into the ability to read and write ("literacy"), the ability to use quantitative information ("numeracy"), and skill in and knowledge of the use of ICT, including earlier experience of and acquaintance with new technology ("informacy"). Education/training is an important indicator for knowledge and skills. The lower people's education/training, the less their ICT ownership and access.

3. *Psychological factors:* fear and "stage-fright" about using computers. Stage-fright can arise because people think that computers are difficult to use or because of negative first experiences. This seems to apply in particular to older persons and, to a lesser extent, to women. They often continue to see technology as something outside their daily lives.

This is connected to the following two reasons, which concern more the qualities of the ICT itself that can explain this non-usage:

8 See Bureau Veldkamp 1998
9 See van Breemen/Terstroot 1999

4. *Perceived usefulness/functionality of ICT:* users need to have the feeling that a new medium represents a certain added value, usefulness or function in their daily lives. An experience of lack of functionality can be found, for example, more often among older people who have not actively grown up with computers: they can feel that computers and related skills are not (no longer) necessary for their purposes in life.

5. *User-friendliness:* one important, but undervalued reason for the non-acceptance or non-use of ICT remains the lack of user-friendliness. One factor for older people, for example, is that ICT takes insufficient account of hand-eye coordination among older people, of the problems of people with poor sight, and of the longer period of practice that they need.

6. *Social factors:* social networks of friends, colleagues or family play an important role in awakening awareness in the computer area, in providing the necessary knowledge and skills in using computers, and in calling for help in the case of problems, etc.[10]

This list of possible explanations underlines the fact that differences in ICT access can be ascribed to a whole series of factors, with the *position* of (non-)users playing a role, and where the *qualities of ICT* can be a major threshold factor. Most discussions about dichotomy fail to start from such a series of related factors, reducing various dimensions of difference to a crude and simple divide between the information-poor and the information-rich. Qualitative research into ICT acceptance and use in daily life also shows not only that non-users often have good reasons for shying away from ICT, but also that people outside the "excluded" category are under little pressure to adopt these technological innovations.[11] There follow a few more specific comments based on this type of research.

Reconstructing acceptance processes shows that people weigh up different factors and that the *costs of ICT* are decisive only when the added value of ICT is seen as very limited. This is healthy, critical consumer behaviour. Moreover, it is not per se true that lower income groups spend little money on communication facilities: comparatively speaking, a relatively large portion of a household budget can be spent on ICT, albeit in certain cases on a games computer, broadband TV or a satellite dish rather than on a multi-media PC.

– Older people are often in fact particularly interested in new developments such as Internet, but feel that "they are not for them," because ICT marketing is directed exclusively at fast-moving young people,[12] or at the

Multidimensionality of differences

Distribution of the ICT budget

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10 See ibid.
11 See, among others, Silverstone/Hirsch 1992; Silverstone/Haddon 1996; Silverstone-/Hartmann 1996-1998; Frissen 1998; Haddon 1998
12 See NPOE 1998/1999; Weijers/van Rijsselt 1998

Focusing on the surprising, amusing, trivial and everyday possibilities of ICT

technologically experienced, and is not presented as a collection of new services that can be of interest precisely to older people. Their resistance or stage-fright is directed in these cases not so much against the innovations as such, but against the language in which this innovation is couched and with which it gains social significance. Exclusion in such cases is much more a *cultural* than a cognitive question (of knowledge and skills) or a financial question. Trailers on the digital highway would probably be better served by making them acquainted, in a manner tailored to their situation, with the surprising, amusing, trivial and everyday possibilities of ICT than by providing them with deadly serious catching-up and refresher courses under the banner of "lifelong learning."

Pragmatic use in the case of women

– Research also shows that an interpretation in terms of *lagging behind,* for example in the way women react to ICT, has its problems. Gender differences certainly appear to exist in patterns of use: women generally tend to be pretty functional and pragmatic in their use of ICT (and therefore to use it less) and also more often take a repudiatory attitude towards ICT. Many women are less interested in endless playing with computers or surfing on the Net, which is seen rather as a waste of time or associated with unhealthy nerd-like behaviour, which they wish not to be associated with. This results in certain cultural values and norms about masculinity and femininity being "embedded" in the technology, notions that also bring with them a certain degree of inclusion and exclusion. This again points to the need for more *culture policy* concepts in ICT policy, which can stimulate a certain diversity of "content" and use.

Availability of time is an essential factor in use

– One factor which until now has been entirely absent from the discussion about dichotomy is that of *time*. The qualitative research mentioned earlier clearly shows time availability to be a major factor in ICT (non-)acceptance and use.[13] For certain types of households (double-earners with children, "urban professionals," etc.), time is becoming an increasingly scarce commodity. In this light one is not surprised, for example, at the conclusion of IT trend studies by KPMG on status and development in the field of information and communication technology.[14] These show that people between 30 and 55 are seriously lacking in knowledge about the possibilities of ICT. The under-30s group scores "reasonably well" to "well" when it comes to ICT knowledge and the 55+ group "reasonably well" (sic!). Cause for concern is precisely the knowledge of the group in between, even though these people are in good social positions and traditionally are expected to embrace things new. Research shows also that people who have extensive experience with and knowledge of ICT in the framework of their work often make limited use of the possibilities that

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13 See, for example, Silverstone 1998; Frissen 1999a; Frissen/Punie 1998
14 See KPMG 1999

ICT offers them, among other things owing to a lack of time, or because of the feeling that the innovations demand too much time, even of them (sic!).[15]

– Finally, on the basis of qualitative research into the acceptance and use of ICT we can conclude that users are not only to a large extent *conservative* (it is those ICTs which can adapt to the processes and routines of daily life that are successful), but also *irrational* besides: emotions, lifestyles, everyday trivia and apparently pointless rituals are often more decisive for acceptance than the functional properties of ICT.

Users show "irrational" acceptance behaviour

The above-mentioned "alternative" research results show clearly that discussion of the accessibility of the information society requires more insight into complex and differentiated user practices before one can even start to identify the relevant social problems.

In this way we can conclude that there are certainly differences in access to ICT, but that these differences do not necessarily justify all kinds of conclusions about exclusion and dichotomy. Discussions about dichotomy are not, in essence, so much about differences in access *per se*, but about something else, i.e. the question: *access to what?* This brings me to a number of fundamental comments of another sort. Why are differences in ICT ownership or access such a serious *social* problem at all? The implicit assumption is that people who are excluded from ICT are also poorly informed and therefore unable to participate as full citizens in a democratic society.

Many conclusions about exclusion and dichotomy are not justified

3.4.2
ICT and Social Participation

The dichotomy discussion suggests in essence a self-evident link between ICT access and social participation. We are threatened with a serious social problem, the more so because information poverty affects the socially weak, whose involvement in society is none too large (so one assumes). ICT reinforces the existing dichotomy between those with ample opportunities and those with few, adding a new dimension: a divide between the information-poor and information-rich. Information, or knowledge, is here seen as the path to social participation. The question that we can ask here is whether these connections are so easy to make.

Questioning the implicit assumption that information access equals social participation

In the discussion about social dichotomy, worried noises about people's weakened involvement in society are the order of the day. Citizens' purported low social participation gnaws at the roots of democracy. Symptomatic of

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15 See Frissen 1998

Socio-political engagement
becomes more fragmented,
but does not diminish

this are a growing individualisation and fragmentation of interests, a lack of social cohesion, and a lack of political interest, as expressed, for example, in low turnouts in elections, etc. However, in the "Social and Cultural Report" of 1998, a comprehensive study of social and cultural life in the Netherlands, which is at the same time an overview of 25 years of social change, we hear very different noises. A chapter in this report is devoted to participation. Starting from a broad definition of social participation as the involvement of citizens in voluntary social relationships, also included under the denominator of "civil society" or "the social midfield," the SCR comes to the conclusion that participation has never been higher in the Netherlands than in the past 25 years. We find a clear trend precisely towards "active citizenship," expressed for example in increased affinity with extra-parliamentary forms of action, "cheque-book activism"[16] and a blossoming of the social midfield. One comment here is that voluntary work is growing less, a fact that the SCR ascribes to the lack of time amongst "that part of the nation that is better equipped for political and social action."[17] This again focuses attention on the "time" factor as a possible explanation for differences in participation, as well as indicating that low social participation is not only specific to disadvantaged groups (quite the contrary). We also observe that the nature of the commitment has become more fleeting, with a greater concentration on informal associations, with a strong trend toward "single issues" and less emphasis on direct meeting. These new socio-political connections are often loosely organised and are easily combined with membership of other social organisations, making participants' involvement more fragmentary and non-committal. The SCR concludes that there is no question of a steep fall in social and political participation in the past decades. Such a conclusion is only justified, to a certain extent, when it comes to political behaviour in the narrow sense of the term, such a voting behaviour and activity in political parties. On the contrary, citizenship and social commitment appear to have received new impulses, and many new faces.

"Life politics" in the
late-modern era is oriented
towards self-fulfilment

This links into what Giddens defines as a shift from "emancipatory politics" to "life politics."[18] People's political and social involvement in "late-modern" society takes the form not so much of membership of large political emancipation movements, but of involvement in moral issues and social associations that are directed strongly at self-fulfilment in emancipated social conditions and at "single issues" of major relevance in everyday life. Here the question is not so much that of fighting for equality between citizens, but much more the desire to give expression to diversity and pluriformity.

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16 SCR 1998, p. 772
17 Ibid., p. 771
18 See Giddens 1991

> **"Attempts to use technology to inhale new life into traditional democracy point to an optimism that is pitiful in its desperation."**

"(...) because of the 'openness' of social life today, the plural-isation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities,' life style choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self iden-tity and daily activity. (...) It becomes more and more apparent that life-style choices (...) raise moral issues which cannot be sim-ply pushed to one side. (...) Life politics – concerned with hu-man self-actualisation, both on the level of the individual and col-lectively – emerges from the shadow which 'emancipatory' politics has cast." [19]

The SCR's findings justify the conclusion that the assumed lack of social involvement and participation by citizens, which plays such a prominent role in discussions of dichotomy, is in fact largely unfounded. The question that we then have to ask is about the relationship between ICT use and social participation. Here we must note first of all that establishing a self-evident effect of ICT use on social participation is somewhat problematic. Until now, for example, we have no empirical indication that non-connection to the Internet leads to people being seriously ill-informed or to citizens being marginalised in terms of social involvement and participation. Such assumptions testify to a severe over-rating of ICT and of its social significance at the present moment. Nor can the Internet or other ICT formats be expected to be able to substantially influence social problems such as social inequalities or political disinterest, which are the outcome of all kinds of complex social processes. In this respect, attempts to use technology to inhale new life into traditional democracy, for example in the form of electronic discussion platforms or chats with those in power, point to an optimism that is pitiful in its desperation.

Although we must not overestimate the social significance of ICT at the present time, this significance will certainly increase. ICT will gradually play a more important role in all kinds of social processes and will to a certain degree also become a reality per se, in which democratic values such as equality, diversity and quality, tolerance and the like will remain important, but probably also take other forms. The shape of future ICT developments will reflect society at that time with all its positive and less positive sides. Starting, for example, from the current blossoming of social participation, as described by the SCR, we can already observe that the Internet fits well into this pattern: Internet is one of those new platforms where the individualised commitment that marks late-modern society is taking shape.

For example, the *network character* of Internet both implies and sup-ports new forms of connectedness, community-forming and cultural iden-tity, based, for example, on shared interests.[20] This is reinforced by the fact

No direct connection between social participation and the Internet

The changing relationship between information suppliers and users

19 Ibid., pp. 5
20 See Jones 1995; 1997

Role swapping

Dealing with intimacy and anonymity

New patterns of inclusion and exclusion

Internet's power of mobilisation

that *time and space* form less of a barrier to connection with other people than before. Another contributory feature is that Internet appears to break through traditional hierarchical relationships, making possible *a different relationship between information suppliers and users.* Increasing user choice, coupled with limited time availability, make it more and more difficult for suppliers or governments to create an "audience" or "market." At the same time, the technology makes it easier for users to supply and disseminate information themselves, turning upside down the traditional division of roles between transmitter and receiver. In terms of participation, this reversal of roles can support and stimulate new forms of citizenship and participation, as the SCR observes. Already, new cultural practices, forms of expression and relationships are developing on the Internet, pointing to other forms of social participation. "Internet language" reflects another way of handling formal relationships and intimacy/anonymity, which would appear to facilitate entering into and being involved in new associations. At the same time, however, we can also observe new patterns of inclusion and exclusion on the Internet, for example in the behavioural codes and "netiquette" which streamline participation based on "new" normative frameworks.[21] And finally, we are witnessing the development of more and more *hybrid* information and communication platforms, in which the traditional dividing lines between amusement and serious information, debate and personal discussion, image and text and between social issues and personal interests are becoming less sharply drawn.[22]

As more and more people make use of these platforms, ICT will also increasingly reflect the capricious and unpredictable manifestations of real life. One example of how ICT can be used to support and give form to political and social participation can be seen in the pupil strike organised over the Internet in the Netherlands. In this case the Internet made it possible to mobilise fellow-militants very rapidly and create an issue with a strong political impact. An even better example – because it shows that social participation, in part due to ICT, can more easily take shape in grass-roots mode outside the existing legal order and can develop into a very particular and uncomfortable reality – is that of the paedophile "neighbourhood watch." This platform uses Internet, among other things, in order to keep paedophiles out of local neighbourhoods. Nothing human is foreign to the Internet**.**

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21 See Frissen 1999b
22 See Frissen 1998

3.4.3
Conclusion

In this discussion, two types of assumptions controlling the discussion about exclusion and dichotomy in the information society have been subjected to closer analysis: assumptions about the users and non-users of ICT on the one hand, and assumptions about the relationship between ICT and social participation on the other. When it comes to the divide between the information-poor and information-rich that is purportedly in danger of arising as a result of differences in ICT access, this analysis and alternative data about ICT acceptance and use can raise a number of questions. We have shown the discussion about access and exclusion to be in fact based on incorrect starting points. In terms of policy implications this signifies that the discussion has, until now, not gone much further than a few ideas about new forms of universal access, and can now be regarded as having been overtaken by market developments.

In essence the dichotomy discussion involves something more fundamental, i.e. ICT as access to the *information and communication* deemed necessary in order to be able to take part as fully-fledged citizens in a democratic society. The more implicit idea here is that ICT represents a means of solving the "democratic deficit." This "deficit," as read from decreasing political-social participation by citizens and the exclusion from information, is seen as potentially further reinforcing this process. Given that it is precisely the "socially weak" who have less access to ICT, it is precisely the involvement of these already marginal groups whose involvement in society will be impaired. The present article again places question marks in front of these assumptions. An initial criticism is that the somewhat limited definition of citizen participation used as a starting point fails to take account of a number of social changes in later-modern or post-modern society which have given a totally different outward form to participation. Starting from a broad definition of participation as used by the SCR, what we see is precisely a huge blossoming of citizen participation. ICT can play an interesting role in this process (for example Internet as a new platform) as it comes to be used by more people. However, its role must not be overestimated. The fact that citizens lack access to ICT does not signify in itself that they are also poorly informed or that their opportunities to take part in society are limited.

The policy implications of this analysis could well be that public tasks lie less in the area of equal access, but more in the field of the provision of information itself. More important is protecting citizen choice (which is not guaranteed per se by the market). It is important to secure varied, multi-media information provision and a wide range of communication platforms, which reflect and give shape to a diversity of forms of citizen participation.

The discussion about access has been overtaken by developments

Closing the democratic deficit?

Increases in citizen participation

Provision of information, not access, is decisive

This signifies a fundamental shift from a discussion in terms of equality and universal access to a discussion in terms of diversity and the concepts of cultural policy. This means, among other things, that the accent is more on content and user practices, with the balance shifting from traditional suppliers of public information and communication to new ones, to new social participation platforms and to users. The upshot of this is that we are perhaps talking of a new public domain.