

Equaliser or divider? Questioning the societal impacts of digitalisation policies

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Abstract

Digitalisation has increasingly been embraced by policymakers as a universal solution to a wide range of socio-economic challenges, including inequality, access to services, and economic competitiveness. However, the assumption that digitalisation inherently delivers inclusive benefits remains insufficiently tested through empirical evidence. Our research examines whether digitalisation in Romania has succeeded in reducing societal inequalities or, conversely, exacerbated them. The study is based on data from a nationally representative survey conducted across Romania which explored issues such as disparities in digital access, intensity of usage, and the digital competencies of different population segments.

The findings indicate that, while digital infrastructure has advanced uniformly at a technical level, significant inequalities persist in terms of digital access and use, which in turn create wider socio-economic rifts. For example, an extremely visible digital divide between urban and rural areas is questioning the “equaliser effect”, with rural regions lagging behind in the frequency and quality of digital tool usage. Moreover, the territorial rural–urban split tends to widen at each level of the digital divide, amplifying, for example, outcomes of digital use. Education-based inequalities are also evident, sometimes alongside age-related differences. By contrast, gender disparities are minimal and, in some cases, almost non-existent.

While our results do not deny the positive impacts that digitalisation can and could have (including effects such as social inclusion and economic development), they challenge the optimistic narrative that digitalisation alone is a panacea for inequality. Instead, they reveal that without careful planning and equitable implementation, digitalisation may reinforce existing social and territorial

disparities. In particular, the analysis reveal that the benefits of digitalisation are dependent upon a balanced territorial distribution of digital education.

Keywords

digitalisation, digital divide, policies, core-periphery, inequalities

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