What is 21st-Century Digital Autonomy?

AMY GONZALES

University of California, Santa Barbara, USA

In March 2021, I was standing in line to receive my first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The medical facility that was distributing the vaccine had created two lines: in one line were people who had scheduled an appointment and in the other line were people who were hoping to get an unused dose when scheduled appointments were unfilled—they were on vaccine "stand-by."

I know I am not alone in saying that scheduling the first vaccine appointment was incredibly difficult. It required days of rapidly scrolling between texts from friends and compulsively refreshing websites simultaneously on my phone and my laptop. It felt haphazard and stressful, despite owning multiple expensive devices, stable in-home Internet access, and being unusually educated (in Internet communication, of all things). It involved a resource-rich social network and a job that kept me in front of the computer all day long (which also meant, of course, that my risk of getting COVID was low), and, as I turned back to glance at those lines before walking in for my first dose, all of that privilege was laid bare in another way as well: nearly everyone in my line was White and everyone in the other line was Black and Brown.

The COVID pandemic was a historical moment in which intersections of technology and inequality—race, income, education, nativity, and language—were brought into stark relief. The implications of these inequalities were apparent from the first moments of the pandemic, though they often remained invisible to those with privilege. With this book, however, we have a clear and detailed view into how Internet access and use from the very beginning of the pandemic shaped life around the globe, often with dire consequences.

In *Connected in Isolation*, Hargittai (2022) reports on survey data from the United States, Italy, and Switzerland from April 2020 regarding uses of Internet technology immediately following widespread social lockdowns in each of these countries. Although Hargittai covers various topics in the book, including the breadth of reliance on the Internet across different domains of life (e.g., education, healthcare), and the difficulties of navigating pandemic misinformation, my response will be focused on the second chapter. In that chapter, "The Digital Context of Lockdown," Hargittai describes the quality of digital access across the three countries in terms of physical access to technology, digital skills, and the need for tech support. She also examines how these measures of access are associated with knowledge of the pandemic and exposure to misinformation. Some of the findings in this chapter are expected, such as the fact that income and education predict digital skills across all three countries. Some findings are perhaps more surprising, including the fact that Americans were more than 10% less likely to own a computer than Swiss or Italian respondents, and at least twice as likely to have only one means of getting online at home. Rather than summarizing findings, however, I encourage readers to

explore this accessible and important data for themselves. I will instead highlight a critical conceptual contribution that Hargittai makes before turning to three points of consideration for scholars of digital inequality.

In the second chapter, Hargittai introduces the concept of *autonomy of use,* which, she describes as "a helpful term for thinking about the aspects of digital inequality that give people freedom to use the technology when and where they want to" (p. 51). She goes on to paint a picture of the ways that autonomy of use can vary by data plans, age of device, Internet speed, the need to share devices, etc. In these data, Hargittai has operationalized autonomy of use by measuring the number of computing devices available. She finds, for example, that greater autonomy of use is associated with more frequent Internet use. However, she has conceptualized the term such that it could be operationalized in a number of different ways. I believe that the utility of this concept extends far beyond the pages of this book.

As digital equity scholars, we are often faced with the challenge of articulating the urgent need for equitable Internet and computing access at the same time that the press, policy makers, and the public are talking about the harms of the Internet (e.g., use of the Internet by extremists, negative mental health effects of being online, etc.). By describing the need for "access" as an issue of "autonomy," Hargittai underscores that digital equity advocacy is not a debate about whether people *should* be online but rather having the *option* to be online. With this tool at our fingertips, I pose three points of consideration for digital equity scholars going forward.

First, the dust has not settled on how the pandemic has shaped our relationship to technology. Work, education, healthcare, and many other sectors have permanently changed as a result of the global lockdown, broadening norms about when and where Internet use is expected. This means that scholars of digital equity have new questions to ask regarding the consequences of digital disparities: *How does the option for remote therapy alter who and how people receive effective mental health treatment? Do low-income parents have more or less quality communication with teachers as schools increasingly communicate through email and portals? How has the use of online scheduling with the Department of Homeland Security changed who is able to immigrate by land into the United States?* In other words, how does post-COVID digital equity map onto digital equity from the "before times," and what is needed to ensure autonomy of use in this new world? It may be too soon to tell, and perhaps may warrant a second edition of this very book.

Second, as a result of the pandemic, the U.S. federal government has poured an enormous amount of money into digital equity initiatives. With $65 billion allotted for digital equity initiatives, much of which will be distributed through the National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA), there will be an abundance of opportunities over the next few years for researchers to partner with state and local grant recipients to help implement and evaluate new digital equity interventions. Decades of data and theoretical constructs like those presented by Hargittai can help guide these solutions. Because researchers are well poised to take a bird's-eye view of digital inequities, their collaboration with practitioners on the ground will be essential to building infrastructure that will last. Framing those collaborative spaces around a desire to create autonomy of use may provide a useful focal point in often complicated but critical cross-sector collaborations.

Finally, I consider the concept of *autonomy of use* from a methodological perspective. As noted above, Hargittai operationalizes the concept by examining number of devices used to get online in the home. This is useful because researchers do not often measure number of device options and, as she demonstrates in the data, options matter. But I believe it would be consistent with her framing of the concept to operationalize autonomy of use in other ways as well, using additional manifest variables (e.g., device sharing needs, time spent seeking Wi-Fi outside the home) or even latent variables (e.g., *Are you able to get online whenever you want? Is your ability to use the Internet ever constrained?*). Additional work may be necessary to better distinguish autonomy from related constructs, such as efficacy, but it could prove a fruitful new direction for digital equity scholars that have limited theoretical concepts to guide their scholarship. I suspect that broad measurement of autonomy might reveal association with other quality-of-life outcomes in a manner that would only further underscore the need for digital equity.

In short, the consequences of the pandemic for digital equity are still unfolding. This book about the early days of the pandemic is a useful snapshot of how we coped, but it also lays the groundwork for much-needed action going forward.

Reference

Hargittai, E. (2022). *Connected in isolation: Digital privilege in unsettled times.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.