Digital Margins
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Conclusions: How are the margins coping in the digital age?
8.1 Introduction

The impact of digitalization on marginal places and people, that is, rural areas and socially excluded people, has been discussed in this thesis. By focusing on advanced economies and their margins, and the Dutch context in particular, the impacts of the current Next Generation Access revolution, and ongoing digital innovations on spatially and socially marginalized communities were discussed. The literatures on material connectivity issues and social inclusion issues have been brought together in order to bridge these two disconnected strands of research. Bringing these together has resulted in a more comprehensive and better contextualized research approach that has allowed for a greater understanding of how communities deal with the digital divide.

Rural broadband initiatives and Gypsy-Traveler communities were studied as examples of digital margins, spatial margins, and social margins, respectively. For both of these examples, the power relations and interdependencies between the core and the margins were analyzed in-depth in order to better understand the origin of marginalization and come up with potential solutions for it. A mix of qualitative methods was used for these analyses. Furthermore, a national database of rural broadband initiatives was constructed to sketch the Dutch rural broadband landscape as accurately as possible. The analysis of rural broadband initiatives particularly built on the concept of neo-endogenous development, focusing on how endogenous capacities, and exogenous powers and resources are linked in order to achieve the endogenously set goal (Ward et al., 2005; Gkartzios and Scott, 2014; Bosworth et al., 2015).

This chapter will reflect on the research questions presented in Chapter 1 and will draw together the insights from Chapters 2-7 to answer these questions. The questions behind this thesis are:

- **RQ1** – What can we learn from previous developments in digitalization so as to better understand the potential impacts of the Next Generation Access revolution on rural development?
- **RQ2** – How do digitally excluded communities try to bridge their broadband gap?
- **RQ3** – To what extent are local and regional actors, such as rural broadband initiatives, able to deal with the complicated issues of broadband deployment?
- **RQ4** – To what extent are socially excluded communities able to participate in the digital society?

The developments around Next Generation Access are still ongoing. This chapter therefore provides an assessment of prevailing policies and a discussion of problems that policy-makers are now facing in their efforts to improve digital inclusion. Based on the empirical insights and the related policy work, I will provide recommendations about how to improve these digital inclusion policies. Suggestions for further research and recommendations for policy are embedded in the broader debate on ‘the big society’ and ‘the participation society’ (participatie-samenleving) (Uitermark, 2015; Bock, 2016). Knowledge gained from rural broadband initiatives and Gypsy-Traveler communities...
provide valuable insights into the potentials and limitations of the participation society, and the critical role of citizens and communities in achieving this policy agenda.

8.2 Digitalizing the margins: connectivity, community, and inclusion

The first step in this thesis, designed to create a better understanding of the potential impact of the ongoing broadband revolution, was to bring together the disconnected debates on connectivity and inclusion. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 do this by building on existing state-of-the-art literature in these fields. The key conclusion from these literature reviews is that, in general, free market rationale makes digital developments possible for a large part of Western populations, but this same rationale also excludes those who live in economically uninteresting areas, and it neglects the needs of those who are less digitally included. Market mechanisms entail the Matthew Effect (Chapter 3), meaning that marginal places and people are continuously forced into a position of ‘catching up’ in an increasingly digitalized society (Castells, 2005; Malecki, 2010). In the context of Western countries, this means that rural areas are trying to catch up with the developments in core areas, and socially excluded people are even further deprived of essential resources. Up to now, governmental policies have not been able to effectively regulate the market, nor have they been able to mediate its outcomes.

The subsequent steps in this thesis involved the question of how marginalized communities deal with the digital inequalities they experience and, more specifically, how they try to overcome the digital divide. Rural communities without access to broadband and socially excluded Gypsy-Travelers were studied, both in the Netherlands. For these two categories, the focal points of the studies differed. In the case of the rural communities, the focal point was the material aspect of the digital divide, meaning they did not have access to certain technologies. The case of Gypsy-Travelers, on the other hand, mainly involved the social aspects of the digital divide, such as social exclusion, a lack of literacy, and a lack of skills.

8.3 Rural broadband initiatives: a solution to the broadband gap?

Rural broadband initiatives are leading in the challenge to resolve the rural broadband gap in the Netherlands, largely because market players and regulators have refused to take the lead up to now. Citizen initiatives as the preferred solution – in this case to a problem caused by market failure – fits the Dutch neoliberal agenda towards a ‘participation society’, in which citizens are made partly responsible for carrying out their own provisions or public tasks (Bokhorst et al., 2015; Uitermark, 2015a; 2015b). The Netherlands has seen a rise in rural broadband initiatives over the period 2013-2015, resulting in a ‘patch work’ on the map, which covers large parts but not the whole of the Netherlands.¹

¹. In April 2016, the database contained 145 initiatives, distributed over all 12 Dutch provinces
The process is still ongoing, yet Chapters 4 and 5 have shown that it is likely that the initiatives approach will not result in a fully connected Dutch countryside. Insights from the national database has shown that, even if communities do run an initiative for broadband, this is no guarantee that these communities will manage to deploy a network. The important conclusion regarding the initiatives approach, therefore, is that it is not effective. It is a time-consuming and energy-demanding venture for communities, and it does not cover the complete country. Furthermore, the database shows that a vast number of initiatives stall and do not progress to the stage of actual deployment. Citizen initiatives as the only solution prove to be insufficient for correcting market failure in the telecom market. The data in Chapters 4 and 5 shows that especially the marginalized rural areas lacking social, intellectual, and financial capital will remain excluded. In that sense, marginalization is the linking element between digitally excluded rural communities and digitally excluded Gypsy-Travelers: the fewer the resources and capacities, the least likely it is that the communities will manage to get included without adequate governmental support. With persistent de facto regional and social disparities, a neoliberal agenda cannot solve this market failure.

Combined with the growing importance of the service we are concerned with here, this re-introduces the question of whether superfast broadband should be defined as a utility. In the European Union, basic broadband connectivity is regarded as a utility, yet current regulations state that Next Generation Access, i.e. superfast broadband, is not. Considering the urban-rural digital divide, an inadequate legal and regulatory framework will result in a persistent Matthew Effect and further marginalization of digitally excluded rural areas (Chapter 2). In summary, a review of the current policies seems necessary on the European, national, and regional levels. It is clear that the market has failed up until now, so Next Generation Access as a utility should be placed on the various ‘Digital Agendas’ again. This can either stimulate the market, i.e. market players will become active in order to safeguard their larger interest, or it can adequately resolve market failure, i.e. the government will provide the service.

Even though the approach with initiatives is not effective, there is, nevertheless, a lot that can be learned about how community-led development works out in practice. The neo-endogenous lens, through which the initiatives were analyzed, allowed for conclusions about power relations and fundamental imbalances between endogenous actors (community members) and exogenous actors (regional governments and market players). At the start of an initiative, it is the members of the community who are leading their venture, but governments and market players will take center stage as soon as an initiative takes a more serious form or becomes a threat to their business. In this light, it appears that governments stimulate initiatives by means of a ‘participation society’ agenda, and, while market players first allow for the initiatives to develop, both governments and market players will step in when their everyday business and practice is considered to be affected. Evidence from the case studies in Chapter 5 indicates that this leads to a (gradual) loss of control on the community side, because the community loses ownership of the project. In more practical terms, it results in disappointment among the volunteers.
Conclusions: How are the margins coping in the digital age?

The conclusions found in this thesis are not a call to set the initiatives aside – in fact, Chapters 4 and 5 showed that local action is indispensable in forming business cases for rural broadband, and it is a trigger for other actors to become active – yet they do comprise a call to better accommodate them. Generally speaking, bundling demand for broadband and organizing the supply for it is a very demanding process. Starting, running, and maintaining a rural broadband initiative becomes more complex as the initiative evolves. It requires perseverance as well as social, intellectual, and financial capital. Above all, it requires a large learning capacity, and the ability to adapt to other discourses and externally set frameworks, which are usually dominated by technological and financial language. Broadband remains a topic that is strongly shaped by market and policy discourses, discourses for which market players and governments logically are much better equipped than communities. This is not unique for the case of rural broadband – see, for example, Fischer (2009) on democracy, participation, and technical expertise – but, in the cases in Chapters 4 and 5, it proved to be a very prominent issue. Even members of successful initiatives, who are usually highly educated and based in capital-rich areas, experience stress because of continuous clashes with more technical-oriented discourses, and eventually they also run the risk of volunteer burnout. These continuous clashes are an integral part of the rural broadband process, as the actors embark on new issues and conflicts with every new stage. On the other hand, if members of the initiatives had been aware beforehand of all the legal and financial risks – if this had been possible – they might not have gone through with their venture (Chapter 5). Running the risks and accepting the uncertainties are crucial for running a complicated initiative in a competitive market.

Citizen participation in rural areas has become a necessity, particularly in this era of neoliberal agendas and calls for a ‘participation society’ or ‘big society’. This thesis shows the limitations of the ‘participation society’ itself, and hence the limitations of what it can contribute to rural development. In rural areas, where there is only a small pool of volunteers, governments should be wary of overburdening and/or overruling them. If governments want the ‘participation society’ to succeed, then they need to empower the people who they are now potentially – wittingly or unwittingly – burning out. A first step in order to achieve actual empowerment – and avoid volunteer burnout – should be that governments recognize the community's discourse and knowledge framework, and use that as the foundation for further actions and interventions. In order to be empowered and actually take the lead, the community should be able to work within their own discourse domain and on their own terms. Generally speaking, governments should enable communities to participate in highly complicated markets, while at the same time protecting them from the market's competitive and disruptive elements. The national government can use its regulatory framework for their protection; regional and local governments need to work together on a regional empowerment agenda that focuses on knowledge exchange and provides training materials for less empowered communities. Moreover, governments should regularly check how the volunteers are coping with their newly endowed responsibilities in order to monitor the risk of volunteer burnout.
For this debate on community-led development, it is essential to conduct further research into which activities and services communities are capable of organizing themselves. For this, one should try to disentangle both the capabilities of the community as perceived by community members, and the capabilities of the community as perceived by local and regional governments. A better understanding of such expectations on both sides could help form local and regional policy agendas with clearer and more suitable tasks and responsibilities. Empowered communities should be able to set policy agendas according to their capabilities in order to form community-tailored policies. To make this happen, however, there needs to be a better understanding of these perceived capabilities.

8.4 Gypsy-Travelers: digital inclusion as a panacea for social exclusion?

Vulnerable and socially excluded groups have been a topical issue in the academic debate on digitalization for some time now, but it is only recently that they have become an explicit focal point in the public debate and in policies (Chapter 3). Until recently, academia employed a user-centered and rather static view of the relation between social and digital exclusion. Social exclusion would lead to digital exclusion, which would then deepen social exclusion (Gilbert, 2010; Helsper, 2012). In public policies, on the other hand, digital engagement was viewed as a panacea for social exclusion, with digital inclusion as an enabler for further social inclusion. However, Chapter 6 shows that, at best, digital inclusion is a first step towards social inclusion rather than a panacea for social exclusion.

In line with the most recent literature and insights (for example, Mariën and Prodnik, 2014), the case of Gypsy-Travelers in the Netherlands shows that the prevailing views in the debate do not cover the full range of complexities of the relation between social and digital exclusion. In general, the static views of existing models of digital exclusion do not explain the findings concerning Dutch Gypsy-Traveler communities. Even though Gypsy-Travelers in the Netherlands are socially excluded, they are, to a certain degree, digitally engaged and included, especially when digital activities fit their individual or group interests. However, their digital engagement cannot do away with offline social exclusion, such as exclusion from employment or cultural rejection. In fact, Chapters 6 and 7 brought to the fore the fact that digital platforms provide stages on which cultural segregation in particular is reproduced. Chapter 6 demonstrated that while Gypsy-Travelers celebrate their culture, members of the settled society stress their distinctness and reject it. Such reproduction shows that digital engagement also can further marginalize already marginalized groups.

The case of Gypsy-Travelers shows that digital inclusion is part of a wider and highly spatial but mostly offline-based constellation, which, as a whole, shapes the inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms. The Gypsy-Traveler site, with its extended families, plays a key role in the negotiation of digitalization. Cultural, social, and spatial factors eventually shape a group's or an individual's profile of digital inclusion—or exclusion for that matter. Chapter 6 demonstrates that a
group-specific or community-specific perspective adds insights to the debate on the relation between social and digital inclusion, insights that would not come naturally with a user-centered approach. The theoretical assumption related to this approach, that is, that social exclusion automatically leads to digital exclusion, requires adjustment. Researchers should concentrate their efforts on improving these existing theories, building on empirical evidence on how contextual factors affect digital inclusion. Understanding the role of the spatial context that negotiates the impacts of digitalization, which is at the heart of Chapter 6, requires a profound and sustained engagement with socially excluded groups. Such research requires trust relations with members of excluded communities and is therefore time-consuming but also essential for furthering the debate.

Chapter 7 of this book includes recommendations for using the cultural distinctness from this offline constellation for the benefit of Gypsy-Travelers. For instance, centuries of exclusion and necessitated self-reliance has resulted in communities with many entrepreneurs who are active on the margins of society. Commonly, however, policy programs to promote inclusion go against the existing cultural assets of Gypsy-Travelers and reject the potential values of those assets. The prevailing idea is that the minority, i.e. Gypsy-Travelers, are not taking part in settled society, and therefore the Gypsy-Travelers should adapt to that settled society, so states the policy doctrine. The dominant idea in Dutch social policies and welfare programs, ‘the Civilizing Offensive’ (Beschavingsoffensief), is a good example of how this policy doctrine works. Those who (used to) travel had to be civilized, according to the standards of Dutch settled society (Powell, 2013). This re-exposes one of the core problems of integration and inclusion. In order for a minority to develop, the majority has to accept that a minority is different and should accommodate that minority accordingly; yet this acceptance of difference has proved to be problematic. The majority's distrust toward ‘the other’, i.e. the minority, can only be alleviated if governments allow for pilot projects in which Gypsy-Travelers can prove the value of their distinctness to society. Such projects should then place the minority's values and assets at their heart so that Gypsy-Travelers can develop on their own terms and for their own benefits. This then, in return, might prove to be beneficial for society as a whole. So, as a first step, local governments should provide Gypsy-Travelers with the opportunity to show their potential contribution to society.

In a broader sense, and similar to the recommendation for community-led development in section 8.3, one can expect that the empowerment of Gypsy-Travelers will be more successful if their knowledge frame – or discourse – is placed at the center of community development. This thesis shows that a proper understanding of a community's assets and capabilities is essential for forming more suitable, more accepted, and therefore more effective policies for communities. A sustained collaboration between academia and policy, as was also the basis for this thesis, can be a first step toward policies that are more community-informed. Overall, ensuring cultural recognition and ownership and preventing overburdening should be key principles behind community development policies.
8.5 Research and policy: a reciprocal relation?

“Koen, zegst ook ‘s wat! Doe bist ja een man van de waitenschop.”
(Koen, you should say something too! You’re a man of science, after all.)

And that is where the data collection stopped and the more applied research and policy recommendations began. The quote above comes from an entrepreneur and member of a rural broadband initiative in the province of Groningen during one of the many occasions on which I was allowed to observe the everyday practice of a rural broadband initiative. It is illustrative of the data collection for this thesis.

The content of this thesis was partially shaped by policy and community interests, hence, it is an outcome of a reciprocal process: It was informed by and was simultaneously informing policy and practice. Throughout the PhD project, I was involved in applied research projects and policy evaluation trajectories (Table 8.1). These projects, and related public events, enabled me to gather detailed data and information. In addition to this, the projects increased the policy relevance of the research. Most of these projects and trajectories were specifically aimed at including community interests (for example, members of rural broadband initiatives), since the commissioning authorities wanted to ensure that their policies were community-informed. This way, the projects also made this thesis more community-informed.

This close relation to policy and practice also provided an opportunity to gather questions and issues from professionals in the field and use these as input for the thesis. Some of these questions were answered in the project reports, but usually unresolved questions remained after the project was finished. Often these were questions dealing with issues beyond the scope of the project. For example, the two projects for the Province of Groningen (Table 8.1) were focused on the situation around rural broadband in the province. The information that was needed to formulate our recommendations only had to deal with Groningen and – to a lesser extent – its neighboring provinces of Drenthe and Friesland. During the project not only did the focus group participants, but also stakeholders from other provinces and market players, who had heard about the project, asked how Groningen and its initiatives were performing compared to other provinces throughout the country. A comparison, as suggested by the stakeholders, was beyond the original scope of the project. Furthermore, it required a national overview of rural broadband initiatives and provincial policies. We found that such an overview was not only a novelty in the policy field but also in academia. In addition to this, members of initiatives asked us to become directly involved in their projects and provide guidance, but we refused to do this in order to safeguard our independent role in the field. In summary, although these projects provided detailed insights into a few rural broadband initiatives (part of Chapters 4 and 5), they also stimulated the construction of a national database.

Working on this basis does present some challenges for the researcher. First, it was not always completely clear beforehand what exactly would be studied and how, but, considering how (PhD) research projects evolve...
recognize this. The contemporary neoliberal policies do well by some, but for others these can be disastrous. If governments really care about digital equality, then they need to enable self-reliant communities to achieve their goals, but they also need to play a more active role themselves and help the more dependent communities.

in general, this uncertainty can be regarded as a common feature. Second, there is the issue of the sense of ownership, which is related to the subjects of study. The influence of stakeholders in the research projects might evoke the feeling that others want to guide or steer the content of the research. In the projects related to this research, therefore, the choice was made to make clear in advance that the data and insights would also be used for independent academic research too, thereby ensuring the independence of the parallel academic research process. In essence this meant that policy-relevant topics were provided as input, but the way the topics were studied and discussed remained the responsibility of the researcher. This safeguard in advance could not resolve the uncertainty of the trajectory, but it did provide the researcher with a sense of control and self-determination.

Altogether, this thesis has shown that a basic sense of control and self-determination is crucial for people who want to become digitally included. The important question that remains, though, is what should be done when self-determination does not come naturally. Some excluded communities try – and manage to a certain degree – to reclaim control of their digital future, and eventually they do become included. However, they manage to do so because they have the capabilities, access to the resources required, and, quite importantly, the courage to take the risks that come with it. This thesis provided evidence, on the other hand, that many communities do not meet all these requirements, making digital inclusion a serious challenge.

Geography still matters in times of rapid digitalization, and governments should
Table 8.1 | Overview of applied research projects and evaluation trajectories that were conducted during the PhD project (project titles translated when needed)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project title</th>
<th>Commissioning authority</th>
<th>Project goal</th>
<th>Stakeholders involved</th>
<th>Related Chapters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ITRACT: Improving TRansport and Accessibility through Communication Technologies</td>
<td>EU Interreg North Sea Region</td>
<td>Pilot testing of novel ICT applications for rural mobility, empowerment of users, and transnational learning</td>
<td>Academic, governmental, and business partners in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Norway, and the UK.</td>
<td>Chapters 2 and 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Superfast Internet East -Groningen</td>
<td>Provincie Groningen – Woon en Leefbaarheidsbasisplan Oost-Groningen</td>
<td>Exploratory research on market situation and regulation around rural broadband</td>
<td>Municipality of Oldambt, Kamer van Koophandel, VNO-NCW Noord, Zorggroep Oosterlengte, Woonstichting Groninger Huis, Vereniging Groninger Dorpen</td>
<td>Chapters 4 and 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Generation Access for entire Groningen</td>
<td>Provincie Groningen</td>
<td>Assessment of developments vis-à-vis rural broadband in Groningen up to that time, and a recommendation about stimulating rural broadband provision in the province</td>
<td>Province of Groningen, Municipalities of Oldambt, Slochteren, Delfzijl, Eemsmond, Appingedam, Loppersum, Breedband Westerkwartier, Stichting Oldambt Verbindt</td>
<td>Chapters 4 and 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on rural broadband initiatives</td>
<td>Ministry of Economic Affairs</td>
<td>Discerning success and failure factors of rural broadband initiatives, comparing the impact of various regional policies</td>
<td>Mainly Ministry of Economic Affairs Data collection among rural broadband initiatives, regional governments, and market players</td>
<td>Chapters 4 and 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of provincial funding scheme and policy</td>
<td>Provincie Overijssel</td>
<td>Evaluation of the efficacy of the funding scheme, the subsidy for the initiatives, and the extent to which Overijssel functions as a 'learning organization'</td>
<td>Mainly the Province of Overijssel and, to a lesser extent, regional market players and initiatives</td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The potential of rural broadband initiatives for connecting schools</td>
<td>Kennisnet – Ministry of Education</td>
<td>Position paper including an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of broadband initiatives for connecting schools to future-proof Internet</td>
<td>Kennisnet (service provider for educational institutes), Ministry of Education</td>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting on Gypsy-Travelers in the Integral Approach to Welfare</td>
<td>Ministry of Interior</td>
<td>Various activities, including policy evaluations, lectures for professionals, and organizing visits to Gypsy-Traveler sites</td>
<td>Ministry of Interior, Gypsy-Traveler communities, local governments, independent professionals</td>
<td>Chapters 6 and 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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References


Ward, N., J. Atterton, T-Y. Kim, P. Lowe, J. Phillipson, and N. Thompson (2005) *Universities, the Knowledge Economy and ‘Neo-endogenous Rural Development’*. Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University