

RESTRICTIONS ON ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP IN POLISH RURAL AREAS DUE TO DIGITAL EXCLUSION - RESEARCH RESULTS

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Abstract:

Nowadays, active citizenship cannot exist without active using information-communication technologies (ICT). In countries of EU, various types of electronic services for citizens have been developed for supporting or enabling active citizenship. The level of their use depends on access to the Internet, skills and actual use of ICT, and awareness of the needs of the citizens. A person digitally excluded, i.e. not using ICT, becomes a “second-class” citizen, increasingly being removed to the margins of the social life. This marginalization has a social dimension, because the citizen does not use the services offered to him by the society (e.g. social networking sites), state or local governments, and their active citizenship is limited. Marginalization has the financial dimension - the increased costs paid by citizens in their daily lives.

The paper presents the results of survey on the level of access to ICT in rural areas in Poland. It also shows the areas of digital exclusions and their causes. Conclusions regarding the actions that increase an active citizenship have been made. These conclusions relate to ensuring an access to ICT, training and public awareness, i.e. to develop the awareness and the needs of citizens.

Keywords: active citizenship, information technology, digital exclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

Active citizenship means the implementation of the rights and responsibilities of citizens in relation to society and the environment. It is a participation in the life of the local community, whole State and, recently more and more often, the global society. This concept is complex (Marci, 2011; Ryland, 2005) and may include how to use the rights and duties of a citizen, but also his or her activity in relation to others (i.e. a help, an association, a co-operation) and even in relation to oneself (for example, self-education and self-development) (Espejo&Bendek, 2011). Active citizenship requires communication between the citizens and the environment (near and far). The flow of information is bidirectional (Phythian, 2008) and should be secured (Juszczuk, 2011). For example, the local government announced a referendum has to inform potentially interested citizens, and active citizen should vote. Nowadays, the traditional information flow (e.g. ads in newspapers or traditional ballot using a paper card) is replaced by an electronic flow, e.g. local government website and electronic voting (Nam, 2012; Dąbrowska et al, 2009). To make this form of communication function efficiently, both parties need to use it. Thus, ability to use information and communication technologies (ICTs) determines the current possibilities of being active citizens. Meanwhile, in a society are digitally excluded groups (Abbey & Hyde, 2009; Luyt, 2006).

European Union attaches great importance to the ICT education of the community. Programs such as eEurope 2002, eEurope 2005 and i2010 were aimed at raising the level of ICT education in the EU population (Michalski, 2007) and building the Information Society in EU but not only. Digitalization of the EU was launched in March 2000 by the adoption of eEurope 2002 by the EU Council. It was a part of the Lisbon strategy (Lisbon, 2013). In 2005, the EU adopted a strategy i2010: "A European Information Society for growth and employment". It states that knowledge and innovation are the driving force of sustainable growth and it is necessary "to build a fully inclusive information society, based on the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in public services, SMEs and households" (i2010, 2005). One of the objectives of the i2010 strategy was wide spread use of ICT by the society. Three ways to achieve this were pointed out (i2010, 2005): "making sure that ICT benefit all citizens; making public services better, more cost effective and more accessible, and improving quality of life."

The Ministerial Conference "ICT for an inclusive society" in Riga (in June 2006) was devoted to the problems of digital exclusion which resulted in Riga Ministerial Declaration (Ministerial, 2006). The Declaration pointed out that ICTs are a powerful driver of growth and employment, and improve the quality of everyday life. The Declaration also identifies problems: digital exclusion of EU citizens ("57% of individuals living in the EU did not use the Internet regularly in 2005, only 10% of persons over 65 used Internet, against 68% of those aged 16 - 24, only 24% of persons with low education used the Internet, against 73% of those with high education, only 32% of unemployed persons used the Internet against 54% of employed persons") and bad quality of public web sites ("only 3% of public web sites surveyed comply with the minimum web accessibility standards and guidelines").

The Declaration endorsed the i2010 proposals of strengthen the actions through initiative on e-Inclusion. At the same time the Declaration defines priorities of its policy (Ministerial, 2006), as follows:

- Address the needs of older workers and elderly people.
- Reduce geographical digital divides.
- Enhance eAccessibility and usability.
- Improve digital literacy and competences.
- Promote cultural diversity in relation to inclusion.
- Promote inclusive eGovernment.

More than a year after the Riga Conference there was announced European i2010 initiative on e-Inclusion (European, 2007), which created a strategic framework for Implementation of the postulates of Riga Declaration. e-Inclusion has defined the following goals:

- Bridging the digital availability, accessibility, affordability and ability gaps.
- Stimulate and enable inclusive ICT as a viable and thriving business.
- Coherent and efficient e-Inclusion policies and legislation.

The e-Inclusion pointed to a number of specific actions that would lead to the achievement of defined objectives for regional and European levels. Regions (mainly EU member states) have to implement their own programs to reduce digital exclusion of their citizens. Currently there is implemented the

Digital Agenda for Europe - DAE (Digital, 2010), which is a part of the Europe 2010 Initiative. DAE goals are focused on the development of broadband access to the Internet (for example, 50% of the EU to subscribe to above 100 Mbps broadband by 2020), an increase in its use (for example, 50% of the population to buy online by 2015, 75% of the population regular use of the Internet, 50% of citizens to use eGovernment to 2015) and the scope of e-services (e.g. all key cross-border public services, to be agreed by Member States in 2011, to be available online by 2015).

In Poland, follows to EU programs, there were implemented various initiatives, such as:

- Computerization Strategy of the Republic of Poland - e for 2004-2006 (Computerization, 2003)
- An action plan for the development of electronic government (eGovernment) 2005-2006 (An action, 2004)
- Strategy for the development of Polish computerization up to the year 2013, and a prospective forecast information society by 2020 (Strategy, 2005).

Strategic documents resulted in launching a whole range of technical infrastructure projects (e.g. the "Polish Broadband network in Eastern Europe – Świętokrzyskie Province" aims to provide up to 2015 an access to the Internet for 90% of the Province habitants at the expense of 200 million PLN (Polish, 2013)), education (for example, a bottom-up project supporting efforts to raise digital literacy of Poles from generation 50+: "Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities" (Digital, 2013)) and the development of e-Government (Michalski, 2007).

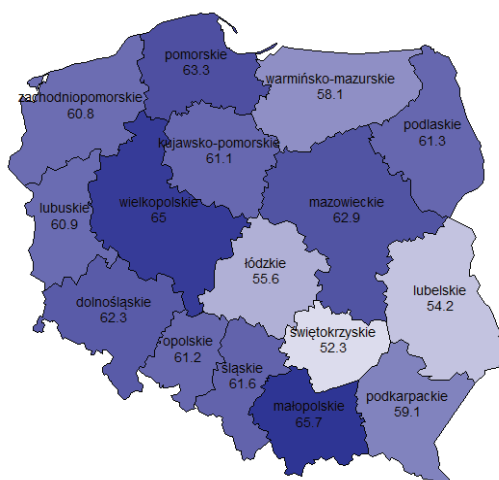
Apart from the system activities of EU and Polish scale, there is a whole range of initiatives supporting the elimination of digital illiteracy in Europe. Excellent examples of such bottom-up actions are systems stimulating ICT education through certification. The development of an ICT competences of citizens in this case is directed through the acquisition (by subjecting the test) consecutive levels and areas of ICT applications using. The well-known certifications implemented by the foundations include the European Computer Competence Certificate (ECCC, 2013) and the European Computer Driving License (ECDL, 2013).

2. DIGITAL EXCLUSION ON RURAL AREAS

In 2003, only 14% of the Polish population were using cell phones, computers and the Internet. In 2010, the percentage of mobile phone users increased to 85%, and the Internet users - up to 60% (Batorski, 2011). At the same time there is significant regional and social diversity in Poland (Picture 1) in the Internet access. This possibility has 90% of families with children, but only 70% of single-parent families, and only 65% of single people and the elderly. Similar trends can be observed in the analysis of Internet access in households according to the average per capita income and place of residence, measured by the number of inhabitants of the village.

Access to the Internet (in 2010) has 73.3% of households in large cities (over 500 thousand population), but only 51.7% of households located in rural areas. 83.3% of households with high income per capita (i.e. within the group of the 25% with the highest income) have access to the Internet, and only 41.1% of the poorer (i.e. within the group of the 25% with the lowest income per capita).

Picture 1: The regional diversification in the access to the Internet of households in 2010.



Source: (Batorski, 2011)

3. THE PROBLEM AND RESEARCH IMPLEMENTATION

The main objectives of the study were:

- indication of digitally excluded groups in the province of Lublin,
- search of pathology in the digital illiteracy area, which may affect the active citizenship.

The study was conducted for the Lublin province as one of the worst (the second to last one) for access to the Internet (Picture 1).

The research method was a questionnaire carried out traditional (paper and pencil) methods. The survey consisted of 60 people, which were diverse in terms of place of residence, occupation, education and status. Selection of research sample was representative and consistent with the statistical structure of the region's residents.

Among respondents, only 25% were from the larger towns/cities (with more than 50 thousand of inhabitants), and nearly 40% reported living in rural areas. However, a part of the declaration of residence in a small town actually meant living in rural areas – in the periphery of towns. The social status of the respondents also corresponds with Lublin Province statistics: 37% of employees, 20% of farmers, 10% of learners/students and 25% of retirees. The rest were unemployed. Unfortunately, there was no question survey to allow respondents to distinguish between the long-term and temporarily unemployed.

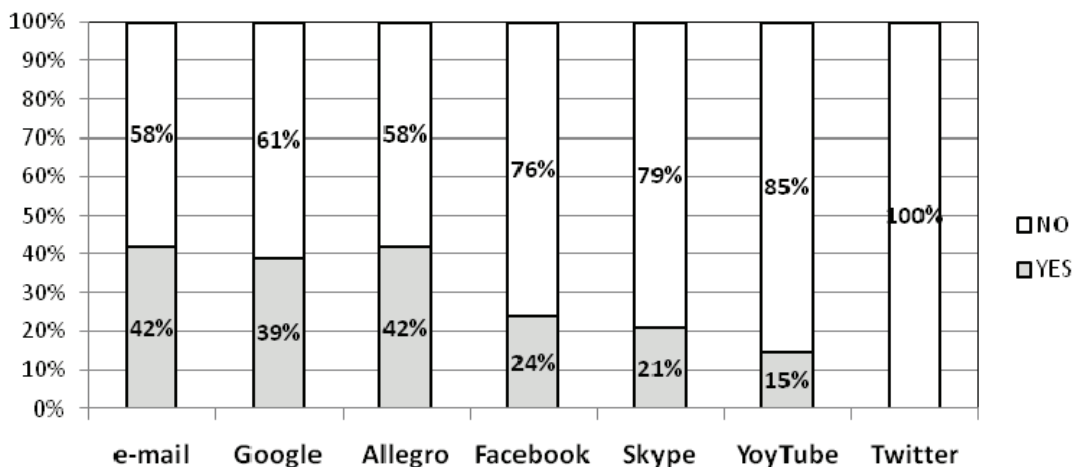
4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Over 70% of the region's residents reported having access to the Internet. This is an increase compared to previous years (Picture 1 - 54.2%). The research results showed that farmers living in rural areas with low education and poor financial situation are the most endangered with digital exclusion group. Only 62% of rural residents have access to the Internet (the inhabitants of large cities - 93%).

Studies allowed detection the pathological phenomena in the use of ICT in rural areas, such as:

- having an access and not using it (30% of farmers and 5% of workers and 0% of learners);
- low awareness of web services (42% of the farmers know the concept of e-mail, and only 15% - YouTube, Twitter - 0%) – Picture 2;
- unwillingness to training (only 38% want to take part in trainings, but as many as 6% do not, or undecided).

Picture 2: The awareness of particular Internet terms (NO or YES) among farmers



Source: own elaboration based on (Czekiejda, 2012)

5. CONCLUSIONS

The situation in the rural areas of the Lublin province in terms of the digital exclusion is the average in Poland. It is continuing to improve. Very many people have access to computers and the Internet. A lot of people can well and very good use of the new ICT. However, there are groups of the population who are digitally excluded, and in which, unfortunately, the situation has not improved. The main group is farmers.

To reduce the problem of the digital divide and to ensure the active citizenship, there should be taken the following actions:

- Providing an access to a computer and to the Internet for people who are particularly digitally excluded because of disability, and for people who have difficult financial situation of the household. This allows increase the availability of access to e-services for both, people with disabilities and children from families with financial problems.
- Organization of training courses on the use of computers and the Internet in everyday life, especially among people who are particularly at risk of exclusion, that is, pensioners, people in the age group over fifty, as well as people living in scattered rural areas.

There is an interesting initiative founded in Poland in 2012, to activate people familiarized with the ICT (they are called "lighthouse keepers"), who using local resources (community, neighborhood or school) hold a meeting-training of older people (Digital, 2013). Lighthouse keepers are social animators, activating the local society, which is very important for older people (mostly retirees). Scattered, local actions play very important role in rural communities. In fact they allow reaching the needy, make them interested and involved in the digital world. The initiative has been transformed in the project "Digital Poland of Equal Opportunities" financed from EU social funds.

- Implementation of informing about the benefits of using the Internet and the problems that may arise as a result of not adapting to new technologies. The aim of such campaigns should be familiarize with the capabilities the advantages of using ICT by citizens, and thus learning "the excluded" (or "partially excluded") about the importance of such factors as the digital divide in society. Campaigns should be addressed to specific social groups, mainly to older people, disabled and farmers.
- Wide access to free e-learning courses, implemented as a massive open online courses (MOOCs). This is important for the residents of rural areas. It enables to reduce the costs of participation and thereby increase the number of people undergoing training. MOOCs also enable self-education in the desired direction.

With the proposed improvements, the level of the digital divide can be strongly reduced, which undoubtedly will improve active citizenship rural communities in Poland.

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