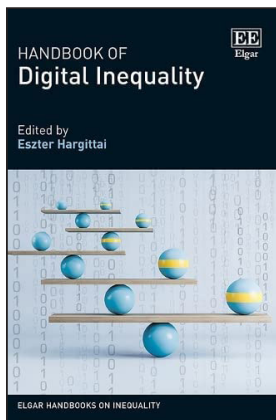


Some of the solutions require the infusion of funds, which are in short supply for many institutions. However, Kelsey and contributors also describe successful initiatives that do not require libraries to rely on grants, funding from their institutions, or the use of money previously earmarked for employee lines deemed no longer necessary. The most useful chapters are those that acknowledge that things have, indeed, changed in the face of the pandemic. Some chapters are written about initiatives that took place before the struggles with COVID-19, and may be of more limited use. Overall, this book will benefit those looking for ways to help students overcome the challenges they face today.—*Ayanna Gaines, Woodbury University*

**Hargittai, Eszter**, ed. *Handbook of Digital Inequality*. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021. 386 p. Hardcover \$265.00 (ISBN: 9781788116565); ebook \$65.00 (ISBN: 9781788116572). LCCN: 2021-946075.



It's the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the “digital divide” first noted by sociologists and political economists in the 1980s has not disappeared. It persists. In the United States, for example, over 30 percent of the Native American population lacks access to broadband infrastructure with even minimally adequate speeds.<sup>1</sup> Large parts of the Biden administration’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the American Rescue Plan target unequal access to high-quality internet, affecting the lives chiefly of rural and urban poor. These disparities also hold true across much of the world.

Today, however, as author Eszter Hargittai, chair of Internet Use and Society at the University of Zurich, argues, the world’s larger concern is *not* access to the internet. In fact, as of June 30, 2022, there were more than 5.4 billion internet users worldwide, an increase of 1,400% over the last 20 years.<sup>2</sup> No, Hargittai calls the problem today a “second-level digital divide” or more succinctly: “digital inequality.” Digital inequality refers not to unequal access to digital infrastructure, but to differences *among internet users themselves*, most commonly having to do with income, education, and the other usual markers for inequality across the social spectrum. Focusing on differences in actual internet use allows us to depart from the simplistic dyad—internet access, yes or no?—and look at a much more complex matrix of unequal skills and other inequalities we find in actual use of the Internet—for work, health, social and societal connection, and recreation.

For all its virtues, the title of this book is a clear misnomer. If the definition of a “handbook” is “a book capable of being conveniently carried as a ready reference” or “a concise reference book covering a particular subject,” two applicable definitions to be found in Merriam-Webster, then this is not a handbook. Handbooks are, as the word suggests, portable: they are “handy.” “Handbook” is the modern word for what scholars in early modern times called a *vade mecum*: Latin, roughly, “[you] go with me” Not that the book would not fit into a backpack or briefcase: I’ve tried, and it does! But the book’s title appears to have been chosen mainly to fit neatly into the publisher’s existing series, “Handbooks on Inequality.”

Even if this isn’t a “handbook,” it is notable and worthy of serious attention. Hargittai has assembled a collection of twenty-four widely diverse articles written by knowledgeable contributors from all over the world—Canada, Chile, Germany, Italy, Singapore, Switzerland, the United States, and others—illuminating highly diverse aspects of the unequal use of the internet and enabling cross-disciplinary as well as cross-country comparisons. As we would

expect, the consequences of inadequate internet skills impact all aspects of modern life, among them health management, job prospects and job performance, social connectedness, creative output, participation in the political process, and (of course) academic achievement.

The contributions in this volume highlight disparities not only in skill levels, but also in *access quality*, a result of poor device quality, frequent breakdowns of equipment or networks, or instability of digital access stemming from economic factors such as exhausting prepaid access or an inability to regularly pay recurring ISP bills. One surprising and unsettling insight revealed in these pages is that landlines—low-tech but also traditionally low-cost and reliable—are increasingly being displaced by mobile-only communication in low-income households, often meaning frequent phone number changes and extended periods of disconnection (11, 62ff.).

While the first five chapters in this volume deal with these issues of access quality (“Part I: Infrastructure and Geographies”), those in Part II (“Digital Inequality throughout the Life-course”) look at specific problems that children, youth, and older adults confront—here, too, with an international component, with authors from Poland and Canada looking at issues specific to their societies.

Those of us who communicate with our health providers largely through dedicated internet portals can well imagine the unintended obstacles confronting digitally disadvantaged patient communities. Research contributed in Part III (“Health and Disability”) by Heinz Bonfadelli (“Digital Inequalities in Health Communication”), Xiaoqian Li and Wenhong Chen (“Inequalities in Digital Health Behaviors in American Disadvantaged Communities”), and Kerry Dobransky and Hargittai (“The Closing Skills Gap: Revisiting the Digital Disability Divide”), among others, show how inadequate computer literacy and communication tools have real life outcomes affecting health and longevity.

Finally, the ability and inability to protect one’s information online is addressed in the six articles presented in Part IV (“Privacy and Trust”). Here, too, digital inequality manifests itself in increased vulnerability for those least able to cope with system weaknesses and security breaches. Those with inadequate skills are also the ones least able to recognize and defend themselves against spam, phishing, and spoofing attacks. As these articles reveal, susceptibility to privacy breaches correlates with age, education, and gender in often very complex ways.

The evidence and arguments in this volume should become known to policy makers (and their staffers) in both developed and underdeveloped countries. The policy implications are many, significant, but at the same time highly nuanced. It is simply not enough to put a smart phone in the hands of an individual experiencing homelessness or to give a laptop to a school child and declare them, suddenly, “connected.” Digital equality requires more.

This volume, therefore, is highly recommended for college, university, and other research collections with strengths in sociology, political science, public policy research, and other social sciences, as well as for students of the political economy of information in graduate information science programs. Remember, though: it is not a reference book. —*Jeffrey Garrett, Northwestern University*

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## Notes

1. White House statement, August 11, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/08/11/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administration-brings-high-speed-affordable-internet-to-tribal-communities/>.
2. <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>