UNIVERSITY OF Southampton

Web Science Institute Blog

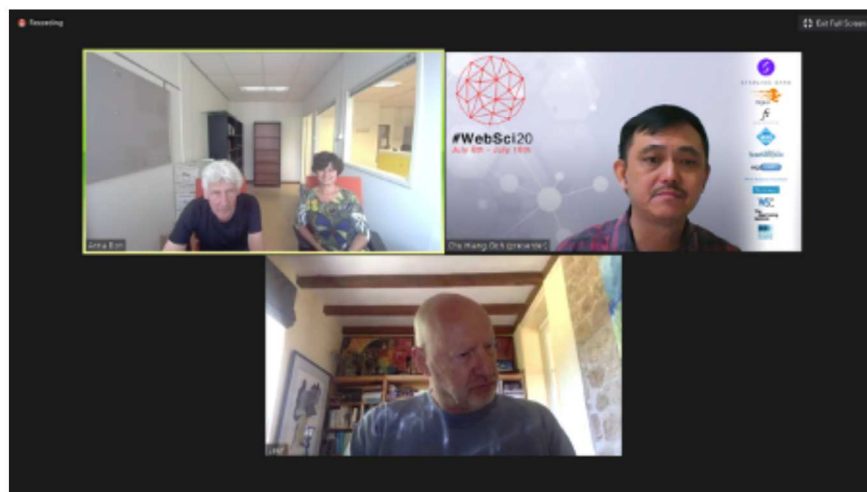**Home**   **Web Science Institute**

Workshop Digital (In)Equality, Digital Inclusion, Digital Humanism by Jo Dixon

👤 Charlotte Foster   🕑 July 8, 2020   Leave a comment

posted on behalf of Jo Dixon

It's an early start for the 'Digital (In)Equality, Digital Inclusion and Digital Humanism (Online 07/07/2020) workshop, at least for those of us in the UK; with contributors from as far afield as India and Malaysia, it's not so early in the day for everyone.

Just before 8am UK time, I let WebSci2020 into my kitchen. I should have prepared myself to replicate the 'real life' conference experience better with coffee and pastries, but I haven't even allowed myself time to throw some muesli into a bowl before Anna Bon and Hans Akkermans are introducing the workshop. They promise 'diversity in geography and themes' and that is absolutely what we are treated to over the course of the morning (unfortunately I couldn't stay to the end of the afternoon

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session).

Kicking off Session A, Leen Zevenbergen sets the mood with a thought-provoking keynote about the need for sustainable business models and the role of technology in achieving sustainability. There's an optimism in his words that sets a positive tone for the workshop: he suggests around 10% of the world's population consists of 'cultural creatives' who want to build a sustainable world, and that we've almost reached a tipping point that will move the whole planet. He fields questions that force him to concede that after Covid-19, some companies, driven by shareholder demands, will just want to get back to the old normal and claw back some lost profits. But, optimistic or pessimistic, things will change, Zevenbergen insists: "As we say in the Netherlands 'When a ship hits the wall, it stops'".

The presentations that follow take us to different parts of the globe to consider various aspects of the theme. I'm dipping in and out a bit and am unfortunately unable to follow all the presentations in full. One of the (dis?)advantages of an online conference for me is that I'm at home with my kids who, one by one, are waking up and invading my headspace, if not my workspace. They've been briefed to try not to bother me this morning, and they're actually being very good, but being the only parent on the scene today, I can't resist removing my headset occasionally to check what they're up to. As a web scientist, I would love to be in a physical conference space, able to immerse myself more fully knowing the kids are safely looked after elsewhere, but I am not a full-time web scientist, and as a parent I'm also glad to be able to attend the conference part-time without having to make arrangements for childcare.

Chu Hiang Goh's talk is about shaping an emoji system such that it supports the sustainability of the local cultural values of a people whose identity might otherwise be compromised by globalised communications and universal emoji design.

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Next Ms Shalini presents a generally optimistic view of the potential of cutting edge technologies including AI for increasing equity and ensuring sustainability in India's education system.

Anna Bon closes Session A with a presentation about evaluating the economic sustainability of digital development projects that 'often don't survive the (donor-funded) pilot period'.

In the Session B keynote, Richard Heeks proposes extending the now well-established model of the digital divide with the addition of 'adverse digital incorporation' in recognition of the fact that digital inequality is not just about unequal access to the web, but also unequal outcomes: when some people access the digital world they still find themselves disadvantaged.
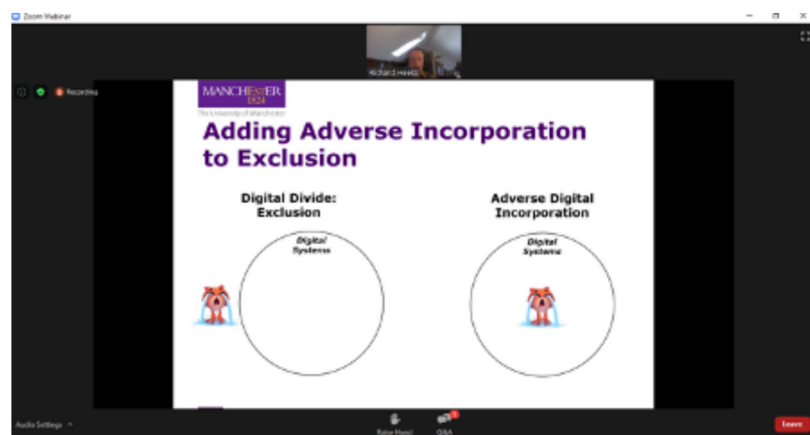
Gertjan van Stam then presents a Zimbabwean view of data sovereignty, exposing colonial impositions and highlighting what is needed to counter adverse digital incorporation in this context.

From closer to home, Amelia Morris reports on an ethnographic investigation into the digitisation of the welfare benefits system in the UK. Personally I'm especially pleased to see ethnography in a web science conference. It's also an interesting reminder that although we need to promote ideas from the developing world in web science, issues around digital inequality and digital justice are still highly relevant

to developed countries too. The designers of the online Universal Credit system that Morris describes could learn a lot from ICT4D approaches, but as Morris suggests with more than a hint of cynicism, perhaps there was never the political will or intention for the system to be accessible.

In another home-grown paper, but one with a more international perspective, EA Draffan is interested in increasing web accessibility for people with low literacy by using symbols. She points out that low literacy is a problem not only in the developing world, but in the developed world too as increasing numbers of elderly people face mild cognitive impairment that can impair comprehension. Draffan discusses the challenges of using AI techniques to automatically map symbols to concepts and the complexities of attempting text to symbol translation in a wide range of languages and cultural settings.

Unfortunately, I have to leave shortly after Francis Dittoh starts to talk about his research in Ghana. Clicking the 'Leave' button allows me to exit, I assume, without the speaker being aware of my rudeness, so I feel I can get away with popping in and out of sessions today more freely than I would at a face-to-face conference where I would usually try to avoid sneaking out of a workshop early – one of the other (dis?)advantages of an online conference.

However, I am able to dip back in after lunch and catch Mirjam de Bruijn's Session C keynote. For the second time today we see how much depth and insight ethnographic research can bring to web science.
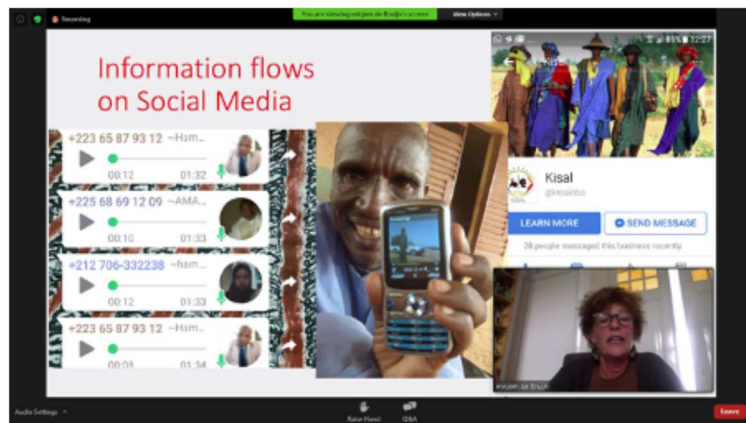
De Bruijn sounds almost apologetic about her methodological approach, saying 'probably you'll find my work a bit anecdotal', but personally I find it the perfect complement to more technical and quantitative web science work, rich in the sort of detail about human feelings, attitudes and behaviour that some other approaches cannot provide. WebSci20 is, after all, all about making the web more human-centric and studying these strange creatures close-up gives us a more complete picture than their digital footprint alone can provide.

My kids need a more substantial break from Tiktok and Netflix now, so I'm now going to take off my part-time PhD hat and resume part-time parent duties, but I'm looking forward to being able to dip in and out of WebSci20 for the rest of the week in a similar way.

J.M. Dixon

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