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Eszter Hargittai

▲ Observing online behavior is one of the methods employed in Hargittai's Web Use Project lab to look at how people go about finding information on the Internet. Results from these studies suggest that abilities differ considerably when it comes to using the Web. Providing help through peers is one way to address skill discrepancies in Internet use. For more information about research in the Hargittai lab, go to www.webuse.org.
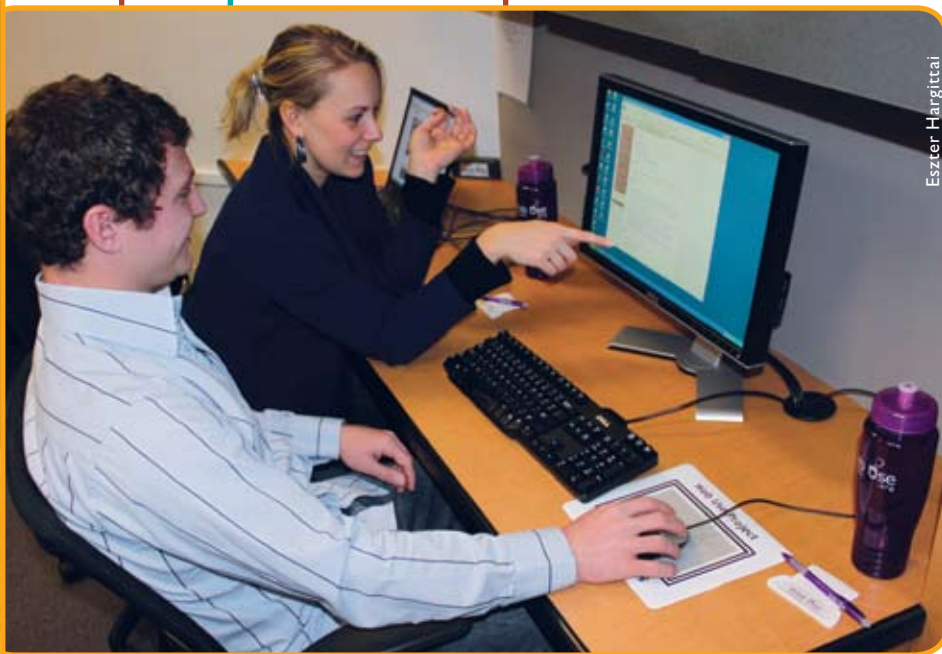
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Understanding Digital Diversity

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009—more commonly referred to as the stimulus package—includes billions of dollars for wiring the nation with broadband infrastructure to ensure that all Americans have access to the Internet. But does such a solely technical solution resolve the potential inequalities that may result from inequitable access to the Internet? Eszter Hargittai, communication studies and faculty associate in Institute for Policy Research, has been addressing questions such as this one in her research for the past decade. With funding from agencies like the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and the NSF, she has been collecting data to look at how people's digital media uses differ across population segments.

Her findings suggest that there are considerable differences in how people use the Internet even once basic access to the medium is accounted for. That is, crossing the so-called "digital divide"—the differences between the haves and have-nots—does not in and of itself address concerns about digital inequality. Rather, being skilled in using the Internet is an additional important component of how people

integrate the Internet into their lives. Through survey data collected on different population segments, Hargittai has consistently found that people from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds are more skilled in using the Web than others. Higher skills then relate to engaging in more diverse activities online, which can be linked to more potential ways of benefiting from the medium.

Through her unique data, Hargittai has been able to show that divergent online behaviors cannot simply be explained by variations in personal interests and motivation. Rather, skill and the social context of where people use the Internet are important correlates of different usage patterns. While it is discouraging to note that the Internet may be reproducing existing social inequalities, the upside of these findings is that through training, education, and social support, people's online skills may be improved. Consequently, as long as the social dimensions of use are taken into account, the Internet still holds the potential to contribute positively to the well-being of people from across the socioeconomic spectrum. ◗