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Conclusion

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This cutting edge research book is written for researchers, students, academics and policy makers and would not have been a feasible book project without the invaluable and timely chapter contributions of all authors. The authors have drawn from their expertise in Information Systems, Management, Information and Communication Technologies, New/Digital Media, and Communications Policy to provide insights into Information and Communication Technology (ICT)-enabled services and social inclusion. The book provides numerous examples of ICT-enabled services in various sectors and their benefits to individuals, organisations and society. ICTs have indeed become pervasive not only in the business sector, but also in others sectors, including government, health, entertainment, and agriculture. Innovative ways of delivering healthcare, education and other community related services have been enabled by the adoption of ICTs.

Given the importance of ICTs for improving the life and enhancing social inclusion of individuals, organisations and broader communities, equitable access to ICT-enabled services by all people is a requirement. However, adoption of ICT-enabled services is not only about the provision of infrastructure, devices and affordable access, but also relates to the competencies and capabilities in using the available services. Thus, despite the many benefits ICT-enabled services offer to society, barriers to widespread access to and effective use of the existing ICT-enabled services have been identified at various levels, ranging from individual to national level. Therefore, in order to take advantage of ICT-enabled services and enhance social inclusion through such services, concerted efforts are needed among and with various key stakeholders who are involved in developing, promoting and supplying such services.

This book contributes to ongoing debates and knowledge concerning ICT-enabled services and social inclusion. It examines the theoretical foundations of ICT-enabled services and social inclusion, presents various innovative cases of ICT-enabled services in a number of contexts, and also investigates adoption, usage and management aspects related to social inclusion and usability of ICT-enabled services. As ICT-enabled services continue to spread rapidly within the society, this book provides valuable insights into the importance of ICT-enabled services for social inclusion, possible barriers to achieving social inclusion and strategies to mitigate them. Increasing the awareness of the

importance of ICT-enabled services is an important first step to develop more socially beneficial and inclusive digital services.

Theoretical lenses discussed in Part 1 of this book, including the capability approach, the concept of connectivity as a social-technical lens, the ambient inclusion framework and the concept of optimal level of user participation, and the offerings of useful frameworks to guide future efforts in addressing social inclusion and usability of ICT-enabled services for both research and practice. Case studies of recent and innovative applications of ICT-enabled services in a number of countries and contexts are presented in Part 2. These case studies provide insights into the drivers of development of digital services, the benefits expected and how social inclusion is addressed through such services, as well as the challenges encountered to improve access to and reach of services and the strategies employed to enhance social engagement with and usability of those services. Insights obtained from these cases studies of ICT-enabled services are invaluable for both researchers who aspire to conduct future study and practitioners who aim to develop more socially inclusive digital applications. Finally, Part 3 presents case studies that examine various aspects related to adoption and management of diverse ICT applications, aiming to enhance the current knowledge of key obstacles to effective adoption and management of such applications within the society. The chapters in this final part of the book apply different theories and concepts including Stakeholder Theory, Theory of Practices and the concept of ‘interactivity’ so as to better understand different types of barriers to ICT adoption and use, factors that encourage such adoption and use, as well as related strategies to manage and effectively use ICT-enabled services.

This book was developed to address the continuing need for making sense of complex socio-technical systems that are associated with the adoption, management and policy of new technological services and, thus, for unpacking the intercourse of social inclusion and usability of innovative ICT-enabled digital services. Thus, all its chapters have aimed to offer theoretical, empirical and case study insights into the complex role of ICT-enabled services in social inclusion, showcasing the importance of the parameters of usability, patterns of adoption and management and moving away from one-sided accounts of technology features or purely socio-driven approaches in this area.

The conceptual insights the book offers show that the field of ICT-enabled services and social inclusion can employ and advance concepts and theories that derive from a range of study fields and disciplines. Thus, the ‘capability approach’ and the concepts of ‘connectivity, ‘ambient inclusion’ and ‘optimal level of user participation’ that the theoretical chapters in Part 1 focus on demonstrate the conceptual richness and interdisciplinarity of this area of study. At the same time, they indicate that this study area is rather under-theorised, as it appears to borrow concepts and theoretical approaches from a range of disciplines, without original theorisations being developed or new conceptual approaches being proposed within its remit. Such under-theorisation often deprives researchers of

original theoretical armoury and suitable conceptual frameworks that would allow them to advance empirical insights further and generate theoretically sharp and informed arguments.

Along these lines, the cornerstone concepts of usability and social inclusion must be revisited in the context of the study of ICT-enabled services, in order for researchers in this area to become better positioned to assess as well as to shed light on currently divergent and often confusing theoretical debates and presumptions regarding ICTs and social inclusion. In this regard, we acknowledge the need for advancing the theoretical work in this area and revisiting currently used theories and concepts, aiming for researchers not only to draw upon existing concepts and theories in pertinent fields of research but also to develop original theorisations which could critically inform future work around ICT-enabled services and social inclusion.

In terms of empirical evidence on ICT-enabled services, this book confirms the existence of a large volume of empirical and case study research on a range of different ICT-enabled services. On the whole, such a significant volume of empirical study allows us to obtain an insight into both the smaller and the bigger picture of how ICTs can open up a new world of entertainment, occupation, social networking, political communication, and e-governance possibilities for diverse groups of the society. Specifically, Part 2 of the book sheds light on a range of such services, such as e-government, e-health, teleworking, e-commerce, e-activism and e-entertainment, while, both Parts 2 and 3 examine a series of actors and stakeholders who might benefit (or not) from such services (e.g., working people, professionals, farmers, activists, patients, older adults). However, we have identified a few challenges, dilemmas and gaps in the research reporting empirical evidence that deserve further consideration.

The first challenge is to do with the extent to which heavily researched ICT-enabled services and case studies of such services do actually contribute original knowledge that can be followed-up and inform new research in this area. Some of the current research seems to follow rather 'secure' knowledge routes, not really pursuing to address unanswered questions, while some other research places existing knowledge at its core aiming to either challenge or confirm it. This is a challenge that relates less to the scale (small or large) of the research or the exact type of ICT-enabled services researched and more to the approach and aims that research in this area sets for itself.

Secondly, researchers should consider the extent to which research on ICT-enabled services moves as fast as services themselves and whether it should actually attempt to do so or not. An associated question is whether there is still a sufficiently good reason not to abandon the study of services that made their appearance a few decades ago (e.g., teleworking). On the one hand, emerging ICT-enabled services and related technologies generate new questions of research interest. On the other hand, existing and well-established services continue to matter in many contexts and for different parts of the society, while they do evolve themselves over time. Thus, researchers often find themselves

trapped in a sort of dilemma, with the main body of research in this area appearing not to have achieved a kind of balance in the study of emerging and well-established ICT-enabled services. At the same time, the pace at which research attempts to keep up with technological and service changes has not received sufficient attention to date.

Thirdly, a question we invite researchers to consider is how research insights and evidence in this area might contribute to knowledge enhancement when the same actors and stakeholders are approached through different lenses regarding their roles and the type of agency they convey. For instance, we found in this book that when terming the sample population, some members of the public are sometimes referred to as ‘users’ and in other instances, they are termed as ‘consumers’, without this necessarily being explained by the possibly different questions that research might wish to explore. Likewise, the same organisations and non-individual stakeholders who aim to supply and/or trade ICT-based services are sometimes labelled as organisations, in other times as professionals and some other times as corporate actors. The issue here is not to do really with labelling and language, but rather with the different assumptions and/or biases that may drive different researchers in this area.

Lastly, there appears to be a range of different focuses in the research in this area. For instance, the focus of some research appears to be on the role of demographics - especially age and profession - in the adoption and effective management of ICT-enabled services, while other research seems to be more interested in making sense of the type of relationship the user develops with technology-enabled services and associated patterns and purposes of use of those services (e.g., personal, commercial or professional uses). However, the grounds on which the researchers set their agendas and priorities and how they position their work in the entire field of ICT-enabled services and social inclusion are questions that have hardly received any attention so far. Hence, regardless of the large volume of empirical research in this area, the choices made by researchers in terms of labelling, language and focus are not much clear or sufficiently explained. In this respect, we argue that this is a gap that needs to be addressed; something that researchers in this area must draw their attention to and reflect a lot more on in the future.

Following the above remarks on the existing theoretical and empirical research on ICT-enabled services and social inclusion and before we close this concluding discussion, we would like to put forward a few recommendations for future research in this area. First, we recommend the conduct of more theoretically ambitious work; namely, of work that will contribute to original concepts and theorisations and will not merely deploy existing theoretical frameworks that are borrowed from other research fields. Second, we recommend the development of a clearer understanding of research labelling, agendas and priorities in this area; thus going deeper into the geographical scope covered and the range of actors and services studied in what already comprises a significant volume of empirical research. Along these lines, we recommend the development of a better understanding of where the various research endeavours stand in this area, what contribution they make and how they

can benefit future research. As ICT-enabled products and services are emerging in society and organisations rapidly, we, researchers, need to become better-positioned in order to address the questions of why and what new research on ICT-enabled services and social inclusion we need and how such new research can add to existing research and contribute to knowledge enhancement in the field.