

Offline life matters: Notes on digitalization debates in Brandenburg

Ian Greer

Does social inclusion require access to the digital world? There is a strong intuitive case that it does. The image of a "digital divide" suggests that there is a group of younger and more educated people who benefit from using computers, cell phones, the internet, and social media, while older less educated people are left behind. In many rural areas in the United States the lack of access to broadband infrastructure makes it much more difficult for people to work or study from home, which was a serious problem during the pandemic.

In reality, though, the connection between social and digital inclusion is debatable. In 2021-22 I carried out field research on people in Berlin and Brandenburg who had been unemployed during the pandemic. Most of the people I met were consciously fighting their own social exclusion. They had not only experienced job loss, but also an overall loss of social connectedness. Flight from war zones, economic migration, the end of the GDR, disabilities, health problems, conflicts with the Jobcenter, family breakdown, discrimination from employers, and series of bad jobs all reinforced this isolation.

The main strategies to connect with other people took place offline, in-person. At the Demokratischer Frauenbund (dfb), where I served as an intern, this took the form of paid volunteering taking care of children, taking elderly people to medical appointments and grocery shopping, welcoming Ukrainian refugees at train stations, serving coffee and cake at village festivals, organizing events, maintaining community centers and their gardens, and more. Other people I met fought their own social isolation by attending trade union meetings and protests, advising people having problems with housing and unemployment benefits, and engaging in other kinds of mutual aid.

The issue is not merely that people reject digitalization. Over four months I took part in a weekly "Digitale Kaffeerunde" on Zoom, where over time participants from different towns around Brandenburg left their analog comfort zones, turned on their computers and cameras, and talked with each other. Trainers led discussions of communication skills, project management, and using computers. Participants made videos and slideshows about

their own neighborhoods. They got to know people in far-flung parts of Brandenburg without the time and expense of train or car travel, and they seemed to genuinely enjoy themselves. I learned that many people who hardly use email are fond of Whatsapp, Facebook, Tiktok, or other smartphone apps.

However, the people I met did raise important critical questions about how digitalization is affecting everyday life. What happens to the in-person relationships when people are at home working or playing computer games? Do problem-solving and conflict resolution in the workplace become more difficult? In this new digital world is childhood better, or worse? Does working from home exacerbate work-life conflicts? Do these conflicts disproportionately affect women? How can under-resourced community-based organizations pay for the expertise they need to have well-functioning equipment and protect their members' data? Is the quality of information from the online world better or worse than that in the analogue world?

These questions are difficult to answer, because the answers depend on in-person social relationships. Digital tools make it easier to communicate among the far-flung towns and villages of Brandenburg, but their effects depend on everyday relationships among family members, work colleagues, and neighborhood residents. The effects of digitalization also depend on the hierarchical relationships between managers and workers, tech companies and consumers, and ministries and the nonprofit entities that they fund. To summarize, much depends on what happens in the non-digital world.

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