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Townsend, Leanne; Salemink, Koen; Wallace, Claire Denise

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Gypsy–Traveller communities in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands: socially and digitally excluded?

Leanne Townsend
James Hutton Institute, UK

Koen Salemink
University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Claire Denise Wallace
University of Aberdeen, UK

Abstract
With the pervasiveness of digitisation communications, those that are left behind are seen as socially excluded. In both academic and policy discourses, it is assumed that digital inclusion as a route into mainstream society is a desirable solution to problems of multiple exclusion and has led to many studies of the digital inclusion/exclusion of ‘hard to reach’ groups. Yet, Gypsy–Travellers, among the most marginalised people in society, have received little attention. Using data from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, we assess the impact of digital communications on Gypsy–Traveller communities. This article makes a contribution in the following ways: First, we address the theories of ‘fields of inclusion’ to show how exclusion and inclusion work together in different ways; Second, we explore how different policy frameworks in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom shape these possibilities; Third, we document the forms of inclusion that Gypsy–Travellers experience in terms of digital communications; Fourth, we look at how Gypsy–Travellers use digital communications to recreate their own cultures as well as selectively integrate with mainstream society.

Corresponding author:
Claire Denise Wallace, University of Aberdeen, Edward Wright Building, Aberdeen AB24 3QY, UK.
Email: claire.wallace@abdn.ac.uk
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Digital exclusion: a new chapter in the exclusion of Gypsy–Travellers

Gypsy–travellers face social exclusion in all European societies in which they find themselves, although the way in which this happens differs according to different policy frameworks. Digital communication not only represents one more potential field of exclusion but also offers new possibilities for empowerment. Here, we will explore the experiences and strategies of digital inclusion among Gypsy–Travellers in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands with contrasting experiences of settlement and integration.

In both the United Kingdom and Netherlands, digital communications assume high levels of access and skills in order for citizens to fully function in society. Engaging with the digital becomes increasingly necessary as key services and aspects of everyday life go online (Helsper, 2012). For example, in the United Kingdom, social security claimants must access state-run online applications and reach set targets in online job applications in order to collect their benefits (Mariën et al., 2016; Yates et al., 2015).

These rapid technological advances have transformed everyday life, but at the same time created an uneven social landscape in the form of what some have called a ‘digital divide’ between the technological ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ (LaRose et al., 2007). Key determinants of digital exclusion include demographic factors such as gender, social class, age and literacy levels (Yates et al., 2015). Geographical factors are also key with more rural regions having less access fast broadband connections than other areas, regarding both fixed and mobile broadband (Townsend et al., 2015). These are often the places where Gypsy–Travellers live. However, lack of a permanent address is one of the key ways in which economically marginalised communities are further excluded from society through being unable to access regular banking and telecommunications contracts (Yates et al., 2015). The mobile lifestyles of Gypsy–Travellers in the United Kingdom make them especially vulnerable in this respect, although Gypsy–Travellers in the Netherlands are marginalised in other ways, as we shall illustrate.

Whereas some aspects of the divide are explained through problems of access (in terms of access to devices, access to infrastructure and access to contracts), digital literacy issues can also account for a lack of engagement in some groups. The many factors impacting upon digital exclusion (and inclusion) are complex and dynamic and often interrelate (Van Dijk and Hacker, 2003). One factor is the different policy frameworks which affect how and where Gypsy–Travellers can live and what sort of broadband infrastructure they can access (Salemink 2016a; Blanks Hindman, 2000; Gilbert, 2010; Salemink 2016b; LaRose et al., 2007; Olphert and Damodaran, 2013; Yates et al., 2015).

The digital divide debate is particularly relevant for Gypsy–Traveller communities (Frediani, 2011). What many of these contributions highlight is the uncritical assumption
that social exclusion is compounded by digital exclusion and that digital inclusion necessarily results in social inclusion, particularly in policy and governmental narratives (Helsper, 2012). Given their peripheral position in society, Gypsy–Travellers provide a unique case for exploring the widespread assumption that digital engagement can alleviate issues of marginalisation and social exclusion.

This article makes a contribution in the following ways. First, we address the theories of ‘fields of inclusion’ to show how exclusion and inclusion work together in different ways. Second, we explore how different policy frameworks in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom shape these possibilities. Third, we document the forms of inclusion that Gypsy–Travellers experience in terms of digital communications, something which has not been adequately addressed in the culture and media literature until now. Fourth, we look at how Gypsy–Travellers use digital communications to recreate their own cultures and reinforce cultural boundaries as well as selectively integrating with mainstream society.

**Theories of inclusion and exclusion**

Discussions of social exclusion have tended to assume that different forms of exclusion compound each other – yet this is not necessarily the case (Byrne, 2005). Even the most marginalised groups, such as Gypsy–Travellers, exhibit different forms of inclusion and exclusion, some of which are preferred rather than imposed, as online communities are created exclusive to these groups. Here, Helsper’s (2012) theorisation of ‘field of inclusion’ can help us to understand some of these complexities, including digital dimensions. Although exclusion from mainstream digital communications would appear to add further reinforcement to social exclusion, they also offer new forms of inclusion both within communities and with the wider society. Hence, we cannot view inclusion and exclusion as being obverse sides of the same coin. Rather, we need to map the more subtle nuances of inclusion in our analysis, which goes beyond a simple ‘digital divide’. Furthermore, it is not sufficient to see Gypsy–Travellers as passive victims of social exclusion; instead, we suggest that we need to see them as active agents in their interactions with digital communications, with wider society and with their own communities. Taking this perspective leads us further to question the divisions between mobile and fixed communications and between settled and transient communities in ways that have broader implications for the way in which we view contemporary societies. Hence, the new forms of mobility, transnationalism and affinity, which are facilitated by digital communications, overlay older forms of mobility represented by Gypsy–Travellers with longstanding cultures (Castells, 2001; Urry, 2007).

Disadvantages commonly found in Gypsy–Travellers groups include literacy levels typically lower than those found in the general population. Problems of accessing education and social welfare are compounded by nomadic lifestyles since the need to keep moving is often critical to daily survival, especially in the case of UK informal settlements where Gypsy–Travellers are frequently evicted from sites within days or even hours of arrival (Cowan and Lomax, 2003). In other words, digital exclusion is often the inevitable by-product of everyday social exclusions and material marginalisation that Gypsy–Travellers are dealing with.
The ubiquity of digital communications arguably presents a new chapter in exclusionary mechanisms. Everyday aspects of life and society move online, while those excluded from these resources are potentially excluded more broadly and deeply. This can impact Gypsy–Travellers in a number of ways: it can further distance children from education such as in the case of schools which require pupils to go online to complete assignments and research; it can exclude them from the online tools required to access state benefits and healthcare; it can exclude them from the wider benefits of digital engagement including low price shopping, social networking, access to knowledge and entertainment resources.

In fact, studies into marginalised groups in developing countries have shown the importance of ‘mobile leapfrogging’ technologies, which refers to moving straight to the newer mobile broadband communications and bypassing the stage of having fixed broadband altogether (Hyde-Clark and Van Tonder, 2011; Napoli and Obar, 2014). Hence, leapfrogging abates the initial disadvantages of a lack of fixed broadband Internet. However, people’s dependency on mobile Internet has also been critiqued for not providing the full advantages of digital connectivity that fixed broadband and PCs offer (Pearce and Rice, 2013). The actual impact of leapfrogging, and the empowerment potential of fixed broadband connectivity vis-à-vis mobile broadband connectivity, is something to critically assess when studying digital engagement patterns of vulnerable groups such as Gypsy–Travellers.

So far, little research has explored this empowerment potential for Gypsy–Travellers in detail, but results are surprising. For example, Marcelo Frediani (2011) conducting ethnographic work between 2007 and 2009 found that Gypsy–Traveller communities and their representatives had begun to embrace digital technologies as tools for political activism and social inclusion, concluding that ‘It (ICT) gives them a voice in mainstream society while maintaining and promoting their lifestyle’ (p. 268). This suggests that Gypsy–Travellers are engaging in new ways, and that this engagement has the potential to strengthen social inclusion. An understanding of this potential is spreading among support agencies which increasingly turn to the web to provide e-learning tools (e.g. for families fearful of sending children to school), health advice, legal advice and other services which overcome issues of discrimination, mobility and accessibilities. There is growing enthusiasm to provide digital literacy training to Gypsy–Travellers and to use digital tools for engagement more broadly with this group. Notable projects have included the Electronic Learning and Mobility Project (ELAMP) project providing e-tools for mobile learning (D’Arcy 2012); ‘SavvyChavvy’ social media network for young Gypsy–Travellers1 and the Friends, Family and Travellers ‘Cyber-Pilots’ project (Frediani, 2011). These activities, along with a small amount of academic work, suggest that there is great potential for furthering understanding of how digital participation can empower this group (Salemink, 2016a). Furthermore, such understandings are likely to be applicable to other displaced communities, such as refugees and asylum seekers for whom digital participation may strengthen inclusion within host societies.

While we can turn to the literature on the digital exclusion of marginalised groups in order to gain a broader insight into the issues (Courtois and Verdegem, 2014; Michailidis et al., 2011; Park, 2008), there is also work which suggests that marginalised groups can in some cases, and with the right support mechanisms, find routes to digital engagement (Lindberg and Úden, 2010; Rennie et al., 2013), although these mechanisms often exist
outside of the group itself (such as community support and development initiatives; Seale and Dutton, 2012). Furthermore, in the case of Gypsy–Travellers, social networks can be spatially distributed due to their mobile lifestyles, meaning that social support with technology may be available only at certain times or in certain places. Nevertheless, digital communications can be a way of communicating between scattered families and communities. More broadly, observations from this article about mobile lifestyles can add to the ongoing debate on mobilities about people being on the move and ever less fixed in places for whom mobile technologies are particularly relevant (Bauman, 1998; Crang et al., 2007). Links to other marginalised mobile groups such as transnational workers but also refugees are apparent. Increasingly, it is mobile communications rather than fixed broadband which are the preferred media and this takes on new meanings in an increasingly mobile society. In this respect, Gypsy–Travellers are at the forefront of new kinds of association and new flows of communication that can be transnational as well as country specific (Urry, 2007).

The context: the Netherlands and the United Kingdom

The Netherlands and the United Kingdom represent two different approaches to the inclusion and exclusion of Gypsy–Travellers which have important implications for their digital presence. Yet in both societies, these communities are stigmatised. In the Netherlands, the relation between ‘settled society’ and ‘the travelling community’ is problematic. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the Dutch state has put a lot of effort into ‘containing the Gypsy-problem’ (Khonraad and Veldhuijsen, 2009; Powell, 2013b). Those who travel – a diverse group consisting of itinerary traders and craftsmen, showmen and Sinti – are seen as a deviant element in a society which is dominantly sedentary. In other words, those who travel are seen as ‘the other’ compared with settled or sedentary people (Sibley, 1995; Salemink, 2016b). In order to ‘contain the Gypsy-problem’, the Dutch state put in place a series of ‘Caravan Dwellers Acts’ (Woonwagenwet) between 1918 and 2000. These Acts ensured that Gypsy–Travellers would reside on designated sites and restrictive planning measures were used to ‘sedentarise’ them. The Dutch system was also used by the Nazi regime (1940–1945) for the persecution of Gypsy–Travellers, resulting in a long-lasting problematic relation between governments and Gypsy–Traveller communities (Salemink, 2016a).

The Dutch state has also pursued a broader ideal to ‘civilize’ maladjusted people in its society, the so-called ‘Civilizing Offensive’ (Beschavingsoffensief). This Civilising Offensive can be seen as an early version of an integral policy, as its ideas were put into practice throughout a variety of policy fields (Powell, 2013b; Salemink 2016b). The core principle behind the offensive is to ‘civilise’ the poor, the socially excluded and the ‘mis-fits’ and eventually assimilate subcultures so as to ensure their integration. Although not aimed at Gypsy–Travellers specifically, the Gypsy–Travellers are among the groups who were frequently targeted by measures that are related to this offensive (Powell, 2013b).

Together, the Caravan Dwellers Act and the Civilising Offensive have resulted in an ethnic minority which is now contradictorily framed by the state as a ‘sedentary nomadic group’ (Khonraad and Veldhuijsen, 2009). Gypsy–Travellers in the Netherlands are now largely sedentarised in specific settlements. The strong opposition of the state to their
lifestyles resulted in Gypsy–Travellers sensing ‘a loss of culture’. Furthermore, and as an outcome of nearly a century of institutionalised exclusion, governments and institutions are regarded as untrustworthy – Gypsy–Traveller try to avoid any governmental intervention. This complicates community development projects; projects which are actually very much needed, considering the deep exclusion which the group experiences (FRANET, 2012; Movisie, 2013; Author removed).

In the United Kingdom, travelling communities predominantly fall into a number of broad populations, including Roma (typically migrants from European accession countries), Romany English Gipsies, Irish Travellers, Scottish Travellers and Welsh Kale Gipsies as well as non-ethnic communities such as ‘showmen’ (fairground proprietors and their families) and more recently New Age Travellers (Brown and Scullion, 2010; Richardson and Ryder, 2012). Legally, ‘Gipsies’, ‘Scottish Gipsies’ and ‘Irish Travellers’ have been officially recognised as ethnic minorities under the Race Relations Act 1976 (Richardson and Ryder 2012). Gypsy–Traveller communities in the United Kingdom have arguably maintained a nomadic way of life more successfully than those based in other countries (Brown and Scullion, 2010). Gypsy–Travellers have historically been, and remain, on the edges of society, suffering ongoing discrimination and social exclusion (Shubin and Swanson, 2010) going back to the 16th Century (Acton, 1997). Their exclusion is seen partially as a consequence of their nomadic lifestyles, shifting the blame from outside institutional forces to the communities themselves (Allen, 2012). The United Kingdom–based Gypsy–Travellers are more often found in mobile forms of housing such as caravans than their European counterparts, although our research has highlighted that bricks and mortar structures (constructed both with and without planning permission) are becoming more commonplace. Efforts to work with Gypsy–Traveller peoples have too often sought to assimilate and eradicate the identity and unique lifestyle of Gypsies and Travelers, with families either influenced to settle in social housing or being denied planning permission for, or access to, land for accommodation purposes (Smith and Greenfields, 2013). This is something which Gypsy–Travellers have resisted fiercely in an attempt to preserve their cultural identities and ways of life.

These negative values are reproduced by an assumption among welfare professionals of a need to impose civilising processes while dismissing the importance of Traveller’s own cultural values (Powell, 2011), a less structured parallel to the civilising offensive (or het Beschavingsoffensief) seen in the Netherlands (Powell, 2013b). Social welfare organisations can at once empower and hinder Gypsy–Traveller groups, evidenced in the ethnographic work of Vanderbeck (2009) who found such organisations simultaneously challenged and reproduced negative representations and practices, which inform the often ineffective interventions that are aimed at these groups (Vanderbeck, 2005). The research on Gypsy–Travellers, though sporadic (Powell, 2013a), has typically focused on those still travelling – sedentarised Travellers have not been researched in-depth, not least given their tendency to disguise their ethnic identity in order to avoid discrimination and abuse (Powell, 2008, 2013a; Smith and Greenfields, 2013). Yet the distinction between sedentarised and itinerant Travellers is important in terms of digital access, as we shall show.

Although UK Gypsy–Travellers have been able to maintain their nomadic culture more successfully, their situation is far from ideal, with many groups settling on unauthorised
land, often without the consent of the landowner or local council, frequently resulting in evictions by council or police officers. The 1968 Caravans Act in some ways worked in the favour of the United Kingdom–based Gypsy–Travellers, as it led to an increase in authorised sites, but at the same time gave local authorities the power to identify areas on which Gypsy–Travellers were not allowed to reside (Hawes and Perez, 1996). Moving on (or being moved on) after only a few days can be unsettling for families and groups and can further exacerbate problems of social exclusion. It seems that maintaining a nomadic lifestyle in the United Kingdom comes at the cost of community and family well-being, with implications for healthcare, schooling and social welfare.

In the United Kingdom, and similar to the Netherlands, Gypsy–Traveller communities are at times useful to settled society, for example, in the provision of informal labour or providing particular economic services, often contributing to the black economy. In other words, they are often prepared to do the work that settled society is not (Salemink 2016b). These exchanges represent one aspect within which settled society and Gypsy–Travellers have historically interacted. Yet Gypsy–Travellers in the United Kingdom have frequently been feared and ‘othered’ by settled society (Sibley, 1995). They are victims of numerous stereotypes which contribute to their ongoing discrimination, including beliefs that they are criminal, dirty, and amoral (Acton, 1997). A survey in 2004 found them to be one of the most reviled groups in society, alongside groups such as asylum seekers (Powell, 2008). As suggested by Sibley (1995), ‘There is a strong desire to expel the abject, but it hovers on the boundary of the self or community, threatening but, at the same time, confirming identity’ (p. 220). This serves to keep Gypsies on the margins of society both socially and spatially. Yet it is argued that occupying this excluded space can empower Gypsy–Traveller groups, by enabling them to enact their cultural identities and exert power in a safe space without fear of surveillance (Sibley, 1998).

Mechanisms of exclusion are manifold, and we would argue that these now include requirements around digital engagement. With the introduction of ‘digital by default’ policies in the United Kingdom, which entail Internet access and skills in order to access key services, and with the Netherlands moving ever more towards an eGoverned approach, we argue that digital exclusion potentially becomes a new mechanism of exclusion for Gypsy–Travellers. This article seeks to explore both the ways in which digital communications can both exclude and empower Gypsy–Traveller communities in the United Kingdom and Netherlands.

By comparing the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, we can better understand the differences between settled and mobile communities, the role of transnational as well as nationally located communications and the importance of fixed versus mobile broadband technologies and the varying forms of offline and online inclusion. This helps us to understand the various interplays of social and digital inclusion/exclusion in different contexts.

**Methods and ethics**

For the data collection in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, partnerships were formed with gatekeepers who were able to provide access to Gypsy–Traveller communities. Researchers in both countries took a qualitative approach, drawing on in-depth
qualitative semi-structured interviews, as well as carrying out ethnographic work within the Gypsy–Traveller communities. In the Netherlands, the fieldwork was carried out in the towns of Emmen, Buitenpost, Opende and Dommelen using material from Gypsy–Travellers, Gypsy–Traveller liaison officers, and a fieldwork diary. In the United Kingdom, interviews were carried out with Gypsy–Travellers in Aberdeenshire, Scotland and with Gypsy–Traveller liaison officers. Researchers also attended a community event run for Gypsy–Travellers at the London Gypsy–Traveller Unit (LGTU).

Research with marginalised groups is fraught with difficulty, largely in terms of issues relating to trust – suspicion is commonplace among groups that are familiar with oppression, such as Gypsy–Travellers (Brown and Scullion, 2010). Gypsy–Travellers are generally reluctant to open up to members of ‘the settled society’ (Powell, 2013a; Sibley, 1995), so researchers need to find an appropriate way to approach the groups. In this project, Gypsy–Traveller liaison officers working with the support agencies acted as gatekeepers. In the United Kingdom, the advantages were twofold: first, the gatekeeper introduced the researcher, helping to diminish feelings of distrust. Second, the gatekeeper had up-to-date information as to where the Travellers could be found (many sites in the United Kingdom and particularly in Scotland are unauthorised, temporary sites).

Nevertheless, the United Kingdom–based researcher was always treated with suspicion in the initial stage of the research. This tended to dissipate once the researcher had explained the purpose of her presence on the site. Typically, once Gypsy–Travellers have been able to establish that a visitor to the site posed no threat to them (and in particular that the visitor is not a representative of a distrusted settled society institution), they are more comfortable with sharing their stories.

The Netherlands-based researcher used his past role as a policy officer for social housing associations managing designated Traveller sites to gain access. However, it proved essential to understand the culture and everyday life of Gypsy–Travellers in order to get the conversations going. Distrust was prominent at first, but well-informed interest helped to improve relations.

Obtaining informed consent was also problematic. In one UK interview, a consent form was handed over to the participant, who signed the form. But it later became clear that the participant could not read or write, so the researcher was required to explain the content of the consent form, ensuring that the participant understood her rights and how her data would be used. This issue was discussed with the Research Ethics Committee in the researcher’s university, and it was decided that as well as presenting a consent sheet, a verbal explanation of its contents should be given, in order to ensure that participants were fully cognizant with what they were agreeing to and understood their rights to withdraw their participation from the research. In the Dutch case, participants in the research claimed that their ‘spoken words were worth just as much as a written signature’. In practice, this meant that if a trust relation was built, the participant would orally approve the use of the data.

Variations in digital inclusion: mobile versus fixed; transient versus settled

Our UK findings show that Gypsy–Travellers are able to access the Internet, although largely this is not through fixed broadband infrastructures. In the United Kingdom, fixed
Internet connectivity is not a viable option for the simple reason that most Gypsy–Traveller families are mobile, and even when spending some time on a site are unsure of how long they will be there – in almost all cases Gypsy–Travellers like to travel to different places at certain times of the year in order to attend family and cultural events and meet up with friends and family. When asked if her group had ever considered pursuing fixed Internet access on their semi-fixed site, one respondent replied, ‘I think there’s other people that have tried. But we don’t know how long we’re going to be here as well’. Another pointed out,

If we got a contract in here, we would be paying for a year and we wouldn’t be here – it doesn’t make sense. I tried to tell BT [British Telecom] am I going to pay and for six months not be here? … I’d be quite happy to be paying something if it was for the six months.

This finding highlights the difficulty that Gypsy–Travellers often have with gaining access to utilities and services more generally – having no fixed abode and not remaining in one place year round means that they are not willing to participate for cost reasons or are not offered contracts due to a fear on the part of the service provider that they will not be remunerated. Access to the Internet is gained primarily through mobile devices, tapping into 3G and 4G networks where available. In order to access the Internet on laptops, for example, mobile devices are used to gain 3G and 4G access and then toggled to the laptop.

In many cases, UK Gypsy–Traveller families are in possession of multiple devices, typically mobile phones, laptops and tablets: ‘Mine [children] have got iPads and tablets yeah – they’ve got it all’. However, digital inclusion is not just question of owning the right equipment. Although many of the Gypsy–Travellers in our sample are in possession of multiple devices, problems with 3G and 4G signals are common, not least because Gypsy–Travellers typically encamp in rural areas, which are shown to suffer from poor 3G and 4G signals in relation to urban areas (Townsend et al., 2015): ‘I’ve got a Blackberry and iPhone … we’ve actually got three laptops and an ipad, and there’s iphones as well although you get no signal at all – we have an iphone 6 and no signal’. One participant describes how ‘if we want to get decent Internet we put the mobile phone up in the windowsill there, we have to balance it high up in the window and then we can just about get it’, when describing how they use 3G to access streamed television shows and download movies from the web. Coastal sites can present problems for mobile access too, as explained by one respondent:

‘The tide – when the tide’s out it’s ok, when the tide comes in it’ll block it – the big boats when they come in they can interfere with it. We’re happy with what we’ve got, but it’s not like having your broadband’.

This suggests that Gypsy–Travellers are aware of how they are excluded from the benefits of fixed digital connectivity, even if they can get some degree of mobile access.

In the United Kingdom, digital inclusion also depends on securing a good contract with a mobile phone provider – again, often difficult for those with no fixed abode or credit history. Respondents frequently talked about their mobile phone contract as being incredibly valuable – phone contracts can vary in terms of how much mobile data they
allow a person to use per month. Gypsy–Travellers ideally want to have mobile phone contracts which allow them access to unlimited or large amounts of mobile data. In some cases, respondents had been given phone contracts with unlimited mobile data which cannot be found on the market any longer, but the mobile phone service providers are obliged to continue to honour the contracts:

I’ve got a 3G contract and it’s Sim only. Everyone was saying ‘oh they’re going to take it off you’. But I get unlimited Internet which I can use as a hotspot. But I looked on my contract thing and it said basically your contract will roll on as long as you want it. Others were saying ‘oh no they took it off us’ and I was thinking ‘oh no’ – maybe they were late payments and maybe to get out of the clause, because they were such good contracts. You can’t get it any more. That’s like gold.

This illustrates that some Gypsy–Travellers are aware of the changing landscape in service provision and are strategic in ensuring they get the best possible deal for their own circumstances.

The Netherlands is different in this respect: most Gypsy–Travellers reside on designated sites which have access to utilities and fixed broadband. Paradoxically, the Civilising Offensive made a positive contribution here, as governments decided that having access to utilities is of benefit to everyone. Some of the sites in Emmen (the Netherlands) even have access to fibre optic broadband, because the municipality actively promoted the inclusion of Gypsy–Traveller sites in the plans of commercial telecommunications companies, although originally the sites were not part of the rollout plan (Fieldwork in Emmen; Salemink 2016a). A more problematic aspect of digital inclusion is getting the contract with an Internet provider. According to the professionals we interviewed, Gypsy–Travellers sites are viewed by businesses as areas where many defaulters live. Effectively, telecommunications companies are reluctant to deliver their services, because they fear payment arrears. In the words of a Traveller woman in Emmen, Gypsy–Traveller sites have ‘contaminated postcodes’.

Although Gypsy–Travellers in the Netherlands are sedentarised, they still travel a lot on a daily basis from their sedentary locations. Many of the Gypsy–Travellers run (small) businesses (MOVISIE, 2013), and for their business activities, they have to be mobile. In Emmen, the Netherlands-based researcher met with Travellers who traded secondhand cars, scrap metal or textiles, and they claimed that the entire Northern Netherlands and parts of Northern Germany were part of their catchment area. These men (as it is usually the men who travel for business) ‘have to be online, day and night’ and require mobile subscriptions which ‘allow for the use of a bulk of data’. Some even have both Dutch and German subscriptions in order to avoid paying substantial roaming charges.

Overall, material access to the Internet is well organised in the Netherlands, including for Gypsy–Travellers, but acquiring access and actually using the Internet is frustrated by financial constraints on the side of Gypsy–Travellers, also discriminating policies on the side of telecommunications companies. Local governments argue that Gypsy–Travellers are well-served when it comes to utilities and broadband connectivity, but material access is useless if one cannot effectively make use of these services. The Dutch case shows that for digital inclusion, excluded groups require more than merely the material access.
Digital empowerment

Our findings from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands reveal insights into the extent that transient and settled communities can be empowered and become socially included as a result of digital engagement.

Gypsy–Travellers in the United Kingdom are using the Internet for a number of purposes. Facebook is the most highly mentioned application of the Internet used, but Gypsy–Travellers are also using the web for information and education, entertainment, finances and communication via email: ‘[We] use it for everything – Facebook. Even for the child, the baby’s on it 24/7’; ‘Health complaints, google it. If anybody’s got a rash, google it. It’s life now’. One respondent explained how her children used the web for different forms of entertainment:

My youngest uses it for reading on the kindle. She had a kindle but she’s done away with it, because now you get Kindle on your iphone. The other one uses it for listening to music, she watches films. We watch TV on it as well.

Indeed, differences in types of web usage seem to depend upon age, with older respondents using the web mostly for email and Facebook and younger respondents using it for a broader range of purposes, such as one young respondent who explained,

I’ve got Facebook, I don’t use it though. I go online to play games, and do research and stuff. I watch a lot of movies online … I use it for emails as well. Cos I’ve got my online banking on it as well.

In the UK sample, the Internet is also used as a means of economic inclusion, as Gypsy–Travellers will often use websites such as Freeads and Ebay to buy and sell things, as one woman explains, ‘He [husband] goes on to Ebay and the likes to sell stuff, he’s found dogs on there, really good quality lurchers that he’s bought, he’s sold them on on there too’. None of the UK sample spoke about employment opportunities found online – this is perhaps because Gypsy–Travellers still participate in largely informal economies, often on a ‘cash in hand’ or self-employed basis. Facebook is the favourite online tool for networking, as explained by one respondent who had used it to reconnect with disparate family and friends:

Us Travelers use it because people we can’t see them because people are going into different sites, and houses and – so it’s easier to stay in touch. I’ve got a friend in Edinburgh and through circumstances we haven’t been able to see each other. But through Facebook he’s been able to come up here, and I’ve been to see him.

Digital tools then are providing Gypsy–Travellers with new routes to social inclusion and social cohesion not previously available to them, often useful when families and groups are split over different locations and sites. In other words, social media are conducive for community building over long distances, partially abating the negative effects of living dispersed and across borders.
Similar to in the United Kingdom, many Gypsy–Travellers in the Netherlands own a variety of digital devices such as laptops, tablet PCs and smartphones, of which the latter is the most frequently used. The smartphone, and the various social media applications it offers, has evolved into a key element for in-group and out-group communication. In Buitenpost, for example, a Traveller explained that smartphones had become indispensable for their in-group communication:

To be honest, I use Facebook purely for communication with members of the family. Some family members live in Utrecht [approximately two hours’ drive away from Buitenpost] so it’s not easy to keep in touch. Facebook makes it easier, you know, for this and that.

The professionals we interviewed in the Netherlands stress the importance of direct messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, and the empowering effect of accessible digital applications. As a project manager in Emmen said,

They [Gypsy-Travelers] really use WhatsApp a lot, also to contact us, for example about renewal plans and all kinds of administrative things. They seem to have skipped the phase of offline, formal communication and they just went straight for the informal, digital form. Now they know how to reach us and they can have their say.

Elements of a different kind of ‘leapfrogging’ can be observed here (Hyde-Clark and Van Tonder, 2011). In this case, Gypsy–Travellers have replaced offline illiteracy with online communications using words, icons, pictures and so on.

Digital technologies can act either as a route to educational inclusion or exclusion for Gypsy–Travellers in the United Kingdom. Educational inclusion can occur when digital tools support people, for example, allowing children to complete homework assignments and allowing people to gain knowledge and learn about new subjects. But many of the respondents explained that they are unable to read or write very well. Literacy problems are common among Gypsy–Travellers due to many having not attended school and are typically worse in the older generations, which perhaps explains the age difference in digital engagement (although age is a key determinant of digital engagement across the wider population, Salemink, 2016a). In addition, many have low levels of digital skills and experience (in part due to low levels of literacy – c.f. Van Dijk and Hacker, 2003), and this limits what they are able to do with technology: ‘Although I’ve got Facebook and Bebo on it, I can’t really read or write. He’s (brother) technology, but I’m not really technology. Because obviously he’s been to school longer than me’. Furthermore, when mobile connection is poor or non-existent, it can contribute to educational exclusion rather than inclusion, for example, in the case of the respondent whose son was unable to get his homework assignment completed, ‘the other week, he couldn’t get it {homework} done. So he had to leave it. Some of the teachers can be [understanding], others are a bit …’. Although digital engagement initiatives are becoming more common in the United Kingdom more widely (Frediani, 2011), these have not reached the Gypsy–Travellers in our sample – perhaps because many of our respondents are frequenting mostly unauthorised temporary sites. Critically speaking, fixed place–based policies cannot adequately support transient communities like Gypsy–Travellers.
Despite these challenges, Gypsy–Travellers are resourceful problem solvers, and many have used the positives of digital access to overcome these problems. Within the network of the Gypsy–Travellers’ extended family, less digitally literate people have access to many proxy users, that is, people who can assist in using digital applications. In practice, this is often the ‘tech-savvy’ nephew, as a Traveller from Buitenpost explained, ‘My nephew knows all about that stuff [digital applications]. He can fix it when it broke down and help me when I don’t understand it’. Some UK respondents talked about how access to the Internet has empowered them to help themselves or to help their family members:

I’m not educated, I left school at 8. So I never had much of an education. So the homework you get for him – I google it. He was doing cylinders, and I didn’t have a scoobie. So I googled it. And we done it together.

Another respondent pointed out some online tools which had helped her child to improve his literacy: ‘I don’t know if you know of the toe-by-toe – it teaches you how to read. So I’ve taught my boy how to read. The other one – Facebook, texting, that’s what’s learnt him’. These findings clearly show that Gypsy–Travellers are using digital tools to empower themselves and their families in terms of knowledge and education and to overcome existing educational barriers.

Our research has shown that digital engagement can empower Gypsy–Travellers and impact upon social, educational and economic inclusion. But to what extent does this inclusion apply to society more broadly? Gypsy–Travellers have traditionally been known to insulate themselves from wider society and generally prefer to ‘keep themselves to themselves’ (McCaffery, 2014). They are keen to protect their cultural identity from dilution from outside influences (Acton, 1997), a notable example of this being the much lower rates of secondary school attendance among Gypsies compared with primary school attendance – Gypsy–Traveller parents are often keen to ensure their children learn basic literacy, but are reluctant to expose them to influences at secondary school which might lead them to break particular cultural norms.

In the UK sample, respondents mostly indicated that they would only use social media such as Facebook to connect with other Gypsy–Travellers: ‘Oh it’s just for Travellers. I wouldn’t have any non-Traveller folk on there!’. A look at Gypsy–Traveller groups in Facebook supports this sentiment – most are set to ‘closed’ and often warn ‘This group is only for Gipsies and Travellers’. Socially, then, in the United Kingdom, Gypsy–Travellers seem keen to restrict interactions online to other Gypsy–Travellers – inclusion is desired only among one’s own people. Here, we see online social networking as a means to reinforcing existing cultural boundaries, rather than as a means for integrating into new groups. Economic activity is a different story.

In both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, several respondents spoke about the usefulness of sites such as Freeads (the United Kingdom), Marktplaats (the Netherlands) and Ebay (both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands) for buying and selling purposes. An exception to the Facebook rule is participation in Facebook buying and selling groups such as those relating to animals and landscaping or construction tools. In this case, Gypsy–Travellers tend to hide their identities in order to protect themselves from
verbal abuse. Respondents expressed a perceived vulnerability online in these settings: ‘It’s easier not to mention you’re a Gypsy. You don’t want them hurling abuse at you and that’s what they do. Easy for them when they’re hiding behind their computers’. Furthermore, and as previous research has shown (Author removed), online openness about being a Gypsy–Traveller can be met with discrimination by members from settled society and reluctance to buy products or goods. Offline distrust between settled society and Gypsy–Travellers resonates online.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion is that although Gypsy–Travellers do represent a socially excluded group and additionally face problems of digital access, digital communications can be a way of finding inclusion in mainstream society by providing economic, social and educational access to resources. Yet Gypsy–Travellers do this on their own terms. In digital communications, they reinforce circles of inclusion within their own community through social media and extend their traditional economic activities, such as small-scale trading, into a digital realm. In this way, they find ways to circumvent other kinds of social exclusion such as written illiteracy, thus ‘online leapfrogging’ traditional forms of offline communication. The introduction of Tablet PCs and smartphones, with high usability and many images/visualisations instead of text, facilitates this ‘online leapfrogging’. Hence, this challenges easy distinctions between exclusion and inclusion as polar opposites and shows that emerging technologies can indeed enable a certain degree of empowerment. Furthermore, ‘online leapfrogging’ is a concept worth studying in relation to marginalised, transient and especially less literate people.

Our findings show that Gypsy–Travellers are finding ways to engage with and exploit the tools of digital technologies. For example, it seems that Gypsy–Travellers are able to exploit the web in order to gain some level of economic integration within settled society (trading with them and providing services to them). Educational inclusion is sought by Gypsy–Travellers in order to expand their knowledge and increase the future opportunities of their children. Knowledge and learning is largely sought online to empower oneself and other members of the family or group. Hence, Gypsy–Travellers use digital communications to both integrate with mainstream society and to recreate their own culture and forms of solidarity.

The contrast between the policy frameworks in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands illustrates how inclusion and exclusion can take different forms. In the United Kingdom, where Gypsy–Traveller communities are still mobile, different solutions are employed to allow communities to connect digitally – largely connectivity is achieved via mobile devices (‘mobile leapfrogging’). In the Netherlands, however, fixed broadband connectivity is possible. This can lead to quite different outcomes regarding digital engagement and the ways in which technology can be used (see also, Napoli and Obar, 2014; Pearce and Rice, 2013). Nonetheless, the United Kingdom–based Gypsy–Travellers find creative solutions to getting online and are still able to exploit these tools to their own benefit.

Yet although they are engaging to some extent, our respondents in the two countries are struggling to be digitally included more broadly. Moreover, our findings hint at the
potential for digital participation to exacerbate exclusion by opening up new channels of discrimination towards Gypsy–Travellers by stressing differences with ‘the other’ online as well as offline. Hence, we found examples of online sites that were abusive or promote vigilante-style monitoring of Gypsy–Traveller activity. This should act as a caution that digital inclusion is not a panacea for social exclusion (see also, Salemink 2016b) despite the promises of the last decade that digital inclusion will provide a fix for problems of social exclusion as research suggests that the intersections are more complex.

This article shows the diverging impacts of national policy histories between two countries. Despite different policy frameworks providing differing kinds of digital access and different models of social inclusion, Gypsy–Travellers manage to use digital communications to maintain their own cultures and lifestyles.

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**Note**

1. http://savvychavvy.wordpress.com/about

**ORCID iD**

Claire Denise Wallace [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1218-624X](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1218-624X)

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