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MECHANISMS OF REPRODUCING DIGITAL INEQUALITY IN THE CONDITIONS OF GLOBAL DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS: A STRATIFICATION AND MULTIDIMENSIONAL APPROACH

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МЕХАНІЗМИ ВІДТВОРЕННЯ ЦИФРОВОЇ НЕРІВНОСТІ В УМОВАХ ГЛОБАЛЬНИХ ЦИФРОВИХ ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЙ: СТРАТИФІКАЦІЙНИЙ І БАГАТОВИМІРНИЙ ПІДХІД

The article examines the mechanisms by which digital inequality is reproduced in the context of global digital transformations, drawing on an integrated framework that combines stratification economics with the Multidimensional Inequality Framework. It argues that digital inequality should not be reduced to separate "digital divides" in access, skills, or outcomes. The conceptual novelty of the article lies in developing a unified explanatory model of the reproduction of digital inequality that integrates stratification economics with the Multidimensional Inequality Framework and systematizes the mechanisms of digital stratification across interrelated structural levels. Instead, it is conceptualized as an empirical manifestation of digital stratification — a hierarchical organization of positions within the socio-economic space shaped by digital transformations, reproduced through the distribution of control over digital resources, the institutional rules that govern their use, and the channels through which benefits are appropriated. From a stratification-economics perspective, digital technologies are interpreted not as neutral instruments of modernization but as elements of an institutional configuration that both reflects existing socio-economic hierarchies and provides additional means for their consolidation. This occurs through the institutional structuring of access, the positional placement of groups within the digital economy, the concentration of digital assets and monetization channels, algorithmic management of labour, and the asymmetric distribution of gains and risks associated with digitalization.

The Multidimensional Inequality Framework is used to specify how these mechanisms operate through the differentiated conversion of resources into real opportunities and outcomes, as well as through cross-domain accumulation of advantages and disadvantages. Formal access to digital resources does not automatically translate into equal life chances, because groups differ in the social, institutional, and spatial conditions that shape the conversion of access and skills into educational, professional, financial, and social outcomes. In this perspective, digital inequality appears as a dynamic process capable of shifting across dimensions: it may weaken at the level of basic access while intensifying at the levels of use, outcomes, and positions within the digital economy. A key analytical contribution of the article is the integration of digital-stratification mechanisms with the

concept of "opportunity traps." The trap of corrosive disadvantages describes a chain-like escalation of vulnerability, moving from unequal access toward unequal outcomes. Zones of cumulative achievements (fertile capabilities) capture the opposite configuration, in which high-quality access and productive practices generate a multiplicative expansion of opportunities. The trap of high-light privileges highlights the structural consequences of concentrated control over data, platforms, and algorithmic systems, including the spatial consolidation of control centers in the global digital economy and the intergenerational reproduction of digital advantages. The article concludes that effective policies aimed at reducing digital inequality must go beyond technocratic expansions of access and address the institutional conditions that shape the distribution of control, opportunities, and benefits in the digitally mediated socio-economic space.

У статті розглянуто механізми відтворення цифрової нерівності в умовах глобальних цифрових трансформацій на основі поєднання аналітичного інструментарію стратифікаційної економіки та багатовимірної рамки аналізу нерівності. Концептуальна новизна статті полягає у формуванні цілісної пояснювальної моделі відтворення цифрової нерівності, що поєднує стратифікаційну економіку та багатовимірну рамку аналізу нерівності і систематизує механізми цифрової стратифікації як взаємопов'язані структурні рівні. Обґрунтовано, що цифрова нерівність не зводиться до окремих цифрових розривів у доступі, навичках чи результатах, а є емпіричним проявом цифрової стратифікації — ієрархічної організації позицій у соціально-економічному просторі цифрових трансформацій, що закріплюється через розподіл контролю над цифровими ресурсами, правилами їх використання та каналами привласнення вигод. У межах стратифікаційного підходу цифрові технології інтерпретуються як елемент інституційної конфігурації, який не лише відображає наявні соціально-економічні ієрархії, а й створює додаткові інструменти їх закріплення через інституційне структурування доступу, позиційне розміщення груп у цифровій економіці, концентрацію цифрових активів і механізми монетизації, алгоритмічне управління працею та асиметричний розподіл вигод і ризиків цифровізації. Показано, що багатовимірна рамка аналізу нерівності дозволяє уточнити дію цих механізмів через логіку диференційованої конвертації ресурсів у реальні можливості та результати, а також через міжсферну кумуляцію переваг і обмежень. Ключовим аналітичним результатом є інтеграція механізмів цифрової стратифікації з концептом пасток можливостей: пастка кумулятивних обмежень описує ланцюгове розгортання вразливості від нерівності доступу до нерівності результатів; зони кумулятивних досягнень відображають мультиплікативне розширення можливостей за умов якісного доступу і продуктивних практик; пастка породження привілеїв фіксує структурні наслідки концентрації контролю над даними, платформами та алгоритмічними системами, включно з просторовим закріпленням центрів контролю у глобальній цифровій економіці та міжпоколінним відтворенням цифрових переваг. Зроблено висновок, що ефективні політики подолання цифрової нерівності мають виходити за межі технократичного розширення доступу і бути спрямованими на зміну інституційних умов розподілу контролю, можливостей і вигод у цифрово-опосередкованому соціально-економічному просторі.

Key words: interdisciplinarity, transformation, differentiation, digitalization, convergence, asymmetries, mechanism, digital economy, digital assets, digital resources, digital competencies, digital inequality, socio-economic development, inequality, infrastructure, platform economy, inclusion, stratification economy, human capital, employment.

Ключові слова: міждисциплінарність, трансформація, диференціація, диджиталізація, конвергенція, асиметрії, механізм, цифрова економіка, цифрові активи, цифрові ресурси, цифрові компетенції, цифрова нерівність, соціально-економічний розвиток, нерівність, інфраструктура, платформна економіка, інклюзія, стратифікаційна економіка, людський капітал, зайнятість.

INTRODUCTION

Digital transformations have become a defining characteristic of modern socio-economic development, significantly changing how work, production, exchange,

and social interaction are organized. In scientific discourse, these changes are often associated with the potential to expand opportunities, increase efficiency, and lower barriers to participation. At the same time, the

accumulation of empirical research shows that digitalization does not lead to an automatic equalization of socio-economic opportunities, but, on the contrary, reveals a tendency to reproduce and transform inequality. That is why digital inequality is gradually transforming from a peripheral topic into a central object of theoretical analysis. In most studies, digital inequality is described through the concept of digital divides, which capture differences in access to digital technologies, levels of digital skills, and outcomes of digital inclusion. This approach allows us to empirically outline the scale and direction of inequality but remains mainly descriptive. It focuses on outcomes without revealing the logic of their formation and therefore has limited capacity to explain the persistence of digital inequality, its internal structure, and changes in form during the process of digital transformation.

A key theoretical problem is that inequality is often conflated with stratification, even though these concepts have different analytical statuses. Inequality captures empirically observed differences between groups, while stratification describes the structural order within which these differences arise, combine, and reproduce. Stratification is not reduced to the presence of inequalities but defines the hierarchical organization of positions in socio-economic space, which makes inequalities systemic and persistent. Accordingly, digital inequality cannot be adequately understood without an analysis of digital stratification, which refers to the ordering of groups by access, use, and control of digital resources.

The digital economy significantly alters the forms in which this order manifests. It not only reproduces existing socio-economic hierarchies but also alters the mechanisms of their operation, translating inequality into more indirect forms. As digital inclusion grows, the importance of direct barriers to access decreases, while the roles of differentiated usage practices, the ability to transform digital resources into economic and social outcomes, and control over digital assets and the rules governing their functioning increase. As a result, inequality does not disappear, but is transformed, becoming less obvious but more persistent.

In this context, there is a need for an analytical approach that combines the structural explanation of hierarchies with the analysis of multidimensional manifestations of digital inequality. This is precisely what the combination of stratification economics and the Multidimensional Inequality Framework provides. Stratification economics provides a causal-structural logic that allows us to examine digital inequality through the hierarchical distribution of control over resources, rules, and benefits. The multidimensional framework, in turn, allows us to trace how these hierarchies are realized through the different abilities of groups to convert resources into opportunities and outcomes and how cumulative trajectories of constraints and advantages are formed.

THE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The analysis of digital inequality has evolved from early descriptive approaches focused on access gaps toward interpretations emphasizing structural, institutional, and positional determinants of unequal outcomes in the digital

economy [1—9]. S. Brennen and D. Kreiss conceptualized digitalization as the reorganization of social relations through digital infrastructures and practices, which shifted the analysis beyond technological determinism [9]. A key strand of the literature explains digital inequality through differentiated access, use, and outcomes [10-18]. P. DiMaggio and E. Hargittai demonstrated that, as digital technologies diffuse, inequality manifests not in binary access gaps but in socially differentiated patterns of use and returns [18; 19; 20]. Subsequent studies showed that network effects and cumulative advantages reinforce existing hierarchies in digital environments [17].

The capability-oriented perspective focuses on unequal abilities to convert resources into meaningful opportunities. T. Burchardt and R. Hick argued that inequality reflects unequal advantage shaped by social and institutional conversion processes rather than only unequal outcomes [10]. This is particularly relevant for digital inequality, where access does not ensure equal benefits. At the macro-structural level, stratification economics explains inequality as a structurally reproduced outcome of intergroup hierarchies. W. Darity emphasized the role of unequal access to assets, institutional power, and channels of wealth accumulation [12]. This perspective is applicable to digital inequality, where control over platforms, data, and algorithms determines positioning. Critical political economy approaches highlight how ownership regimes and institutional arrangements reproduce unequal development trajectories globally [22]. Research on platform economies and digital ecosystems shows that algorithmic management, contractual asymmetries, and concentration of value creation reinforce stratified participation [2; 3; 4; 6; 8; 25].

Despite significant advances, the literature remains fragmented. Studies on digital inequality document disparities but often lack a coherent explanation of their reproduction, whereas stratification economics offers a structural logic that has only recently been applied to digital contexts. This gap underpins the integration of stratification economics with a multidimensional framework to conceptualize digital inequality as a structurally conditioned and self-reinforcing outcome of global digital transformations.

THE PURPOSE OF THE ARTICLE

The aim of the article is to identify and conceptualize the mechanisms of reproduction of digital inequality in the context of global digital transformations, integrating stratification and multidimensional approaches. Such an analysis allows us to move from describing digital divides to explaining digital inequality as a structurally determined and self-sustaining phenomenon of the modern digital economy.

THE MAIN MATERIAL OF THE ARTICLE

Stratification economics emerges as an analytical toolkit for studying socio-economic inequality, in which inequality is viewed as a structurally determined and reproducible outcome of the hierarchical distribution of resources, opportunities, and outcomes across groups occupying different positions in the system of access to assets, institutional rules, and opportunities to influence

their distribution. In this perspective, inequality is understood not as a set of random disparities or individual differences, but as a function of a person's position within the structure of socio-economic relations. The analytical toolkit of stratification economics emerged at the intersection of political economy, institutional analysis, and the sociology of inequality, thereby shaping its fundamental interdisciplinary nature. This approach allows us to simultaneously consider economic mechanisms of distribution, institutional constraints, social hierarchies, and spatial asymmetries. Within this framework, socio-economic inequality is conceptualized as an intergroup phenomenon, the reproduction of which is determined by historically entrenched differences in access to assets, in resource accumulation, and in the ability to influence the rules governing their distribution.

Within the framework of the combination of stratification economics and the Multidimensional Inequality Framework, the isolation of the mechanisms of reproduction of digital inequality becomes of fundamental importance, since it is the mechanisms that allow us to move from describing empirical gaps to explaining why hierarchies in the digitally mediated socioeconomic space do not disappear with the expansion of digital inclusion, but are transformed and reproduced. In this approach, the mechanism is understood as a set of interconnected processes through which the unequal distribution of positions is transformed into systematic differences in access, usage practices, and outcomes, and is also entrenched in time, space, and intergenerationally. The multidimensional framework for the analysis of inequality clarifies the mechanisms through the logic of converting resources into opportunities and outcomes: equal formal resources do not guarantee equal opportunities, since groups differ in their ability to convert resources into real-life chances depending on social, institutional, and spatial conditions (conversion factors). This is where the analytical bridge between the mechanisms of digital stratification and the traps of opportunity arises, capturing the accumulation of constraints, achievements, and privileges.

The first block of mechanisms concerns the infrastructure level and explains the inequality of access. The stratification logic here lies in the institutional structuring of access: digital infrastructure is not distributed evenly but rather along a trajectory determined by investment regimes, tariff policies, privatization models, state support priorities, and the spatial logic of return on investment. Because of this, access becomes not only a technical but also a positional characteristic: some groups have stable, fast, and secure access, while others have low-quality, unstable, or high-transaction-cost connections. Within a multidimensional framework, this means different starting opportunities, which are subsequently translated into varied educational, labor, and financial outcomes. It is at this level that the trap of cumulative disadvantages (corrosive disadvantages) is triggered: insufficient quality of access or its insecurity reduces the likelihood of accumulating digital competencies, limits access to online education, complicates the use of financial and government services, and therefore forms a chain of restrictions that extends to the following dimensions.

The second block of mechanisms operates at the functional level and explains the inequality in skills and usage practices. The key mechanism here is socially conditioned differentiation of digital competences: skills and practices are not neutral; they are shaped by unequal access to quality education, differences in professional environments, varying time and resources available for learning, and cultural and institutional barriers. The multidimensional framework of inequality analysis allows us to show that it is at this level that the mechanism of differentiated conversion operates, even with access; groups differ in their ability to transform digital tools into real opportunities for learning, employment, and social participation. Under favorable conditions, this mechanism forms zones of cumulative achievement (fertile capabilities): digital competences strengthen educational and professional trajectories, open up opportunities for the productive use of technologies, and expand access to networks and contacts, which further strengthen advantages in subsequent domains.

The third block of mechanisms describes the effective level and explains the inequality of digital inclusion outcomes. Within the stratification economy, this is primarily a mechanism for the concentration of digital assets and monetization channels: the benefits of digitalization accumulate disproportionately where there is control over platforms, data, advertising, intellectual property, financial flows, access to markets, and standards. Digital inclusion in this logic becomes unequal in terms of returns: one group receives significant economic and social benefits, while the other experiences minimal or unstable effects. Within a multidimensional framework, this reflects vertical hierarchies of opportunities, that is, inequality not only between groups but also in terms of the level of concentration of opportunities and influence. It is this mechanism that is the core of the spawning privileges trap: the excessive concentration of digital opportunities in some actors turns into the ability to set the rules of access and monetization for others, thereby making privileges a structural condition of others' restrictions.

The fourth block of mechanisms concerns the level of work and explains the inequality of work positions in digitally mediated work. The central one is the mechanism of algorithmic management and employment segmentation: digital platforms and work management systems can increase control, standardize workers' behavior, shift risks to the individual, and shape unequal access to orders, bonuses, and protections. In the context of a stratified economy, this means the institutionalization of unequal positions in the distribution of risks and benefits, with some groups occupying management, design, and control positions, while others occupy execution positions with lower levels of autonomy and protection. In a multidimensional framework, this mechanism is important because it creates a transfer of constraints between domains: precarious digital employment affects financial security, housing conditions, learning opportunities, and social participation, i.e., reinforces the trap of cumulative constraints.

The fifth block of mechanisms is spatial and explains global digital inequality. The key mechanism here is the uneven inclusion of countries and regions in the global

digital economy: centers of control, investment, standards development, platform ownership, and data are concentrated in certain territories, while other territories are included mainly as markets, labor suppliers, or data sources. Stratification economics emphasizes that space is not a neutral background, but a way of institutionally entrenching hierarchies: international regulatory regimes, financial flows, tax jurisdictions, and the logic of value chains shape the asymmetric distribution of benefits. In a multidimensional framework, this mechanism is important because it determines distinct sets of opportunities and varying conversion conditions for groups residing in different regions. Consequently, spatial differences become a multiplier of the traps of cumulative constraints and the generation of privilege.

The sixth block of mechanisms is intergenerational in nature and explains the long-term persistence of digital inequality. It is a mechanism of intergenerational consolidation of digital advantages: access to quality education, digital resources, cultural capital, network connections, and stable incomes creates unequal starting positions for subsequent generations. As a result, digital inequality ceases to be merely a current difference between groups and becomes a trajectory that is reproduced over time. The multidimensional framework of inequality analysis allows us to show that cumulative effects arise: advantages in one domain reinforce advantages in others, forming stable zones of cumulative achievement for some groups and stable traps of cumulative limitation for others.

CONCLUSIONS

The mechanisms identified within the stratification economy can be interpreted as mechanisms for the formation and reproduction of hierarchical positions in digital space. Meanwhile, the mechanisms refined by the multidimensional framework of inequality analysis describe how these positions are transformed into cumulative trajectories of opportunities and outcomes. In combination, they allow not only to name the mechanisms by level (infrastructural, functional, performance, labor, spatial, intergenerational), but also to analytically show their integrated effect through opportunity traps: the trap of cumulative limitations arises as a result of the mutual reinforcement of institutional differentiation of access, socially selective formation of digital competencies, segmentation of digital labor and limited access to monetization channels; zones of cumulative achievements are formed where quality access, productive practices and favorable working conditions provide a multiplicative effect of converting digital inclusion into outcomes; The trap of privilege generation arises where the concentration of control over digital assets, standards, and platforms translates into structural power to shape the rules and trajectories of development for other groups and territories. It is this integrated logic that creates a theoretically sound basis for analyzing digital inequality as a systemic phenomenon of global digital transformations.

Stratification economics provides the causal and structural logic of this approach, enabling us to link multidimensional manifestations of digital inequality to the hierarchical distribution of control over digital resources, the institutional rules governing their use, and the channels

for the appropriation of benefits. Digital technologies in this perspective are not a neutral means of modernization, but an element of the institutional configuration through which positional advantages are consolidated, risks are distributed and the boundaries of participation in digitally mediated processes are determined. That is why digital inequality appears as a structural characteristic of modern socio-economic development in the context of digital transformations, rather than a side effect of digitalization or a temporary disproportion during the transition period.

The multidimensional framework for analyzing inequality, in turn, provides a way to analytically demonstrate how the operation of digital stratification mechanisms translates into stable trajectories of inequality across different spheres of life. Its fundamental contribution is that it captures not only the limitations of opportunities, but also the excessive concentration of opportunities and influence, that is, it allows us to simultaneously analyze the narrowing of life chances for some groups and the reproduction of positional advantages for others. In the proposed logic, this takes the form of opportunity traps, which are an analytical generalization of the cumulative action of digital stratification mechanisms.

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