

## **Gypsy-Traveler communities in the UK and the Netherlands: socially and digitally excluded?**

### **Digital exclusion: a new chapter in the exclusion of Gypsy-Travelers**

Gypsy-travelers face social exclusion in all European societies in which they find themselves, although the way in which this happens can differ according to different policy frameworks. Digital communications represents one more potential field of exclusion - but they also offer new possibilities for empowerment. Here we will explore the experiences and strategies of digital inclusion among Gypsy-Travelers in the UK and the Netherlands with contrasting experiences of settlement and integration.

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

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 (author removed Philip et al., 2015). These are often the places where Gypsy-Travelers 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-Travelers in the UK make them especially vulnerable in this respect, although Gypsy-Travelers in the Netherlands are marginalized in other ways as we shall argue.

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 Travelers can live and what sort of broadband infrastructure they can access. (Author removed; Blanks Hindman, 2000; LaRose et al., 2007; author removed; Yates et al., 2015; Gilbert, 2010; Olphert and Damodaran, 2013).

The digital divide debate is particularly relevant for Gypsy-Traveler 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-Travelers provide a unique case for exploring the widespread assumption that digital engagement can alleviate issues of marginalisation and social exclusion.

This paper 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. Secondly, we explore how different policy frameworks in the Netherlands and the UK shape these possibilities. Thirdly, we document the forms of inclusion that Gypsy-Travelers 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-Travelers use digital communications to recreate their own cultures 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 marginalized groups, such as Gypsy-Travelers 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) theorization 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-Travelers 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-Travelers with long-standing cultures (Urry 2007, Castells 2001).

Disadvantages commonly found in Gypsy-Travelers groups include literacy levels typically lower than 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-Travelers 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-Travelers are dealing with.

The ubiquity of digital communications arguably present 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-Travelers 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-Travelers.

So far little research has explored this empowerment potential for Gypsy-Travelers in detail, but results are surprising. For example, Marcelo Frediani conducting ethnographic work between 2007 and 2009 found that Gypsy-Traveler 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” (Frediani, 2011, p268). This suggests that Gypsy-Travelers are engaging in new ways, and that this engagement has the potential to strengthen social inclusion. An understanding of this potential is spreading amongst 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-Travelers and to use digital tools for engagement more broadly with this group. Notable projects have included the ELAMP project providing e-tools for mobile learning (D’Arcy 2012); ‘SavvyChavvy’ social media network for young Gypsy-Travelers<sup>1</sup>; and the Friends, Family and Travelers ‘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 (Author removed 2016a). Further, 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.

Whilst 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;

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<sup>1</sup> <http://savvychavvy.ning.com>

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). Further, in the case of Gypsy-Travelers, 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 paper 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-Travelers 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 UK**

The Netherlands and the UK represent two different approaches to the inclusion and exclusion of Gypsy-Travelers which have important implications for their digital presence. Yet in both societies these communities are stigmatized. 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 itinerant 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' as against settled or sedentary people (Sibley, 1995; author removed). 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-Travelers would reside on designated sites and restrictive planning measures were used to 'sedentarise' them.

The Dutch state has also pursued a broader ideal to 'civilize' maladjusted people in its society, the so-called 'Civilizing Offensive' (*Beschavingsoffensief*). This Civilizing 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;author removed). The core principle behind the offensive is to 'civilize' the poor, the socially excluded, and the 'misfits', and eventually assimilate subcultures so as to ensure their integration. Although not aimed at Gypsy-Travelers specifically, the Gypsy-Travelers 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 Civilizing 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-Travelers in the Netherlands are now largely sedentarised but in specific settlements. The strong opposition of the state to their life-styles resulted in the Gypsy-Travelers sensing 'a loss of culture'. Furthermore, and as an outcome of nearly a century of institutionalised exclusion, governments and institutions are regarded as untrustworthy and in the eyes of the Gypsy-Traveler any governmental intervention should be avoided. 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 UK, travelling communities predominantly fall into a number of broad populations, including Roma (typically migrants from European accession countries), Romany English Gypsies, Irish Travelers, Scottish Travelers and Welsh Kale Gypsies as well as non-ethnic communities such

as “showmen” (fairground proprietors and their families) and more recently New Age Travelers (Brown and Scullion 2010; Richardson and Ryder 2012). Legally, ‘Gypsies’, ‘Scottish Gypsies’ and ‘Irish Travelers’ have been officially recognised as ethnic minorities under the Race Relations Act 1976 (Richardson and Ryder 2012). Gypsy-Traveler communities in the UK have arguably maintained a nomadic way of life more successfully than those based in other countries (Brown and Scullion, 2010, Author removed). Gypsy-Travelers have historically been, and remain, on the edges of society, suffering ongoing discrimination and social exclusion (Shubin and Swanson, 2010) going back to the 16<sup>th</sup> 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). UK-based Gypsy-Travelers 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-Traveler peoples have ‘too often sought to assimilate and eradicate the identity and unique lifestyle of Gypsies and Travelers’ (Lord Avebury, 2012, p. vii), 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-Travelers have resisted fiercely in an attempt to preserve their cultural identities and ways of life.

These negative values are reproduced by an assumption amongst welfare professionals of a need to impose civilizing processes whilst at the same time dismissing the importance of Traveler’s own cultural values (Powell, 2011), a less structured parallel to the *civilizing offensive* (or *het Beschavingsoffensief*) seen in the Netherlands (Powell 2013b). Social welfare organizations can at once empower and hinder Gypsy-Traveler groups, evidenced in the ethnographic work of Vanderbeck (2009) who found such organizations 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-Travelers, though sporadic (Powell 2013a) has typically focused on those still travelling - sedentarised Travelers 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 and Smith and Greenfields 2013). Yet the distinction between sedentarised and itinerant Travelers is important in terms of digital access, as we shall show.

Although UK Gypsy-Travelers 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 UK-based Gypsy-Travelers, 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-Travelers 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 UK comes at the cost of community and family well-being, with implications for healthcare, schooling and social welfare.

In the UK, and similar to the Netherlands, Gypsy-Traveler 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 (Author removed). These exchanges represent one aspect within which settled society and Gypsy-Travelers have historically interacted. Yet Gypsy-Travelers in the UK 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 (Valentine and McDonald, 2004; Powell, 2008). As suggested by Sibley, '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' (Sibley 1995, p220). 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-Traveler 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 UK, 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-Travelers. This paper seeks to explore both the ways in which digital communications can both exclude and empower Gypsy-Traveler communities in the UK and Netherlands.

By comparing the UK and the Netherlands we can better understand the differences between settled and mobile communities, the role of transnational as well as nationally-located communications, 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 UK, partnerships were formed with gatekeepers who were able to provide access to Gypsy-Traveler 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-Traveler communities. In the Netherlands the fieldwork was carried out in the towns of Emmen, Buitenpost, Opende, and Dommelen using material from Gypsy-Travelers, Gypsy-Traveler liaison officers, and a fieldwork diary. In the UK, interviews were carried out with Gypsy-Travelers in Aberdeenshire, Scotland and with Gypsy-Traveler liaison officers. Researchers also attended a community event run for Gypsy-Travelers at the London Gypsy-Traveler Unit (LGTU).

Research with marginalised groups is fraught with difficulty, largely in terms of issues relating to trust - suspicion is commonplace amongst groups that are familiar with oppression, such as Gypsy-Travelers (Brown and Scullion, 2010). Gypsy-Travelers are generally reluctant to open up to members of 'the settled society' (Sibley 1995; Powell 2013a), so researchers need to find an appropriate way to approach the groups. In this project Gypsy-Traveler liaison officers working with the support agencies acted as gate-keepers. In the UK the advantages were two-fold: firstly the gate-keeper introduced the researcher, helping to diminish feelings of distrust. Secondly, the gate-keeper had up-to-date information as to where the Travelers could be found (many sites in the UK and particularly in Scotland are unauthorised, temporary sites).

Nevertheless, the UK-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-Travelers 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 Traveler sites to gain access. However, it proved essential to

understand the culture and everyday life of Gypsy-Travelers 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 vs. fixed; transient vs. settled**

Our UK findings show that Gypsy-Travelers are able to access the Internet, although largely this is not through fixed broadband infrastructures. In the UK, fixed Internet connectivity is not a viable option for the simple reason that most Gypsy-Traveler 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-Travelers 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-Travelers 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 in to 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-Traveler 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-Travelers in our sample are in possession of multiple devices, problems with 3G and 4G signals are common, not least because Gypsy-Travelers typically encamp in rural areas, which are shown to suffer from poor 3G and 4G signals in relation to urban areas (author removed): '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-Travelers 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 UK, 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-Travelers 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-Travelers 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-Travelers reside on designated sites which have access to utilities and fixed broadband. Paradoxically, the Civilizing 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 (NL) even have access to fiber optic broadband, because the municipality actively promoted the inclusion of Gypsy-Traveler sites in the plans of commercial telecommunications companies, although originally the sites were not part of the rollout plan

(Fieldwork in Emmen;author removed). A more problematic aspect of digital inclusion is getting the contract with an Internet provider. According to the professionals we interviewed, Gypsy-Travelers 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 Traveler woman in Emmen, Gypsy-Traveler sites have 'contaminated postcodes'.

Although Gypsy-Travelers in the Netherlands are sedentarised, they still travel a lot on a daily basis from their sedentary locations. Many of the Gypsy-Travelers run (small) businesses (MOVISIE, 2013;Author removed) and for their business activities they have to be mobile. In Emmen, the Netherlands-based researcher met with Travelers who traded second-hand 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 (the men are usually those who still 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, also for Gypsy-Travelers, but acquiring access and actually using the Internet is frustrated by financial constraints on the side of Gypsy-Travelers, and discriminating policies on the side of telecommunications companies. Local governments argue that Gypsy-Travelers 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 UK 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-Travelers in the UK are using the Internet for a number of purposes. Facebook is the most highly mentioned application of the Internet used, but Gypsy-Travelers 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-Travelers 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-Travelers still participate in largely informal economies, often on a 'cash in hand' or self-employed basis (Author removed). 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-Travelers 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 UK, many Gypsy-Travelers in the Netherlands own a variety of digital devices such as laptops, tablet pc's, 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 Traveler 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-Travelers 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-Travelers in the UK. 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 amongst Gypsy-Travelers 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 –author removed). Additionally, 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’. Further, 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 UK more widely (Frediani 2011), these have not reached the Gypsy-Travelers 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-Travelers.

Despite these challenges, Gypsy-Travelers are resourceful problem solvers, and many have used the positives of digital access to overcome these problems. Within the network of the Gypsy-Travelers’ extended family, digitally less literate people have access to many proxy users, i.e. people who can assist in using digital applications. In practice, this is often the ‘tech-savvy’ nephew, as a Traveler 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-Travelers 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-Travelers and impact upon social, educational and economic inclusion. But to what extent does this inclusion apply to society more broadly? Gypsy-Travelers 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 amongst gypsies compared with primary school attendance - Gypsy-Traveler 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-Travelers: 'Oh it's just for Travelers. I wouldn't have any non-Traveler folk on there!'. A look at Gypsy-Traveler groups in Facebook supports this sentiment - most are set to “closed” and often warn 'This group is only for Gypsies and Travelers'. Socially,

then, in the UK Gypsy-Travelers seem keen to restrict interactions online to other Gypsy-Travelers - inclusion is desired only amongst one's own people. Economic activity is a different story.

In both the UK and the Netherlands several respondents spoke about the usefulness of sites such as Freeads (UK), *Marktplaats* (NL) and Ebay (both UK and NL) 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-Travelers 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 Gypsy-Traveler can be met with discrimination by members from settled society and reluctance to buy products or goods. Offline distrust between settled society and Gypsy-Travelers resonates online.

## **Conclusions**

The overall conclusion is that although Gypsy-Travelers 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-Travelers 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 oppositions, 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-Travelers are finding ways to engage with, and exploit the tools of digital technologies. For example, it seems that Gypsy-Travelers 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-Travelers 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-Travelers use digital communications to both integrate with mainstream society but also to recreate their own culture and forms of solidarity.

The contrast between the policy frameworks in the UK and the Netherlands illustrates how inclusion and exclusion can take different forms. In the UK, where Gypsy-Traveler 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 on the other hand, 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 Pearce and Rice 2013; Napoli and Obar 2014). Nonetheless, UK-based Gypsy-Travelers 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. What is more, our findings hint at the potential for digital participation to exacerbate exclusion by opening up new channels of discrimination towards Gypsy-Travelers 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-Traveler activity. This should act as a caution that digital inclusion is not a panacea for social exclusion (see also Author removed) despite the promises of the last decade that digital inclusion will provide a fix for problems of social exclusion research suggests that the intersections are more complex.

This paper 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-Travelers manage to use digital communications to maintain their own cultures and lifestyles.

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