Anticipating digital skills policy outcomes: a pseudo-panel evaluation of outreach initiatives in Italy

Abstract

Over the 25-year debate on digital inequalities, scholars and policymakers have long identified social stakeholders whose activity can be leveraged upon to reach marginalized citizens. Particular emphasis has been placed on "outreach initiatives", where such organizations proactively go beyond their traditional perimeter of action.

However, few studies have attempted to quantitatively evaluate the impact of this approach. My research fills this gap, employing both a static and a dynamic analysis of a pseudo-panel dataset relating to Italy, a country that is experimenting different policy interventions to boost basic digital skills.

I aggregate data from a repeated cross-sectional survey investigating aspects of daily life and online activities carried out by a representative sample of more than 40,000 individuals every year, and I proxy “outreach” through the number of public events promoted to spread digital literacy and the culture of coding (the EU Code Week).

The static model highlights that the structural reduction of digital inequality requires action on systemic variables: employment, broadband take-up, human capital, social participation, density of social networks. The dynamic model, on the other hand, shows that outreach initiatives – together with library activism – can create positive fluctuations around the trend, but reach a plateau.

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