Beyond the Cable: 'The embrace of co-designed, plural futures'

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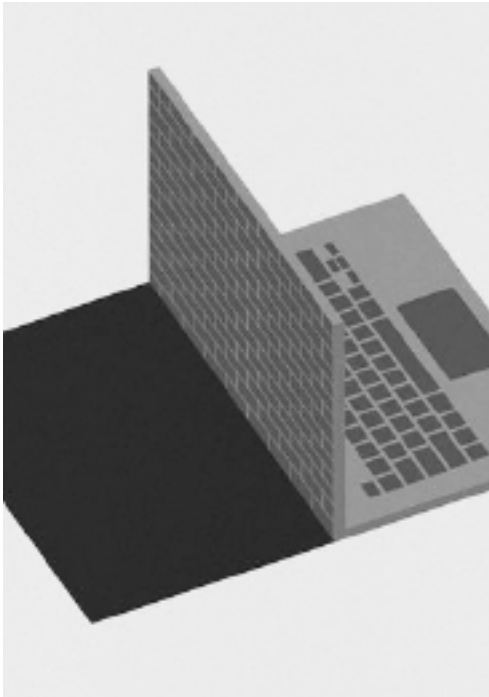

Figure 6.3 Remember what it means to be digitally literate today, may change tomorrow Source: ITCILO (2021) reproduced with permission

Digital inclusion is often reduced to the task of connecting the unconnected — as if access to devices, networks, and bandwidth alone could bridge a divide. This narrow, tech-centric perspective reflects a form of linear technological determinism that overlooks the intricate, context-specific realities experienced by billions worldwide. Defining inclusion merely in terms of infrastructure and digital tools misses the deeper, human dimensions that give technology its significance. In many regions, fostering inclusion means more than enabling connectivity; it requires addressing entrenched layers of exclusion, historical trauma, and systemic marginalization — challenges that technology by itself cannot resolve.

This is why we must stretch the boundaries of our imagination and craft new narratives grounded in *simplexity* — the ability to engage with complexity without flattening it. True digital inclusion cannot emerge from one-size-fits-all solutions dropped into communities whose lived experiences, languages, and local histories diverge significantly from those of the designers. Rather than framing inclusion as a matter of technical fit or market reach, we need to reconceive it as a cultural, political, and ecological endeavour — one that resists the urge to abstract human experience into reductive categories like 'user needs'. Embracing complexity is not a barrier to progress; it is the path to just, and context-sensitive inclusion.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1923) once remarked, 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'. This sentiment resonates deeply with the current limitations of the digital inclusion discourse — a space often saturated with confident proclamations, yet lacking the nuance to capture its full human complexity. It was from this recognition that *Posterheroes 2021* emerged: a global visual storytelling initiative inviting artists to reimagine what digital inclusion could mean across diverse contexts (ITCILO, 2021). One of these images is reproduced here. Rejecting the clichéd imagery of glowing screens and orbiting satellites, these artists offered quieter, more grounded visions — scenes of interdependence, resilience, and everyday struggle. Their work stands as a visual counter-narrative to techno-solutionist aesthetics, reminding us that genuine inclusion is not something imposed upon communities, but should be co-created with them, rooted in their stories, textures, and aspirations.

The call, then, is to move beyond inclusion as mere access toward inclusion as *transformation* — a redefinition that gestures toward a truly radical inclusion. This vision demands co-designing for the *pluriverse* — a world where multiple ways of being and knowing coexist. In such a world, digital tools are not delivered as symbols of progress, but cultivated as instruments of solidarity, storytelling, and survival. It means elevating disabled voices, indigenous epistemologies, gendered experiences, and informal economies — not as peripheral exceptions, but as essential sources of wisdom. It also requires humility: recognizing that inclusion may sometimes mean safeguarding the right to remain disconnected, autonomous, and unseen.

By embracing this stance, we resist the ongoing privatization and control of the digital commons by corporate and geopolitical powers, and instead reclaim it as a space for shared creativity, care, and collective becoming. Here, inclusion becomes a verb — a practice, not a performance. It is enacted through deep listening, critical reflexivity, and a commitment to designing as if people — not platforms — truly matter.