On the Margins of the “Information Society”:
A Comparative Study of Mediation

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Visions of a globalized economy and an information society propelled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly being pursued and negotiated at the global and local levels involving governmental organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and private-sector organizations. These visions focus on the potential of information, knowledge, and networking for transforming society (Lyon, 1995; Webster, 1995). Increasingly, an understanding is dawning that the processes of globalization also produce marginalizing effects. This realization is reflected in the notion of the digital divide and the various debates it has generated in international and national forums (Norris, 2001; UNDP, 1999).

Frank Webster, a key writer on the information society, argues that globalization is accompanied by rising inequality and chronic insecurity in many parts of the world (Webster, 1995). Writers like Ulric Beck and Castells have emphasized that globalization and marginalization are interconnected dialectical processes (Beck, 2000; Castells, 1998; Levitas, 2000). Even in a small country like Norway, the Research Council of Norway has announced a research program on globalization and marginality (NFR, 1998). Despite the spectacular development of ICTs and growing sense of connectedness felt by many in the developed and developing world, it is evident that the gains from participation in global economic activity are by no means evenly distributed (Castells, 1998; Wresch, 1996; Van Dijk, 2000).

While much has been written about marginalization as a structural phenomenon, there is little understanding of how the dynamics of marginalization unfold at the micro level in urban contexts. We seek to understand these micro-level marginalization processes via a comparative study of Bangalore, India, and Ronneby, Sweden. Our analysis highlights the important role that “mediators” such as governmental agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and international agencies play in ensuring the success of initiatives launched by national governments and international agencies for drawing disadvantaged groups into the information society.

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of computing-related workplaces and integrating marginalized groups. But how these visions are played out in practice differ substantially: micro-level analysis reveals divergent tendencies on issues related to marginalization. We try to understand why the translation of similar macro visions into specific programs is different in the two contexts. Our analysis emphasizes the critical role of the process of mediation between government bodies initiating the vision of the information society and the groups and organizations (citizen groups, government organizations, and NGOs) toward which change is directed. We analyze the dynamics of these change processes and the role of mediation in shaping them.

In the next section, we outline our research approach. It is followed by a theoretical discussion on governance, marginalization, and mediation. We then provide details of the two case studies, followed by an analysis of the cases with a focus on mediation. Finally, some conclusions are presented.

**METHODOLOGY**

The authors did empirical work in Bangalore and Ronneby independently without prior intention of doing a comparative study. We therefore first describe the methodologies that were used independently in two separate studies and then discuss how the analytical framework was developed via joint discussions.

**Bangalore**

Since 1998 Madon and Sahay have been engaged in a study of information flows to support local governance in Bangalore. The primary objective of this project is to understand information flows as intrinsic elements of exchange between the providers and consumers of basic services as they combine to form a network of stakeholders involved in city governance (Madon & Sahay, 2000). In the process of our field research, we have conducted more than 100 interviews over a period of 2 years with various stakeholder groups including a wide range of governmental agencies, especially those that deal with the provision of civic amenities in the city in general and also those that focus on slum dwellers in particular. An important focus of this fieldwork has been Jana Sahayog, an NGO fighting for the rights of slum dwellers in the city (Madon & Sahay, 2002). Ten interviews were conducted with members of this organization over a 3-year period, including its director, people responsible for specific information initiatives it has launched, and slum dwellers, to elicit their views on the developments taking place within the city. Data from secondary sources, ranging from government reports and media briefings to informal sources such as wall posters and audiotapes, were also collected and analyzed.

**Ronneby**

Since 1996 Beck has been engaged in a study of the efforts of the Swedish municipality of Ronneby to turn the small town and its surrounding area into an “IT [information technology] society” (Beck, 1997, 2002). To examine effects on people who might be impacted by the initiative without being initiators of it, part of the study was conducted in one of the municipal services, the Home Help Service of the Social and Health Services. The Home Help Service is a municipal service offering assistance at the homes of elderly, disabled, and fragile citizens at subsidized prices. Following interviews with supervisors and managers, repeated rounds of “participatory observation” were conducted with a group of home help workers (home helpers). The fieldwork consists of about 25–30 interviews with managerial staff, observation of 1 training day for municipal employees, and about 30 days of participatory observation of home helpers over 10 field trips during 1996–2001. Interviews were audio taped when permission was given; otherwise, field notes were used. Field notes from participatory observations were written up the same day or during the course of the next few days and topics were brought back for further discussion among informants. Secondary data sources included policy documents, material directed at the public (such as booklets, advertisements about the project), newspaper clippings, and discussions with local researchers.

**Juxtaposing Ronneby and Bangalore**

Towards the end of the two studies just discussed, the idea for this comparative analysis developed, as two of the three authors were located in the same institution and they became aware of each others’ work. Our discussions showed that in both cases there was substantial distance between officially stated objectives of creating inclusive (i.e., equal opportunity) “information societies” and the realities of the marginalization of a section of the population. While informally sharing insights from our fieldwork we started discovering compelling parallels in our findings. These in turn aided us in developing fresh insights into our respective cases. In particular, two realizations crystallized as key movers of our comparative study.

One, the understanding that conditions of inclusion and marginalization could not be treated as an “either–or” state. Both inclusion and marginalization were complex states, continuously contested and negotiated, and thus always changing. Sometimes affected people were themselves exercising their agency in different ways to contest exclusion. It was thus important to analytically view marginalization
not as an end result or a static state but as a situated process that was continuously unfolding. While the detailed manner by which this process of negotiation and contest played out differed due to the contingencies within each setting, we sought to understand what would account for similarities and differences, particularly in outcomes.

Two, for both cases, we saw the important role of what we came to understand as "mediators": people who were engaging in attempts at changing or altering the impact of the marginalization. In the Bangalore case, the mediator group (between the municipal agency and the slum dwellers) was the NGO Jana Sahayog. In Ronneby, the mediator was the Home Help Service, whose workers were attempting to provide high-quality services to the elderly. Even though these mediating groups occupied different positions (non-governmental and governmental), with respect to the different municipalities, their aims were similar: to try to improve the marginalized position of excluded groups in the emerging information society.

While the specific contexts and processes vary quite significantly in the two cases, these two parallels provided us with a rich basis for a comparative analysis. Before presenting the cases in more detail, in the next section, we develop our theoretical understanding by examining the literature on exclusion, marginality, and ICTs.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION, MARGINALIZATION, AND ICTs: A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

National governments, regional organizations like the European Union (EU), and other international organizations like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have launched numerous research and policy initiatives in cities. These have centered on how processes of urban governance need to respond to influences of global economic activity and the changing social and political organization of cities (Amin & Graham, 1997). A major focus of these initiatives has been the inclusion of a range of alternative institutions, such as community-based organizations (CBOs), NGOs, and small and medium enterprises into urban governance processes. Another important focus of these initiatives has been to introduce “best practices” and ICT-enabled modern management techniques into urban governance processes.

These efforts have resulted in initiatives to disperse routine governmental information, facilitate interactions with citizens, conduct transactions, and enable citizens to more actively participate in urban governance processes. Efforts to disperse routine information have typically employed web sites to make information available to citizens (Norris, 2001). A good example is the system developed by Andhra Pradesh, a state in India, for the payment of bills and other transactions. The “e-seva” scheme is administered through information kiosks where representatives from different government departments (such as telephones, electricity, and land registration) sit under the same roof and share a common ICT platform to perform various transactions (like payment of a bill or issuing of a death certificate). While in India and other developing countries these e-services are relatively new, in the developed world they are routinely available services. However, successful examples of citizens’ participation in governance are still relatively limited in both the developed and developing world, and e-democracy applications still remain largely an unrealized utopia (Ranerup, 1999; Cornford & Naylor, 1999). In general, examples of successful and effective use of e-enabled urban governance services are relatively fewer than suggested by e-democracy rhetoric (Robins, 1999). Despite the increasing push for reforms in urban governance, writers argue that many social groups remain excluded for a variety of reasons (Sassen, 1994; Robins, 1999).

The original French usage of the term social exclusion, defined as a “rupture of the social fabric,” was deeply rooted in the tradition of solidarity in which the state played a major role in integrating the citizen into the state (Burchardt et al., 1999). Since the 1980s, the concept has gained popularity in other European countries with regard to various types of social disadvantage in employment, education, housing, health, and social networks (Sen, 2000). While this debate on deprivation has mostly taken place in developed countries, it closely mirrors the debate on poverty in developing countries (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997; Byrne, 1999; Clert, 1999). In both cases, the focus is on assessing the problems of systematic and multiple deprivations, including the various psychosocial factors involved.

Social exclusion is therefore a complex and multifaceted condition that must be recognized as a long-standing social problem. It takes us beyond a mere description of deprivation or measurement of different aspects of deprivation and focuses attention on what Sen (2000) calls the “relational roots of deprivation.” While the literature on social exclusion has importantly focused on understanding the “conditions” of certain segments of society in relation to various welfare services, less has been done to explain the “processes” through which these conditions are created, sustained, and redefined over time. An understanding of the conditions needs to be more effectively integrated with an understanding of the processes leading to exclusion. The literature on marginality partly overlaps with social exclusion but offers a different slant for exploration of processes through which communities and individuals become marginalized.

Germani (1980) argues that who is designated as “marginal” depends on historical and cultural expectations of self and others. He emphasizes the complexity and heavy context-dependent nature of marginality (and dominance) and how, as these conditions are reproduced,
they become structural. Germani posits that for the term *marginality* to apply, those affected must see themselves as deficient in participation in multiple domains of socioeconomic and political activity. Building on Germani’s ideas, Svedberg (1995) describes four main views of marginality: in the literature as cultural split, as a (personal) social—psychological dilemma, as sociocultural isolation, and as partial socioeconomic participation.

In Svedberg’s own analysis marginality has a focus on states “between” “anchored” and “outcast” (see Figure 1). Being marginal is considered to be a volatile position that implies the possibility of moving closer to one of the extremes along a continuum at any point in time. From a marginal position, someone can become anchored in socioeconomic activity, for example, through securing and retaining regular work; become outcast by losing all or most avenues for sustaining life through legal means; or remain marginal by being economically active for a short or long period (Svedberg, 1995). Thus Germani and Svedberg conceptualize marginality such that important relations between structure and change become evident. Change is not only possible but also probable through the actions of the various people affected by the process and implicated in the relation. However, change may not affect the marginal position as such, or it may lead to either a more outcast or a more anchored position. It follows then that we should use marginalization as an analytic concept—behind which the reality will vary according to the context under investigation. Someone described as marginalized in one respect may or may not be so in other respects, or at some other point in time.

Many writers have argued that what is important in determining inclusion and exclusion in the information society is connections in networks of information. For example, Castells (1998, 2000) highlights the importance of global flows and networks of information in spurring globalization and defining societal relations across and within nations. He and others argue that the inclusion of people, societies, and nations in the new economy lies in their ability to link up with these information processes and compete in a global context (Phipps, 2000; Preston, 2001). A range of EU and other initiatives aim to make new technologies and services publicly available to tackle, reduce, and prevent social exclusion along various important dimensions in terms of connection, awareness, and involvement (DFID, 1999). A key argument made by writers on the information society and exclusion is that ICTs are not inherently a cause of exclusion, but lack of access to the means of communication increasingly used by the rest of society has the potential to systematically worsen the relative position of excluded individuals and groups. The problem is well illustrated in the case of homeless people who find it difficult to get work precisely because they lack an address (Silverstone & Haddon, 1998). Nowadays contact via basic telephones and more recently mobile telephony and the Internet has increasingly become indispensable.

While writers have emphasized the need to build “informational networks” to combat marginalization, less has been written about how this can be done in practice and the underlying challenges that exist. For various reasons, including those relating to history, geography, economy, education, and demography, these marginalized groups are extremely limited in their capacity to build and become part of these informational networks. “Mediators” such as governmental agencies, NGOs, and international agencies could play an important role in the development and institutionalization of these networks. The idea of mediation is not new and has been discussed in various contexts such as development (Amin, 1985), local appropriation of capital in a globalized economy (Appadurai, 1990), public—private partnerships for service provision, and advocacy work for the rights of marginalized communities (Edwards & Hulme, 1992, 1995). However, in the context of ICT-enabled mediation, the challenges are quite different (and also magnified) as it involves additional questions of access and the capability to use and institutionalize these technologies. In this article, we explore the potential roles of mediators in the context of marginalization in two different settings of Rome and Bangalore. Our comparative analysis with a focus on these mediating roles helps to examine different approaches to mediation, and analyze how they relate to the context and process of change.

**Mediation in a Process Model of Marginality**

Our theoretical analysis takes as its starting point Svedberg’s analysis of marginality to develop a perspective on the dynamics of exclusion processes. However, as his analysis applies to individuals it is limited in explaining the dynamics of marginalization of groups and communities. Our focus on groups and communities requires deeper analysis of the changing structural conditions at the global and local level within which marginalization processes are continuously shaped. We argue that processes of mediation provide the potential to alter some of these structural conditions, and thereby influence marginalization processes. Our analytical approach explores degrees to which human agency and sociopolitical processes can shape the way in which information infrastructure within cities are developed and applied to deal with the issue of marginalization.
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FIG. 2. Mediation and processes of marginalization.

Drawing on the preceding literature review, our theoretical approach rests on the following key assumptions:

- Social exclusion is relational in nature, and thus is a process.
- Exclusion is contingent on social relations and institutions of society.
- Marginalized people have the potential to act.
- Mediating institutions can play a potential role in leveraging action.
- Rather than being fully included or excluded, marginalized groups may occupy an in between position with the potential of movement in either direction.

Figure 2 illustrates how our model relates mediation to processes of inclusion–marginality–exclusion. In Figure 2 the agency of the marginalized group is represented by arrows akin to those in Svedberg’s model (the arrows indicate the movement of the marginalized person or group). It is further emphasized by the representation of the marginalized group as a person. The figure depicts the effects of actions of a mediating organization that facilitates the movement of the marginalized groups toward an anchored position (i.e., toward becoming socially included). The strong arrow from “marginal” to “anchored” indicates this movement. The dotted arrow toward a more outcast position indicates that there is no automatic movement toward greater anchoring, but this is now a relatively smaller arrow, a less likely possibility.

Figure 2 depicts a situation in which a mediating organization is successful in supporting a marginal group. As the strength of the arrows indicates a likelihood of change, a situation with a less than successful mediation would be depicted in the model by similar arrows in both directions. The arrows would be reversed to depict a “mediating” organization that hampers inclusion by making anchoring harder (Svedberg [1995] discusses such a situation).

Marginality, then, depends on the actions of multiple parties: those who are marginalized; those who willingly or unwillingly erect or strengthen the boundaries surrounding the dominant culture; and those who seek to open those boundaries and facilitate transitions.

CASES: MARGINALIZATION AND MEDIATION IN TWO “INFORMATION SOCIETIES”

While the two cases are drawn from quite different geographical contexts, both reflect on the nature of local government involvement and its implications for the city in terms of social exclusion and marginalization. They focus on the issue of mediation to promote inclusion. The Bangalore case reflects the situation in many cities in the developing world where the mediator is a grassroots NGO that acts as a missing link between the burgeoning slum-dwelling population in the city and the local authority. The NGO is engaged in deliberate action to move the slum dwellers from conditions of marginalization toward inclusion.

The Ronneby case mirrors a situation found in many European cities where, effectively, municipal employees act as mediators between the local authority and citizens. This case study explores the degree to which these employees who find themselves marginalized are able to make a difference to the marginality of the elderly and disabled sections of the city’s population with respect to service provision.

Bangalore

In recent years Bangalore has been a focus of global attention as the “Silicon Valley of Asia.” This sobriquet emphasizes the software development capacity that has been nurtured in the city through the efforts of both the government and international companies wanting to draw on the relatively inexpensive local technical talent to meet their software needs. With this increasing attention, and the related international and also regional migration to the
city, there has been growing pressure on the civic infrastructure for water supply, sewerage, sanitation, solid waste management, and wastewater treatment (Benjamin, 2000). This pressure has prompted agencies like the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank to support the development of civic infrastructure.

In line with Bangalore’s status as the “Silicon Valley of Asia,” the government of Karnataka, the state within which Bangalore is located, has formulated an IT policy to enhance the city’s position as an IT hub. The state government has also recognized the potential of IT-enabled initiatives for improving the condition of the poor and marginalized. For example, the recent state e-governance policy called Mahithi states:

The government of Karnataka believes that effective implementation of e-governance will take IT to the common man. The Government would like to be pro-active and responsive to all citizens particularly the poor. Presently, computers are being used in several departments and such decisions are being taken in a decentralized manner. (state web site

This policy statement is interesting on two counts. One, it shows a recognition on the part of the government for the need to expand the benefits of computerization to the poor. Two, the thinking is predominantly computer-centric. In this article we explore how these policies play out in practice, especially in the context of slum dwellers in the city.

About 25% of the city population can be said to live in slums even though the estimates vary. These slum dwellers were estimated to have an income of Rs 10,000 ($215) or less per annum in 1998 (Jana Sahayog, 1998). This segment of the population is typically excluded from a majority of the civic services like lights, water, and sewerage. A recent survey found that most of the households have as head of the family male members whose primary occupation is “coolie” (doing physical labor). Most of the slum dwellers are illiterate (illiteracy is nearly 90%). Households generally comprise four to six members; couples tend to have two to three children and have other adults (old parents typically) living with them. It is paradoxical, within the broader attempts of creating an information society in Bangalore, that there is a large group in the city that does not even have information about what their basic rights are and what services the government is obliged to provide them with. Trying to break through these historical exclusionary processes is Jana Sahayog, an NGO that is focusing on providing information to the slum dwellers about their rights so that their voices can be more forcefully heard by the governmental agencies.

Jana Sahayog is a small urban resource center of Samuha, a development agency, based in Karnataka, that works in 20 slums of Bangalore and in 7 other cities within the state. Many of those working on Jana Sahayog initia-
resource for slum dwellers in their fight for their dues and rights as provided for in the constitution and laws. It is envisaged that the profile document will shortly be brought out in the form of a resource booklet, which can be easily used by slum dwellers.

The three informational initiatives just described are examples of Jana Sahayog’s approach to act as a “missing link” by mediating at the local level between the state and municipal governments at one level and the slum dwellers at another. The collection and dissemination of formal and informal information act as a powerful intervention strategy to help bring about change. The underlying assumption of this strategy is that if slum dwellers are more aware of their rights in terms of the legal, moral, and human-rights-related obligations the government has toward them, they can fight more strongly for their rights by making their voices heard. Increasingly, many government officials are beginning to acknowledge and accept the work and contribution of the NGO, and there are signs of increasing budgets and resources being allocated for upgrading conditions in the slums.

**Ronneby**

In the municipality of Ronneby, Sweden, declining numbers of jobs in heavy industries from the 1970s onward led to concern about high unemployment rates. In the latter half of the 1980s, however, success with the establishment of a business park for computer software companies and a college with an emphasis on computer-related courses gave grounds for optimism about a new source of jobs. A policy document was adopted in 1992–1993 by the local government which set in motion a 10-year project to implement an “IT society,” known as the “2003” project. The idea was to make Ronneby known as a place where “people know computing” and thereby to attract new computer companies to the municipality. Part of this plan was to get all citizens—later adjusted to all municipal employees—to become familiar with IT. A range of projects were funded and implemented, many of these attracting substantial interest in national and European (EU) forums. This vision was largely realized, and Ronneby became a showcase in Sweden for ICT development. As of 2003, Ronneby continues to attract substantial interest from businesses, especially in software development. The initiative seems to be by and large successful on this front.

Our interest in potentially vulnerable citizens led us to focus on how the “2003” project impacted the Home Help Service. This municipal service helps the elderly and people with debilitating disabilities to continue to stay at their homes. The beneficiaries are more or less marginalized due to gaps between their bodily abilities and the expectations of contemporary Swedish society as to bodily agility and/or control (especially of emptying functions). The home helpers and visiting nurses (known as district nurses) help them manage (i.e., often conceal) such gaps. Furthermore, the weekly, daily, and in some cases hourly interaction with home helpers provided much needed human contact for those living alone. Most home helpers got to know the people they visited personally, and the resulting relationship was at times mutually enriching.

Home help entails more than “service provision” in a narrow sense and can be said to be “in between” the municipality and the recipients of the service. This position was at times fairly straightforward—that is, when the support system was working as intended and recipients accepted its limitations. Under certain conditions of the “system” or “network” not providing the promised help, such as when biweekly cleaning was postponed due to staff shortages, home helpers expressed signs of strain due to lack of adequate support. In these cases home helpers needed to make decisions within certain limits as to how the additional work could be distributed. However, they had little latitude in these matters, as all decisions on staffing and resource usage rested with their supervisors. Complaints from those dependent on their service were at times simply absorbed by home helpers. Although their charges could be encouraged to call the home help supervisor to complain, doing so was fairly contentious among the home-helpers themselves. In practice the formal redress of complaining to the home help supervisor appeared to have been rarely used. Evidence of home helpers themselves raising such issues with their supervisor was also minimal during the study. In general, home helpers were excluded by municipal decision makers from discussions on issues of direct relevance to their work and other matters that could have benefited greatly from their extensive experience in the field.

A prior expectation of the study was that home helpers would be reached by the municipal “2003” project in two ways: as municipal employees and as citizens. The group of home helpers studied was a pilot group for ICT implementation. Instead of the municipal project “reaching them,” the daily concerns of the home helpers—in particular, relating to short- and medium-term cost savings—shaped the introduction of ICT to this group. Further, the information/dissemination strategy originally adopted by the project centrally (i.e., an introductory interest-raising day for all employees, followed by training for specific computing skills) was abandoned when it proved too costly. It was not replaced by an alternative strategy. As a consequence, the home helpers’ exposure to ICT—much of which took place during the course of this study—appeared haphazard (to them and to the field-worker). In the end, exposure was driven by personal interest, private investment, and support offered in one’s personal network. The project’s aim of ensuring that all municipal employees are IT literate was largely unfulfilled.

While home helpers were expected to be part of a pool of municipal “IT knowledgeable workers,” there was
little sign that the practicalities of doing so were seriously planned. What did take place during 1997–2001—partly in parallel with the municipal “2003” project—was the development and introduction of an IT-based information system linking the nearest hospital with some pilot municipal Home Help Service branches, including the one in Ronneby. Through this system, home helpers received more reliable information about imminent discharges of their hospitalized charges back into their homes and hence back into the responsibility of the Home Help Service. While most home helpers welcomed this aspect of the system, this was not its primary aim—rather, avoiding financial penalties was (that is, concerns of the supervisory and above levels). Possibly as a consequence of this, home helpers received wholly inadequate training for using the system.

The case just described shows a twice-missed opportunity for the home helpers to become “IT knowledgeable workers,” a stated priority of the municipality. First, the steam ran out of the general push toward computer literacy among municipal employees after interest had been aroused and promises had been made of general ICT training. Second, a few years later, “side effects” of an implemented computer system that benefited the target group were hampered by inadequate training on that system as well as inadequate support for the informal training network among the workers themselves. Here, home helpers came across as a marginalized group within their own organization because of their inability to influence policies impacting information access and usage.

In summary, the situation of marginality in this case refers to the dependence of a group of citizens on home help service from the municipality and, at times, the unreliable provision of this service. While the actual providers (the home help workers) were acutely aware of the negative impacts on the quality of life of people they worked hard to help, in our analysis the potential for change was very limited. The municipality’s lack of facilitation and, apparently, unwillingness to accept citizens’ direct influence on service provision underscore the need for mediation from those with “a foot in each camp.” Few resources for enacting the mediation role in terms of time, training, or decision makers’ apparent interest in their points of view were, however, available to the mediators. Thus, mediators as well as the elderly recipients themselves were “in between” outcast and anchored.

ANALYSIS

Relating the two cases of marginality, as we do in this article, implies a certain level of comparability. Both cases show situations in which a group of citizens is in a vulnerable position with respect to obtaining services offered by the municipality. The comparison is made at a relatively abstract level of analysis because there are important ways in which the two cases are asymmetric. One is the great difference in material, educational, and other resources available to members of the marginalized groups in the two cities. The level of service offered to slum dwellers in Bangalore is not comparable to that offered to elderly people in Ronneby; the former lack the most basic amenities, such as water and hygienic drainage. Furthermore, while in Bangalore slum dwellers are marginalized with respect to their “own” society in a comprehensive sense, the marginalization of the elderly and people with disabilities is much more contained in Ronneby. In the Ronneby case, the home helpers also considered themselves marginalized within their organization. However, the difference between the two cities is smaller when we focus on the information available to these groups about their rights as citizens, and on the resources available to the mediators. In both cases, the disadvantaged citizens are being underserved by the local government despite their legal and moral commitments to take care of their needs.

Our comparative analysis is presented around three key points: (1) the roles of the mediating institutions in leveraging action; (2) the relational nature of exclusion; and (3) the process-oriented nature of marginality.

The Roles of Mediating Institutions in Leveraging Action

We found that while mediation takes place through both the NGO and the government organization in the two cases, respectively, there were major differences with respect to the institutionally “established” opportunities and constraints in carrying out mediation. For example, in Ronneby the institutionalization of certain needs of the elderly and fragile has entailed a substantial and dependable amount of public resources being devoted to fulfilling them. In contrast, what is lacking takes quite a different order of magnitude for the slum dwellers, who can only dream of corresponding amounts of public resources being devoted to their needs. Our study demonstrates that struggling for visibility does not necessarily end when needs of a marginalized group become “legitimized”/institutionalized. On the contrary, our study identifies ways in which the NGO appeared to have created more leeway to campaign for “its” marginalized than the government agency had done in Ronneby. In the case of the government agency, the terms on which the established service provision were set (and altered) were not open for changing or questioning by either those in receipt of assistance or those providing it. This substantially curtailed the opportunities for home helpers to mediate the needs of the people they were serving. The NGO, on the other hand, had through deliberate targeting managed to establish information channels to decision makers
that appear to be having a substantive effect on service provision.

In both cases, despite the aims of the municipal agencies being to serve the needs of the marginalized, the established bureaucracies served as obstacles to reduction of marginalization. "Openness of information," a new aim for the Bangalore City Corporation, seemed to have been leveraged successfully by the NGO. On the other hand, "knowing IT," the new aim of Ronneby municipality, failed to alter the marginal positions near the bottom of the social hierarchy. While the NGO was able to use the increasing focus on information as leverage in its efforts to improve the situation of a marginalized group, the corresponding focus on ICT in the second case produced simply an arena for ambiguous resistance among mediators.

An important factor in the success of municipal efforts is the position of the mediators themselves. In both cases these can be seen to be “weak.” For the home helpers, awareness of the information society efforts of their central municipal administration was relatively limited. They were in a mediating position but had access to few information resources relevant to enact this position, and limited possibilities to change this situation. In Bangalore, a parallel can be found in the historical acceptance by slum dwellers of less than their legal and moral rights. The NGO put substantial effort into mediating this situation and has achieved changes. In contrast in Ronneby home helpers find themselves mediating service provision expectations so that they conform to what is offered. These two strategies for mediation differ markedly, and raise interesting questions about the manner in which the respective local governments are attempting to implement their information society visions. In Ronneby, marginalization patterns disempowering the mediators themselves are being reproduced. A contributing cause may be the marginal position of democratization within the “IT society” project itself in favor of a technology focus. In Bangalore the implicit alignment by the urban authorities and Jana Sahayog with information society ideals has produced formal commitment to information availability through the various channels, without an explicit focus on ICTs. The NGO is now also increasingly included in consultations with local government regarding urban development. This and the independence and commitment of the NGO have enabled them to successfully mediate the needs of slum dwellers. Interestingly, the right to information is present in Sweden too—but it is not the current issue; rather, technology is in focus.

While we have discussed the roles of the NGO and home help workers as mediating agencies in the two cases, other forms of mediating agencies can also operate. For example, in Bangalore the Bangalore Agenda Task Force (BATF) was established around 1998 as a network of different stakeholders in the city including civic authorities, citizens, service provides, and the industry. The BATF describes itself as follows: “Having committed itself to specific doables, the BATF will henceforth function purely as enabler rather than project implementers” (BATF web site http://www.blrforward.org/home/home.asp). The BATF is thus positioned as a mediating agency between the government, the providers of civil services, and the citizens and industry that are consumers of this service. Being comprised of senior and respected citizens of the city, the BATF is playing an important mediating role, especially through lobbying at the highest level in the state, including the Chief Minister. These mediating efforts have already achieved notable successes and their aim is to “make Bangalore into a world class city by 2004–2005.”

In Ronneby, the municipality has strived to improve democratic participation through various e-democracy projects. Women’s participation in the information society was in focus in Ronneby’s contributions to an EU-funded project, Dialogue. One outcome was a 10-point plan for use of the Internet in citizen participation. The municipal web site was at one point redesigned to enhance citizen participation. Ekelin (2002) briefly presents the redesign process, showing how consultation with citizens emerged during the redesign process, but also asking searching questions about “what is it for the citizens?” (p. 298).

As of December 2003, the municipal web site includes a future scenario, “Vision 2010,” developed with citizen participation. The vision for the municipal services, however, is little more than a single page containing lists of institutions that should be in place, and there is little that touches on either the employees or beneficiaries of these services. Thus, interesting as these efforts are, they may have limited impact. A contrast can be made with some more permanent changes mediated through other channels than these identifiable projects. For example, Elovaara (2001) discusses the roles of librarians, including in Ronneby, in transforming notions of information technology. Through their patient work of inclusion they have slowly changed what the information society could mean for many people. They do not, however, have a mandate to work with marginalized citizens as such, beyond providing a service for all citizens. While some of the development projects interestingly have been conducted through the library, the librarians do not touch the marginalized in the deeper way that the home helpers do.

Germani (1980) insists that a designation of “marginal” must correspond with the views of those in question. This precondition is met with respect to the slum dwellers, who are acting out a view of themselves as deficient in participation through their demand for a greater say. In Ronneby, home helpers have explicitly lamented to the field worker that their opinions do not matter to superiors. As for inclusion in IT society, actions of privately including oneself also speaks of such a need. On the other hand, the
potential of home helpers as mediators for the people being served (where they would be regarded as marginal with respect to service provision) is less clear. Home helpers have commented that their charges in many respects ought to receive a better service, yet they themselves often subtly defend the service in front of their charges. The recipients of service themselves rarely seem to express misgivings beyond comments that could be heard as fairly personal. The mediating potential is therefore mostly tentative: If they felt their views would be heard, what might they say?

The Relational Nature of Exclusion

Svedberg’s dynamic marginality can be read as a note of hope. In our cases this is reflected in the efforts of Jana Sahayog to change the slum dwellers’ position of influence on service provision; their successes in doing so confirm the possibilities of reducing the marginality of slum dwellers’ position and of becoming more recognized (“anchored”). The mediating agency of Jana Sahayog has been instrumental in these changes. For the home helpers, the situation is unclear. While changes are taking place in their relation to the information society, their relative position as marginal seems to be reproducing. Effective mediation in this case would require time with the groups being served (where they would be regarded as marginal with respect to service provision) and a forum in which they and the home helpers would be heard (which seems nonexistent today). Both require a logic of service provision different from cost efficiency. While the logic of Ronneby municipal authorities is primarily cost efficiency, Jana Sahayog is driven by “empowerment” goals.

The Process-Oriented Nature of Marginality

To understand processes of marginalization we need to also look at processes of “nonmarginalization,” that is, of inclusion in dominant society. Bowker and Star’s (1999) classification theory reminds us that a category is constituted by the noncategory, especially in the case of the ones made invisible (residual categories).

Marginality with respect to the information society, in our conceptualization, is a state of being partly included, partly excluded from its professed benefits. Access to information and communication is structured by partial access to the dominant means of communicating and/or obtaining information (due to lack of training, access, or other resource constraints). While such access may increase over time (as in Bangalore and Ronneby), the access of dominating groups also increases. Thus the determining factor for continued marginalization is highly relational. In Ronneby, with the advent of an “IT” society focus, the problem of marginalization resurfaces as lack of ability and knowledge to use networked computing. It is interesting to note the partial reorientation toward “knowledge” rather than “IT” as a focus toward the turn of the millennium. This changed focus, however, showed no sign of having any impact on the knowledge of both the home helpers and the people they assisted. The pattern seems to apply locally, within a nation, and globally.

The important analyses provided by Castells (1998, 2000) and Urry (2000) of new developments such as ICT-enabled networking demand exploration also of what happens in the “non-new” places. We need to understand more about, for example, points where the “old” and “new” structures of domination coincide—that is, potential “transitional”7 places or modes of existence. Urry and Castells both elaborate the point that they are describing—the flows, the networks, the timeless time—concerns fluidity, changes, movements across boundaries, physical and otherwise, that previously were considered substantive obstacles. “Transitional,” then, is a key feature of these theorists’ descriptions of the dominant social discourse itself. A question that remains is how to talk about the “hangers on,” those who may (or may not) be on their way into the dominant discourses but are not quite there. Our study has provided insight on this question, suggesting mediation as one useful and useable analytic focus.

CONCLUSIONS

Our article has drawn on ideas from recent research on social exclusion, juxtaposing these with earlier literature on marginality. Our contribution has been the development of a process-oriented understanding of marginalization as compared to the more “conditions”-oriented literature on social exclusion. We see marginalization as a continuous process that creates, sustains, and redefines conditions leading to continued marginality: a play of relational dynamics rather than a static state.

We studied the process of marginalization as it has unfolded in two very different contexts—Bangalore and Ronneby. Both cities have become known as centers for ICT-related research and development, and both embarked on governmental renewal within the new ICT-oriented paradigm. Ronneby, additionally, explicitly set itself targets for eliminating inequalities in ICT competence among employees via training and skills development. In the broader context of Bangalore gaining prominence as a “software hub,” Jana Sahayog has pursued an information strategy of increasing the information access of the slum dwellers. Interestingly, its strategy is based on developing indigenous information systems, as opposed to ones that rely on ICTs. The municipal bodies in both Bangalore and Ronneby seemed to share a lack of commitment to action that could help redress imbalances. However, while the mediating body in Bangalore developed the agency to change this structural condition, the corresponding entity in Ronneby was not able to achieve similar results. In
Ronneby the structural conditions were right for ICT training but the opportunity was repeatedly lost. In Bangalore Jana Sahayog did not need to depend on any external sources of training and operated on its own strength — intimate knowledge and understanding of the situation of slum dwellers.

In both cities we find groups of people with unmet statutory rights to and needs for local government services. While the magnitudes of the discrepancies are not comparable, we found more positive change taking place for the poorer people in the less affluent India than in the more affluent Sweden. The role of mediators in the two cases explains the paradox. We found substantial differences in the willingness and strategies of the mediating organisations to take action against the local government. Our analysis indicates that the reasons may pertain to certain key opportunities and constraints, some of which appear more structural (e.g., “sticky” marginalization, degree of willingness to “cause a stir,” issues of prime loyalty), and some relate to the commitments of the people involved. Our analysis gives cause to ponder about the appropriateness of treating “structural” and “personal” conditions as disjointed.

The ability of the NGO Jana Sahayog and the Ronneby home helpers to realize their potential as (partial) mediating advocates for marginalized citizens has implications beyond the two cities. The strategy of both municipalities of aligning with “globalization” trends and at the same time improving the condition of disadvantaged groups has not worked in favor of the latter. Our two cases suggest that neither legal rights nor espoused ideals of inclusion suffice to include marginalized citizens in the information society. Thus our study is a warning against complacency with regard to ICT projects that are supposed to provide access to marginalized groups. But it is also a source of optimism, as, clearly, marginalization is not immutable.

NOTES

1. In Swedish, IT-samhälle.
2. Home helpers were acutely aware of their significance for a range of assistees in terms of providing human contact. This was evidenced on the one hand in observed comments between home helpers, and on the other in comments to the visiting researcher by home helpers before taking her into homes where she had not previously visited. Such comments informally but precisely instructed the researcher in what aspects of the complex interrelationships between the service and the home helpers were salient to display with the next assistee.
3. Strategic project plan of 1993 and interviews with project management.
4. For more information on this project, see http://www.ronneby.se/dialogue (valid as of December 2003).
6. At the policy level it is interesting to note that the original IT focus of the Ronneby development plans was reduced from about 2000 in favor of a “knowledge society.” This term, however, though in itself substantially broader, did not appear in practice to include the elderly or the home helpers any more than the previous technology focus did.
7. For want of a better term, we use transitional, though inappropriate to the extent that it suggests specific duration (short) relative to what is not thus termed, and being “on the way to something else” as the key aspect of interest. While elements of both may be found in our empirical studies, we find no reason to assume short duration or temporary status of the “marginal” positions. On the contrary, our key exploration is of contributors to stabilizing or destabilizing marginality in a changing world.

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