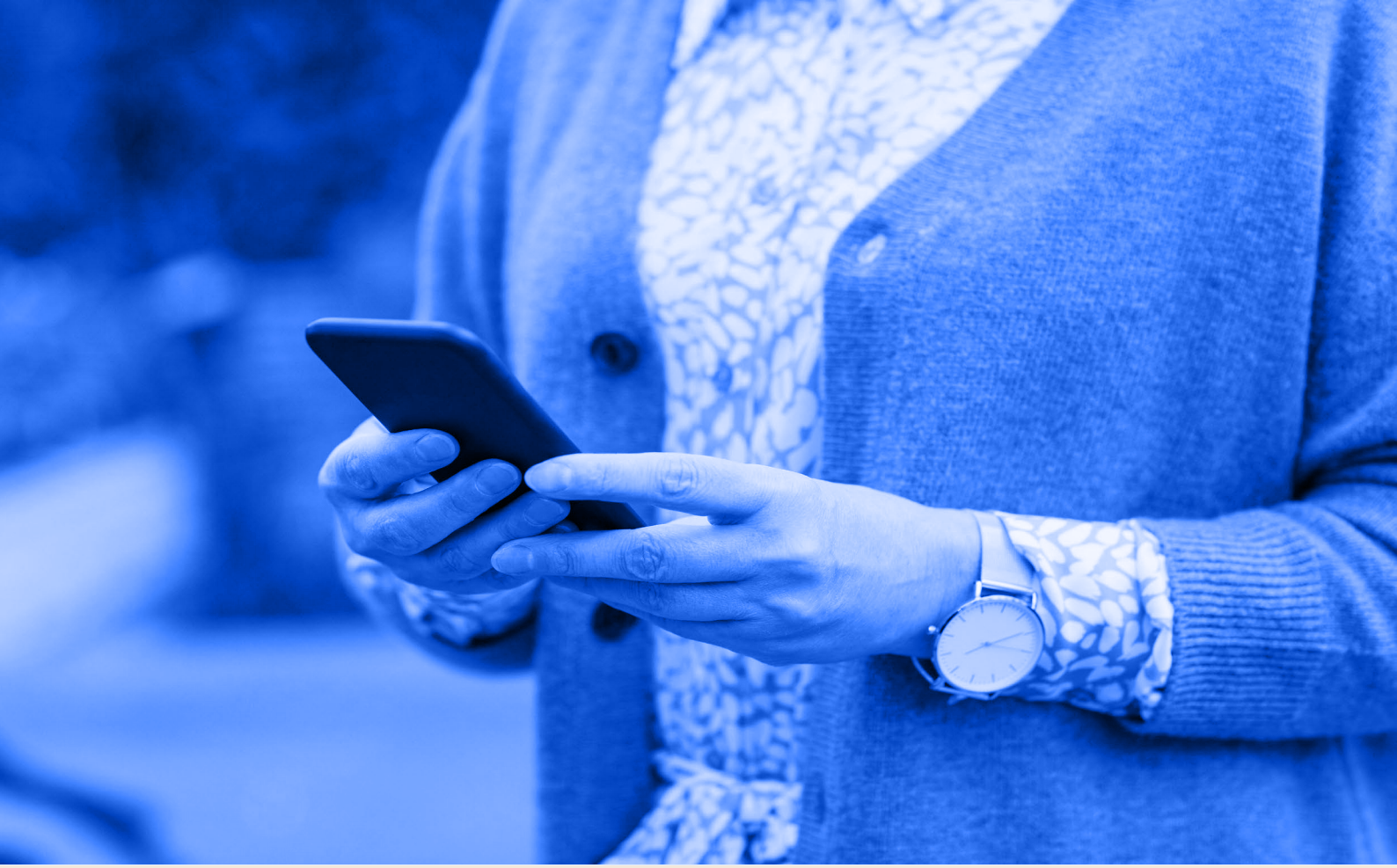

The Digital Landscape and Community Connectedness in the UK

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Ellie Lockley

The Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness

UKRI Economic and Social Research Council

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Authors

Ellie Lockley (Sheffield Hallam University).

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Contents

Research Question

How do digital technologies shape community connectedness and participation in the UK, and what role do digital inclusion, critical digital literacies, and community organisations play in enabling or constraining equitable, meaningful engagement?

Introduction/background

In an increasingly interconnected world, digital technologies have become integral to everyday life. Given that they have reshaped how individuals interact, and contribute towards social connectedness, understanding how they shape communities is important - especially when the pace of technological change is intensifying.

This paper explores both the potential and the pitfalls of leveraging digital tools for community-building and considers how co-located neighbourhoods, social capital, and meaningful relationships can be strengthened through innovative uses of technology whilst including an awareness of persistent inequalities in access and engagement. With an emphasis on the balance between ethical innovation and inclusivity, the paper outlines key trends, key issues, outstanding challenges to form the research plan priorities which intend to provide a roadmap for the work within theme four: digital technologies within C4.

Everyday life in the digital age involves a complex mix of in-person and online relationships and connections and there is a need to find a balance between the two as 'hybridity' is important for well-being and resilience. For communities to thrive, individuals need the skills, confidence and knowledge to have meaningful agency to act in the digital spaces in a democratic way. In an increasingly digital world, access to technology is often taken-for granted, but many users still don't fully understand what's happening to their data or what their rights are.

The UK context shows rapid digital transformation, with internet access and smartphone adoption among the highest globally and the government's Digital Development Strategy (DDS) 2024-2030 striving to achieve digital transformation, inclusion, responsibility and sustainability objectives to drive 'digital development' not only in the UK but also globally. The launch of the Home Office's 2030 Digital Strategy (July 2025) further enforces the drive to empower people with technology through boosting digital skills.

However digital exclusion is a problem that has not gone away and will remain for some time yet as technology advances and social inequality remains. In 2025 it was reported that 3% of UK adults (1.7 million people) has no internet access at all and the same factors – age, rural versus urban and low-income households are impacted (broadbandfreedom 2025). Debates centre on whether current inclusion initiatives are sufficient to close the digital divide (some people simply don't want to engage with being online) or if structural inequalities require more comprehensive solutions (Selwyn, 2021). Access issues relating to digital infrastructure is not within the scope of this work (see the *UKRI digital research infrastructure programme*). However exploring the digital divide – that is the skills and use – is important for understanding how technology can contribute to social capital (Yates et al 2015, Yates and Lockley 2018, Yates et al 2020) and understanding fields of knowledge about citizenship, rights and literacy in the digital age (Pangrazio and Sefton Green 2021).

Research undertaken by C4 may not directly tackle data and device poverty, but it must be acknowledged in parallel to opening opportunities through skills and building confidence and supporting local delivery. This complements the UK government's Digital Inclusion action

plan (February 2025) which recognises that digital inclusion and importantly digital skills, are a foundation for the development of individuals, and communities – not only for wellbeing but also growing the economy.

However, the digital landscape is further complicated given that individuals are navigating issues relating to privacy and personal data, data surveillance and algorithms, digital by default and the erosion of the democratic sphere (Pangrazio and Sefton Green 2021). Given the importance of the digital in everyday lives, it is also important that users, including those in communities are operating in a 'digital democracy'– ideally where citizens are fully informed and have agency about the choices they make online. The power imbalance across the digital domain is often overlooked and ignored by individuals who feel it doesn't concern them. The Freedom Online Coalition advocates for information and knowledge sharing to address key challenges and opportunities toward human rights online and offline and is part of a larger movement concerning the governance of the internet and a good digital society (Kacar and De Luca 2024). This digital evolution presents opportunities to further understand the complex challenges related to community connectedness through exploring issues of digital inclusion, ethical data usage, and the impact of digital platforms on social relationships and democratic education.

Key Trends

The following section provides a brief overview of four key trends, adoption of platforms, artificial intelligence, digital exclusion and digital good are linked to the digital landscape and community connectedness.

Adoption of Digital Platforms

Over 90% of UK adults access the internet daily, with widespread use of platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (X), and Instagram for communication and social interaction (Ofcom, 2023). Although these statistics paint an optimistic picture, they fail not only to recognise data poverty but also to acknowledge that these users may have digital skills limited to social media use only (Yates et al 2015).

However, the global pandemic contributed to rapid growth of local and neighbourhood mutual aid groups via WhatsApp and Facebook with over 4000 groups created in the early stages of the pandemic. WhatsApp was used for smaller groups for specific streets or neighbourhoods due to its 256-member cap and used in conjunction with open-source software. (Kavada 2022 Ntontis et al 2022). Video conferencing tools such as Zoom and Skype also saw rapid adoption during the pandemic, used for facilitating community events, support networks, and social cohesion. Despite the This has increased the everyday use of video calling across professional and personal contexts. (NESTA, 2021, *Local Trust & Good Things Foundation 2020*). Digital platforms during C19 facilitated information sharing, coordination and mutual aid, however increased misinformation and a return to normalcy saw a rapid decline in use after the first wave in March –December 2020 (Kavada 2022 Ntontis et al 2022).

Localised digital platforms, such as Nextdoor, have gained traction for connecting neighbours and fostering hyperlocal interactions and communities with an estimated 10 million users across the UK Digital platforms are increasingly used to strengthen social ties in co-located neighbourhoods, enabling residents to share resources, organize events, and engage in collective action with some local government advertising the platforms use. A range of community mapping platforms exist to help people map their localities and community assets and build a hyper local

picture of community needs. Addodle.org, mapping for change.org.uk, and 'commonplace' allow citizens to share feedback on their local area, document local histories, and are participatory tools designed for local engagement.

Artificial Intelligence

The UK government's 2025-2030 action plan and £2 billion investment into developing AI infrastructure for economic growth across the country. *AI growth zones* promise to create thousands of jobs and increase investment in five sites including Oxfordshire (April 2025) Northeast (Sept 2025) North Wales (Nov 2025) South Wales (Nov 2025) Scotland (Jan 2026). Whilst innovation across the use of AI is rapid the UK Gov has highlighted the need to ensure that the technology is regulated – ensuring safety and security, transparency and fairness, and accountability, and has launched the *AI Securit Institute* in an effort to manage the risks of advanced AI (UK GOV 2024, UK AI Council Roadmap 2024) .

With drivers in AI growth focussed on economic growth, there is a risk that AI impact on an individual and community level is left behind. ONS data on opinions and social trends relating to AI (2024) attempts to understand how AI is perceived across society and reports that 43% of the people questioned do not trust UK Government to use AI. But given AI utilised to personalise user experiences, including recommending community events and resources (McKinsey, 2020, UK GOV 2025). User's need the capabilities to utilise these technologies in empowering, yet ethical ways and yet AI transparency is a continued evolutionary debate.

Digital Inclusion

Digital exclusion and inequalities persist with 3.7 million families falling below the minimum digital living standard (MDLS). The Good Things Foundation highlight key statistics relating to digital poverty, essential digital skills and MDLS:

- 1.6 million adults lack a smart phone tablet or laptop
- 1.9 million adults struggle to afford broadband
- 7.9 million adults lack foundation level essential digital skills
- 1.7 million adults are offline.

Older, low-income, disabled and rural populations are most affected, with nearly 1 in 4 adults over 75 rarely or never going online (OFCOM 2024). Invariably this present core digital challenges for people accessing everyday services (including local council and government services, applying for jobs, banking and healthcare). Whilst government and non-profit programs, such as "DevicesDotNow," focus on reducing the digital divide by providing access to devices and digital literacy training for underserved populations (Good Things Foundation, 2020, 2025), online services that are now 'digital by default' are not always available in languages other than English. This can present barriers for some individuals who may already be marginalised (Yates et al 2015). Although translation technology exists (Google Translate, Deep L Microsoft Translator) individuals and communities need to be able to access systems with advanced translation capabilities and have some existing digital skills to do so (Rothwell et al 2023).

The independent commission on neighbourhoods have published a Hyperlocal Digital Inclusion report (2025) which explores how digital exclusion affects disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England and outlines why hyperlocal approaches are essential for addressing digital inequalities. Research also highlights that health inequalities are directly (through access to health services

and indirectly (affecting access to employment, housing, financial support) compounded by digital inclusion (Poduval et al 2025, Honeyman et al 2020) Digital inclusion is deemed a social issue that has risen up the policy agenda and the report advocates for better data about digital inclusion at a national and local level. It also highlights that digital inclusion should be embedded into core policy and not treated as an add-on or temporary initiative. (Knight 2025).

Towards the 'digital good'

The term digital good describes how digital technologies, infrastructures, systems, and policies can generate positive societal outcomes—from inclusion and wellbeing to equity, safety, sustainability, and democratic participation. In the UK, key contributions come from major centres such as the ESRC Digital Good Network, Good Things Foundation, the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), UKRI and others.

Good Things Foundation's Digital Futures for Good report (2025) brings together expert and community perspectives on ensuring digital technologies benefit society, particularly people who are currently excluded. It argues that achieving the digital good requires strong leadership, system-wide change, and policies grounded in lived experience.

The ESRC-funded Digital Good Network (2022–2027) is the UK's largest coordinated programme exploring what a good digital society looks like and how it can be realised. Their work highlights that digital technologies can enhance wellbeing but also create harm; that connectedness can foster belonging but also risk and exclusion; and that the digital good must centre diverse and marginalised voices rather than default to majority users. Their framework emphasises reflexive, ethical and people-centred approaches to evaluating digital innovation.

Government initiatives are also advancing this agenda. The Government Digital Service (GDS) is embedding digital inclusion into the design of public services. Recent work includes updating the Service Manual and Service Standard, developing cross-government measures to assess how well services reach excluded groups, and leading the "Services" strand of the 2025 Digital Inclusion Action Plan. This demonstrates a clear commitment to incorporating digital good principles in public service design.

Beyond government, organisations such as the Freedom Online Coalition are exploring digital democracy, while research from Lloyds (2023/24) reports that 12.1 million people could still benefit from improved digital capabilities. The Digital Delivery Strategy 2024–2030 also foregrounds elements of critical digital literacy—such as civic engagement—within broader digital transformation aims, complementing work from initiatives like the Centre for Digital Citizens.

Key Issues

Five main issues require further examination in relation to the role of digital in community connectedness: Digital inclusion, community organisations driving local digital change, critical digital literacies, ethical concerns and social connectedness vs overreliance, are outlined below.

Social connectedness vs overreliance

Social capital—defined as the networks of relationships among people who live and work in a particular society—is enhanced when technology facilitates trust and reciprocity among neighbours (Putnam, 2000). This concept can be applied to communities and is an important

consideration when thinking about the role of digital within community connectedness since digital engagement can lead to social capital but people who have social capital are more likely to be digitally engaged. Furthermore, Wright et al (2023) argue that leveraging digital technology to promote social connectedness has the potential to affect positive health outcomes. Whilst Liu et al. (2016) provided a thorough meta-analysis of the positive relationship between social networking online and social capital. They argued that social networking sites offer a platform to strengthen existing interpersonal relationships. How technology is shaping relationships is evolving rapidly but there is a question about whether digital interactions can foster the depth and authenticity of face-to-face relationships (Turkle 2011, Hampton et al 2011). While digital platforms can facilitate initial connections, translating them into meaningful, sustained relationships often requires offline engagement (Baym, 2015).

However digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for connecting with others globally, enabling individuals to maintain relationships across vast distances, through providing the means for instant communication and shared experiences. For instance, video calls allow family members separated by geographic distance to interact in ways that feel more personal than traditional phone calls (Taipale 2019). Digital tools can help maintain relational closeness, particularly for long-distance relationships, by providing consistent channels for communication (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

Digital platforms have demonstrated significant value in fostering community resilience during crises, such as natural disasters and pandemics. They provide timely information, enable coordination of relief efforts, and facilitate communication between affected individuals and organisations (Park et al 2024). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms like WhatsApp and Zoom enabled mutual aid groups, remote work, virtual education, and social connectivity, mitigating the negative impacts of physical isolation. Similarly, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been instrumental in disseminating real-time information during natural disasters, helping communities respond more effectively (Houston et al., 2018).

Additionally, online communities can serve as spaces for individuals to find like-minded people, fostering connections based on shared interests or experiences. Platforms like Reddit or niche Facebook groups allow people to connect in ways that might be impossible in their immediate physical environment (with greater geographic mobility). These virtual spaces can provide emotional support and cultivate a sense of belonging, particularly for marginalized groups (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

However, one concern is the potential for digital interactions to become superficial. The ease of liking a post or sending a quick message might substitute for deeper, more meaningful engagement. While these micro-interactions can sustain a relationship in the short term, they may not suffice for long-term relational depth. Research highlights that meaningful relationships often require shared physical experiences and time spent together in person to build trust and intimacy (Baym, 2015).

For neighbourhoods, hyperlocal platforms like *Nextdoor* and community Wi-Fi projects '*Project Gigabit*' exemplify how digital tools can strengthen neighbourhood bonds. However, individuals and communities should engage with technology in a fully democratic way for instance the commercial aspects of the Next-door platform can only really be fully understood through critical digital literacy: whilst its forward-facing business model emphasises connecting hyper-local people, it also sells data to third parties. Awareness about the platform design, along with the user's democratic right to understand what is happening to their data through informed individual and collective autonomy could lead to increased meaningful interactions.

Another concern is that reliance on digital platforms also poses risks. Critics argue that

excessive dependence on these tools can weaken offline social networks, reduce face-to-face interactions, and create vulnerabilities if digital infrastructures fail (Bork-Hüffer & Yeoh, 2022). The challenge lies in leveraging the benefits of digital platforms while maintaining robust offline networks and reducing systemic risks associated with digital dependency.

While digital platforms can reduce isolation and loneliness, excessive social media use has been linked to anxiety, depression, and reduced well-being, complicating their role in fostering healthy community connectedness (Twenge 2019). Overreliance on digital platforms or devices may lead to a false sense of connectivity (Lockley 2009) the weakening of local, in-person networks, which are deemed crucial for long-term resilience and social cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Additionally, digital dependency can exacerbate inequalities, as marginalized groups with limited access to technology are excluded from the benefits of digital platforms. Therefore, addressing the digital divide is critical to ensuring that all community members can contribute to and benefit from resilience-building efforts (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015).

To counter dependency on devices and platforms, combining hybrid approaches of digital and offline, can contribute to inclusivity. Equally equipping individuals with the skills to critically engage with digital platforms can enhance their ability to navigate online risks and build resilience, thus helping them to reflect on their dependency.

Therefore, integration of digital and offline interactions may offer the best of both worlds within community settings where there is no preference for one form of communication over another. Whilst digital tools can help initiate relationships or sustain them during periods of physical separation (e.g. during the Covid pandemic), transitioning to offline engagement can solidify and deepen these connections. Given this, digital interactions are not a complete substitute for the depth and authenticity of face-to-face interactions. Co-located 'in person' meeting affords 'informal' shared activities and emotional resonance that digital communication alone cannot fully replicate.

Digital Inclusion

The *National Digital Inclusion Network* consists of 8000 organisations delivering digital inclusion services in their local communities and is driving to change policy to fix the digital divide. The digital divide is a problem that has not gone away across the UK. It more complex than assuming that access to infrastructure and technology will increase inclusion. It is about access to technology; digital skills; attitudes towards technology; and type of technology use (Helsper 2008), it's also about considering how individuals and collectives can be empowered to use technology.

While digital technologies enable connectedness for many, significant disparities in access persist, particularly among older adults, low-income households, and rural communities. The Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index (2023) reveals that millions of individuals in the UK remain digitally excluded. Among older adults, many lack the skills or confidence to engage with online platforms, leaving them unable to access essential services that have increasingly moved online (Van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Low-income households also face barriers, linked to access including affordable devices and reliable internet connections. In rural communities, inadequate infrastructure often limits high-speed internet availability, further exacerbating exclusion (Helsper, 2021). A further concern is that low confidence can solidify into resignation, with individuals coming to believe that digital technology is "not for them" or that they are "too old" to learn—deepening self-exclusion and making re-engagement even harder.

The consequences of digital exclusion are far-reaching. For older adults, it can lead to social isolation, as many social and health services now operate online (Seifert et al., 2020). Similarly,

for low-income families for example, digital exclusion can perpetuate cycles of poverty by limiting access to education, job opportunities, and government support systems (Warschauer, 2003). Whilst in rural areas, exclusion can hinder participation in broader economic activities, as businesses increasingly rely on digital tools for marketing and operations (Robinson et al., 2015).

In the UK context, Good Things Foundation, Age UK, Citizens Advice, and Citizens Online are leading the charge in driving a digital agenda by actively working to tackle digital exclusion, particularly among vulnerable groups and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, by providing digital skills training and access to technology for those who might otherwise be left behind; they often partner with local government and grassroots organisations to understand local needs and provide tailored support to achieve this goal. In turn, these organisations partner with local authorities to scale up their efforts and reach wider audiences. They also promote digital transformation by supporting their digital strategies to improve services for citizens. Other notable partnerships include NHS Digital whereby digital inclusion programs within the healthcare sector. A national digital skills charity Go ON UK also promotes digital literacy across the UK.

Current digital inclusion initiatives often focus on providing basic digital skills training and improving access to devices and internet connectivity e.g. the UK government's Digital Skills Partnership seeks to address skill gaps across different demographic groups. However, critics argue that such efforts fail to address the deeper structural inequalities that underlie digital exclusion (Selwyn, 2021). For instance, while providing free or subsidized devices may alleviate immediate access issues, it does not address ongoing affordability challenges related to broadband costs or the socio-economic conditions perpetuating digital inequality (Hargittai, 2011). Nor does it improve individuals' knowledge of democratic education for inclusion in a digital democracy (Carmi and Nakou 2025, Carmi and Yates 2023).

More comprehensive solutions could involve policy interventions to regulate broadband affordability, ensure universal service obligations, and invest in digital infrastructure in underserved areas to ensure that minimum MDLS are met so that individuals can participate fully in society. Additionally, tailored interventions for vulnerable groups, such as older adults or individuals with disabilities, could help mitigate the social and economic costs of exclusion. Robinson et al. (2015) highlight the importance of community-based approaches that prioritize local needs and foster collaboration between public, private, and third-sector organizations. Therefore, our consideration for digital inclusion goes beyond the need for basic digital skills to advocate for critical digital literacies to increase the agency of individuals towards improved social connectedness.

It is worth noting that beyond the UK context, a government-led report (DDS 2024-2030) highlights aspects of critical digital literacies under 'digital transformation' - civic engagement, digital rights and digital democracy; and 'digital inclusion' citing digital literacy and skills with a focus on underserved communities (FCDO digital development policy framework). Whilst underplaying the UK's digital inclusion needs, this work has been designed to support countries across the globe.

Community Organisations Driving Local Digital Change

Community organisations play a critical role in shaping local digital agendas, and their contribution to digital inclusion should not be underestimated. Good Things Foundation (2023) has demonstrated the power of this local ecosystem approach, supporting up to 8000 community partners to improve the digital access and skills of over two million people. Similarly, the Local Government Association (2022) emphasises that voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations are uniquely positioned to deliver digital inclusion because of

their trusted relationships, cultural awareness, and deep embeddedness within communities.

However, the capacity of community organisations to enable digital change is uneven. While many staff possess personal digital skills, these do not always translate into their professional practice or wider community work (Homes 2023; Yates & Lockley 2020). Organisational culture is a major factor: openness to experimentation, a willingness to share skills, and the ability to adapt to new digital tools are all key enablers of digital adoption (Sousa & Rocha 2021; Willis et al. 2025). Resistance, caution, or simply lack of time can become significant barriers.

A closely related issue is digital acceptance. Research shows that willingness to engage with new tools is shaped not only by technical competence but by confidence, perceived usefulness, and the availability of support (Willis et al. 2025). This highlights the importance of community-level support structures. Local digital hubs, digital inclusion networks, and community-based digital skills delivery are all important examples of face-to-face support which build trust, confidence and long-term 'digital comfort' (Good Things Foundation 2025) These community-led infrastructures not only teach skills; they have the power to create safe, supportive environments in which people feel empowered and encouraged to learn.

National initiatives such as the National Databank, National Device Bank, and the National Digital Inclusion Network complement this local work by providing the tangible resources—connectivity, devices and structured learning (e.g., Learn My Way)—that community organisations can use to offer meaningful support.

A further area to note is the role of digital leadership within community organisations. UK research shows that hyperlocal digital inclusion efforts often depend on trusted local leaders who legitimise, inspire, and sustain digital development within their communities (Knight, 2025). Interviews with practitioners from Good Things Foundation, the Local Government Association, and 100% Digital Leeds highlight how these individuals mobilise participation, build trust, and encourage residents to experiment with unfamiliar digital tools (Knight, 2025). Crucially, such leaders do not need to be technical experts; their value lies in their persuasive authority and capacity to model confidence.

Evidence from wider UK case studies further emphasises that organisational culture and leadership are critical enablers of community-level digital adoption. The British Academy's (2023) review of digital inclusion programmes across Derbyshire, Leeds, and Liverpool shows that initiatives are most effective in organisations where leaders create supportive, collaborative environments and encourage experimentation with digital approaches. Where leadership buy-in is weak or confidence is low, community organisations struggle to embed new digital practices (British Academy, 2023).

Local government research supports this pattern. The Local Government Association (2025) identifies that clear leadership and organisational ownership are essential for digital inclusion, particularly for residents identified as "Not for Me" or "Reliant on Others," who depend heavily on trusted intermediaries to build confidence and overcome apprehension about digital technology (Local Government Association, 2025).

This emphasis on community leadership is also reflected in national policy. The UK Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025) positions community organisations as key actors in delivering digital inclusion, particularly for groups such as older adults and low-income households. The plan underscores the importance of local leaders and trusted organisations in ensuring that digital opportunities reach those most at risk of exclusion (Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, 2025).

Beyond digital skills toward critical digital literacy capabilities

Beyond access to infrastructure and technology is a layer of the digital divide which focuses on skills and use. Whilst ONS (2024) reports that 99% of people are online, 8 million people reportedly still have low levels of literacy (Lloyds 2024). User's literacy levels and confidence vary greatly (Yates and Lockley 2020; Yates and Lockley 2018) and capability is not static and can be linked to different life stages. So, there is still a need to understand the 'hidden middle' (Lloyds 2022), that is, users who have access to broadband but don't use a digital platform to its full potential.

The internet is supposed to be 'open and free' but there has been an increasing awareness that there are uneven power balances across the internet (Nguyen 2022) where tech giants have the power and the people do not. Yates and Carmi (2024) highlight that citizens are concerned about their data use and abuse, but similarly, awareness about how to resolve the concerns is quite low. Coupled with this is the global context in which users are operating which further highlights the need for people to move away from being 'passive users' who are concerned to 'informed citizens' who understand the implications of their data and can act. A relevant example of this was the decision by the social media company Meta in January 2025 to remove fact checking from its platform in favour of de-censorship (McMahon et al 2025). There is a need for the 'everyday user' to not only be aware of the implications of the platform governance but also to be able to identify mis and disinformation (Carmi et al 2020).

In the UK, policy efforts such as the Online Safety Act (2023) have attempted to strengthen citizen protection online, with a particular focus on children. Schools have played a key role in relaying guidance to parents and carers, offering an indirect route into improving adult awareness of online governance. However, research shows that although many people recognise terms such as cookies, tracking or privacy options, they often fail to act on this knowledge (Yates et al., 2021; Yates et al., 2020; Yates & Lockley, 2018; Yates et al., 2015). There remains a gap in supporting meaningful 'digital civic participation'.

Digital civic participation refers to engaging in democratic processes online, such as signing petitions, contacting representatives or taking part in digital consultations. The Community Life Survey defines civic participation as involvement in democratic processes, including online forms of engagement, and reports that around one-third of adults participated at least once in 2023/24 (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2024). Beyond these basic acts, new forms of digital democracy—such as participatory platforms piloted through EU projects like D-CENT and DECODE—show how digital tools can support collective decision-making, community power-building and more transparent governance (Fischli & Muldoon, 2024).

Recent research on data citizenship argues that knowing about privacy or data rights is not enough; people need the capacity to act on this knowledge within unequal digital systems. Carmi and Nakoub (2025) highlight how data literacy, structural barriers and power asymmetries shape people's ability to participate democratically in a datafied society. Systematic evidence also shows that while digital technologies can expand participation, they can also reinforce inequalities if access and skills are uneven (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025).

Digital civic participation matters for community connectedness because it strengthens people's sense of involvement and representation. Civic participation in the UK varies significantly by age, disability and socioeconomic status (DCMS, 2024), meaning that inequalities in digital engagement can translate directly into democratic under-representation. Research also shows that digital skills and communication practices are strongly linked to civic engagement among young people (Tsouparopoulou et al., 2025), suggesting that strengthening digital engagement

supports wider social participation.

Work from the Responsible Innovation Centre similarly argues that public media and digital public spaces must actively support democratic participation by helping people navigate digital information environments confidently (Knight, 2025). This reinforces the argument made by Carmi and Yates (2024): democratic and data education should not be framed as individual responsibility alone, but rather as a collective, systemic endeavour.

Relevant to this, is how people share their critical digital skills and knowledge through 'networks of literacy' (Carmi et al 2021). Formulating best practices for knowledge sharing is a step towards helping communities and individuals to be empowered by for example not only understanding privacy and security but also by managing 'self-determination' online (Masur 2020).

Whilst acknowledging that digital inclusion issues will continue to exist, there is an opportunity to raise awareness of global issues that impact internet governance and advocate for the relevance of critical literacy to decrease the skills gap in the 'hidden middle.' There is the potential to empower people to be confident in (global) digital contexts and through increasing awareness of digital issues that directly impact their everyday online use, and by encouraging people to act.

Community organisations' willingness to drive digital change and also advocate for democratic digital education is therefore important. Developing 'Critical Digital Literacies' would lead to empowered digital citizens who are aware of their digital rights and free confident to participate within and across online spheres. How the 'networks of literacy' work in practice within community contexts is therefore important to understand.

Ethical Concerns

Recent ONS data (2023) shows that 50% of respondents reported not having used AI technologies before the survey was conducted, highlighting low levels of awareness and illustrating the risk of a growing "hidden middle" of users who rely on AI systems without fully recognising them. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in everyday digital interactions, it is essential for individuals to understand not only their own capabilities but also the capabilities and limitations of the systems they use.

AI has significant potential to enhance community engagement by making interactions more efficient, responsive and personalised. Research suggests that AI can support citizen participation by analysing large amounts of data, identifying community needs, and tailoring communication or support to individual preferences (Sarafis, Karamitsios, & Kravari, 2025). Tools such as Social Pinpoint's Analysis Assistant demonstrate how machine learning can process qualitative, unstructured data at scale, assist moderation, and help ensure community platforms remain safe and constructive spaces. AI-driven translation tools can also reduce language barriers, supporting participation in diverse communities.

However, the deployment of AI also raises well-documented risks relating to misinformation, surveillance, and the deepening of inequalities (Floridi et al., 2018). These concerns emphasise the need for users and community organisations to understand how AI systems make decisions, how data is collected and used, and what rights individuals have in relation to their data.

Strengthening critical digital literacies is therefore essential. Improved data literacy within community organisations—passed on through networks of practice (Yates & Carmi, 2021)—can increase awareness of privacy, security, and responsible data governance (Yates et al., 2021). This supports individuals to meaningfully consent to, question, and control the data collected about them, an issue highlighted in critiques of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Transparency

about system capabilities and data practices can also strengthen trust and accountability within communities by clarifying which elements of governance lie with organisations and which depend on individual decision-making.

As AI becomes more integrated into everyday life, the ethical implications of its use reinforce the argument for expanding critical digital literacy education. Understanding AI is no longer optional; it is fundamental to promoting safe, equitable and democratic community engagement.

Conclusion

UK government policies, (the Digital Inclusion Action Plan 2025) emphasize the importance of digital inclusion and the need to provide access to digital technologies for underserved communities. These initiatives must work in parallel with grassroots efforts and community-driven projects to create truly inclusive digital ecosystems (Welsh Gov 2025). Additionally, fostering social capital through technology involves promoting trust, reciprocity, and transparency, and advocacy for sharing and transferring knowledge about critical digital literacies.

Within a UK context, digital media and technology have the potential to enhance the way communities connect and interact offering tools to address issues such as isolation, inequality, and the erosion of traditional social structures. However, there must be a consideration for bridging the digital divide and enhancing the critical digital literacy offer to its citizens, this will in turn enhance ethical innovation in community connectedness research. Co-designing research with citizens and communities so that it meets their needs is another clear ethical pathway towards impact.

Ultimately, the integration of digital and social technologies into community development must prioritise ethical considerations, meaningful engagement, long-term sustainability, and inclusivity, all of which require a foundation of critical digital literacy education that empowers and supports citizens to engage both in co-local and global contexts.

Outstanding Challenges

The preceding discussion and review of the current evidence base highlights a range of key questions and outstanding challenges.

Bridging the Digital Divide

Enhancing access, skills and inclusive participation:

- Building upon the Government's Digital Inclusion Action Plan (2025) beyond access to digital tools and resources, how can policymakers and practitioners ensure equitable basic digital skills as well as critical digital skills for all demographic groups?

- What role should/could communities play in addressing digital exclusion?

Advocating the relevance of Critical Digital Literacies.

In support of digital democracy and empowering citizens through knowledge of skills, rights, governance:

- What role can communities have in fostering and advocating for improved critical (digital) literacies / digital democratic education?
- What interventions are most effective in promoting accurate information and mitigating polarization (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)?
- To what extent are community organisations driving digital change and how is it woven into their ethos and agenda setting?

Ethics

In technological innovation – not leaving people behind when technology advances:

- To what extent do communities already provide support toward their members' knowledge and awareness of (critical) digital literacy?
- To what extent is critical digital literacy deemed important/relevant to communities?

Demonstrating social capital

Considering the links between digital, community connectedness and social capital:

- How can digital tools encourage the development of trust and cooperation and social connectedness in co-located neighbourhoods?
- What strategies are most effective for fostering meaningful relationships and community solidarity through digital platforms?
- Examining the relationship between critical digital literacy levels and social capital: Can literacy education contribute towards improved social capital?
- Critical digital literacy and wellbeing: can digital inclusion be considered as a determinant of health?

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