Technology and Inequality Roundtable Series: Summary of Discussions

February 2023

The British Academy

Contents

Introduction

In November 2022, the British Academy convened three roundtable events as part of its project on Technology & Inequality for the Government Office for Science. This project seeks to improve our understanding of how government can play a key role in supporting access to, uptake of, and investment in technologies that can be critical to delivering broad public objectives, in a way that ensures that inequalities do not become entrenched.

This roundtable series focused on the question: *"How can digital technologies be harnessed to improve policies that tackle inequality, their design, and the equitable delivery of public services?"* Each roundtable convened a different set of stakeholders - local authorities, central government, and the private sector - examining their roles in tackling inequality, their relationships to digital technologies, and how different forms of data can be integrated to better understand and tackle inequality.

Given that more and more public and private services are moving to online forms of delivery, the pertinence of this question will only increase as the ability to engage digitally becomes more essential to interacting fully with society and the economy. Digital skills are becoming increasingly tied to people's opportunities to find employment, access services, and to receive redress. However, according to a report by the Centre for Economics and Business Research and the Good Things Foundation, more than 10 million people in the UK still lack basic digital skills.[1] There are therefore significant economic costs associated with digital exclusion, while investments in digital skills create benefits for the wider economy.

This document summarises the key insights that emerged during these three roundtable events and is included in the Academy's Technology and Inequality project evidence hub. Remarks from participants have been anonymised, synthesised, and grouped under relevant headings. Contact details of the British Academy's Digital Society team are provided at the end of this document.

---

1   CEBR (July 2022), *The economic impact of digital inclusion in the UK*, A report for Good Things Foundation, p11.

Roundtable 1: The role of local authorities in using digital technology to address inequality

The British Academy convened representatives from local government from across the UK, as well as civil society organisations and British Academy Fellows, to discuss the opportunities and challenges they face in their areas and the different strategies that they have implemented in local interventions using digital technology to tackle inequality. Hetan Shah, CEO of the British Academy, chaired this online event. This note summarises three of the main themes that emerged in the discussion.

The importance of co-producing digital strategies with local communities

A recurring theme at the roundtable was the need for digital inclusion strategies to be developed locally, to empower communities within their local contexts. Participants noted that a 'place-based' approach to digital inclusion, whereby local authorities co-design and co-deliver solutions in close partnership with local organisations and other public and third sector bodies, can produce better outcomes than centralised 'top-down' approaches. Participants highlighted that:

- Local Voluntary & Community Sector (VCS) organisations are particularly important for local authorities to engage with, given their knowledge of local communities and the challenges they face in their areas. A representative from a digital inclusion team at a City Council pointed out that a key part of their role is to build the capacity of partner organisations across the city to enable them to strengthen digital infrastructure and embed digital inclusion initiatives into service provision.

- Challenges exist for rural areas, which often have disproportionately high levels of digital 'not-spots' due to private service providers' lack of interest in placing digital infrastructure in areas unlikely to generate a satisfactory financial return.

- The responsibility for promoting digital inclusion in local areas cannot be the individual responsibility of either local government or VCS organisations, but that the two working in close partnership could offer a more sustainable long-term approach. The Liverpool 5G Consortium was given as an example of an effective collaborative project between public, private and health and social care sector organisations aimed at providing free and accessible connectivity to local services.

This kind of collaborative working was seen as particularly important because of the way in which digital exclusion and other inequalities (such as economic inequality and health inequality) intersect and have the potential to compound one another. In the context of the current cost of living crisis, affordability was highlighted as an increasingly significant barrier to digital inclusion – one participant noted that paying for connectivity may become too expensive for the economically vulnerable, but that reduced connectivity could further entrench economic disadvantage due to shutting people out from accessing online opportunities for cost savings.

They also pointed out that 'social tariffs', which are designed to provide more affordable broadband packages to those on lower incomes, were still too expensive to be useful to those who may be struggling financially, as well as being poorly advertised and having poor service standards.

Central government has a role to play in supporting and joining up the work of local authorities on digital inclusion

Participants noted that not every local authority recognises digital inclusion as a major issue or is able to devote funding for a permanent team to tackle it, and that the definitions of digital inclusion and the metrics being used to measure outcomes can vary from one local authority to the next. A representative from a local government digital inclusion team highlighted that most digital teams carry out their work with little guidance, support or investment and rely heavily on sharing best practice with teams in other local authorities. The online Digital Inclusion Toolkit, developed by Leeds City Council and Croydon Council for other local councils tackling digital exclusion, was cited as having achieved significant success but participants expressed concerns that it could now progressively go out of date as central government funding for this initiative has since ended.

Several participants suggested that, while digital strategies should be developed locally, there is scope for central government to bridge some of the gaps between local authorities in this space. Some suggestions for national government included:

- Providing a national definition of digital exclusion that all local authorities could adopt. This could form part of a wider refresh of the government's Digital Inclusion Strategy, which has not been updated since 2014, and could include best-practice underlying principles that local authorities could adapt for their own areas;

- Leading on knowledge-sharing by mapping the work that local authorities are doing across the country;

- Creating a network of local digital inclusion teams to connect those with expertise at local, regional and national levels;

- Embedding digital inclusion as a consideration within policy areas across government rather than as a separate policy issue.

Attendees also pointed out that citizens can slip in and out of digital exclusion during their lifetimes, as new technologies are developed, and as new skills become vital for engaging with the online world. One participant noted that this signalled a need for sufficient funding from central government to allow for councils to appoint permanent teams to lead digital inclusion work, particularly as these teams will themselves require up-to-date skill sets to keep up with emerging technological trends.

The value and limitations of data in addressing local inequalities

Participants agreed that up-to-date datasets would help local authorities to identify areas facing gaps in service provision, locate digital exclusion hotspots, measure outcomes and success, and demonstrate the value of digital inclusion. Some councils have used local data to map their own areas, an example being the 'Manchester Digital Exclusion Index' developed by Manchester City Council. At the national level, the Digital Exclusion Risk Index (DERI), aims to act as an interactive dataset showing where digital exclusion is most likely to occur across the country while also providing granular data at the local level.

However, some participants emphasised the difficulty in sourcing the right data with limited resources and questioned whether local authorities should be responsible for collecting this data. They also pointed out that data cannot tell 'the whole story' of a person's individual circumstances and therefore cannot be a substitute for the relationships that local government should have with local communities and organisations, which are often best placed to provide insights into local issues and inequalities.

Roundtable 2: The role of digital technology across government departments in policies that address inequality

The British Academy convened policymakers from central government departments (including DLUHC, DWP, DCMS, HMRC, Cabinet Office, OSR), those working in more specialist teams, civil society organisations and British Academy Fellows, to explore the role of digital technology in understanding and addressing inequality at a departmental level and discuss the scope for more joined-up policymaking between departments on these issues. Professor Helen Margetts FBA, Professor of Internet and Society at the Oxford Internet Institute and Director of the Public Policy Programme at The Alan Turing Institute, chaired this event. This note summarises three of the main themes that emerged in the discussion.

Generating value from data across scales

Information box: Issues preventing data sharing
The CDEI's report on exploring the role of data intermediaries highlights six issues that can prevent data sharing:[2] 1. lack of incentives to share data, 2. lack of knowledge of potential uses of data and what data can be made available and how, 3. commercial, ethical, and reputational risks, 4. legal and regulatory risks, 5. costs of data access/sharing, and 6. missed opportunities to use data in the public interest

A central theme of the discussion was about creating flows for evidence generation, analysis, and the sharing of expertise across both horizontal scales (e.g., between departments and teams) and vertical scales (from the local to regional to national scale). It was noted that forming vertical data flows is an especially big challenge for government because it requires connecting data and processes from hundreds of local or regional authorities across the country.

However, doing so could open significant opportunities for policymaking. For example, regional datasets could be used to understand the contours of the UK's infrastructural landscape and identify challenges specific to regions or communities.[3] Participants noted that, from a policy-making perspective, high level regional data may be more valuable than smaller more fragmented local datasets, as data on larger areas would be more likely to have sway in the political process (e.g., for ministers). They also emphasised the potential value of datasets or approaches to analysis that enable areas to be compared with one another (for example, propensity

---

2   Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (July 2021). *Unlocking the value of data: Exploring the role of data intermediaries,* pp. 13-14.
3   Participants noted the important role of the ONS in producing regional data and statistics.

score matching, experimental modelling, configuration modelling, and behavioural science methods.

The discussion also recognised challenges with the creation of data flows, such as keeping track of the provenance of data being used in government systems, which could have implications for citizen redress. However, if each government department holds different datasets, this creates issues of fragmentation and duplication for both citizens and analysts. Datasets owned by large technology companies such as Google and Meta also offer great value and insight for policy, but there are multiple barriers to opening up data flows between private entities and government. Participants nevertheless iterated the value of a kind of central repository of information that government departments can feed into and use as timely sources of data.

Supporting data flows with networks and champions

Participants discussed the kinds of relationships and connections needed to support and maintain to the flow of data across government, including interaction between central government and mayors or regional leads (to identify how to make local data that regional government holds available for national decision making – and vice versa), and partnering and working with established 'champion' organisations in devolved cities.

Attendees also emphasised that the informal networks across government that aim to share best practice on technology and data science, such as the Government Predictive Analytics Network (GPAN), are also valuable ways of creating flows of data and expertise in government, but might benefit from better integrated in institutional infrastructure. Participants also noted the Local Government Association's Digital Inclusion Network and the Chief Scientific Advisers' Network in this regard, and also suggested that there would be value in having metropolitan CSA networks.

The discussion also highlighted that approaches to tackling inequality through creating and facilitating data flows will need to recognise how technical systems are embedded within social contexts (for example, what different users need to know about data they access, or how data collection can be undertaken practically in certain contexts – an attendee provided the example of data related to social work).

Managing technical transitions

Participants also discussed the challenges associated with upgrading or adapting legacy systems in government departments. While adopting new systems can provide significant opportunities for integrating different data sets and creating flows both across government and between government and citizens, transitioning to them requires considerable resources and the relevant capabilities, capacity and knowledge within government to effectively make use of them. This might involve both internal re-skilling internally and bringing skills into teams through hiring.

Case example: e-Estonia

Some participants mentioned the case of Estonia's digitalised public service, a portal that requires citizens to have a single identifier code that is related to their data across government services and provides access to all public services in a safe way, without requiring government to conduct costly verification checks for each interaction.

Roundtable 3: The role of the private sector in policies that use digital technology to address inequality and strengthen local infrastructure

The British Academy convened representatives from the private sector, civil society organisations and British Academy Fellows to discuss the role of business in facilitating the use of digital technologies to strengthen infrastructure at different scales (local, regional and national levels), improve the delivery of public services, and contribute to more effective policy implementation aimed at reducing inequalities. Dr Molly Morgan Jones, Director of Policy at the British Academy, chaired this event. This note summarises three of the main themes that emerged in the discussion.

Identifying the interests of businesses in addressing inequality

Participants considered both the current economic landscape and historical regional disparities across the UK as vital context in which to frame this discussion and noted the role that businesses can play in the Levelling Up agenda given their capacity for creating jobs, opportunities, and growth. Some viewed the role of business as being intrinsically linked to supporting inclusion, reducing inequalities and strengthening communities, and pointed to tools such as techUK's Local Digital Capital Index as valuable guides to understand the impact and value that the technology sector can bring to different regions, and apprenticeships and short courses as means to make the technology sector more accessible to workers of different backgrounds and skills.

Another participant remarked that some companies do actively seek to reduce inequalities but require support from government to ensure the financial viability of these private initiatives. Social tariffs, such as BT's Home Essentials broadband package designed for those on lower incomes, were raised as provisions that could eventually become unaffordable for companies to maintain in their current form, due to a growing number of people becoming eligible for them. Alternative solutions to this issue were suggested, including a 'digital inclusion fund' funded by the VAT on broadband and a broadband discount scheme jointly co-funded by government and the telecommunications industry for those on lower incomes.

Aligning incentives to encourage cross-sector collaboration

However, some questioned whether businesses would commit to supporting communities if this proved to be unprofitable, and pointed to schemes such as The Good Things Foundation's National Device Bank, which creates incentives to make addressing inequality mutually beneficial for businesses and communities. In this scheme, businesses striving to fulfil net zero operations can donate used technologies to a device bank that is distributed by local community organisations to those who are digitally excluded.

A number of participants highlighted the scope for collaboration between the private and public sectors, with the provision and use of commercial technology in public services given as an example of an area in which businesses have a significant positive impact on the lives of those using or requiring public services. For example, a participant from the Alliance for Affordable Internet noted that some of the most successful projects around digital inclusion in low/middle income countries have been public-private partnerships in which the public sector acted as the driving force and had invited private sector organisations to participate.[4] Others pointed out that government can play a role in designing or rolling out aligning incentives to encourage collaboration with and between private sector actors that otherwise would not be likely to work together.

Participants noted that while digital platforms such as Facebook and Whatsapp play a big part in connecting local communities, local authorities can find it extremely difficult to partner with these organisations, due to a lack of opportunities to build relationships between large companies and local government. It was suggested that central government therefore has a role to play in encouraging 'Big Tech' companies such as Meta and Google to engage with government at the local and regional level, rather than simply at the national level. There is an opportunity for local government to engage more effectively with communities through collaborations with the private sector that provide access to wider data sources about needs and patterns in the local area as well as technical expertise, capacities and resources. Crucially, however, any such collaborations would need to engender the trust of local communities and highlight the value added to citizens' lives, empowering them to benefit from technological systems.

Promoting digital skills to fill public sector skills gaps

It was noted that some parts of the public sector have a considerable digital skills gap and are unable to retain or attract talent when higher salaries can be found in the private sector for those with digital skills. Participants considered whether private companies could be more active in seconding their digitally skilled workers on placements to where they are needed in the public sector or reskilling/upskilling workers with few digital skills to enable them to succeed in digital jobs.

Case example: Broadband as a utility?

The idea of conceiving of broadband as a utility was raised at both the local authority and private sector roundtables. While some considered this to be a valuable aim, which could ensure all households receive a basic level of online access, others warned that it could have significant consequences for the telecommunications industry and viewed connectivity as being fundamentally different from water and gas due to rates of technological innovation related to digital and broadband products.

---

4   See A4AI (2021). *Affordability Report 2021: A New Strategy for Universal Access,* pp.18-19.

About the Academy

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

If you would like further information about this project or would like to engage with us, please contact: digitalsociety@thebritishacademy.ac.uk

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future.

From artificial intelligence to climate change, from building prosperity to improving well-being – today's complex challenges can only be resolved by deepening our insight into people, cultures and societies.

We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone.

The
British
Academy