

2023 Civic Cultures Horizon Scanning Summary

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We started exploring Civic Culture, one of the key thematic areas of [INCLUDE+ Network](#), through a workshop series facilitated by Thrive by Design with charities, public sector organisations and NGOs. [Civic culture](#) traditionally refers to certain expressed virtues of 'citizens' (those recognised by the state) such as 'responsibility', 'cooperation', 'solidarity', 'involvement', 'activism', and 'engagement'. What all these terms have in common is a continued and active engagement with society, usually at a community rather than individual level, and in ways that are both critical and negotiated. Our horizon scanning work queried the idea that only those recognised by the state engage in civic culture, not least because many of the organisations we engaged with work with marginalised communities that are often not recognised by the state, or only recognised in particular and problematic ways. We include in our definition of civic culture, issues of social cohesion, social mobility and civic participation, all of which are related to health and wellbeing; all of which are increasingly [under stress](#) from rising socio-economic and digital inequalities.

We started by asking '**what is and what isn't civic participation?**' And we widened this out during the workshops to ask questions around digital equity, access and practices: '**what is the role of digital technologies now and in the future? What is the relationship between digital equity and civic participation?**'

We worked with existing Include+ partners Thrive by Design, Leeds City Council, and Space 2, and we also widened these conversations to include new organisations: ODI Manchester, Mhor Collective, Citadel Youth Centre, Then Try This, Sheffield Council, Data Justice Lab, and the Green Estate.

In a related project led by Dr. Joanne Armitage, we also collaborated with project partner Space2 to work with community groups (Heart to Art, Clothing Rebellion, Clear out your Closet) through creative participatory workshops where we built creative digital responses to generative AI.

In this way, we gathered perspectives from the public sector, charities and NGOs along with community group members.

What We Did: digital civic participation workshops

Our INCLUDE+ Civic Participation and Digital Equity Workshops took place in April and May 2023 and were attended by representatives from the public sector, charities and NGOs noted above. We collaborated with Thrive by Design agency to develop and implement an inclusive digital participatory methodology. As a result, two 1.5hr workshops were facilitated using Zoom and Miro & Mural Boards. This will be followed by a self-paced activity focused on co-writing on digital civic participation and digital equity recommendations in August. The analysis of these three research stages will be published in a report (to be launched at the INCLUDE+ CONNECT event in September).

Between April and July 2023, we also collaborated in a Research England funded project led by Dr. Joanne Armitage participating in creative build workshops with community group. The overall theme of these workshops was digital inclusion, and through this we explored issues of digital civic engagement asking how communities would like to be made visible (or not), datafied, and tracked. We engaged digital artists on creative build projects where we co-built alternative chatbots, wearable devices and artefacts using generative AI.

Working with civic organisations, researchers, communities and activists, we've learnt that most (if not all) civic activities are affected by issues related to digital equity. Digital equity is necessary for civic participation, employment, and access to essential services (e.g., online health resources), not least because of the [digital by default agenda](#) and approach to services within the UK, which uses a digital first approach to engagement. But *how* digital equity is understood by different communities and organisations is necessarily different and should be recognised as such.

To meaningfully and proactively take part in digital civic participation activities, people need to have access to digital devices, affordable Internet access, and digital skills. Digital inequalities have a significant impact on one's ability to participate in society, and digital inequalities are also impacted by wider socio-economic issues. The soaring cost of living for example has led many people to cancel their broadband subscription. 2.5 million people in the UK are reported to be

behind on their broadband bills ([digital poverty alliance](#)). Those who are digitally excluded often pay more for essentials (e.g., gas, and electricity). Digital poverty [intersects](#) with other factors then, such as one's socio-economic inequalities, age, race, disability. As Digital Poverty Alliance Community reports, only 74% of those who earn up to £13,500 per year have Essential Digital Skills for Life, compared to 95% of those who earn over £75,000 (Allmann, 2022). All the above need to be taken to considerations when designing and implementing digital civics activities.

Findings:

- **Civic participation – who owns its meaning and how it is measured?**

The term civic participation is problematic and is often defined, not by communities but in a more top-down way by organisations responding to externally imposed funding initiatives. In the last decade, civic spaces/participation have been affected by loss of funding and public spaces, the impacts of austerity, and increased difficulties in finding volunteers given ever-more-precarious work conditions (CSF, 2018). This has led to higher densities of work around certain communities and modes of civic participation, for example, rural or youth civic participation, digital skills or uptake. Funding is also often informed by existing political and policy agendas and this in turn has made some forms of civic participation and some communities more visible than others. As indicated by workshop participants, most civic activities aim to involve or include communities into or through pre-imposed definitions of civic participation, measuring civic participation also in pre-defined ways. This not only affects the communities' agency and ownership of the process, it also fundamentally misrepresents what civic participation is and might be because evidence of it is fit to existing measurements. Instead, the aims and meaning of civic participation, needs to be framed within a global trend of governments efforts to 'shrink' the space for civil society ([Keutgen & Dodsworth, Keutgen & Dodsworth, 2020:5](#)). From here we can then incorporate and make more visible long forgotten communities, activities or practices and therefore change definitions and perceptions of what civic participation is.

- **Civic [digital] participation is a networked and collective effort bound by existing social, economic, and technological power dynamics, and impact agendas.**

Civic activities are situated within existing power dynamics — be it offline or online (or both). Civic participation initiatives are often supported and funded by local authorities or NGOs, whose agendas and goals inform and regulate their purpose, pace, and potential impact agendas. This,

in turn, might have an impact on the transparency, integrity, and ownership of the participatory process, as well as shaping our assumptions, terms and conditions of civic participation.

Through our work, we have also learnt that civic digital participation is often situated within the opaque and inaccessible network of [surveillance capitalism](#), whereby being/becoming digitally included often means being monitored, quantified, and having your 'data self' shared with third parties. This in turn has impact on project's participants agency, safety, and privacy. Evidence has shown that citizens have no or limited access to or control over the implementation of the automated decision systems (ADS) which make predictions about citizens' needs and actions, and inform how public services are delivered (Data Justice Lab, n.a.).

Project participants reported issue when trying to strike the balance between ensuring that people are digitally connected but also informed about the digital terms and conditions of their participation and have the knowledge to mitigate risks associated with their digital activities.

- **Digital equity vs digital exclusion: the impact of digital technologies on civic culture.**

Digital technologies have played an increasingly important role in civic participation and civil movements. However, their analysis requires a critical and intersectional approach that positions digital equity within specific socio-technological power dynamics and how these affects access to civic culture. Digital equity refers to fair and equitable access to digital tools and digital literacy education. Our research revealed that digital inequalities have a significant impact on one's ability to exercise their human rights. Issues such as lack of access to digital devices and reliable, affordable Internet connection have negatively affected both project participants and organisers. Then there are the issues of privacy, surveillance, and online safety. How can we ensure that our participants are safe online (e.g., data leaks, adds) and are not exposed to algorithmically targeted ads as result of our work, for example? What if we, as organisations, don't have the appropriate skills and funding to support those digital excluded? And finally, what can we do about those who choose to stay offline and exercise their right to disconnect? These were some of the questions asked during the workshops.

Key questions that emerged from our horizon scanning activities are:

- What happens to the values, terms and conditions of [digital] civic participation, when they are co-defined by communities rather than imposed onto them? How can we create forms of civic action that represent these values, terms and conditions?

- What interventions can we positively make to address the power of existing socio-technological systems and processes to define what civic culture and civic participation is and might be?
- To what extent are our own [digital] civic participation practices and assumptions contributing to existing power inequalities (e.g., digital exclusion), and how could this be mitigated?
- What might be the core ethical values of [digital] civic participation and how can we build for this?
- What are the minimum standards that need to be met to ensure one's meaningful and informed [digital] civic participation?
- What are the differences between [digital] civic participation and [digital] civil disobedience?
- How are socio-digital structures negotiated, lived, felt and intervened into by communities and what does this mean for how we should think about and design for civic culture?