

Researching rural digital inclusion – a multi-layered approach



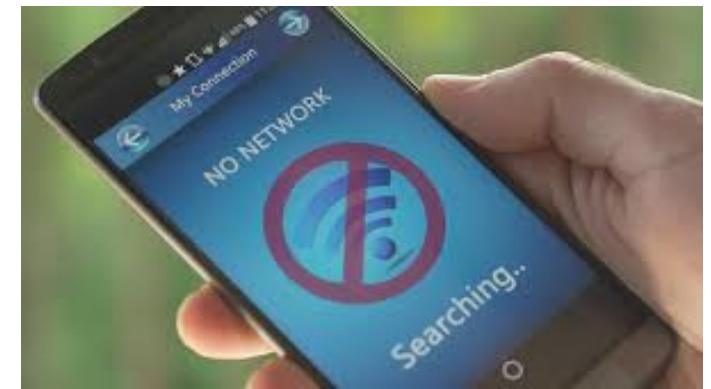
**Loughborough
University**

**Sharon Wagg, PhD researcher
Loughborough University
@SharonWagg**

Presentation Outline



- Research aim
- Literature Review findings
 - Methodology
- Multi-layered approach
 - Data Collection
- Activity Theory analysis
- Key Findings so far
 - References



Research Aim

To investigate digital inclusion initiatives in rural communities: a UK perspective

Why?

To bring together digital inclusion policy and practice with academic research

To problematize digital inclusion as a phenomena

To gain a greater understanding of the challenges of implementing digital inclusion solutions

To disseminate research and offer recommendations for digital inclusion stakeholders

Literature review findings

- Digital inclusion initiatives are complex and multi-layered in nature (Wagg, et al., 2019)
- Existing research on digital inclusion is fragmented, and the theoretical understanding and foundations for studying digital inclusion are scarce (Wagg et al., 2018; Wagg, et al., 2019)
- The problem of digital exclusion has still not been adequately resolved and commentators worry that pushing on with ambitious digital policy agendas will exacerbate existing inequality of access to digital services (Hepburn, 2018)

Methodology

- Qualitative Exploratory Case Study (England, Scotland & Wales)
- Semi-structured interviews, observations and focus groups
- Macro, meso, micro
- Document analysis
- Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
- Activity Theory for conceptual/analytical framework (Vygotsky, 1978; Engeström, 1987)

Multi-layered approach

Macro level

Meso level

(the missing piece of the puzzle)

Micro level

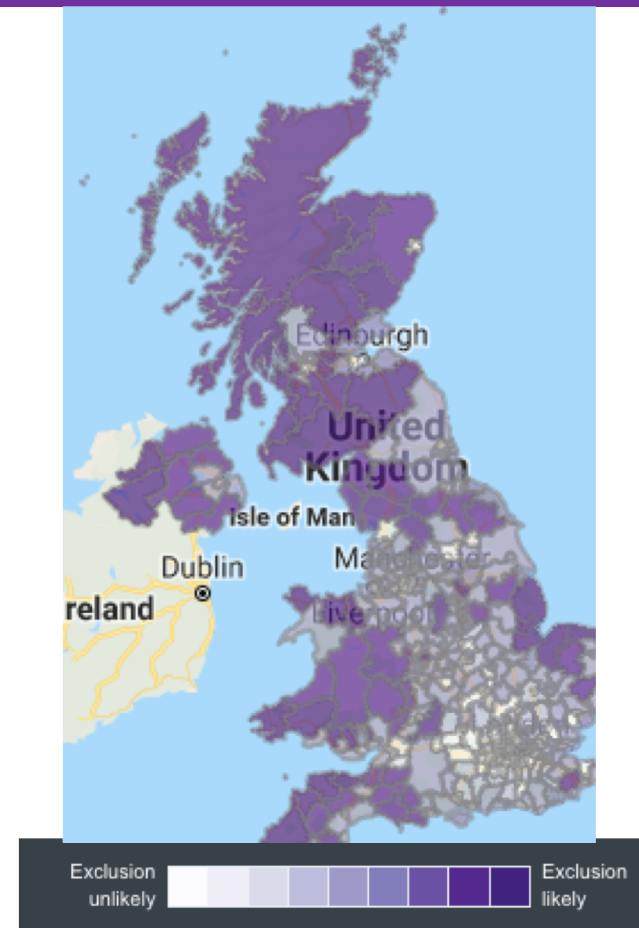
Data Collection

Three rural locations

Macro level – interviews

Meso level – interviews, focus groups, observations

Micro level – interviews, focus groups, observations

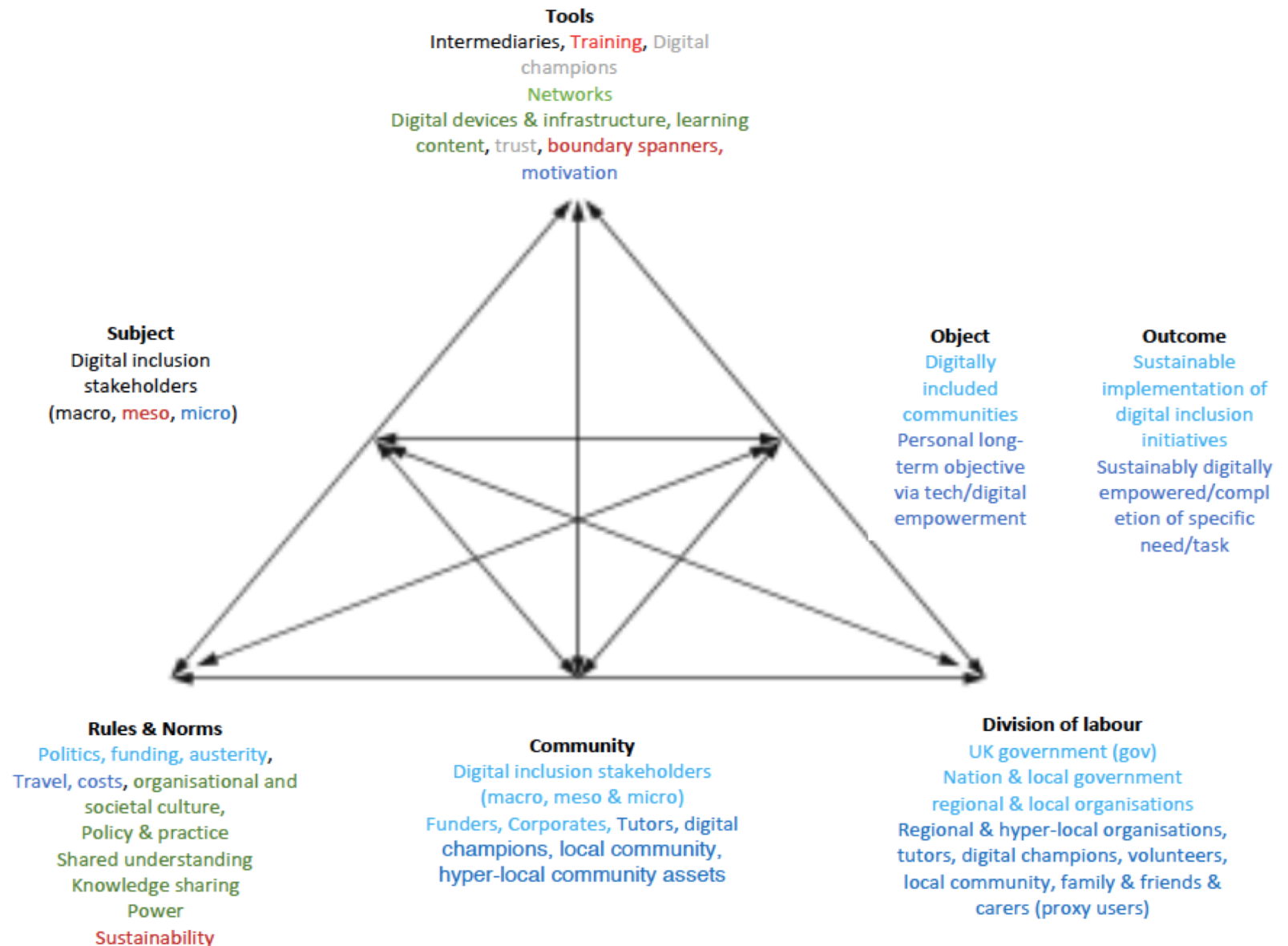


Source: Tech Partnership, 2017

Activity Theory Analysis (in progress)

Macro
Meso
Micro

Key
Macro
Meso
Micro
Macro, meso, micro
Macro, meso
Meso, micro



Funding & investment

“Not so many organisations are doing digital inclusion outreach work in rural areas largely due to the costs of travelling and the lack of funding. It’s difficult to get funding for rural areas as digital inclusion funding is often, but not always, target driven” [Director of a third sector organisation]

“How we tackle it [digital exclusion] in rural communities is a big issue and one that we are probably only just beginning to get to grips with, especially as so many banks and GP surgeries have been closed” [Manager at third sector organisation]

“Often the statutory services are not there in rural areas or as accessible in rural areas as they are in urban areas or semi-urban areas” [Programme manager at third sector organisation]

Knowledge Sharing

Some evidence of stakeholders coming together and sharing best practice and innovative ideas, but still a need for more joined up thinking

“The more we can create forums to come and discuss the better. I don’t think there has been enough of those spaces” [UK Government official within digital]

Knowledge sharing activities evidenced at macro, meso and micro level

- Macro – as a convenor
- Meso – partnerships, macro and micro (trainers learning from beneficiaries)
- Micro – between learners/beneficiaries

Trust

Trusted people, trusted relationships, trusted places, trusted partnerships

“The nature of the people who are not online are not going to get online through traditional approaches where by people will cross the threshold of some kind of educational institution. In order to help these people to get online, the most likely person to help them is someone who is trusted, someone who has understanding of why they need to be online, can help them with skills, motivation and confidence.” [Programme manager at third sector organisation]

“We work through intermediary organisations. We want to make sure that we are working closely with a whole host of organisations who have those relationships with individuals, its trusted people in local places who are going to help those who are not online” [Head of service of government funded body]

Intermediaries & Boundary Spanning

Findings reveal a clear dependency on intermediaries to deliver digital inclusion activities, yet not all **intermediaries** have sufficient digital skills to support digitally excluded communities.

“Small scale initiatives that have been happening thus far have shown that digital skills of staff need to be looked at first before they get the confidence and ability to be able to impart that information to others” [Government official within digital]

Findings also reveal some intermediaries are in the position to be able to break down barriers and span boundaries (**boundary spanners**) across the macro, meso, micro levels of digital inclusion. Important attributes include knowledge at local, regional, and national level, the ability to connect and bring organisations together, and to be able to share knowledge.

Key Findings so far...

- Digital inclusion is complex and multi-layered in nature
- Activity Theory helps define macro/meso/micro level digital inclusion activities (but also reveals blurring between each level)
- Activity Theory helps reveal tensions, contradictions and dynamics between AT elements and factors
- **Knowledge sharing** is fundamental to the success of sustainable digital inclusion initiatives
- **Power, trust** and **culture** need further exploration
- **Funding** and **investment** is a problem for rural communities
- **Boundary spanners** and **intermediaries** as key sustainable digital inclusion activities

References

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology* 3(2), pp. 77–101

Engeström, Y. (1987) *Learning by expanding: An activity-theoretical approach to developmental research*, Orienta-Konsultit: Helsinki.

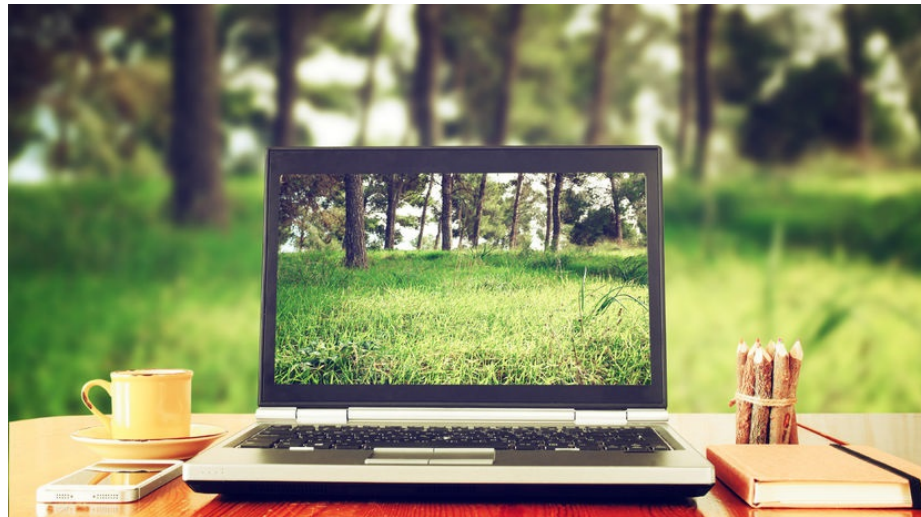
Hepburn, P. (2018) A New Governance Model for Delivering Digital Policy Agendas: A Case Study of Digital Inclusion Amongst Elderly People in the UK. *International Journal of E-Planning Research*, 7 (3)

Vygotsky, L. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological functions*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wagg, S., Simeonova, B., and Cooke, L. (2018) Exploring digital inclusion initiatives through the lens of Activity Theory. *European Conference of Information Systems*

Wagg, S., Simeonova, B., and Cooke, L. (2019) Digital inclusion and Women's Health and Well-Being in Rural Communities, in: Yates and Rice (Eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Technology and Society*, Oxford University Press, UK

Thank You



s.wagg@lboro.ac.uk

@SharonWagg