

# What are the Possibilities of a Good Digital Society?

*Introduction to a set of papers  
commissioned by the British Academy*

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## Introduction

The discussion papers that form this series are part of the British Academy’s Digital Society policy programme, which draws upon the Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy (the ‘SHAPE’ disciplines) to explore the ways in which digital technologies, tools, and practices shape and are shaped by our society, and to address the questions of what makes for a good digital society and how policymakers can navigate the digital society in the coming decade.

The Academy’s Digital Society programme began in 2022, emerging from a variety of preceding activities that laid groundwork for the workstream. This included the Academy’s [COVID-19 and Society: Shaping the COVID Decade](#) project and our 2021 partnership with UCL Public Policy on [Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Work](#).<sup>1</sup> From 2022 to 2023, the work in the Digital Society programme centred on an independent project on digital technology and inequality that was commissioned by the Government Office for Science. This project explored the relationship between digital inequalities and existing societal inequalities and examined how advances in digital technology can mitigate or exacerbate existing inequalities, as well as how existing inequalities pose challenges for access and skills related to digital technology. Insights from this project informed a long-form report, [Understanding Digital Poverty and Inequality in the UK](#), as well as a [Policy Brief](#) on Digital Technology and Inequality.<sup>2</sup>

Across 2023, the British Academy also engaged in a [range of activities](#) to feed into the UK government’s Artificial Intelligence (AI) Safety Summit, which included convening a pre-summit roundtable around the topic of the possibilities of AI for public good.<sup>3</sup> In April 2024, we also launched a Digital Society-themed call as part of our [Policy-led Innovation Fellowship](#) scheme, in which Fellows work with policy partners specified by the British Academy.<sup>4</sup>

## What makes a good digital society?

Building on the above activities, at the end of 2023 the British Academy began a four-stage, multi-year programme around ‘What makes a good digital society?’ This programme set out the work in four consecutive stages: Possibilities, Principles, Processes, and Practices. Thinking through the *possibilities* of digital societies was identified as a crucial starting point, because it focuses on how to identify and balance the various visions, hopes, fears, and aspirations for a digital society that exist for different stakeholders and communities. From this, we will move on to think through the *principles* and values underlying different notions of the possible digital society. However, while principles-based thinking is valuable and necessary in this space, especially in a fast-changing policy contexts, it can leave scope for misapplication and misunderstanding. It is therefore crucial to also think beyond principles, to identify means to enact, implement, and embed these principles (*processes*), and how people and organisations (a variety of actors) work with such processes and principles in *practice*. The four stages are:

1. **Possibilities;** What are the possibilities of a good digital society?
2. **Principles;** What are the principles that underpin a good digital society?
3. **Processes;** What are the processes and mechanisms available to implement the principles of a good digital society?
4. **Practices;** What does a good digital society look like in practice?

The papers in this volume were commissioned as part of the first stage of this programme. We invited contributions from across the SHAPE disciplines that explored the question, ‘What are the possibilities of a good digital society?’

<sup>1</sup> The British Academy (2021), [COVID-19 and Society: Shaping the COVID Decade](#); The British Academy, UCL (2021), [AI and the Future of Work](#); The British Academy, The Royal Society, [Data Governance](#).

<sup>2</sup> The British Academy (2022), [Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK](#), The British Academy, London; The British Academy (2023), [Digital Technology & Inequality: Policy Brief](#), The British Academy, London.

<sup>3</sup> [British Academy engagement around the UK AI Safety Summit](#).

<sup>4</sup> [Innovation Fellowships 2024-25 – Route B: Policy-led \(Digital Society\)](#)

## Overview of papers

Before turning to the range of different responses to the central question across the papers, it is important to note that some papers critically interrogated the question itself. The prompt, ‘What are the possibilities of a good digital society?’ has a normative component to it, particularly in relation to the notion of the ‘good’ (though arguably concepts such as the ‘digital’ and the ‘digital society’ are also value-laden and contingent), and this was challenged by two papers in particular.

### Unpacking notions of the ‘good’ digital society

In their cross-cutting paper, ‘[What Do We Mean When We Talk About a Good Digital Society?](#)’, the Digital Good Network (DGN)<sup>5</sup> consider what is taken for granted in the question itself, pointing out that definitions of the ‘good’ are highly contested and often underpinned by contradictory understandings of what counts as good.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, asking what is ‘good’ also requires asking who decides “whether, how, when, where, and for whom digital technologies are good.”<sup>7</sup> Their paper acknowledges the different philosophical traditions from which different notions of the good descend, noting that scholarship has historically focused upon narrow definitions of the good derived from the global North, while overlooking perspectives from Global South and Indigenous cultures, such that dominant definitions have “prioritised the individual over the community.”<sup>8</sup> Similarly, terms like ‘digital’, ‘data’, and ‘AI’ are often widely formulated, taken to encompass a variety of different technologies, systems, and processes depending on their context of use.

However, the DGN argue that the term ‘good’ is not solely problematic; it can also be a useful tool to consider the experiences of people from a diverse array of groups and think through the complex politics of data, a means to productively “imagine” the possible worlds and futures that we wish to create for society. Accordingly, they suggest three essential components of what constitutes a good digital society – equity, resilience, and sustainability – and point to various projects within their network that are working on delivering research that unpack how these components of the good can be understood and addressed.

In concluding, they offer three propositions for policy work in this area, drawn from their collective work: the importance of listening to diverse users regarding the nature of the good; the need to consider the context-specific elements of definitions, perceptions, and recommendations related to digital technologies and systems; and, finally, the value of taking a principles-based approach, which involves setting standards and identifying shared beliefs as opposed to prescriptive rules.

Peter Bloom’s paper, ‘[Envisioning a Just and Sustainable Digital Future: Expanding Policy Horizons for a Good Digital Society](#)’, also challenges dominant conceptions of the good that have guided many digital policies to date, contending for a fundamental rethink of how we move globally toward a just and sustainable digital society.<sup>9</sup> Bloom proposes an alternative approach to developing digital policies based on principles of abundance, common resource sharing, sustainability, and participatory democracy, and shifting away from narrow market-driven approaches that either focus on “capitalist optimisation” or “future proofing”.<sup>10</sup> He argues that these are exemplified, respectively, by the UK’s pro-innovation approach to technology regulation and the EU’s proposed AI Act and its focus on individual protections and safeguarding fundamental rights.

Bloom suggests policymakers might therefore explore the possibilities of the following four levers for a digital society: (1) distributed (localised) production, (2) collective ownership, (3) environmental sustainability, and (4) participatory governance. While recognising the challenges associated with effecting systemic change that may appear utopian to some (including securing buy-in for, and scaling up, such approaches), he highlights a range of initiatives across global contexts that can operate as useful starting points for policymakers seeking to prioritise community ownership, ecological well-being, and the equitable distribution of the benefits of technological innovation across society. These initiatives include community wealth-building strategies, social, regenerative, and circular economy approaches, platform cooperatives, and community-based innovations.

Thus, a crucial next step for digital policy initiatives is to think through how digital technologies might be used to create more equitable, sustainable, and democratic societies,

<sup>5</sup> The Digital Good Network contributors consist of Scott Hale, University of Oxford; Rhianna Jones, BBC Research & Development; Helen Kennedy, University of Sheffield; Rachel Middlemass, Zinc VC; Abigail Millings, Sheffield Hallam University; Gina Neff, University of Cambridge; Jonathan Corpus Ong, University of Massachusetts Amherst; Reema Patel, Elgon Social Research; Dan Richards, Lancaster University; Kim Snooks, Lancaster University; Sara Wajid, Birmingham Museums Trust; Ros Williams, University of Sheffield.

<sup>6</sup> The Digital Good Network (2024), [What Do We Mean When We Talk About a Good Digital Society?](#), The British Academy.

<sup>7</sup> The Digital Good Network, [What Do We Mean When We Talk About a Good Digital Society?](#), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Bloom, P. (2024), [Envisioning a Just and Sustainable Digital Future: Expanding Policy Horizons for a Good Digital Society](#), The British Academy.

<sup>10</sup> Bloom, [Envisioning a Just and Sustainable Digital Future](#), p. 1.

through multi-level policies that promote technological development and adoption “in ways that prioritise the well-being of people and the planet over the accumulation of profit and power.”<sup>11</sup> In short, he is contrasting policies that seek to use digital technologies to uphold the ‘good’ of existing (dominant) societal structures, with those that use digital technologies in efforts to reimagine, transform, and improve our collective understanding of a good society, and our ability to get there.

The remainder of the papers in this set contribute to this kind of reimagining, by thinking through the challenges associated with current approaches to digital policy across a range of sectors, considering the variety of alternative possibilities that re-envisioning the status quo could have for a good digital society, and offering some routes forward to transform these possibilities into shared principles, implementable processes, and continued practices. For the purposes of this introductory overview, the contributions have been divided into four clusters. We also anticipate that these clusters will provide a basis for activities within our Digital Society programme as it moves into its subsequent phases of work.

### Digital public services in a good digital society

The first cluster of papers envision a range of different possibilities for what digital public services might look like in a good digital society.

Anna Dent’s contribution, ‘[Digital Social Security: Towards Disciplinary or Relational Futures?](#)’, examines two distinct approaches to employment support to ask what a good digital public service might look like in the context of social security.<sup>12</sup> As the UK’s Universal Credit (UC) system is now largely mediated through automated decision-making systems and digitised processes, Dent argues that digitalisation is a tool for the implementation of UC’s broader objectives such as the reduction of budgets and claimant numbers, combatting fraud, and the implementation of tools to influence claimant behaviour. The standardisation process involved in the datafication of claimant identities in this ‘disciplinary’ system generates potential for discrimination, bias, and harm towards applicants, with the most vulnerable populations usually the most negatively affected. This “distant and non-human” disciplinary approach aligns with the “belief that more data will always lead to better outcomes from public services.”<sup>13</sup>

Dent contrasts the disciplinary approach with the possibilities offered through a ‘relational’ model of public services, which puts service users in control and prioritises the relationships between a service and the community, and between citizens or service users. Such systems are often designed in collaboration with the communities they serve (as opposed to imposed upon them) and aim to support the building of relationships within the community and the generation of social capital. This relational model points back to the principle of localised production and diverse participation that both Bloom and DGN highlight in their papers. Dent notes that most current examples of relational services exist in local or regional contexts (and acknowledges programmes in Scotland and Liverpool), and that in these cases relational support programmes have been found to improve employment outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

Yet the challenge of scaling up a relational model from the local to the national context remains, as political contexts and underlying policy drivers, the process of standardisation itself in digital systems, and even the aim of linking employment-seeking with benefits entitlement, may create a fundamental mismatch between social security infrastructure at the national level and an implementation of relational principles. In concluding, Dent suggests some potential starting points from which to navigate this dilemma, including the co-design of services with service users, the facilitation of relationships between UC claimants, and the joining up of services in a more holistic fashion (for instance, through the creation of a portal or data-sharing system that enables claimants to explore a package of support across government services – including housing, employment support, tax and debt management, and so on).

In ‘[The Possibilities of a Public Service Intervention to Support a Good Digital Society](#)’, Helen Jay similarly suggests that current digital policies toward the digital public sphere, such as the Online Safety Act, the Digital Markets, Consumer, and Competition Bill, or the UK’s ‘pro-innovation’ approach to regulating AI, have kept a narrow focus on fostering economic growth, minimising negative harms, and preventing misinformation, rather than looking to proactively support improved social and democratic outcomes.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, she contends that the UK’s historical approach to media policy, which has “sought to deliver positive civic ‘freedoms’ oriented at the public good through public models, funding and regulation”, can offer lessons for what good digital ‘public service’ style interventions might look like.

<sup>11</sup> Bloom, *Envisioning a Just and Sustainable Digital Future*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Dent, A. (2024), *Digital Social Security: Towards Disciplinary or Relational Futures?*, The British Academy.

<sup>13</sup> Dent, *Digital Social Security*. As governments often draw from digital innovations employed in social security systems in other countries to develop their own policies, they risk an unmitigated expansion of authoritarian

approaches to disciplinary social security despite known issues relating to accuracy, bias, surveillance, and privacy – Dent gives the examples of predictive analytics, biometrics, electronic data cards, and job matching data analysis.

<sup>14</sup> Dent, *Digital Social Security*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Jay, H. (2024), *The Possibilities of a Public Service Intervention to Support a Good Digital Society*, The British Academy.

Jay points out that the for-profit structural incentives that drive the business models of dominant contemporary digital platforms, which emphasise attention engagement and data extraction, often do not align with expectations that technology platforms should also be delivering public good, or, in the words of the British Academy's Future of the Corporation report, that they should be purposeful, producing profitable solutions to the problems of people and planet, rather than profiting from problems.<sup>16</sup> As an example of this tension, Jay points to the controversy that OpenAI faced in November 2023 following the dismissal and then reinstatement of CEO Sam Altman by the non-profit's board, a dispute that hinged upon the board's concerns around the rapid pace of AI development versus Altman's vision for commercial growth.<sup>17</sup>

By contrast, Jay suggests that public service broadcasting has operated as a type of 'positive' regulation to "promote the desirable" – such as informed citizenship, trusted information, equal access to knowledge, and cultural diversity – rather than just stopping the undesirable. Many of the entities that deliver public service broadcasting (e.g. BBC, Channel 4) are publicly owned, and have to adhere to detailed public service obligations, and treat their users "first and foremost as citizens participating in a society, rather than as consumers in a marketplace."<sup>18</sup> She sets out a number of possible ways in which the public broadcasting approach could be implemented for a digital society through a combination of funding mechanisms, ownerships models, and regulation, including platform cooperatives, the development of 'pro-social' tools, and the adoption of 'full stack' approaches that consider how non-commercially driven, public-oriented interventions targeted at digital platforms could deliver public benefit at different layers, from distribution of technology to content moderation.<sup>19</sup>

Jacob Ward's paper, '[The Futures Past of the UK's Digital Communications Infrastructure](#)', turns to the history of Britain's national telecommunications infrastructure as a site for developing and implementing plans for digitalising the nation.<sup>20</sup> Examining the early stages of digitalisation in the 1960s to the privatisation of British Telecom (BT) in 1980s, Ward draws three lessons from the ways in which policymakers in the past characterised the aims of public digital infrastructure. First, he contends that history shows

that policymakers must engage with telecom engineers and strategists much earlier than they have in the past. If not, technical decisions made by engineers and strategists may – even unintentionally – set undesirable policy directions that are hard to rectify.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, Ward highlights how leaving policy directions to network operators led to situations in which the network's most commercially valuable customers steered the development of communications infrastructure, noting how large business users in the financial services sector of the 1970s established a lobby to influence the direction of Post Office telecoms strategy. This lobby argued for a financial purpose for digitalisation that would be best met through privatisation and competition, and Ward contends that this weakened BT's commitment to its less commercially valuable users, such as residential users and small businesses, while also closing off alternative pathways for British telecommunications strategy. Crucially, Ward points out that similar dynamics exist today, noting that it remains unclear whether Openreach and telephone service providers will be adequately prepared for these users' needs during the digital switchover initially planned for 2025 (now 2027).<sup>22</sup>

Finally, Ward emphasises that "policymakers may want to consider new, alternative structures for the organisation of Britain's telecom infrastructure, especially for consumers, rather than providers," particularly arrangements that can transcend binaries of privatisation and re-nationalisation.<sup>23</sup> The privatisation of BT closed off alternative futures of the UK's digital infrastructure, such as the adoption of a regionalised system model, the use of community technology initiatives, collective purchasing and switching, or regional cooperatives, which could give consumers greater purchasing power and align network initiatives with social needs.

Drawing across three different contexts – social security, public service broadcasting and media, and communications infrastructure – Dent, Jay, and Ward offer three ways to re-think the possibilities of 'good' digital public services. All three papers centre upon systems that are currently primarily developed, diffused, and governed in a top-down manner. In the next section, we turn to a set of papers that think through the possibilities of a good digital society by asking what we can learn from digital initiatives and practices that have emerged from specific communities in a bottom-up fashion.

<sup>16</sup> The British Academy (2021), *Policy and Practice for Purposeful Business*, The British Academy, London.

<sup>17</sup> Jay, H., *The Possibilities of a 'Public Service' Intervention to Support a Good Digital Society*, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Jay, H., *The Possibilities of a 'Public Service' Intervention to Support a Good Digital Society*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Jay, H., *The Possibilities of a 'Public Service' Intervention to Support a Good Digital Society*, p. 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, J. (2024), *The Futures Past of the UK's Digital Communications Infrastructure*, The British Academy.

<sup>21</sup> Ward, *The Futures Past of the UK's Digital Communications Infrastructure*. Ward cites the examples of the Viewphone and the millimetric waveguide, two technologies developed by the Post Office from the 1960s onward, and both of which were ultimately failures, as examples of the risks associated with relying on singular, technical visions of digitalisation when setting long-term policy strategy.

<sup>22</sup> Ward, *The Futures Past of the UK's Digital Communications Infrastructure*.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, *The Futures Past of the UK's Digital Communications Infrastructure*, p.10.



## The role of community-led innovations in a good digital society

The second cluster of papers envision a range of different possibilities for community innovations, agency, and resistance in a good digital society.

In ‘[Building a Good Digital Society from the Grassroots: Harnessing the Tradition of Community-led Initiatives in the Governance of Digital Services and Infrastructures](#),’ Paolo Gerli examines the challenges of sustainability and scalability that grassroots digital initiatives face and offers both policymakers and researchers a set of actions to help sustain such initiatives and promote systemic change toward a good digital society.<sup>24</sup> Gerli presents three forms of cutting-edge community-led initiatives from across the world, some of which have been mentioned in the papers already discussed here: community networks (broadband infrastructures built, managed, and co-operatively owned by groups of users), platform cooperatives (digital platforms run as and by cooperatives of workers or other forms of cooperative organisations), and data cooperatives (cooperative organisations that pool the data of multiple subjects and negotiate on their behalf the conditions at which third parties can access and use their data).<sup>25</sup>

While many such initiatives have produced societally beneficial outcomes within their contexts, they come with a range of challenges. Community network initiatives are often undertaken in contrast to nationwide or regional programmes that support broadband deployments, with the aim of empowering local communities to achieve technological sovereignty over their broadband infrastructures. Similarly, procurement regulations on public spending have led governments to favour larger commercial providers over community-led networks because of the economic benefits and lower risks associated with large-scale corporate contracts. Grassroots platform cooperatives often struggle to scale up their activities due to resource limitations and a lack of institutional support. It is not yet clear how data cooperatives can maintain financial viability. Moreover, data cooperatives will need to develop the skills and workforce to appropriately navigate the technical standards and procedures involved in data sharing, raising questions about whether it is viable to ask traditional cooperatives to undertake this function, or whether new entities are needed.<sup>26</sup>

However, there are some promising routes forward. Gerli notes that federative models have enabled platform cooperatives to preserve their local nature while developing technologies at scale. Such approaches could plausibly be used in creating sustainable business models for e-government and e-healthcare services. Likewise, research and incubation programmes could provide frameworks for testing alternative cooperative models for data governance, creating opportunities to pilot the use of collective data intermediaries in different industrial and geographic settings. Gerli also recommends follow-up to pilot projects that commits additional resources to the scale-up and replicability of successful practices, additional measures to strengthen the competitive positions of new entrants to markets (such as the revision of procurement regulations), local and regional authorities taking up roles in integrating grassroots approaches with local initiatives and infrastructures, and the dissemination of knowledge of models for governing digital transformation through schools, colleges and universities.<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, Kyle Beadle examines acts of data resistance across the world in ‘[The Possibilities of Data Resistance in a Digital Society](#)’.<sup>28</sup> Beadle argues that data resistance in a digital society empowers individuals to reclaim control over their digital identities and experiences and ensures that they have adequate representation for their interests and can hold to account those who violate these interests. He suggests that a ‘good’ digital society mirrors a ‘good’ democratic society, by supporting individual and collective agency, autonomy, and empowerment, strengthening democratic values, promoting equality and justice, and stimulating market competition. Likewise, a ‘good’ datafied society is “one that supports autonomy and enables the agency of collectives and individuals to express ownership over the collection, storage, and usage of their data.”<sup>29</sup>

Privacy-violating data practices and harms derived from algorithmic bias and discrimination, which also weaken collective autonomy, tend to disproportionately affect marginalised and vulnerable populations – including LGBTQ+, refugee, and racial minority populations – and Beadle notes that data resistance is largely led by these negatively affected groups. He identifies two interconnected forms of data resistance: individual data resistance, which involves individual users seizing control of their own digital identities, data portability, and online experiences, and collective data resistance, which highlights ongoing injustices and supplies the tools needed for solidarity (particularly in contexts of corporate algorithmic decision-making which often aims to isolate users from each other), including developing strategies to resist surveillance.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Gerli, P. (2024), *Building a Good Digital Society from the Grassroots: Harnessing the Tradition of Community-led Initiatives in the Governance of Digital Services and Infrastructures*, The British Academy.

<sup>25</sup> Gerli, *Building a Good Digital Society from the Grassroots*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Gerli, *Building a Good Digital Society from the Grassroots*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Gerli, *Building a Good Digital Society from the Grassroots*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>28</sup> Beadle, K. (2024), *The Possibilities of Data Resistance in a Digital Society*, The British Academy.

<sup>29</sup> Beadle, *The Possibilities of Data Resistance in a Digital Society*, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup> Beadle, *The Possibilities of Data Resistance in a Digital Society*.

Beadle provides a range of examples of such resistance practices and technologies in his paper, while also pointing to and addressing some of the challenges relating to data resistance (which include the need for democracies to protect themselves from disinformation and extremism, the use of tools and strategies of resistance by criminals and terrorist organisation, and the effects of the ‘digital divide’).

Beadle ends by offering three policy provocations that consider how policy could leverage or embed the positive and beneficial elements of data resistance. The first is the imposition of a data tax for corporations and governments that collect, analyse, manipulate, and utilise individual data as their main business model, to be applied to the entire digital economy rather than one company. The second is the adoption of participatory governance and deliberative democracy in the design of data regulations, to ensure these do not violate individual and collective freedoms. The third is the establishment of self-sovereign identity for citizens through the synthesis of various identity systems across digital services, to enable individuals to control access to their digital identity across the digital economy.<sup>31</sup>

Kate Miltner and Tim Highfield, on the other hand, examine sector-specific challenges and strategies to reclaim individual and collective agency over their data and the use of generative AI in their paper, [‘The Possibilities of “Good” Generative AI in the Cultural and Creative Industries.’](#)<sup>32</sup> They engage with concerns that have been voiced across artistic and creative industries regarding the training of AI models on artists’ work without their permission, and the threat of AI taking work away from creative professionals or even changing the nature of that work without their consent. On the other hand, they also recognise the opportunities and creative possibilities that AI offers across culture and the arts, through enabling professionals to experiment with new creative practices.

Miltner and Highfield divide the primary critiques aimed at generative AI in the creative and cultural industries into three interrelated categories: bias-related harms, impacts on labour, and the cultural impact of AI. They suggest that the UK government can grow both its creative and AI sectors through leading in ‘good’ AI development across four areas that address these critiques: consent (the creation of a mechanism by which creatives can give permission for AI to be trained on their work, and be credited appropriately), remuneration (licensing arrangements to ensure artists are paid for the use of their work by AI, and registries to enable artists to identify where this has been the case and be compensated accordingly), consultation (the incorporation of the voices of creative practitioners into policymaking, consultations, and negotiations on AI development and regulation) and supporting diverse cultural outputs (supporting alternative and artist-driven approaches to generative AI development).<sup>33</sup>

Miltner and Highfield provide examples of emerging initiatives across these areas and examine three case studies of artists who are experimenting with the boundaries of AI in novel and innovative ways. Ultimately, they argue that a ‘good’ incorporation of generative AI in the creative and culture industries “needs to recognise and support the rights and interests of artists while also fostering creative and innovative applications of these technologies.”<sup>34</sup> They suggest that, given the only recent widespread adoption of generative AI across the economy and to the public, we are not yet “locked in” to a technological pathway that violates rights and negatively impacts livelihoods. Much like Gerli and Beadle’s contributions, they suggest that policymakers have an opportunity to create a good digital society by learning from, listening to, and working with community-led initiatives and innovations across the digital economy.

## Wellbeing and sustainability in a good digital society

The third cluster of papers collectively consider what the future of health, wellbeing, and sustainability might look like across a good digital society.

For instance, Morrow et al.’s paper, [‘Exploring Artificial Intelligence Technologies and Quality of Life for Older People Ageing in Place in Super-Aged Societies’](#), considers the opportunities and challenges associated with the use of digital and AI technologies to address the fact that growing numbers of older people worldwide are choosing to “age in place” in their own homes, or with family and friends in their communities.<sup>35</sup> Morrow et al. discuss the various ways that digital technologies might be used to benefit and enhance quality of life for ageing populations – particularly given emerging health and care supply challenges and increasing demand for care – in ways that do not simultaneously disadvantage individuals who lack the capacity to digitally engage.

The benefits that they point to include increased opportunities for remote monitoring and clinical management of conditions at home, early detection and improved self-management of health issues, addressing quality of life issues relating to mobility, and the promotion of active lifestyles. Alongside these healthcare benefits, digital technologies can also provide indirect benefits by creating opportunities for social connection, company and companionship, supporting older people with their physical, financial, and emotional safety and security, improving nutrition and food security, fostering a sense of independence and autonomy, and facilitating broader spiritual activities.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Beadle, [The Possibilities of Data Resistance in a Digital Society](#), pp. 10-12.

<sup>32</sup> Miltner, K., Highfield, T. (2024), [The Possibilities of “Good” Generative AI in the Cultural and Creative Industries](#), The British Academy.

<sup>33</sup> Miltner, Highfield, [The Possibilities of “Good” Generative AI in the Cultural and Creative Industries](#), p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Miltner, Highfield, [The Possibilities of “Good” Generative AI in the Cultural and Creative Industries](#), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Morrow, E., Ross, F., Naessens, E., Kelly, C., Lynch, M. (2024), [Exploring Artificial Intelligence Technologies and Quality of Life for Older People Ageing in Place in Super-Aged Societies](#), The British Academy.

<sup>36</sup> Morrow et al., [Exploring Artificial Intelligence Technologies and Quality of Life for Older People](#), p. 1.



To ensure that ageing people are able to access and benefit from digital developments in care contexts, Morrow et al. emphasise five crucial policy levers: (1) regulatory oversight, including evidence-based guidelines to inform the development and deployment of technologies to safeguard against risks and harms; (2) ensuring equity and fairness through policy frameworks that uphold rights, standards and anti-discrimination laws; (3) adequate funding and investment in both technologies and human resources, including grants and incentives for innovation and public-private partnerships; (4) the implementation of comprehensive and targeted digital inclusion initiatives; and (5) stakeholder engagement through collaboration between policymakers and public service providers, technology companies, and advocacy groups and civil society organisations.<sup>37</sup>

Hertog, Weinstein and Zhao take a different approach to considering wellbeing, by thinking through the implications of parental digital monitoring.<sup>38</sup> In their contribution, '[Data-Driven Parenting: Robust Research and Policy Needed to Ensure that Parental Digital Monitoring Promotes a Good Digital Society](#),' they discuss how digital monitoring technologies are now significantly increasing parents' capacity to oversee and limit the online and offline behaviour of their children. While such technologies have the potential to increase children's safety and help parents feel secure, they also come with risks such as the potential to undermine trust in families and hinder children's development of self-regulation.

However, Hertog, Weinstein and Zhao suggest that these risks can be mitigated through strategic human-centred design, how technologies are marketed to families, and the ways in which they are adopted into family practices. Echoing Jay's paper, Hertog, Weinstein and Zhao argue that "existing policymaking, such as the Online Safety Bill, tends to focus on preventing harms, but ignores the possible benefits that may go hand-in-hand with the risks."<sup>39</sup> They offer three considerations and concomitant recommendation to guide researchers and policymakers to realising a future in which digital monitoring technologies can bring benefit to society, parents, and children.

First, they suggest prioritising and investing in research that does not solely think about children's safety in a narrow sense that focuses on avoiding harms but overlooks other goals of parenting such as connecting with and empowering children. Second, they argue that research must consider individual characteristics and the societal and family contexts in which parental monitoring occurs, and should inform the ways that policy addresses the variation in the use of

digital parenting technologies across UK homes. Finally, they propose that design decisions made in the development of monitoring technologies should include a participatory role for children, so that technologies are designed in a way that fosters children's wellbeing and abilities to self-regulate. They call for industry to facilitate ways for parents to engage and support their children with self-regulation, and for regulators to encourage the adoption of participatory design practices.<sup>40</sup>

In '[The Impacts of Digitalised Daily Life on Climate Change](#)', Amanta et al. consider the environmental implications of a good digital society, specifically exploring the indirect energy impacts of digitalisation (impacts on energy consumption due to changes to processes, systems, and behaviours) as opposed to the direct impacts (the energy used in use, manufacture, and disposal of digital devices and infrastructure).<sup>41</sup> Specifically, they explore three mechanisms through which digital innovations lead to indirect changes to energy and carbon consumption: efficiency (the capacity of digital technologies to streamline processes and resource allocation), substitution (the replacement of traditional products or services by digital alternatives with different energy implications) and rebound (where expected gains such as energy demand reduction are offset by additional consumption/usage of goods/services).<sup>42</sup>

Amanta et al. contend that a good digital future will uphold both social wellbeing and energy reduction, empowering individuals and helping them reduce energy consumption, and that achieving these goals requires meeting what they term systemic pre-conditions. These pre-conditions include equal and fair digital access, trust in tech companies, governments, and interactions in digital spaces, and ensuring users have informed control over how they use technologies and the ways that their data is being used. Accordingly, Amanta et al. map the potential indirect energy impacts of digital transformation across several household activities. They argue that meeting the systemic pre-conditions across these domains would significantly reduce energy demand from daily life in a scenario with high levels of digitalisation.<sup>43</sup>

In conclusion, Amanta et al. suggest that policymakers, research, and industry must develop a combination of targeted climate policies and novel business models to foster these pre-conditions, paying particular attention to the interaction effects between such initiatives. They propose five directions for a research agenda in this area, and four proactive policy strategies to realise a good digital future. These four strategies are (1) developing a standard measurement and reporting of energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions for a technology or application's

<sup>37</sup> Morrow et al., *Exploring Artificial Intelligence Technologies and Quality of Life for Older People*, p. 15.

<sup>38</sup> Hertog, E., Weinstein, N., Zhao, J. (2024), *Data-Driven Parenting: Robust Research and Policy Needed to Ensure that Parental Digital Monitoring Promotes a Good Digital Society*, The British Academy.

<sup>39</sup> Hertog et al., *Data-Driven Parenting*, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Hertog et al., *Data-Driven Parenting*, p. 8-12.

<sup>41</sup> Amanta, F., Kumar, P., Seger, M., Vrain, E. (2024), *The Impacts of Digitalised Daily Life on Climate Change*, The British Academy.

<sup>42</sup> Amanta et al., *The Impacts of Digitalised Daily Life on Climate Change*, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Amanta et al., *The Impacts of Digitalised Daily Life on Climate Change*, p. 3-4.

lifecycle, (2) embedding environmental sustainability as a goal in digital strategies, (3) developing cross-sector digital transformation policies, and (4) managing rebound effects by promoting sustainable business models.<sup>44</sup>

Collectively, the three papers in this section highlight tangible ways in which digital innovations can help to meet societal goals around health, wellbeing and sustainability, while also identifying important design, engagement, and governance mechanisms that need to be put in place to ensure these benefits are realised in equitable and sustainable ways. Governance mechanisms are given specific attention in the next cluster of papers.

## Governance and institutions in a good digital society

The fourth cluster of papers focus on the importance of good governance and effective institutions in realising a good digital society.

Rachel Coldicutt presents the case for a Digital Civil Society Observatory in her paper, [‘People Not Code: The Case for a Digital Civil Society Observatory.’](#)<sup>45</sup> She argues that a non-departmental public body of this kind in the UK would ensure that public experiences are more fairly represented across digital policymakers, noting the crucial role that civil society organisations play in anticipating, identifying, understanding, and responding to early indicators of societal changes and challenges. She sees such a body sitting alongside new and existing institutes, such as the AI Safety Institute and the Alan Turing Institute, functioning as a voice for public interest, undertaking horizon scanning, synthesising research and expertise from across civil society, and delivering research, social impact assessments, policy proposals, and training and best practice guidance. Indeed, such a mechanism could provide a function for the kinds of participatory governance and deliberative democracy that several of the papers have discussed.<sup>46</sup>

Coldicutt details the valuable ways that civil society organisations are uniquely positioned to provide support networks, empirical knowledge, and early identification of emerging trends, pointing to how it is vital for the sector to be engaged alongside government, academia, and industry in not only the development of digital strategy and policymaking, but also in direction setting and defining what a good digital society looks like on an ongoing basis.

These features make up what Coldicutt terms a ‘social sensing’ function of the Digital Civil Society Observatory, something that stands in contrast to ‘hard systems’ approaches to sociotechnical change (which tend to overlook the experiences of vulnerable people and communities and second- and third-order social or political outcomes of innovation and technology adoption and diffusion). As such, it provides a vital mechanism to identify, understand, and respond to the wider and more far-reaching societal impacts of existing and emerging digital technologies.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, in [‘Digital Inclusion for a Good Digital Society: Leveraging the Benefits and Mitigating the Dark Side’](#), Kacar and de Luca call for governments to prioritise digital inclusion efforts via mechanisms of citizens engagement, arguing that the preservation and restoration of citizens’ trust in governments and other institutions is a precondition for a good digital society.<sup>48</sup>

Kacar and de Luca point out that existing international policy goals, such as the United Nations’ aim as part of its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to ‘leave no one behind’ in the hybrid digital society, assume that digital technologies “reinforce and enhance the institutions that make society safe, stable, functional, and more sustainable.”<sup>49</sup> While this can be the case, Kacar and de Luca note that digital technologies can also lead to unanticipated effects that undermine institutions, such as a reduction in trust in public institutions, driven by an increasingly polarised, unreliable, and complex online information environment. In this way, efforts not to leave people behind can unintentionally create new obstacles to realising a good digital society. Rather, Kacar and de Luca claim that a “in a good digital society a digital ecosystem of technologies and actors works for the public interest by supporting the relationship between people and core societal institutions.”<sup>50</sup>

Kacar and de Luca ultimately contend that a good digital society is one that is participatory and responsive. They note that collaborative mechanisms with citizens, such as the co-production of public services, have been found to improve wellbeing, political accountability, and the management of budget deficits.<sup>51</sup> They also highlight that digital technologies can themselves be used to increase citizen participation through e-participation initiatives, which involve relevant stakeholders in online participatory processes around public decision-making and policymaking, and point to research that has found that e-participation has led to an increase in citizens feeling that they can influence decisions in their local area.

<sup>44</sup> Amanta et al., *The Impacts of Digitalised Daily Life on Climate Change*, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Coldicutt, R. (2024), *People Not code: The Case for a Digital Civil Society Observatory*, The British Academy.

<sup>46</sup> While Coldicutt and Kacar and de Luca’s papers focus more explicitly on governance and institutions, many of the other papers also engage with this theme. Indeed, the clusters noted in this summary are a useful means to think through the core themes across the papers but are by no means intended to be mutually exclusive.

<sup>47</sup> Coldicutt, *People Not Code*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Kacar, M., de Luca, L. (2024), *Digital Inclusion for a Good Digital Society: Leveraging the Benefits and Mitigating the Dark Side*, The British Academy.

<sup>49</sup> Kacar, de Luca, *Digital Inclusion for a Good Digital Society*, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Kacar, de Luca, *Digital Inclusion for a Good Digital Society*, p. 7.

<sup>51</sup> Kacar, de Luca, *Digital Inclusion for a Good Digital Society*, p. 10.

## Conclusion: Moving from Possibilities to Principles

In July 2024, the British Academy convened the paper authors with selected stakeholders from across policy, academia and civil society for a workshop to reflect upon the papers and the similarities and divergences across them. Furthermore, with the second stage of the British Academy's Digital Society programme in mind, participants were asked to reflect on the principles of a good digital society that might underpin the various visions discussed across the papers.

Workshop participants raised how digital technologies, tools and practices are so embedded in our everyday lives that it is impossible to separate out discussions around the 'good digital society' and the 'good society' more broadly. A recurring strand of the conversations focused on the risks of the key technologies and digital infrastructure upon which our societies depend being developed, owned, and managed by a few private technology companies, organisations that can and often do have aims and interests that do not always align with enhancing public good and delivering wider societal benefit. Additionally, participants noted that these companies tend to focus on developing new technologies as quickly as they can, but it is doubtful that they are aware of, or understand, the full extent of the societal impact of their innovations.

By contrast, participants suggested that, in a good digital society, technology companies would embed principles of inclusive, human-centred, value-informed design at the heart of their approaches to developing new technologies, working with different sectors, communities, and actors from across civil society, academia, and policy, and harnessing insights from both STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and SHAPE disciplines in order to better understand the societal impacts – both positive and negative – of their technologies. Such an approach would recognise that conceptions of the 'good' can and do vary between different communities, groups, and sectors across society, providing a basis for bridging differences and building systems that generate benefits that can be shared equitably.

Similarly, public engagement and participation emerged as key principles in a good digital society for shaping the design, monitoring, and regulation of new digital technologies and the legislation governing them. Participants emphasised the importance of participatory mechanisms as a means of promoting accountability that would enable both policymakers and private companies responsible for crucial digital infrastructures and services to consult

meaningfully with the public in their research, development, and evaluation processes. They stressed that a good digital society would be one realised through engagement with a diverse range of communities, including with children, young people, older age groups, and particularly with grassroots organisations, marginalised groups and those who do not wish to engage with the digital world, to ensure that their voices are heard and their values are taken into account, to encourage co-creation, and to enable digital technologies and policies that can improve outcomes across a wider range of different life circumstances and socioeconomic contexts.

Relatedly, participants pointed out that priority should be given to engaging communities most impacted by digital innovations (for example, artists and creatives whose livelihoods are already being negatively impacted by Generative AI technologies). Crucially, such engagement would build trust between stakeholders, in societal institutions, and in government – an essential component to a good digital society, according to Kacar and de Luca.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, given that the most harmful environmental and social impacts of digitalisation are likely to fall on the already marginalised and disadvantaged, numerous participants also suggested equity as a key principle of a good digital society that promotes social justice.

Finally, the group stressed the value of sustainability as a central principle in a good digital society, both in an environmental and social context. As noted by Amanta et al., digitalisation can produce a range of environmental externalities; while in some instances, it can reduce direct energy consumption, these reductions can be offset by increased indirect energy consumption and 'rebound effects'.<sup>53</sup> Other participants pointed out that digital innovations could be designed and employed to meet sustainable aims and needs of specific communities, for example improving the wellbeing of young people and parents, older age groups, and marginalised communities. Digital technologies, tools, and practices can help meet societal objectives around health, education and wellbeing, so participants suggested that in a good digital society environmental sustainability, and sustainability more broadly, could also be embedded as objectives in digital strategies.

The next stage of the British Academy's Digital Society programme will build upon the provocations in these papers and the ideas generated at the workshop to propose a set of principles that might usefully underpin these diverse visions of a good digital society, while looking to ensure that any such principles are feasible, and supported by mechanisms that transform them into ongoing praxis.

<sup>52</sup> Kacar, de Luca, *Digital Inclusion for a Good Digital Society*, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Amanta et al., *The Impacts of Digitalised Daily Life on Climate Change*, p. 6.

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