

Citizen Challenge Area:

Connected Citizen

How will future citizens remain digitally connected with each other, with public services and with the socio-political issues of the day?

We explore the role of digital technologies with respect to community engagement, democracy, discrimination, politics and action.

TEAM

Connected Citizen Leads: Prof Shaun Lawson and Dr Vasilis Vlachokyriakos

Academic team: : Professor Roger Burrows, Dr Ian Johnson, Dr Sarah Lewis, Dr Toby Lowe, Dr Kyle Montague

OVERVIEW

Citizens are – perhaps – better connected than ever before. However, such connectedness has not come without challenges nor unintended consequences. Social media platforms, for instance, have been widely criticized for limiting debate and tolerance around political & societal concerns, driving wedges between communities, and even families. Much of our exposure to narratives about the world around us - and each other – often seem influenced by online rumour and misinformation and the long-term implications of this are, as yet, unclear.

Meanwhile, such connectedness is by no means universal and equitable – as has been brutally exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond existing issues of digital access and literacy, we are witnessing new forms of exclusionary practices brought on by the irresponsible design of services and infrastructures that further marginalise vulnerable individuals and communities. Despite the rapid uptake of “digital-first” strategies in the public sector, we lack the technologies, processes and the deep understanding to support co-production with policy makers and citizens working together on social and civic issues.

The Connected Citizen Challenge area will explore how we can design and configure technology to support equitable citizen engagement around socio-political issues, support public consultation and democratic processes, and engage with policy makers.

Get involved:

- Find out more by having a chat with the Connected Citizen Challenge Area leaders, [Shaun](#) or [Vasilis](#), or contact [Rachel Pattinson, Centre Manager](#)
- Share your project ideas! If you have an idea you'd like the Centre for Digital Citizens support with, we'd love to [hear about it!](#)
- Visit the website: www.digital-citizens.uk

Areas we're interested in exploring

Misinformation, fake news and political participation: Social media is now often the mainstream fora for citizen participation in public discourse. Although it has contributed to significant positive action (e.g. #blacklivesmatter, #metoo), it can also support dissemination of misinformation, or fake news, which reduces our exposure to different viewpoints and limits tolerance to difference. We will explore how citizens are influenced online, and the role that unregulated and emerging technologies are playing in our lives. We will seek to better understand the role of social media in democratic, decision-making processes and social justice.

Inequalities of connectedness and participation: During COVID, the inequalities of internet and technology access have become more and more conspicuous. This has implications for equal connectivity to reliable and pluralistic information and access to services as well as the online participation in the creation of new services or value produced from citizen data. We aim to design inclusive processes and technologies to support equitable participation in the digital economy. This will include working with communities that are typically excluded from socio-technical design processes because of their abilities, expertise and socio-economic circumstances; and designing for increasing the quality, rather than the quantity, of our online social engagements.

Citizen data, sensemaking and collective action: The widespread dissemination of systems that collect and make sense of (big) data raises questions about the role and participation of citizens in deciding *what is important, how to act and how to make sense of everyday problems and solutions*. We are interested in exploring the role of technology in bringing people together around issues of concern and creating the conditions for the citizen-led collection and sensemaking of data to inform collective action. We will explore ways to legitimize such bottom-up projects through careful configuration of expert knowledge and data analysis processes; and explore the ways that such data projects can inform change.

Digital public services and policymaking: Public services are increasingly being delivered online through digital-first/only strategies, while "once-only" principles attempt to create centralised data repositories to be shared across services and departments. Although such digitalisation contributes to the efficiency of public services, it raises questions about their citizen and human-centeredness. In this area, we want to involve citizens in the co-production of digital public services, to better understand what a citizen-centred "once-only" strategy might look like. This includes the development of technologies for participatory and accountable local policymaking and exploring the relationship between digital democratic processes both at scale and a hyper-local context.

Examples of collaboration:

CuRAtoR (Challenging online fear And Othering): [CuRAtoR](#) was UK research council funded project which investigated the cultures of fear that are propagated through online othering and how this can lead to subsequent mistrust and stigmatization of groups or communities. We worked with activists to explore how new interactive digital experiences might be designed to counteract othering, and lead to more critical and balanced online debate around contemporary socio-political issues.

Let's Talk Parks: A [collaboration with Newcastle City Council](#) to design a public engagement and consultation programme to involve local people & multiple stakeholders in the decision-making processes on how the city's parks should be managed in the future. The project engaged over 3,000 citizens through design workshops and coordinated social media debates and ultimately informed the development of a new entity - Urban Green Newcastle (formerly Newcastle Parks Trust), tasked with running Newcastle's city parks.