

Developing a Minimum Digital Living Standard

Simeon Yates (University of Liverpool)

Co-authors: Chloe Blackwell, Katherine Hill (Loughborough University);

Emma Stone (Good Things Foundation)

Introduction

The 'Minimum Digital Living Standard' (MDLS) project provides a novel household-based assessment of digital needs - what a household needs to be digitally included. This UK nationwide mixed-methods project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation, Nominet, the Welsh and Scottish Governments.

Approach

The project used a combination of methods to develop and measure MDLS, including:

- Drawing on the Minimum Income Standard (MIS) methodology (Davis, A., et al., 2022; Blackwell, C., 2022; Hill, K., et al., 2015, 2016; Padley, et al., 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) to develop a definition of MDLS that established a 'minimum basket of digital goods, services, and skills' that households need to meet this standard. Covering households with dependent-age children, and households (single and couple) without children of working or of retirement age.
- UK-wide national survey of households with dependent age children (n=1582 households) with statistical and geographic evaluations of MDLS to explore correspondence with other social, economic, cultural, and digital measures.
- Multiple in-depth interviews and group consultations with stakeholders representing a variety of communities at risk of digital exclusion, to explore the relevance of the standard regarding key dimensions of lived experience and intersectionality, such as disability, ethnicity, rurality, and poverty.
- Engaging with government, regional, public and third sector organisations to explore the use of MDLS as a tool to inform policy development.

Why an MDLS?

To date, the majority of research on digital inequalities has focused on three issues: first, inequalities in material access to digital devices and internet connection; second, differences in digital skills; and third, differences in digital use. These can relate to socio-economic variations and the personal resources people have (Hargittai, 2001; Helsper, 2012; Van Deursen et al., 2014; Yates and Lockley, 2018; Yates et al., 2015; Yates and Lockley, 2020). However, this predominantly survey-based research is effectively 'top-down' in its assessment of what counts as digital inclusion or exclusion rather than drawing on citizens' perceptions of digital needs. While existing research shows that there is a complex interplay between levels and types of social and digital inequalities, current policy predominantly focuses on material access to technologies. There is, therefore, a substantial requirement for a deeper understanding to guide interventions. This must build on an in-depth assessment of household and community needs (not wants) to be digitally included.

Deliberative process and groups

These were undertaken with representative members of households across the UK in 4 stages:

- Orientation > Groups discussed what digital inclusion meant to them and developed a definition of MDLS which could then be presented to the next stages.
- Task> New groups worked together to agree the digital inclusion needs of hypothetical individuals within households (rather than their own needs) and how these could be met.
- Checkback > New groups reviewed the decisions from the task stage to identify any missing or unnecessary items and resolve where previous groups had been unable to agree.
- Final > New groups reviewed the lists of goods, services and skills resulting from the checkback stage and addressed any discrepancies.

The verbal MDLS definition from the Orientation phase is:

A minimum digital standard of living includes having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills, knowledge and support people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence.

The required goods, services, and skills needed to meet this as then deliberatively agreed by households through the process described above and is presented in the paper.

Survey

This was administered in person at home and covered a nationally representative sample of 1,582 households. This provided data on 4,616 individuals:

- 2,605 adults with parental responsibility
- 300 other adults
- 891 secondary school children
- 1,162 primary school children
- 681 pre-school children

Data were collected on the elements of MDLS and on a range of demographics. Postcode data were used to link detailed geodemographics. Results are weighted to maximise representativeness across UK household demographics.

Conclusions

This MDLS study moves research and policy debate forwards - away from simple individualised measures of access or skills - by taking a new bottom-up, citizen- and household-focused approach to understanding digital inclusion, exclusion, and inequalities. By utilising the MIS methodology to develop MDLS, we drew directly on the lived experience of citizens but situated the measure at the level of the household. This was particularly relevant in households with children where individual family members' needs and resources can interlink with each other. This helped us to:

- Understand digital exclusion as the product of a mix of factors (access to goods, services and skills

and knowledge) that limit citizens' and households' digital opportunities and participation.

- Understand digital inequalities as complex, relative to time and social context, and deeply linked to other aspects of social inequality.
- Understand which digital inclusion policies and interventions do or might best address the factors and contexts that limit citizens' and households' digital capabilities.