# Episode 9 – Digital Exclusions: mental health and digital life

## Transcript

**Introduction to OSS** [00:00:02] Welcome to our Sick Society, a podcast series where researchers from King's College, London and people with lived experience explore together how social factors contribute to mental health problems. We want to make you think and question society's role in mental health. What are the systems and the structures which mean some people are more likely to be mentally unwell than others? And crucially, what steps should society take from national government policies to local grassroots community organising? How can we cure our sick society?

**Dörte Bemme:** [00:00:46] Welcome to this episode. My name is Dörte Bemme, and I'm a lecturer at the Centre for Society and Mental Health. Today we talk about digital exclusion and how the demands of digital participation in nearly every area of life intersect with mental health and disability. Especially under Covid, the world has moved online. But only for those who can afford and know how to navigate the digital realm. This podcast explores digital exclusion from different angles. We ask how it is defined and addressed, what it feels and sounds like, and how it plays out in practice and local and global communities, and importantly - what can be done about it?

So this podcast has three parts that are rather different from each other. We start off by talking to Kate Scodellaro, a graduate researcher and activist about how digital exclusion intersects with inequality and how it is addressed in the UK. Then we hear from people who have experienced obstacles to digital participation, and we share the highlights of a theatre workshop that produced

fierce discussions, beautiful poetry and powerful soundscapes that bring to life the emotions, the challenges of digital exclusion, but also their visions for change and for meaningful support. Lastly, we will hear from a group of academics, medical anthropologists, psychologists and computer scientists who contributed to a blog series called Tracking Digital Psy. Together with the editors of the series, Natassia Brenman, Beth Semel and myself, they explore the forms of exclusion that emerge in the realm of digital mental health care.

I want to thank all of our collaborators and in particular River Ujhadbor, a theatre practitioner and researcher at the Centre for Society and Mental Health, who directed our creative process and co-produced this podcast. We are grateful for the support from the Centre for Society in Mental Health, the Department for Global Health and Social Medicine, the ERSC and the theatre company Clean Break.

So let's start with our first part in which we talk to Kate Scodellaro about digital exclusion in the UK and how it relates to mental health and disability. Hi, Kate, welcome to this podcast and thank you for joining us. Could you tell me a little bit about yourself and the work you do?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:03:12] Hi, I'm a post graduate student at King's College, London. I'm studying a masters of Global Health and Social Justice. I've worked in the private sector for a long time, but decided to return to uni as I have an interest in disability after volunteering within the disability sector for about 10 years in Australia in the UK.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:03:33] So how did you become interested in the concept and the lived experience of digital exclusion?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:03:39] Before the coronavirus pandemic, I was volunteering in Lambeth as a swimming mentor for people with disabilities, so before lockdown we were going swimming together and then when everything closed, we had to start interacting virtually and so to interact virtually, we had to learn how to zoom together. And it was just so interesting to see that once we learnt how to use Zoom, my mentees were able to then go and do all these things that they'd never been able to do before, have face to face conversations with their relatives overseas. They

were able to join disability support groups without having to catch the tube across London, which can be really difficult for them. And it made me see how many doors technology opened up for them. And then at the same time, they were coming to me saying, Oh, I'd really like to learn this, or can you teach me how to do this on my phone? Just seeing the impact that being able to use technology had on their lives, it just made me realise how important it was for them to be digitally included. I also feel like it's not something that people talk about a lot. People use technology so much in their day to day lives that they forget that other people don't use technology and therefore they can't see how limited other people are when they're not able to use a mobile phone or use WhatsApp or YouTube.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:05:04] Would you mind explaining to us what the term digital exclusion means and how it is commonly used?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:05:10] So in simple terms, digital exclusion is where people have unequal access to online information and services, as well as unequal opportunities to communicate online, the term exclusion suggests some kind of hard line between being excluded or included, that in reality, someone's ability to successfully use technology really depends on a range of factors. For example, whether they have an Internet connection, what device they might be using, the task they're trying to perform, how easy to use website or programme is, and who they have around to support them.

So it's very complex and varies from one situation to another. Many websites are also inaccessible to people with varying abilities, for example, those who have site impairments or dyslexia. And finally, for many different reasons, people often lack the motivation to learn how to use digital channels. So, for example, studies have shown that many seniors believe that browsing the Internet is not safe and feel that using things like email and Zoom will be too challenging for them. There's a lot of ethical debate about whose responsibility it is to motivate people of people responsible for motivating themselves to use technology if they have the skills and resources to use it. But I would argue that. When someone has been oppressed their whole life and they've been told that they're not able to have the same opportunities as other people, they become very demotivated in terms of trying to learn new skills and trying to get access to things that never have

access to before. And I think the responsibility is really on the people and organizations and governments that have created that disadvantage in the first place, which is often structural to overcome that and help people sort of find the agency to learn the skills and to adopt new technology.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:07:17] And who do you think is most affected by digital exclusion and why?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:07:23] As you would expect, digital exclusion is more common in low and middle income countries, where fewer people have access to digital resources as well as fewer learning opportunities through school and work. But even within high income countries like the UK, we have about seven percent of the population who are completely offline. And 16 percent of people don't have what the government considers to be basic digital skills, like being able to connect to a device to Wi-Fi.

The UK Office of National Statistics also reports that the main factor is increasing someone's likelihood to be digitally excluded is being older, living in a rural area, having a low socio economic status and also having a disability. So by looking into how digital exclusion affects these people, we start to see a strong link between digital exclusion, social exclusion and someone's health and wellbeing.

Firstly, you find that people who are digitally excluded have fewer opportunities to access social resources online, which are a lot of the time only available online. So, for example, during Covid, when everyone was locked out, Universal Credit became available through online application. That's changed now. But all of a sudden all these people who couldn't use computers and the internet were unable to get universal credit. Having employment opportunities and housing opportunities and accessing other social resources online just becomes impossible for people who can't use computers or there are just have fewer opportunities, which obviously creates more social inequality.

It also means that they have limited access to health care. So, for example, if you can't use a computer, you won't be able to book an online consult with your GP, which is obviously a big

problem for people who have social distancing and children recovered. You can access mental health services that are provided online, also can't get access to information quickly. So, for example, if you hear that there's been changes to the rules of this information that you need about vaccines and you can't go on your computer and look it up, you might have to watch TV all day until that information is there for this time. Or you might have to go out and go somewhere to find that information.

So there's all these psychosocial stresses that are related to all those restrictions placed on you. Finally, all these sort of limitations and restrictions that are caused by digital exclusion are concentrated in communities where people are already suffering from other disadvantages, like people who have a disability or people who are older or people who live in regional areas, for example. So it sort of has this compounding effect where disadvantage just creates further disadvantage.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:10:29] And what impact did the pandemic have on digital exclusion in the U.K.?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:10:35] The pandemic has really exposed how difficult life can be for people who are digitally excluded before when you could go to the bank and get your money out, you know, you're able to perform everyday tasks like accessing your finances. But with Covid that completely changed. And people who were digitally excluded just became completely excluded from society, weren't able to do basic things. So, for example, I was speaking to a friend the other day, who up until a month ago used to access her money from going to the teller at her local bank. But until recently the branch was shut down and she can't use online banking. Her only option was to go and try and use her local ATM for the first time, which is, of course, a digital device in itself. And unsurprisingly, during her first time using the ATM, she needed assistance. So she had to ask for help from a stranger in line with her, which obviously put her in a very vulnerable position.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:11:37] And what is being done to support people to stay connected during Covid?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:11:42] So during lockdown, there's been many successful efforts to address digital exclusion amongst disadvantaged groups. For example, there's been drives to deliver Internet and devices to people and families in urgent need. And there is new government funding for things like digital skills, boot camps. But it's also important to realise that not all interventions have had their intended effect. And in some cases they've actually widened inequalities rather than bridged the digital divide. For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, major Telcom companies removed data caps on broadband plans so people weren't charged for using extra data during lockdown. However, broadband is typically used by higher income groups, whereas people in deprived communities tend to be pay as you go customers. And they weren't offered any of those discounts or subsidies,

**Dörte Bemme** [00:12:40] Are there programmes and interventions that you would consider well done and effective. And if so, could you tell us a bit about them?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:12:49] So there's been some local initiatives where organisations who specialise in providing people with programmes to learn how to use technology rather than sort of delivering them themselves, that actually upskills members of the local communities instead of deliver that on their behalf. So you're sort of enabling communities to help each other as opposed to having to rely on one organisation to access workshops or boot camps or whatever it might be.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:13:20] Thank you so much, Kate. So as we're drawing to a close of this section of the podcast, what is the most important takeaway message you would like to pass on? And how can all of us, and especially those in power, make a difference?

**Kate Scodellaro** [00:13:35] I think it's important to stop making assumptions about people's abilities, not only as individuals, but as companies, as organisations, as governments. Just because we are digital natives doesn't mean that everyone is digital native. And in fact, there are a lot of people in the UK who aren't online who can't use digital devices. And by making those assumptions, we essentially are excluding them from society. So make sure that whatever you're designing is a service provider is accessible to everyone and not only accessible to everyone, but accessible to the people who need your service the most. I think there's a clear opportunity for all

organisations, whether they're government, public, private or non-profit, that before transitioning to new digital channels is really crucial to understand how suitable they are for different groups of people, especially those groups who have the greatest need for whatever service organisation is providing. Important part of this understanding also goes beyond statistics. It's only after listening to people's lived experiences that you can make sense of all the intricate enablers barriers that are commonly overlooked. Only when those intricate factors are taken into account can we be confident that interventions will actually reduce the digital divide as opposed to making it wider.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:15:06] Thank you, Kate. It's been a pleasure having you on the podcast. In the second part of the podcast, we explore the lived experience of digital exclusion by sharing the highlights of an online theatre workshop with people who have experienced obstacles in digital participation. Together, we creatively explore the intricate barriers, as Kate has called it, and the relationship between our digital and mental lives. So the workshop was itself an experiment and also a vivid example of the mechanisms of digital exclusion. It was both full of joy and expression, as you will hear, but also marked by the very digital challenges we discussed. Technology broke down, computers malfunctioned, headsets crackled, and all of this resulted in important voices literally missing from this recording. So while we reflected on digital exclusion, we were also perpetuating it. And we mentioned this to apologise for the occasional uneven sound, but also because we realise that an online workshop and podcast still leave out too many we would have liked to reach and hear from.

**Amala Joy** [00:16:32] In this part of the podcast, we share the highlights of a theatre workshop that explored digital life, worlds and all the highs and lows that come with technology. A group of artists collaborating on this project were Oriana, Chill Jill, Amala Joy, Dee, and River Ujhadbor. We discussed our life experiences with the digital world and online technology and used drama tools like music movement and image theatre to produce prose, poetry and spoken word.

**Chill Jill** [00:17:08] We released what was already embedded in us through words and soundscapes. The workshop created a reassuring space that allowed for real openness and for us to spark off each other. Everything was possible because it felt flexible enough to allow things not to go to plan and that to be OK.

**River Ujhadbor** [00:17:28] The online sessions were led by the process of mutual learning, trust building and the discovery of release and joy within this difficult topic. In the following, you will hear lively discussions and artistic responses inspired by theatrical games and exercises. Let's hear from Oriana first.

**Oriana** [00:17:51] This is a spoken word poem written and performed by Oriana. It's about the journey of digital participation and our well-being. It's called "And if I speak of digital participation" and the piece was inspired by Roger Robertson.

And if I speak of digital participation, then I'm speaking about technology,

and if I speak of technology, I'm speaking about isolation.

If I speak of isolation, I'm speaking about disconnect.

And if I speak of disconnection, I'm speaking about accessibility.

Who has access? Can we have access? We all have a right to access.

And if I speak of the ability to access, I'm speaking about devices, hardware, software, digital overload.

And if I speak of devices, hardware, software, digital overload, I'm speaking about personal information adverts and data.

And if I speak of personal information adverts and data, I'm speaking about overloading my brain.

If I am speaking of brain overload, I'm speaking about the burn out.

And if I'm speaking of burning out, I'm speaking about muting.

And if I'm speaking of being muted, I'm speaking about Zoom's.

And if I'm speaking of zooms, I'm speaking about connectivity.

And if I speak of connectivity, I'm speaking about sharing and caring.

And if I speak of sharing, empowering, I'm speaking about breaking down barriers.

And if I'm speaking of breaking down the barriers, I'm speaking about local community. And if I speak of local community, I'm speaking about unity.

And if I speak of unity, I'm speaking about rhythm.

And if I speak of rhythm, I'm speaking about the body, the mind and the soul.

And if I'm speaking of our bodies, our minds and our souls, I'm speaking about healing. And if I speak of healing, I'm speaking about, staying safe and well.

If I speak of staying safe and well I'm speaking about being kind to others

And if I'm speaking about being kind to others, then I'm speaking about being kind to yourselves.

The process of wellbeing and the digital participation is repetition, repetition, repetition.

**River Ujhadbor** [00:20:00] Our artistic responses prompted many discussions, recounting our frustrations with the digital world, getting lost, feeling exposed or thinking about how to increase use of online technology might be chipping away at our privacy and impacting our mental health. But equally, we talked about the joys of being connected by our digital platforms to agency and control we can carve out in these spaces and the pact we make with our devices.

**Chill Jill** [00:20:32] I'm forever swearing at my computer. But I also acknowledge that it's like a necessary evil. Everybody I know we're close to his computer completely changes my personality, and it does because I am a very quiet. Calm, laid back person with lots of patience, but that all goes out the window as soon as I'm in front of a computer like the first the frustration of it. I get really frustrated. And it's like in the piece I wrote, there must be logic. There must be logic that starts every time I'm on a computer. I'm scared to touch the keyboard in case I lose something. But then I'm like, no, there must be some logic to it. Come on, you will find the answer. Just keep going. And I try and follow YouTube clips for I just get so lost in the vocabulary of it all. I find the technology for computers is you've got to be in the know how.

**Oriana:** I absorb so much information, I have complex post-traumatic stress disorder as well, so for me, I can really resonate with what Jill was saying about having a connect and having some form of structure, actually, but also the same thing. Even if I'm in a room full of people online or in real life, I, I also have to be aware of my own health and wellbeing. And by absorbing people's emotions or energies, I get really burnt out. So yeah, I have to be conscious of that and I have to keep breathing and it has to be a conscious decision to continue to to stay connected. I signed up to three things the other day. Three zoom meetings. And it was three zooms in one day and each were like over two hours. Had that be physically, there's no way I would have attended those three meetings in one day, I would have staggered them. But I just thought we could do this. And I

did. I attended. But yeah, the next day I couldn't do anything. Absolutely burnt out I was mentally, physically, spiritually, I suppose I just sort of just needed to regroup.

**Chill Jill:** When I've been very mentally unwell, I have not been able to go near a computer. I think it's something that Oriana said because I get quite paranoid, my illness results in me becoming paranoid and to stay well, as not to get paranoid I cannot use the computer. It triggers me, sets me off. So even though I know to be connected is the best thing, the thing that's connects me makes me paranoid. It can, yeah. And also as well, I feel like in this space - and not today particularly in this space per se - but in a space where you're in a virtual reality, even though it's all reality and we're here, you're there, I'm here. But actually, it's afterwards that I think, oh have I overshared, I guess myself. And it's paranoia, it creeps in. And there's often, you know, if the phone rings, I can't often answer the phone. And if I don't know who it is, I definitely won't answer the phone. And if they leave a message, I can call them back. It's just there's a fear that takes over my chest, right. I can't breathe. I'm sweating and I get scared. And who could it be? Once I had this psychotic episode and part of my care plan was do not go online. Now if that happens during the pandemic, which I did get a bit, you know loopy, and superstitious of the computer. But, you know, if you're being told the only way to keep well is to stay offline, don't watch the news, don't do anything, and then all your life is attached online. It is like you're kind of part of the most vulnerable people in society, are being completely left out of this new digital age.

**Kim Marsh** [00:24:27] You don't leave here, and go somewhere else, you just press a button and you still and I'm still in my room and they've disappeared and it's like, what? What just happened? There is also another phenomenon called disinhibition we might get because I'm safe at home in my little space so I could say anything. And it kind of removes the filter.

**Amala Joy** [00:24:49] I can't control outside of me I have to decide what it is that I'm going to do to maintain or grab back my sanity, but then there's all the tech anxiety and there's the if I'm going into a group of people that I don't know, how is this going to work? Are we all going to be heard? Is everyone going to do as we've agreed to do? I my thing is I want my privacy. I have to have my privacy. And I need to feel secure, which is, I have to admit, it sometimes take longer with me. This thing we are speaking about, being able to be off camera and still be involved and being accepted

with that. I think that's major. And I don't think that's just for me. I think that that can be major and therefore build confidence in lots of people who have sat in meetings not knowing where to put their faces, thinking, oh, I'm sweating too much, I need to go to the toilet or whatever, whatever, whatever, to be able to be off camera and control all of that or sit with it. I think that's like the great big gift, if I can utilise it, and be allowed to utilise it as well.

Oriana [00:26:16] Well, yeah, I just picked up on that because I think I think what parts of Amala is sort of saying that it's about freedom and it's freedom of choice, freedom for us to be able to choose how we are, how we represent ourselves, how we want to be represented. And it just resonates because we should be able to have the freedom to do. What we want that makes us feel OK, that makes us feel safe by ourselves to connect through the technology with other people. It's OK for us to be in control of our own environment and to be able to manage our own environment when it starts to impact on your own well-being and your own safety. It's okay to say no, it's okay to say no. And it's okay to say, you know, enough. I'm going to take myself away or I'm exhausted. I'm going to switch my camera off. I don't, I don't feel like I to be in that space now. I've been in 20 zooms. We can't control the world around us, can we? All the time. But we can try to manage our response to that another side and get past.

Kim Marsh [00:27:24] This is Kim, Katie Marsh. That's my piece. I kept my phone on silent so I couldn't hear it when you didn't call me, that phone is a bastard tyrant. It's a source of all my happiness and misery. But I refuse to be your victim phone. I've got strength. You don't have any idea how strong you keep me hooked on the line, but I won't hang you dangling. I know that we both have our problems and we are far from love's young dream, but honey you light up my screen, our connection is precious and is a two way street, so speak up, call back because incommunicado isn't somewhere I would choose to live.

River Ujhadbor [00:28:09] Next up, you will hear soundscapes that were created by a drama methodology called "The Theatre of the Oppressed". It was developed by Brazilian theatre practitioner Agusto Boyle. In this exercise each artist chooses a unique movement and a sound to create what is called the human machine. The machine comes to life when the sounds are layered onto each other to form a rhythmic chorus. In this way, we bring to life what unhelpful support in

digital participation sounds and feels like, followed by a machine that explores its opposite, the experience of full support in navigating the digital world. After the soundscapes, you will hear an artistic response by Amala Joy in the discussion and the machines. Enjoy!

[REPEATED CHORUS, SWELLING AND EBBING in VOLUME]

**Amala Joy** [00:28:59] That is not helpful. That is not helpful. That is not helpful. That is not helpful. Well, that is not helpful. That is not helpful. That is not helpful. That is not helpful.

**Oriana** [00:29:24] Whaaat? Whaaat? Whaat?

**Dee:** Just click. Just click. The button! Just click!

**Oriana:** Turn up the brightness, turn bright things, turn up the brightness

[REPEATED CHORUS, SWELLING AND EBBING in VOLUME]

**Amala Joy:** That makes so much sense. That makes so much sense,

**Oriana:** [00:30:09] It's ok, take your time. It's ok, take your time. It's ok, take your time

**Dee** [00:30:11] Plug and play. Plug and Play. Plug and Play

**Chill Jill:** Eureka!! Eureka!!

**Amala Joy** [00:30:48] My hands were on my hips while saying "That is not helpful". And I felt the repetition build up. My exploration had the beginning of a song, a rhyme, rhymes are brought to life for pleasuring, aren't they? My energy transforming from scorn to humour filled, took the weighty pressure off me. The pressures realised in my initial tone and stance were supported, held, brought into new life in the machine. That is not helpful. I know that one well and I haven't

always had the courage to say it. I can sit there thinking it and walk away, thinking it and thinking, right, yeah, never going back to that, or, you know, cutting my losses in this meeting and I'm going to go and do something that means something to me. It's so interesting because for me, machines just mean machination, pain. Well, it won't work. That was the complete opposite.

**Oriana** [00:31:57] Yeah. It had a movement to itself, didn't it. Had its own movement. Yeah, it functioned. We functioned. We functioned. It was a functioning machine. [laughs] Wonderful. Wonderful. [00:32:18] Thank you, ladies.

[Group laughter]

**River Ujhadbor** [00:32:21] The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed our relationship to online technology in the following, we share our experiences of barriers in accessing all our resources and platforms. Then we explore how that relates to inequality and injustice. Finally, we posed the question who is responsible for ensuring the possibility of digital participation in our society?

**Chill Jill** [00:32:44] Actually, during lockdown, as I said, we've had to come to a truce, me and the computer have had to have a truce with each other and I'm glad we have because it's the computer that got me through lockdown. Classes, parties, you know.

**Amala Joy** [00:33:04] I could see the need to get online coming. And I just thought, you know, I'm not going to even though I was getting texts saying "come to this meeting, come to this meeting". If it hadn't been for clean break, I didn't even, they insisted that, they didn't leave me alone. So I couldn't, I couldn't say no because one minute I'm without a laptop and then somebody from Clean Break is saying, "I'm in the car, I'm coming with a laptop. So just tell me where you live. Exactly, and I'll be parked outside." So that was that. Clean Break supports women who have experienced the criminal justice system and that's in any way, in any way at all. So, yeah, I've been with them for six years. They were just persistent, actually, which is obviously what I needed because I needed a laptop. If I was going to continue with life that I needed the laptop.

**Oriana** [00:34:04] Everything just went really quiet. I just felt really uncomfortable with that first and then being able to connect through room and through friends, I just think technology enabled us to have that connection. I was already isolated for so long before Covid. There's some things that didn't change for that other than everyone else joined my party, so to speak. Everyone else got on board. I kind of got onto a level playing field. I felt like life and time was running out for me. I lost a lot of years through trauma and recovery and being dissociated, I felt, and suddenly the whole world had to stop.

So hold on, right. So now you guys can understand those that live with physical, invisible illnesses that until they're physical and visible people don't actually necessarily understand or respect or have compassion for. And as much as I've missed being social, where I was able to be in terms of having to plan my whole meeting for safety or for toilets or access, it kind of it worked in my favour, actually.

Especially if you're a single parent working on the bread line, trying to get by, and then all your kids are at home and you've got to homeschool them. Might have been laid off from your job. I mean, that's that constant worry. And I think I heard yesterday, like a quarter of Londoners live under the poverty line. And if you're under the poverty line, is still quite a luxury to have Internet and a computer. You know, it's like, do I feed my kids or do I go online so they can do their homework? I think a lot of families, especially single lone families, had to make very harsh decisions during the pandemic.

That's right, it's obstacles, it's an obstacle, and it seems to suit one type or one class or one demographic, so it's not even just about economical access. It's there's fear and there's education. And there's this whole other level. It is is multilayered, having the rights to access and having access and being able to access. And even if you're able, if you are physically able, are you mentally able to do that? You know, in government and all these spaces, because I feel like they are judging, because of these obstacles, that they are not worthy. Well hold on. Who said they're not? Your life can change in a matter of seconds. You can lose somebody. Something can happen. You know, illness. We have choices to take power and not take part. But the government and those that are making choices on behalf of it feels like they want everybody to push towards this

digital world where everybody has to be digital. And that can't just fall upon everybody to do that. There needs to be support out there from local authorities. And for those local authorities from the government, everything is becoming more and more digital. And we all know that this has been happening for a number of years now. But it does seem and it's been fast forwarded, especially with the pandemic, there needs to be more support. And whose responsibility is that? Because, yeah, we can say, oh, well, we're all individuals, we take responsibility for our actions in our own lives. But when these choices and decisions are being made by larger platforms and companies and the government say, no, we want you all to be digital because we want to know where you are, what you're doing, who you're talking to, how you're spending your money, where you're getting your money from, where is your money going and what you know. Then there needs to be supports out there, because it doesn't matter whether you've got no children, one child or ten children. That support needs to be there. Everyone has a right to eat. Everyone has a right to fresh clean water. And everyone should have the right to be able to access online, if they choose to and have one device or no device to have to share between between ten people. Not one it's not it's not right. And these things should be should be accessible for everybody.

**Chill Jill:** Spoken word by Chill Jill, a woman of a certain age, has a message for the techies of this world: Do not label her. Dear techie people, you say there are words for people like me. Great, another label to carry. You say I'm a walking technobane, I make computers fucked. Computer says no because I've touched it. Well, that just sounds really personal. Like the bane of your life, like a poison ruining your whole existence. But my cards do get eaten up at ATMs, and automated bills when it inevitably takes more than one go. But yeah, me and computers have some issues in our relationship. But we have come to a friendly truce. You say, well, then you're a technophobe at the very least. Yes, they scare me. Pending doom. Something will go wrong. And I don't get the lingo, the gibberish. Why is everything in text speech? You still not sure LOL stands for laugh out loud or loads of love. And what about the trolls? That's just nasty, nasty, nasty. Who would invite them in their home spewing out their vile insults at you? You go kill yourself. You are stupid and worthless. You are a loathsome lesbian. Constant online harassment kills. Look, I'm fragile enough and spent my whole life being labelled a marginalised. I don't need it from you techie people or your invisible bully in cyberworld. I just want to be in my own way. I want face-to-face, and some help when I need to use the gizmos and gadgets at my pleasure. And when I accidentally delete

work that's taken me hours it is not helpful to say: "Oh, why didn't you save it on the cloud." What fucking cloud?

**Dörte Bemme** [00:40:38] Thank you all so much for sharing yourself and your thoughts and your art with us so generously. It's really been such a privilege to be part of this wonderful workshop and process. So now the third part of the podcast turns the mic over to a group of academics who think about digital exclusion in the context of the recent turn to digital mental health care.

**Beth Semel** [00:41:01] Hi, this is Beth and Natasha together with Dörte, we are the co-editors of a blog series called "Tracking Digital Side Mental Health and Technology in an Age of Disruption", which explores the digital turn in mental health care. You can find the series on Somatosphere, a blog about science, medicine and anthropology at [www.somatopshere.net](http://www.somatopshere.net) This podcast episode has been asking the question what is digital exclusion and how does it relate to mental health? And we have posed this question to the academic contributors of our series. We will hear from four anthropologists and clinicians who have thought about how digital exclusion shakes out in global contexts of mental health care.

**Natassia Brenman** [00:41:50] So we're curious about thinking through digital exclusion. Never is just a given a static condition, but we want to ask, how does inclusion and exclusion actually come about? Is it baked into service provision or how export fields like mental health care defined that problems could even be embedded into the code of digital things? So we asked our contributors to respond to the following questions. Where is the problem of digital located? So where do we look for it and what are the mechanisms of exclusion? So in other words, how why does digital exclusion play out in practice? And we were surprised by the diversity of answers that we had.

Our first contributor reflects on digital mental health care in the US. Rebecca Lester is professor of anthropology at Washington University and a licensed practicing psychotherapist. Her piece was entitled "Mediated Intimacies Tell Therapy and the Changing Face of American Mental Health Care" and Rebecca locates digital exclusion in the provision of digitally mediated therapy.

**Rebecca Lester** [00:42:58] Teletherapy has increased access to mental health care for millions of Americans, but it is not an equal opportunity phenomenon to engage until tell therapy. People need five key elements a piece of technology, computer or phone capable of connecting to the Internet. Internet service fast enough to sustain video calls, resources to pay for therapy, the ability to carve out an hour, a week or more for a session, and a private place to speak from. These requirements necessitate a level of socioeconomic and interpersonal security that is simply not the reality for many people, often those most in need of mental health care. Aside from financial constraints, perhaps the most significant barrier is the ability to have privacy long enough to conduct a session, work, childcare duties, busy households, and even micromanaging partners can make having a sustained private conversation difficult, if not impossible. For some, maintaining privacy around the fact that one is involved in therapy at all can be an important safety issue for teletherapy to realise its goals of increasing access to mental health care for underserved populations. These limitations must inform future developments and initiatives.

**Natassia Brenman** [00:44:17] So our second contributor brings into the structural inequalities in Ecuador, especially under and how that shaped the mental health helpline. Manuel Capella works at the Faculty of Psychological Sciences at the University of Guayaquil province, Ecuador, where he currently teaches social psychology and conducts qualitative research. His essay was entitled Corpses in the Street, psychologist on the phone telling psychology, neoliberalism and covid-19 in Ecuador. And he locates digital exclusion in the politics and ideologies that shape the administration of mental health services.

**Manuel Capella** [00:44:57] Exclusion in Ecuador is painfully visible through poverty and economic inequality. This, of course, includes unequal access to the Internet and unequal access to quality mental health services. Exclusion also takes place through ideological mechanisms, the ideology of mainstream psychiatry and psychology, which are mainly imported from global centres of power, tends to exclude other ways through which we can understand human distress. For example, it can exclude understandings rooted in a local cultural landscape that is quite diverse. It can also exclude socio political approaches that focus on power, relationships and social justice. In Ecuador, official discourse can turn social suffering into issues of individual psychopathology and self-regulation, they can also frame social media mainly as a source of fake news, thus ignoring its

potential for valuable collective action. And they can blame suffering and death mainly or exclusively to psychological and cultural flaws. When covid-19 heat wave kicked, corpses lay in the streets while neoliberal governments responded with the psychology of the morale of the work by well-meaning volunteers notwithstanding, some of these ideological mechanisms seem to have been at work.

**Beth Semel** [00:46:29] We also spoke with the computer scientist, an artist who reflects on how inequality becomes part of the design of digital technology itself. Jonathan Zhong is a visual artist and computer scientist based at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. His piece was entitled Form Content Data Bodies, which was an interview between Jonathan and myself about an experimental typeface he's designed called Biometrics NS. And Jonathan suggests we can find digital exclusion in the code and bits of the digital itself.

**Jonathan Zong:** The digital begins with exclusion, binary values zero and one are mutually exclusive from the starting point. Digital technology is largely used to differentiate people into strict diagnostic categories. People are well or unwell, deserving or undeserving of care. Keystroke biometrics is one of many data driven mechanisms used in digital psychiatry to store people. In this way, biometrics are fraught because they exclude they failed to capture social, ethical and political complexities that are not reducible to numbers. They're also fraught because they include people in ways they would rather not be included. They capture people in large scale networks of surveillance and hyper visibility. Our work focuses visibility on the inner workings of biometric systems as we work within the uncomfortable grey space between care and control.

**Natassia Brenman** [00:47:58] So a final two contributors bring anthropology to applied science to think about the ethics of artificial intelligence and data. Livia Garofalo is a cultural and medical anthropologist and a researcher on the health and data team at Data and Society. Alexa Hagarty is an anthropologist and co-founder of Dovetail Labs and a researcher at the University of Cambridge Centre for the Future of Intelligence. That piece was entitled "Mapping Algorithmic Assumptions", and in doing this, Livia and Alexa locate the mechanisms of digital exclusion and the possibility of inclusion in the design process.

**Livia and Alexa** [00:48:39] Digital exclusion is often understood to mean inequitable access to specific technologies, but true digital inclusion isn't just about access. It involves having a meaningful say in how technologies are designed, used and assessed and the futures that they are creating. Communities must have a voice in decisions about the technologies that affect their lives. When people from a narrow demographic segment think Silicon Valley tech pros design side technologies based on Eurocentric and superficial models of human minds and behaviours, these technologies inevitably exclude most ways of being in the world. True digital inclusion means turning our attention from conversations that are narrowly focused on access and bias to considerations of structure and power. This means the use of participatory community engagement and achieving true equity and diversity in the teams designing, building and studying these technologies.

**Natassia Brenman** [00:49:41] So to return to our question of where we look for digital exclusion, we can find digital exclusion at work across scales and zip codes from the global politics of crisis response in Ecuador to the spaces between zeros and ones of binary code. We find exclusion when mental health care moves online and social and economic circumstances make it difficult to find a private space to do therapy or reliable source of Internet to connect in the first place.

So, suffice to say that there was no one singular location of digital exclusion, no standardised experience or straightforward way to define without considering context. And what about the mechanisms of exclusion, how and why does it play out in practise? Well, this I think it's the harder question to answer, but maybe the most important one when it comes to thinking about how to disrupt these patterns of exclusion, so do the stories that we've heard in this episode give us clues as to how things could be done otherwise? What we take away is that is important to understand all of the technical, bureaucratic and political mechanisms of exclusion. But in the end, it's all produced by people and communities. So it's important to let people with lived experience lead the process. So instead of asking for digital exclusion looks like them, perhaps the answer is to leave it up to the people most impacted to define digital inclusion, how to design for multiplicity and nuance in a way that facilitates a sense of belonging in a digital world.

**Dörte Bemme** [00:51:20] Thank you so much, Natassia and Beth. I agree with you. What I think we learn from all of our contributors in this episode is that digital inclusion and exclusion have a moving and evolving, and perhaps even a double edge. The ideals of participation, access and connection are not only shaped by social inequalities, but also inextricably linked with experiences of surveillance, of unequally distributed agencies, safety, and respect and online spaces. Digital inclusion can be both care and control, as Jonathan pointed out. It can both help and harm our mental well-being and often simultaneously, as we've heard from our artists. And it is this complexity of digital life worlds shaped by power, societal norms and individual needs and abilities that we need to tune into as we set out to make digital worlds more habitable for everyone.

So let me now give the last word in our shared exploration of digital exclusion to Amala. Joy, who will read her poem, which is entitled Steeped to Long/Continuum,

**Amala Joy** [00:52:25]

Steeped Too Long/Continuum

Steadily eroding sense of self
Surrounded, the suffocating hum of certain intensity
Speeding down slowing in singular silences
Singing and buzzing stilled in denial
Set free? Or ensnared in putrid deceit's thru the ages
Singled out, sort, from millions, same continuum, yet differing

Steadily eroding sense of me
Steeped too long in need, WANT, lack of etc...
Super sounding dreams, to heal a nation
Squashed? No, not yet. Delayed? Yes, that's tolerable.
Situation too precarious for building back better.
Sprinkling - the tingle of tragedy touring my spine

Steadily submerging. Erasing

Spreading tracking through, humming, up down, vibrating out into my space

Squatting I am the chair, slaughtered the floor I am; the desk

space, devoid of tablet to sooth, heal or score my wall; of

smart phone in which to state (if known) the name of the medical emergency

Silenced, streaming ceased (for now) In this continuum, again.