

# BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

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## PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND THE DIGITAL—SOCIAL INEQUALITY LOOP

Nearly 1 in 4 Australians struggle to access, afford or independently use the internet. As rapid innovation exacerbates this inequality, experts warn of an impending AI digital divide. This project supports the capacity of public libraries to address this issue.

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## OBJECTIVE

This research aims to:

- improve the knowledge base by expanding our understanding of the digital—social inequality loop and the role of civic cultural spaces in addressing digital inclusion.
- inform and influence policy decisions and implementation strategies related to digital inclusion and public library development.

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## METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data is being collected at four distinct library sites across NSW, chosen in partnership with the State Library.

Semi-structured interviews with community members and staff provide rich data on local lived experiences of digital and social inequalities.

Living labs, where small groups take part in various digital activities, generate observational data on how different interfaces and approaches shape socio-technical engagements in situ.

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## RESULTS

Pilot fieldwork has revealed the importance of the social and human-centric ways that libraries offer digital support within a climate of rising digital disengagement. Public libraries normalise technology challenges and are recognised sites for free access to trustworthy support and information.

Further fieldwork will examine the potential of cultural outreach and social connection strategies to spark digital engagement amongst local communities, and the positive influence of AI exposure for digital literacy, confidence and participation for diverse marginalised populations.

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## ANALYSIS AND IMPACT

This interdisciplinary project utilises reflexive thematic analysis to bridge sociological insights into inclusion with media studies insights into participation environments and computer science evaluations of technological usability.

We will measure the impact and influence of this research by sharing findings and recommendations with library staff and evaluating their utilisation and benefits. Strategic engagements include an industry roundtable and information sessions for library professionals; a policymaker workshop; and scholarly and media outreach.



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## TEAM

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