

Sociodigital Futures

Susan Halford

Co-Director ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures

Co-Director Bristol Digital Futures Institute

Introduction

A statement of the obvious

Two shared commitments

And a warning

Overview of the ESRC Centre

- Framing
- Organization of Research Programme



Sign up to our newsletter

Read our inaugural Impact Report

The ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures

We are working with the new ESRC-funded research centre.

At Bristol Digital Futures Institute, we're shaping a digital future that works for all. Our mission is to transform the way we create new digital technology for inclusive, prosperous and sustainable societies. Together, we will tackle some of the biggest global challenges - from how we transform healthcare, to how we move around, to how AI will impact our lives.



Our pioneering research brings together business, government and citizens with world-leading interdisciplinary researchers from the University of Bristol to transform how we create digital technologies.

"Our long-standing research partnership with the University of Bristol underpins the very foundation of modern and future communications technologies. We are excited about Bristol Digital Futures Institute and how we grow our partnership further."

— CASOL FLETCHER, HEAD OF ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS, BT

"Digital technology plays a crucial role in our goal of achieving social mobility for young people in disadvantaged and ethnically diverse communities, and we welcome the knowledge and understanding that Bristol Digital Futures Institute will bring to us."

— POKU OSEI, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, BABBARA

ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures



Researching how sociodigital futures are made

Digital technologies, devices and data are woven into the fabric of contemporary societies: the social and the digital are co-evolving in a sociodigital world. This Centre focuses attention on sociodigital futures and what might be done to drive these towards fair and sustainable ways of life.

CenSoF Latest Blog Posts

- [The future does not exist, but how we think about, imagine and act on the future in the present matters a great deal](#)

Bristol Digital Futures Institute
(BDFI)

ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures
CenSoF

bristol.ac.uk

CenSoF: Overview

- The social and the digital intra-act in a sociodigital world.
- Pasts, Presents Futures?
- A paradox:
 - sociodigital intra-actions are not **predictable**
 - sociodigital intra-actions will be **critical** for emergent futures
- The ESRC Centre for Sociodigital Futures will be an international hub for sociodigital futures research and collaboration. Our ambition is to make emerging sociodigital futures intelligible and actionable with direct impact on policy-making, organizational practice, community participation, and technology design.
- Launch 1st May 2022 – initial funding to May 2027.

bristol.ac.uk

CenSoF: Framing

1: From 'The Future' to 'futures in the making'.

- The future cannot be known, but how futures are claimed, acted on and made in the present can be known, and matters a great deal. Expectations, imaginaries and visions shape discourse, define what is 'thinkable', driving investments, policy and legislative frameworks.
- Claims -> actions -> emergent futures
- From the prediction of futures yet to happen, to the social relations of sociodigital futures in the making.

2: Drives two lines of enquiry

- **How some futures are opened-up, whilst others are closed-down**
 - Who or what is able to claim the future is an exercise of power
Dominant actors
 - Naturalization of certain repertoires
 - Limited notions of time and temporality
 - Latent consequences for actual futures
- **Big and little futures in the creation of sociodigital change**
 - Big actors shape discourse and materialities – and are required for change
 - Little actors in everyday life animate and create change – under different socio-economic-digital conditions

3: Theoretical innovation – drawing together practice theories

- Emphasis on action, activity and practical routines involving diverse entities (e.g., technologies, ideas, skills and cultural meanings), paying close attention to where and when these are reproduced or disrupted and modified
- Tension between reproduction and change is key to understanding if and how the ‘big’ sociodigital futures imagined and materialised in powerful institutions are negotiated in(to) the ‘little futures’ of everyday practices, and vice versa.

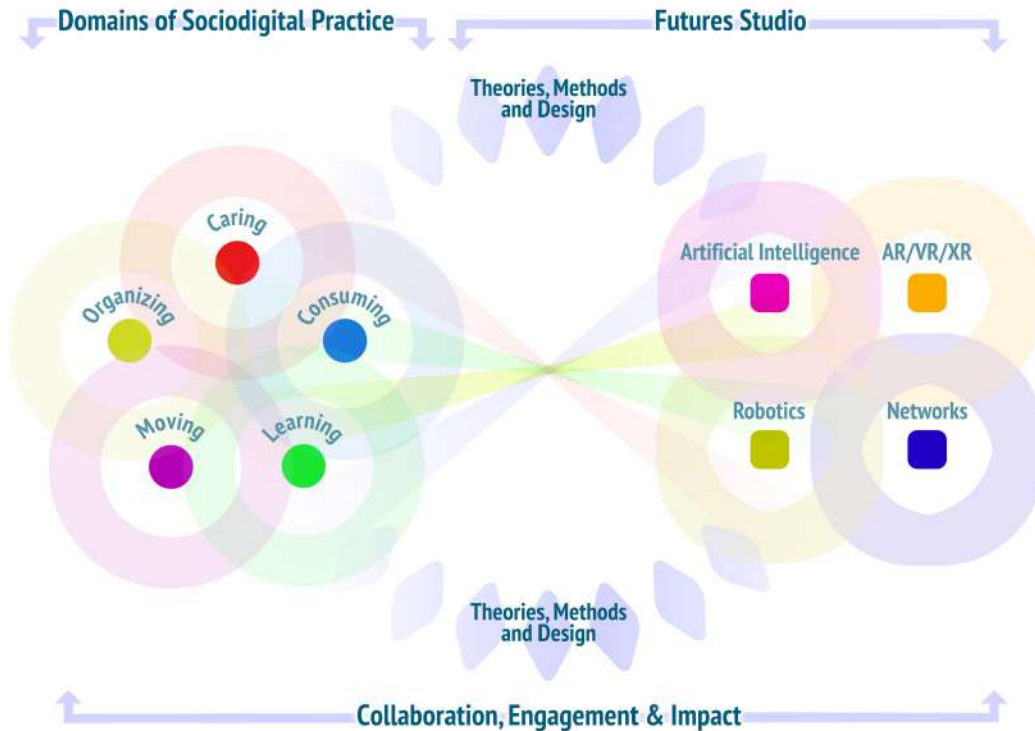
4: Methodological innovation

- Capturing big and small futures – what is said And done?
- In depth knowledge of both social and digital and their intra-actions
- How to engage with futures?

5: Collaboration

- Working with powerful actors;
- Working to broaden and deepen range of participants
- Creating change

Organization of Research Programme



Core Research Questions

- 1) What sociodigital *futures are being claimed* by which actors, and how?
- 2) What sociodigital *futures are being made* in everyday practice?
- 3) What capabilities and capacities are needed to *do sociodigital futures differently*?

Organization of Research Programme

These research questions demand in-depth and sustained interdisciplinary collaboration to create new research expertise, methods and knowledge:

Across the Social Sciences: Education, Human Geography, Law, Innovation Studies, Organisational Studies, Science & Technology Studies, Social Policy, Sociology.

With Engineering: Artificial Intelligence, High Performance Network Engineering and Robotics

And with the Arts & Humanities: Classics, Communications, Design, Languages, Performance Arts, Visual Cultures.

Organization of Research Programme

UK Partners



bristol.ac.uk

Organization of Research Programme

External Partners

Logos removed pending marketing and comms

BT

Defra

Locality

Maybe*

NCSC

UNESCO

Connections?

Domains of Sociodigital Practice (DoSP)

DoSP are conceptualised as verbs (not fields or sectors) capturing the **performativity and dynamism of practice** across diverse and inter-related:

- (i) *sites*
- (ii) *analytical scales*
- (iii) *infrastructures*

DoSP are **interlinked** through:

- Centre-wide research questions
- Futures Studio Threads
- Technical Affordance Projects

Caring

- *Caring Practices in the Digital Home.*
- *Caring Through Immersive Technologies & Lived Experiences.*

Consuming

- *Changing Entertaining & Communicating Practices at Home.*
- *Sociodigital Systems & the (Re)-Configuration of Domestic Entertaining & Communicating Practices.*

Learning

- *The Sociodigital Speculation & Shaping of Educational Futures.*
- *Futures Literacies & Immersive Worlds: Educating the imagination.*

Moving

- *Sociodigital Mobilities in Place.*
- *Making Different Futures for Sociodigital Mobilities.*

Organizing

- *Towards a social infrastructure platform.*
- *Futures of sociodigital labour & (re-)distributions of work across time & space.*

Futures Studio (FS)

The hub of the Centre, which:

- integrates and supports the DoSP research programme, driving the creation of interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral **capabilities and capacities** for sociodigital futures research and intervention.
- **brings together** different sets of expertise to creatively share ideas and experiment with new methods.

Four threads:

- **Theories**: explores landscapes & foundations for sociodigital future making.
- **Methods**: futures-focused; 'futuring' capacity of conventional methods; NEFD.
- **Collaboration**: co-production of research; collaborative methods; critical analysis of questions of power, value and expertise in research.
- **Design**: innovation, experimentation & intervention; co-design; futures design.

Technical Affordance Projects (TAPs)

take digital technologies as the object of inquiry to:

- **critically engage** with the affordances of technical materialities & their societal effects
- explore the **complexities & contingencies** of human—technology entanglement
- **re-script** sociodigital configurations through intervention & experimentation.

Four TAPs:

- *Artificial Intelligence*
- *High Performance Networks*
- *Robotics*
- *Artificial, Virtual & Extended Reality (AR/ VR/ XR)*

Each TAP will develop a **suite of research enquiries** in *collaboration with DoSP*.